

MAPPING OUT THE WILLING SUSPENSION OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN DALIT FEMINIST NARRATIVE OF *SANGATI*

Rashmi Ralhan

PhD English
Research Scholar
SOH, IGNOU
Maidan Garhi, Delhi

This article examines the concept of a willing suspension of human rights in the Dalit feminist narrative of *Sangati*, a novel by Bama. It explores how the book portrays the struggles of Dalit women in India, highlighting the intersectionality of caste, class, and gender-based oppression. Through a critical analysis of the novel, this article sheds light on how Dalit women's rights are suspended or compromised, and how they resist and challenge these oppressive systems.

Sangati, a novel by Bama, is a powerful portrayal of the lives of Dalit women in India. The story is a testament to the struggles and resilience of Dalit women, who face multiple forms of oppression based on their caste, class, and gender. This article explores the theme of the willing suspension of human rights in the context of Dalit feminist narrative, examining how the novel highlights the compromise of Dalit women's rights.

Dalit women in India face multiple forms of oppression, including caste-based discrimination, economic exploitation, and gender-based violence. They are often forced to live on the margins of society, with limited access to education, healthcare, and other fundamental rights. Bama's *Sangati* portrays the struggles of Dalit women, highlighting how they are subjected to physical and verbal abuse, exploitation, and marginalization.

The concept of willing suspension of human rights refers to how individuals or groups may compromise or sacrifice their rights to survive or navigate oppressive systems. In the context of *Sangati*, the novel highlights how Dalit women's rights are suspended or compromised due to the intersecting forms of oppression they face. The book shows how Dalit women are forced to accept their circumstances, often due to a lack of awareness about their rights or limited access to resources.

Despite the oppressive systems, Dalit women in *Sangati* resist and challenge their circumstances. The novel portrays how they find strength and solidarity in their community and work together to overcome their struggles. Through their resistance, Dalit women assert their rights and challenge the dominant power structures that perpetuate their oppression.

According to the caste system, Dalit is a term which is used to address a person belonging to the lowest caste. They were prohibited from practising their rights for the sake of virtue and to avoid polluting influence, and were chosen by the Brahmins, who were protected by the royals or under the auspices of wealthy sanctuaries. A few poor and uneducated individuals were outcasts, considered unclean or unfit by the general public. They were prohibited from being touched, wearing footwear, drinking/sitting/showering out in the open

territories, eating great nourishment or living similarly to others. They prohibited any social, practical or political right. In the wake of torment from the racial and primitive partition for many years, and fighting against an exceptionally extremist social order that prompted their mistreatment, abuse, and unequal and unfair treatment, individuals at long last started communicating their dislike against the caste system and what it was doing to Dalits.

“Among the Backward Castes, Scheduled Castes are socially, economically, politically, religiously, and culturally oppressed. In the past, many Scheduled Castes embraced Christianity during the British rule in India, these converts were given free food, clothes, and education by the missionaries. Many of them got good educations and jobs”.

“In order to avoid ill-treatment, Scheduled Castes have often preferred to change their religion. With the legacy of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the Indian constitution guaranteed to all citizens the fundamental rights and equal protection before the law. It provides a number of safeguards to Scheduled Castes to ensure their all-round development and protection against all kinds of the discriminations in India. But most of the provisions of the constitution have remained only on paper because their implementation has been faulty, half-hearted and inadequate and inequality, discrimination, exclusion, and stigmatization can jointly contribute to the utter marginalization in India. No doubt, Scheduled Castes were never given in human rights or treated with dignity; hence those cannot be restored to them as such”.

It suggests that those at the lowest levels have their interpretations and follow a rationality shaped by their own life experiences, rather than what is imposed upon them from above. These perspectives from the bottom are indicative of how the oppressed live their lives, make vital judgments, and also level protests, both symbolic and primarily based on real violence against the oppressive system. The focal point is more experiential and grounded in fact-based chapters. It highlights the truth that history is comprised of both the bottom and the pinnacle, and that people at the lowest levels are often their retailers and are well aware of their difficult positions.

Special Rights to Dalit Communities (SC/ST) according to the Constitution.

An illustrative list of laws from the various Constitutional provisions is given below:

1. The Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955.
2. The Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes Act, 1989.
3. The Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976.
4. The Child Labour System (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1976.
5. Acts and regulations in force in different States to prevent alienation of land belonging to SCs/STs.
6. Acts in different States for the restoration of alienated land to SCs/STs.

“Kalpana Kannabiran lays out a radically new approach to constitutional interpretation by making nondiscrimination the central organizing concept. Arguing the fundamental rights cannot be disaggregated, she demonstrated how article 21 (guaranteeing life and liberty), Article 14 (Guaranteeing equality before law), and Article 19 (listing the freedom of expression, association and movement) and intrinsically connected to Article 15 which prohibits the discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. In doing so, she seeks to sustain and develop the creative articulations of constitutional morality and limit the possibility of reductionist readings of rights”.

