

## Original Article

# CASTE, COMMUNITY, AND THE DALIT FEMINIST VOICE: REARTICULATING RESISTANCE IN BAMA'S SANGATI

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the intersectional dynamics of caste, class, and gender in Bama's landmark novel Sangati, exploring how it constructs a distinct Dalit feminist standpoint. Unlike traditional autobiographies that focus on the individual trajectory of the protagonist, Sangati employs a collective narrative voice shifting from the "I" to the "we" to document the shared struggles and systemic resilience of the Paraiya community in South India.

The research analyzes how Bama rearticulates resistance by moving beyond the binary of victimhood and agency. Through a close reading of the text, the paper explores three primary modes of subversion: the use of non-standard Dalit dialects (Paraiya Tamil) to challenge linguistic hegemony; the depiction of physical labor as both a site of exploitation and a source of bodily autonomy; and the celebration of oral traditions songs, stories, and gossip as tools for communal healing and survival.

By applying the theoretical framework of intersectionality, this study argues that Bama's work exposes the dual oppression of "Brahminical Patriarchy" and "Internalized Patriarchy" within the Dalit community. Ultimately, the paper concludes that Sangati does not merely record events but serves as a radical political manifesto that redefines the Indian feminist landscape, asserting that the Dalit feminist voice is central, rather than peripheral, to the broader discourse of subaltern resistance.

**Keywords:** Dalit Feminism, Intersectionality, Bama, Sangati, Collective Autobiography, Subaltern Resistance, Caste and Gender

## INTRODUCTION

The emergence of Dalit women's writing in India marked a seismic shift in the country's literary and social landscape, challenging the monolithic narratives of both mainstream Indian feminism and the male-dominated Dalit movement. While early Dalit literature was primarily characterized by the "testimonio" or the individual autobiography of male struggle, Bama's second work, Sangati (1994), redefined the genre by centering the collective experience of the community. In Sangati, the focus shifts from the singular "I" of the narrator to a choral "we," weaving together the stories of multiple generations of Paraiya women. This paper examines how Bama utilizes this collective voice to rearticulate resistance, arguing that the text functions as a radical manifesto of Dalit feminism that addresses the specific, intersectional burdens of caste and patriarchy.

Historically, the "Dalit feminist standpoint" has been necessitated by the exclusion of Dalit women from the broader feminist discourse in India. As Sharmila Rege notes, mainstream feminism often failed to account for the "difference" of caste, frequently assuming a universal female experience that was, in reality, centered on the concerns of upper-caste, middle-class women [Rege](#)

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(1998). Conversely, Dalit male narratives often marginalized the gender-specific violence and domestic oppression faced by women within their own communities. Bama's Sangati fills this vacuum by documenting what Gopal Guru describes as the "politics of difference," wherein Dalit women are oppressed not only by the "outer" world of the caste-Hindu but also by the "inner" world of internalized patriarchy within their own homes Guru (1995).

The narrative structure of Sangati translated by Lakshmi Holmström is purposefully non-linear, mirroring the fluid, oral traditions of the women it portrays. It does not seek to provide a sanitized version of Dalit life; instead, it revels in a language that is "earthy, colloquial, and visceral," directly subverting the Sanskritized "high" Tamil of the literary elite Holmström (2005). By documenting the daily acts of survival, the ribald humor, and the physical resilience of women like Vellaiyamma and Maikkanni, Bama asserts that resistance is not always a grand political gesture. Rather, for the Dalit woman, resistance is embedded in the very act of speaking, working, and existing against a system designed to silence them. Through this lens, this paper will explore how Sangati reclaims the Dalit body and voice as sites of revolutionary agency.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The academic discourse surrounding Bama's Sangati is situated at the complex juncture of caste-based struggle and feminist theory. To understand the novel's significance, it is essential to trace the evolution of the Dalit feminist standpoint and its departure from both mainstream Indian feminism and male-centric Dalit activism.

