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Rewriting the Caste Archive: Historical Memory, Dalit Resistance, and Counter-History in Bama's *Sangati*

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Abstract— *This article examines Bama's Sangati as a piece of literary work, which serves as an intervention against the ways in which caste and historical memory have traditionally been represented in India. The article accomplishes this through showing how the intergenerational narrative of the novel, its depiction of caste violence, and its portrayal of the Paraya community all work to subvert the official narrative of the past. This is viewed through the lens of Dalit literary aesthetics, counter-history, and Ambedkarite anti-caste thought, with a particular focus on the relationship between collective memory, material inequality, and historical agency. Instead of simply being a story of suffering, the novel serves as a text which speaks to survival, resistance, and the constraints on the possibility of social change. Likewise, it contributes to the wider discussion of Dalit historiography and the way in which the form of a narrative can be used to contest the very structures of historical knowledge.*



Keywords— ***Dalit literature, Caste historiography, Counter-history, Collective memory, Dalit agency, Ambedkarite thought.***

Bama's *Sangati*, translated by Lakshmi Holmström, is a landmark work in terms of the way it presents a picture of a Paraiya Dalit community, despite the fact that it is not a novel at all, in the conventional sense of the term. It is a work that provides a collective history of the community in terms of its struggle, its resilience, and its culture. It is a work that actively challenges the very notion of who has the right to write the history of India. Drawing on the 'marginal' concepts of the Dalit theorists, such as Limbale, Ambedkar, Omvedt, Prakash, Guru, Sarukkai, and Rege, this article examines the political significance of *Sangati* as a literary form, captured in the form of the text, the way it represents social experience, and the way it represents caste. Likewise, the text is more than just a representation of suffering; it is really about the construction of voice, dignity, resistance, and a collective counter-history.

The significance of caste cannot be denied, for caste continues to shape social relations, labour, power, and, indeed, the very foundation of historical knowledge. The dominant archives of South Asia have traditionally been curated through an upper-caste, elite lens and have systematically excluded the lives and agency of the subaltern, consequently reinforcing caste hegemony through historical silence. In response, literary narratives serve as a counter-archive for the lives of the oppressed. They are a means of recording the lives of those who have been marginalised and whose experiences have been ignored or dismissed by the official record; this is achieved by preserving the oral tradition and collective memory of the community. *Sangati* is in effect a collective autobiography of Paraiya women, tracing the lives of women across a number of eras to document the changing nature of work, education, and domestic life. In this sense, it provides a strong illustration of how fiction can be used to subvert the erasure of Dalit experience from history and assert the agency of the subaltern.

Mainstream criticism tends to reduce Dalit literature to the level of stories restricted to the topics of suffering and protest. While it is true that Bama's *Sangati* very much belongs in that tradition, it also goes far beyond these narrow limits to include so much more. Ultimately, it is a novel that succeeds in building a collective memory and a collective history, which it accomplishes through the use of oral testimony, humour, and work songs. As a celebration

of the life and energy of the Paraiya women, the text affirms the Paraiya women as self-aware agents with an active role in their own history. In a very direct challenge to the exclusion of Dalit lives from the mainstream historical narrative, *Sangati* reworks Indian history through the lens of the Paraya community. The way the text is structured across eras and the way it deals with caste violence positions Dalit literature as a radical intervention in both the writing of history and in the pursuit of social equality. Since the text comes out of the Dalit Panthers and the radical movements of that period, it serves as a complete subversion of the norm, with a particularly great emphasis on exposing the violence of caste and the need for Dalit liberation. To achieve this goal, the literary modes of testimony, autobiography, and fiction are all central to the recovery of marginalised realities. Dalit writing is a form of documentation for structural violence and survival, going from the individual to a collective counter-archive. *Sangati* weaves uniting personal recollections, oral stories, and folk songs together, deliberately eschewing the conventions of elite literature in favour of the subaltern dialect, humour, and frankness of the people.

Caste structures the very nature of daily labour, resources, and dignity. Paraiya women are paid less for their work, have restricted access to water, and are punished by the village councils. The novel is very much in the colonial and anti-caste tradition, in that it positions Dalit women as active participants in history rather than as mere victims. Dalit literature is in a very different ballpark than traditional Tamil literature, in that it uses spoken Dalit Tamil (kodu-Tamil) and raw speech as a means of resistance to caste-based hierarchy and patriarchy. As the scholars point out, *Sangati* in particular breaks down the art/politics divide and moves from the individual autobiography to a collective voice of the Paraiya women. Dalit women's testimonies turn personal struggle into a form of community resistance and form the basis of a Dalit feminist standpoint focused on examining the interaction of caste, class, and gender oppression. *Sangati* succeeds in reconstructing history across a number of generations through the use of oral forms and cultural practices, which in turn become a means of preserving memory and survival.