It enhances an understanding of the position on the ground that demands our attention. It explores the concept of democratic citizenship, including concepts of liberty and non-discrimination. It highlights the breakdown of discrimination in constitutional interpretation.

There are many social reformers, thinkers, writers and political figures who gave their contribution to the Dalit literary movement, like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who provided special provisions to the weaker section of the society, especially the untouchables.

Bama's novel *Sangati* is best read and understood to understand the suffering of the Dalit, especially women, in the early days of Independence. It's a novel written by a Dalit author who is concerned with issues affecting Dalits. It depicts real-life incidents and challenges of Dalit women. In this book, there is a set of stories in which women worked hard all their lives and went through violence by fathers, brothers, and husbands, and it also depicts numerous discriminations and sufferings of Dalit women. It explores their human rights violation and how these Dalit women are doubly disadvantaged through both caste and gender. Bama is one of the first Dalit women writers to successfully weave multiple narratives together, exploring the social inequalities faced by Dalit women. She is widely recognised and her work is translated into many languages, spreading all over the world. It generally focuses on contemporary caste and gender issues, and her writings are also included in a Dalit writing. The novel *Sangati* is translated by Lakshmi Holmstrom, who has also translated numerous other Tamil novels and short stories by modern writers. Her writing is more a celebration of Dalit women's identity. It depicts women's struggle against male oppression, inequalities, and the privileged system. It's an autobiographical novel, but still, the story is about community, not an individual. It is entirely focused on the events in the lives of Dalit women. It also contains a question of economic inequality, as she learned through her real-life experiences. The most significant aspect of the novel is the transformation of women from girls to women and the older women. It completely reveals the struggle and strength of Dalit women, how they fought for the Right to education, sex, and equal treatment. Despite struggle and suffering, the author has beautifully highlighted the positive aspects of Dalit women, showing how they transformed their battle into a great strength, and it has become truly praiseworthy.

This paper mainly focuses on the discrimination and suffering of Dalit women and how their human rights have been violated. This novel contains no main plots or main characters. It only creates a Dalit-feminist perspective and explores the poverty and discrimination suffered by Dalit women. Therefore, they are doubly oppressed. Caste and gender are the two pillars to create a Dalit feminist perspective. There is a depiction of several generations of women in the Dalit community. It confronts us with the harsh realities of daily life for the Dalit community. The book features interconnected events through individual stories, anecdotes, and memories.

"My mind is crowded with many anecdotes: stories not only about the sorrows and tears of Dalit women but also about their lively and rebellious culture, passion about life with vitality, truth, enjoyment and about their hard labor. I wanted to shout out these stories."

Bama introduces the theme of economic inequality and sexual harassment.

As the author negotiates the grievances of the Paraiyya women. Firstly, she raised the question of economic inequality. In this novel, women are equally presented as wage earners, working alongside men in agricultural and building-site labour, yet still earning less than men do, thereby highlighting Socialist Feminism. Yet the money that men earn is their own to spend as they

please, whereas women bear the financial burdens of running the whole family. They are constantly vulnerable to a lot of sexual harassment in the world of work. Within their community, the power rests with men as the caste-courts and churches are male-led. Rules for sexual behaviour are brow-raisingly different for men and women. Hard labour and economic precariousness lead to a culture of violence, and Bama boldly explores this theme too. According to Article 39(d) of the Constitution of India, men and women are entitled to equal pay for equal work.

Here, the author has explored a Dalit woman's life since childhood and how they are differentiated.

The novel, *Sangati*, explores the gender bias faced by Dalit women from a young age. Girl babies are always considered inferior and taken less care. The narrator of this book is a young girl in the early chapters, who becomes pensive due to the numerous events happening around her. As she grows into a young woman, she stresses the need for change and calls out for action against atrocities that happen to the girls and women in her community. Invidious patriarchal distinctions are initially inculcated in girl children within the first ten years of their lives. Gender games act as practical tools to achieve this goal. Bama, as a young girl of twelve, learns that boys have different roles to play than girls, which are perpetuated in the form of gender games that they are made to play as children. While games like 'kabaddi' and 'marbles' are meant for boys, girls play at cooking, getting married and other domestic matters.

In the Dalit community, girls hardly enjoy their childhood, and elders consider boys as permanent members of a family because they are supposed to take care of their parents. On the other hand, female children often have little time to play, as they must take care of their siblings and other household tasks. They are considered transient members who have no significant role to play in their families and are often adopted by another family. This causes gender prejudices even in the minds of parents. The author depicts the real-life experience of a Dalit girl.