## THE EVOLUTION OF DALIT FEMINISM: THE "POLITICS OF DIFFERENCE"

The conceptual foundation of Dalit feminism emerged as a critique of the homogeneity within Indian social movements. In his seminal essay, Gopal Guru argues that Dalit women "talk differently," asserting that their lived experience of oppression is qualitatively different from that of both Dalit men and upper-caste women Guru (1995). Guru highlights that Dalit women suffer from "external" oppression (caste-based discrimination by the state and upper castes) and "internal" oppression (patriarchal violence within their own community).

Sharmila Rege expanded this discourse by advocating for a Dalit Feminist Standpoint. She critiques the tendency of mainstream sociology to view Dalit issues solely through the lens of caste, while ignoring the gendered nature of labor and sexual violence. Rege argues that a Dalit feminist standpoint is not just about the "identities" of Dalit women, but about a "labor-centric" epistemology that challenges the "Brahminical Social Order" Rege (1998).

## MAINSTREAM FEMINISM VS. DALIT FEMINISM: CRITIQUING "BRAHMINICAL FEMINISM"

Literature on this subject frequently contrasts the priorities of mainstream Indian feminism often referred to as "Brahminical feminism" with the realities of the subaltern. Mainstream feminism in India has historically focused on issues such as legal reform, inheritance, and domesticity from a middle-class, urban perspective. However, Dalit feminist critics argue that this framework ignores how the "purity-pollution" binary of the caste system regulates the lives of lower-caste women.

As Anupama Rao suggests, the Dalit woman's body has historically been treated as "public property" by upper-caste men, a form of violence that mainstream feminism failed to theorize adequately for decades (Rao 12). Thus, Dalit feminism rearticulates resistance by centering the body as a site of both labor and systemic violation, moving the struggle beyond the private domestic sphere into the public agrarian and social landscape.

## EXISTING SCHOLARSHIP ON BAMA

Critical reception of Bama's work has evolved since the publication of her first autobiography, Karukku. Early scholarship focused heavily on the themes of trauma and religious conversion, particularly her disillusionment with the Catholic Church's failure to eradicate caste discrimination Pandian (1998).

Recent critics, however, have shifted their focus toward her linguistic subversion. Lakshmi Holmström emphasizes that Bama's choice to write in the "katcheri" (colloquial) Tamil of the Paraiyas is a deliberate political act that defies the aesthetic standards of "High Tamil" (Holmström xv). Other scholars have explored the eco-feminist dimensions of Sangati, noting the profound connection between the Dalit woman's labor and the natural environment. Collectively, these scholars view Bama not just as a chronicler of pain, but as an architect of a new literary aesthetic that celebrates the "unconquerable spirit" of the subaltern woman.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To analyze the layers of resistance in Sangati, this research employs a multi-dimensional theoretical lens that addresses the unique positioning of the Dalit woman within the Indian social hierarchy.

## INTERSECTIONALITY: CASTE, CLASS, AND GENDER

The primary analytical tool for this study is Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of Intersectionality. While originally developed to address the experiences of Black women in the American legal system, intersectionality provides a vital framework for understanding how Dalit women are positioned at the "crossroads" of multiple oppressions. In Sangati, a woman's struggle is never purely about her gender; it is inextricably linked to her caste status and her economic position as a landless laborer.

Bama illustrates that for the Paraiya woman, patriarchal violence is intensified by poverty and the lack of social capital. By using this framework, the paper moves beyond "additive" models of oppression (caste + gender) to an "interstitional" model, where these identities fuse to create a unique social location that requires a specific form of resistance.

## SUBALTERN AGENCY: CAN THE SUBALTERN SPEAK

This study engages with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's foundational question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" and Ranajit Guha's work on subaltern consciousness. Spivak famously argued that the subaltern specifically the subaltern woman is often spoken for by the colonial or indigenous elite, leaving her without a voice in the official record.

However, Sangati provides a counter-narrative to Spivak's skepticism. By utilizing Ranajit Guha's concept of "protest as a signifier of consciousness," the paper examines how the women in Bama's community reclaim their agency. They "speak" not through traditional political channels, but through:

- **Linguistic Subversion:** Reclaiming the derogatory language used against them.
- **Bodily Defiance:** Refusing to be cowed by domestic or upper-caste violence.
- **The Choral Voice:** Moving from the isolated subaltern subject to a collective subaltern identity that possesses its own history and agency.

## THE "SOCIOLOGY OF THE DALIT LIFE-WORLD"

Finally, the paper adopts the concept of the "Sociology of the Dalit Life-World" to understand Sangati as an ethnography of resistance. This framework, often used in subaltern studies, looks at the "lived experience" (Anubhav) as a valid source of knowledge.

Bama's text is not merely a work of fiction; it is a sociological document that maps the "Life-World" of the Paraiya community. This involves analyzing the everyday rituals, the economy of the household, and the communal gatherings at the village well or the fields. Understanding the "Life-World" allows us to see resistance not as a singular event (like a riot or a protest), but as a continuous, everyday practice of survival and self-assertion.

## ANALYSIS CHAPTERS

### FROM THE 'I' TO THE 'WE': THE COLLECTIVE NARRATIVE

In the tradition of Western and Brahminical literature, the autobiography is typically a record of the individual's journey a "Bildungsroman" that tracks the moral and intellectual development of a single ego. However, Bama's Sangati radically disrupts this convention by adopting the form of a community autobiography. By decentralizing the individual narrator, Bama centers the collective consciousness of Paraiya women, asserting that the Dalit woman's identity is inseparable from her communal ties.

## THE DE-CENTERING OF THE INDIVIDUAL EGO

In Sangati, there is no singular protagonist whose life story dictates the plot. Instead, the narrator acts as a witness and a conduit for the "sangatis" (news/events) of the community. This structural choice is a political act; it reflects the reality that for Dalit women, struggle is rarely an individual endeavor but a shared communal burden. By removing the central "hero," Bama highlights the communal struggle against the structural forces of the village hierarchy.

The narrative moves fluidly between the stories of various women Maikkanni, Vellaiyamma, Pecchiamma, and others creating a tapestry of resistance rather than a linear biography. This "choral" structure suggests that the strength of the Dalit feminist voice lies in its plurality. As the narrator observes the lives of those around her, the text demonstrates that the individual "I" is always embedded within the historical and social "We" of the Paraiya quarter.

## GRANDMOTHERS AND MOTHERS: REPOSITORIES OF ORAL HISTORY

The generational transmission of knowledge is a central pillar of resistance in Sangati. Bama places significant emphasis on the role of elder women, particularly the grandmothers, who serve as the repositories of oral history. While the men in the community may turn to physical aggression or religion, the women turn to storytelling as a survival strategy.

- **Vellaiyamma and the Grandmother Figures:** These characters provide the narrator with a historical perspective on their caste's oppression. Their stories are not merely passive recollections; they are pedagogical tools that teach younger generations how to navigate a world that is hostile to them.
- **Survival through Narrative:** These oral histories include accounts of how women dealt with starvation, landlord exploitation, and domestic abuse. By sharing these "sangatis," the elders pass down a lineage of resilience.
- **The "Mother-Tongue" as Resistance:** The wisdom shared by these women is often delivered in a raw, unapologetic language that rejects the "shame" associated with their status. They teach the younger women to laugh, to mock their oppressors, and to find joy despite the "triple burden" of their existence.

Through this collective narrative, Bama redefines the "self" in autobiography. The resistance articulated in Sangati is not a solitary rebellion but a legacy inherited from the grandmothers and shared among the sisters, ensuring that the voice of the community remains "unconquerable" (Bama 123).

## THE LANGUAGE OF SUBVERSION

In Sangati, language is not merely a medium of communication but a battleground for identity and power. Bama's decision to write in the Paraiya dialect a vernacular often dismissed as "vulgar" or "unrefined" by the literary establishment serves as a primary act of subaltern defiance. By elevating this "low-caste" colloquialism to the status of literature, Bama deconstructs the linguistic hegemony of Sanskritized "High" Tamil.