"Even when we played 'mothers and fathers', we always had to serve the mud 'rice' to the boys first. They used to pull us by the hair and hit us says, 'what sort of food is this, di, without salt or anything!' In those days we used to accept those pretense blows, and think it was all good fun. Nowadays, for many of the girls, those have become real blows and their entire lines are hell"

Bama portrays the physical and mental torture of a Dalit woman

Violation of Article 14, Right to equal protection under the law within the territory of Indian. Prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. Bama realistically portrays the physical violence like whipping, lynching and canning that Dalit women suffer from their fathers, brothers, and husbands. She explores their psychological stress and strains. The author cleverly explores the prevailing subordinate condition of women throughout history, from being a girl, to being a woman, to being a breadwinner for the family, and her role in the church. In the Dalit community, all of these proved claustrophobic to the womenfolk. The stories of Mariamma and Thayi, whose marital disharmonies are revealed in an attempt to stereotype the Dalit predicament. As they are beaten up and ill-treated daily by their husbands. Although both the husband and wife came after a hard day's work in the field, the husband went straight to the Chavadi to while away their time, coming home only for their meal. However,

when the wife returns home, she must clean the house, collect water, wash utensils, gather firewood for cooking and other tasks, feed the husband and children before they sleep, eat what is left over, and then go to bed. It shows the process of inequality and how they go through mental and physical torture in their personal life. They don't find a sphere of time for themselves and are always busy serving others.

"Why can't we be the same as boys? We aren't allowed to talk loudly or laugh noisily; even when we sleep we can't stretch out on our backs nor lie face down on our bellies. We always have to walk with our heads bow down, gazing at our toes even when our stomachs are screaming with hunger, we mustn't eat first. We are allowed to eat only after the men in the family have finished and gone what Patti aren't we also human beings?"

Comparison between a Dalit and a Non-Dalit woman

According to the author, the Dalit situation is better than that of upper-class women who have been forced to live in the most vulnerable conditions. She believes that Dalit women are more progressive and independent than non-Dalit women because upper-class women find no way to express their pent-up emotions. She appreciates Dalit women and feels proud that they have economic independence from their male relatives; they work hard in the fields and raise their children. Sometimes, widows are allowed to remarry, and their culture never alienates them from the mainstream. But the upper-class women confine their emotions within the four walls of their homes. But Dalit women suffer caste oppression in the mornings and gender oppression at night.

In the novel, *Sangati*, the child narrator in the early chapters, grows melancholic and rebellious due to the events happening around her. When she grows into a young woman, she stresses the need for a radical change and calls out for action against the exigencies of her companions. She exhorts them to take pride in their (Dalit women's) caste and march towards social empowerment. Bama draws attention to their immense capacity for hard labour, their spirit of protest, and the absence of dowry, as well as their rich cultural heritage. She talks about the narrator's courageous grandmother, who pawned her 'thali' to feed her children, Katturaasa's mother, who bore her son by herself while cutting grass, and about Marriamma, who came back to work even after she met with an accident. But they have been silenced in the crucial moments of their lives. Bama highlights the "difference" between Dalit women and privileged upper-caste women, and more importantly, celebrates their "identity" in terms of their strength, labour, and resilience.

The author not only portrayed the hopes and aspirations of Dalit women but also their fight for survival. Unfortunately, these women are denied and diminished in their fundamental rights due to the mechanisms of oppression and exploitation. However, Bama makes this novel shine with positivity as she portrays the women of her community who overcome fear and become gritty and courageous. Here, the women take pride in being strong and agile workers who can face difficult situations. At the beginning of the novel, Bama portrays women as objects of exploitation, but they consistently fight for their interests, as they know how to swim and possess the freedom to take baths in the wells. In *Sangati*, both the boldness and the weakness of Dalit women are exposed by Bama. She confronted the reader with the lives and hard work of Dalit women, and how these women in the community become self-independent. Bama describes that women of this community do not have a single moment of rest for themselves.

Unfortunately, many women are not even aware of their fundamental women's rights. So it entirely depends upon the realization of these human rights. According to the Indian Constitution, Dalit women are liable to enjoy a whole range of human rights, such as the right to life, freedom from torture or cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment or punishment, etc. Moreover, it protects the rights of Dalits and women. Therefore, it encourages women to attempt to speak out about their traumatic pain and experiences and theorise their anger and sufferings in their autobiographical writings.

Conclusion

Sangati presents a compelling portrayal of the challenges faced by Dalit women in India, highlighting how their rights are often undermined or disregarded. The novel emphasises the resilience of Dalit women as they resist their circumstances, assert their rights, and challenge prevailing power structures. This article underscores the necessity of acknowledging and addressing the intersecting forms of oppression faced by Dalit women, as well as the importance of supporting their quest for justice and equality.

Work Cited

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