## RECLAIMING THE "POLLUTED" TONGUE

For centuries, the Dalit voice was excluded from Tamil literature, or at best, represented through a sanitized, "standard" lens. Bama shatters this convention by using the raw, everyday language of the Paraiya quarter. This linguistic choice is a direct challenge to the purity-pollution binary that defines the caste system. If the Dalit body is considered "polluted," so too is their speech. By unapologetically utilizing this dialect, Bama:

- **Decolonizes the Mind:** She rejects the "Brahminical aesthetic" that equates linguistic complexity with intellectual superiority.
- **Validates Lived Experience:** The dialect carries the specific rhythms, pains, and histories of the community that "standard" Tamil cannot capture.
- **Forces Engagement:** The reader is forced to encounter the Dalit woman on her own linguistic terms, rather than through a filtered, middle-class translation.

## HUMOR, SATIRE, AND THE "POLITICS OF ABUSE"

A striking feature of Sangati is the exuberant use of humor and satire, often expressed through what the elite might consider "abusive" language. For the women in Bama's narrative, these linguistic tools are essential for survival and reclaiming psychological power.

- **Satire as an Equalizer:** The women use sharp wit to mock the hypocrisy of upper-caste landlords and the patriarchal dictates of the Church. By laughing at their oppressors, they strip them of their perceived "divine" or social authority.
- **The Empowerment of "Abuse":** In the Paraiya quarter, women often use ribald language and aggressive verbal sparring. Bama illustrates that this is not a sign of "backwardness," but a form of emotional release and a way to occupy space in a world that tries to shrink them.
- **Verbal Defiance:** When a woman uses "abuse" against a domestic abuser or an exploitative master, she is reclaiming her agency. As the narrator notes, their words are "like a sudden rain that washes away the filth" (Bama 68), providing a cathartic resistance that sustains their spirit.

Ultimately, Bama's linguistic subversion proves that the Dalit feminist voice does not need to be "polished" to be powerful. Her prose rearticulates resistance by proving that the language of the oppressed is, in itself, a revolutionary tool.

## THE BODY, LABOR, AND VIOLENCE

In Sangati, the Dalit woman's body is the primary site upon which the structures of caste, class, and patriarchy converge. Bama illustrates that for the Paraiya woman, existence is defined by a "Triple Burden" a simultaneous struggle against economic exploitation, religious hypocrisy, and domestic subjugation. Yet, through this violence, the body also emerges as a resilient vessel of defiance.

## THE "TRIPLE BURDEN": SITES OF DISCRIMINATION

Bama maps the oppression of Dalit women across three distinct yet overlapping spheres:

- 1) **The Workplace (Fields and Forests):** As landless laborers, the women in Sangati endure backbreaking work in the fields. Here, they face double discrimination: they are paid lower wages than Dalit men (class/gender) and are subjected to the "purity-pollution" taboos of upper-caste landlords (caste). The forest, while a place of labor, is also a site of constant fear regarding sexual predation by upper-caste men.
- 2) **The Church and Religion:** Despite converting to Christianity to escape the Hindu caste hierarchy, the characters find that the Church replicates the same prejudices. Bama highlights the "caste-Christianity" paradox, where Dalit women are marginalized within the clergy and denied dignity in religious rituals.
- 3) **The Home:** The domestic sphere provides no sanctuary. Bama is unflinching in her portrayal of internalized patriarchy, where Dalit men emasculated by the caste system outside reassert their dominance through domestic violence at home.

## PHYSICALITY AND RESILIENCE: THE BODY AS A VESSEL OF STRENGTH

Despite being subjected to sexualized caste violence and the physical toll of unrelenting labor, the Dalit woman's body in Sangati is never portrayed as merely broken. Bama reclaims the physicality of her characters, celebrating their strength and endurance.

- **Labor as Agency:** While labor is exploitative, the women's ability to work the land gives them a level of economic independence and mobility that upper-caste women, confined by "Brahminical domesticity," often lack. Their bodies are "hardened" and "tough," capable of enduring both the elements and the whims of masters.
- **The Rejection of Victimhood:** Bama describes the women's bodies in a state of constant motion working, dancing, and fighting back. When Maikkanni is beaten, she does not simply wither; she absorbs the pain and continues to provide for her family, showcasing a "visceral resilience" that is central to their survival.
- **Sexual Autonomy and Truth:** By speaking openly about puberty, menstruation, and sexual desire, Bama strips away the "shame" imposed by patriarchal morality. The Dalit woman's body is presented in its raw, natural state, asserting a biological truth that defies the social constructs of "impurity."

In Sangati, the body is the ledger upon which the history of oppression is written, but it is also the weapon with which the Dalit woman carves out her space in the world.

## REARTICULATING RESISTANCE: RITUALS AND EVERYDAY ACTS

In Sangati, resistance is stripped of its traditional, monolithic definitions. It does not manifest as a structured political uprising or a formal manifesto; instead, Bama presents resistance as a lived, breathing reality an "everyday persistence." For the women of the Paraiya community, the act of surviving with dignity in a world that denies them humanity is the most potent form of rebellion.

## EVERYDAY PERSISTENCE VS. GRAND REVOLUTION

Bama shifts the focus from macro-politics to the micro-resistance found within the domestic and communal spheres. This aligns with James C. Scott's concept of "infrapolitics," where oppressed groups engage in low-profile acts of defiance that evade the notice of the powerful. In Sangati, resistance is found in:

- **Domestic Defiance:** The quiet or vocal refusal to submit to the unreasonable demands of men within the household.
- **Communal Solidarity:** The way women gather at the village well or in the fields to share their grievances, creating a "safety valve" that prevents psychological collapse.
- **Persistence:** The sheer refusal to die or disappear, despite systemic efforts to marginalize them.

## THE POWER OF SONGS AND STORIES

Cultural expression acts as a primary vehicle for subversion in the text. Bama meticulously documents the songs and stories that punctuate the lives of these women. These are not merely for entertainment; they are political tools.

- **Oppari (Lament Songs):** While ostensibly songs of mourning, they often contain sharp critiques of social injustice and the cruelty of the "fate" imposed by the caste system.
- **Nursery Rhymes and Ribaldry:** Even the games played by children and the bawdy jokes shared by elders serve to desensitize the community to the "shame" the upper castes try to project onto them.
- **Storytelling as Truth-Telling:** By narrating the "sangatis" of those who fought back, the community maintains a counter-history that challenges the dominant Brahminical record.

## THE REJECTION OF VICTIMHOOD: CELEBRANTS OF LIFE

Perhaps the most radical aspect of Bama's rearticulation of resistance is her rejection of victimhood. While the text is replete with pain, it is not a "misery memoir." Bama portrays her characters as "celebrants" of life.

- **Joy as Subversion:** The ability to sing, dance, and find humor in the face of starvation is presented as a defiant "no" to the oppressor. It signifies that the oppressor may control their labor, but they do not control their spirit.
- **Vitality and Resilience:** Characters like the narrator's grandmother, Vellaiyamma, possess a vitality that is infectious. They celebrate their hard-won autonomy however small and take pride in their physical strength and their ability to care for one another.
- **Collective Celebration:** Festivals and communal gatherings become spaces where the hierarchy of the outside world is temporarily suspended, and the Dalit feminist voice finds its most exuberant expression.

By framing these women as celebrants rather than victims, Bama ensures that the Dalit feminist voice is one of power and agency. Resistance, in Sangati, is ultimately the "art of the everyday" the stubborn, joyful insistence on being human.

## DISCUSSION: THE IMPACT OF THE DALIT FEMINIST VOICE

The publication and subsequent critical reception of Bama's Sangati have had a profound impact on the Indian literary and sociopolitical landscape. By articulating a specific Dalit feminist voice, the text does not merely add to the existing canon; it fundamentally disrupts the epistemological foundations of how gender and caste are studied in South Asia.

## CHALLENGING THE "BRAHMINICAL GAZE"

One of the most significant impacts of Sangati is its direct challenge to what scholars call the "Brahminical Gaze" a perspective that either invisibilizes Dalit women or portrays them solely as objects of pity and victimhood. Bama's narrative forces the reader to engage with the Dalit woman as a sovereign subject with her own internal logic, humor, and strategies for survival. This shift has compelled mainstream Indian feminism to move away from a "universal sisterhood" model toward an intersectional approach that acknowledges how caste privilege functions within feminist circles.

## REDEFINING AESTHETIC STANDARDS

Aesthetically, the impact of the Dalit feminist voice in Sangati has been revolutionary. Before Bama, "good" Tamil literature was often synonymous with Sanskritized, formal language and themes of middle-class domesticity or classical romance. Sangati introduced a new aesthetic of the "raw and the real." Linguistic Liberation: By proving that the Paraiya dialect can sustain a complex narrative, Bama paved the way for other subaltern writers to use their native tongues without apology.

- **The Aesthetic of the Body:** The visceral descriptions of labor, childbirth, and physical abuse shifted the focus of Indian literature from the "mind" and "soul" to the "body" as a site of political struggle.

## POLITICAL SOLIDARITY AND INTERSECTIONAL ACTIVISM

The impact of the Dalit feminist voice extends beyond literature into the realm of activism. Sangati provided a vocabulary for Dalit women to discuss the "internal" patriarchy of their own communities without feeling that they were betraying the broader Dalit movement. As Gopal Guru argues, this voice created a space for "autonomous Dalit women's organizations" that could address issues like land rights and wage gaps while simultaneously fighting domestic violence and caste-based sexual assault.

## GLOBAL RESONANCE

Finally, the Dalit feminist voice has found resonance globally, particularly in conversation with Black Feminist Thought and Womanism. Scholars now frequently compare Bama's work with that of Alice Walker or Toni Morrison, noting the shared focus on the "community autobiography" and the use of vernacular as a tool of resistance. This global impact has elevated Dalit literature from a regional concern to a vital part of the world's post-colonial and subaltern discourse.

By centering the "lived experience" (Anubhav) of the marginalized, Sangati has ensured that the Dalit feminist voice is no longer a silent footnote in Indian history, but a loud, celebratory, and critical force that continues to demand structural change.

## CONCLUSION

Bama's Sangati stands as a transformative text that reconfigures the boundaries of Indian literature and feminist thought. By moving away from the singular, introspective "I" of traditional autobiography, Bama constructs a choral narrative that captures the

multifaceted nature of Dalit feminist resistance. Through the analysis of the "Triple Burden"—the simultaneous oppression of caste, class, and patriarchy it becomes evident that the Paraiya woman's struggle is uniquely intersectional, requiring a specialized framework of resistance that mainstream Indian feminism has historically failed to provide.

The research has demonstrated that Bama's rearticulation of resistance is embedded in the vernacular and the everyday. Her use of the Paraiya dialect is not merely a stylistic choice but a political reclamation of a "polluted" tongue, transforming derogatory labels into badges of communal identity. Furthermore, by framing her characters as "celebrants" of life rather than passive victims, Bama subverts the "pathology of the subaltern." The songs, oral histories, and ribald humor documented in the text serve as infrapolitical tools that sustain the community's spirit against the systemic violence of the village and the Church.

Ultimately, Sangati asserts that the Dalit feminist voice is not a peripheral sub-category of Indian feminism, but a central, vanguard perspective that challenges the "Brahminical Social Order" at its roots. Bama's work proves that for the subaltern woman, the act of remembering, speaking, and working is, in itself, a revolutionary act of defiance. The "sangatis" (events) of the past are thus transformed into a blueprint for a more inclusive and radical future of resistance.

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