While the scholarship on *Sangati* has already documented its linguistic subversion and representation of dual oppression, much less has been written about its function as a form of multi-generational counter-historiography. In response to this deficit, the present article seeks to clarify how the transmission of collective memory and oral traditions turns Paraiya women into the very producers of history, and thus the very makers of Dalit history as a process, which is in constant contention and flux. *Sangati* is a multi-generational structure, which functions as an oral counter-archive, with the older women passing on caste memory through the media of story, song, and work. The novel demonstrates how memory of the past is reworked among generations, from the memory of surviving poverty to the memory of rights and political agency.

Since the narrative structure transitions from the child's point of view to the adult's analysis, it serves as a very clear illustration of how the Paraiya women become active agents. The character arcs are visible as well, from the midwives taking control of their own economic destiny and expressing their collective rage at injustice to the young women's labour and solidarity; all of these show women's journey from being passive objects to becoming active agents. Since the book re-frames spirit possession as a reaction to trauma and labour, the text makes it clear that the only way to be free is to have self-respect and to be in solidarity. Holmström's excellent translation keeps Bama's use of spoken Dalit Tamil intact, the rawness and rhythm of the language being essential to the novel's grounding in its cultural context. Subaltern terms and practices are all retained to ensure that the cultural context is protected, and the novel is properly situated within the wider Dalit and feminist movements for the international reader. *Sangati* avoids the false binary of reducing Dalit women to victims or heroes, instead emphasizing that survival is maintained through humour, wit, and the various forms of communal art. The very act of going about one's day is a form of endurance, asserting ethnic identity, and continuing to resist in the face of oppression.

As *Sangati* is structured across generations, the text functions as an oral counter-archive of caste memory. Vellaiyamma Paatti and Kizhavi are the principal keepers of the community's history, able to recount the food shortages of the past, as well as the Christian conversions and the migration of labourers. Caste memory is transmitted through the very act of labour, through oral tradition, and through folk songs. The older women are the ones who pass this knowledge on to the younger generation. The structure across the generations is very much one of a transition from mere survival to political consciousness and the assertion of labour rights.

The narrative of the novel turns the Paraiya women from passive objects into active agents. It charts the progression from child observation to adult critique, with the experience of living informing a political and social consciousness. Vellaiyamma Paatti is a case in point in terms of economic self-reliance and challenging injustice. The trial of Mariamma and the defiance of Sammuga Kizhavi are events which bring about a feeling of collective awareness. The process of de-mystifying spirit possession is inextricably linked to the trauma of the women and their

need for self-respect and alliance. The notion of counter-history is deployed to challenge the dominant archives, with community memory and oral tradition lying at the heart of the narrative. Ambedkarite thought underpins the novel's critique of caste as a system and informs the treatment of self-respect and collective action.

In the early chapters of *Sangati*, the most basic of physical survival activities – gathering firewood, fetching water, and foraging – are all bound up in caste terror. Paatti warns the narrator, as she's collecting fuel in the landowners' fields: "If an upper-caste fella claps eyes on you, you're done. They'll drag you off and rape you". A very basic moment of subsistence becomes a very acute moment of caste conflict when Mariamma, while resting with a bundle of firewood on her back, stops at a landlord's irrigation pump-set to have a drink of water. The landlord's man goes on to sexually assault her, and the village council (naattaamai) later fines her family, saying that Dalit women who go into upper-caste space "should think about what you are left with in your bellies". How does such policing of the situation reveal the social regulation of dignity and survival? By fencing off the roadside wells from “lower caste donkeys” and by using the very access to water and fuel as a weapon, the upper-caste landowners are in fact enforcing a state of total dependence for the subaltern. This example provides a very clear demonstration that caste is not merely some abstract notion of a person's attitude or some individual prejudice. It is a very real, material, and social structure with the power to determine who owns the land, who controls the life-sustaining resources, and whose bodies can be subjected to the most violent forms of exploitation in the absence of any institutional recourse.

Sangati completely rejects the traditional idea of a single hero, instead preferring to record the autobiography of a whole community. The text moves across the generations with the matriarchs like Vellaiyamma Paatti holding the memory of the past, as the women do the farm work and endure the patriarchy, while the younger women like Maikkanni do the work of the day. This narration style provides a structure which links the individual to the social. It is a story of enduring hardship and of the evolution of roles. While material deprivation is of course inherited, *Sangati* shows that the subaltern life is also the inheritance of a whole range of other things: negative realities, such as caste norms, bodily regulation, violence, and economic punishment on one hand, but also more positive realities, such as survival, defiance, and wit, on the other. The very structure of the generational life is a challenge to the idea that progress is the same as equality. Caste and gender hierarchies are not static, for they evolve and change, proving that real change requires a collective awakening.

In *Sangati*, collective memory functions as the vital link between the individual's experience of pain and the wider socio-political structures in which that pain is caught up. A singular event, such as Mariamma being unjustly tried by the village council or a woman having a spirit possession (pey), is not simply a personal misfortune. The grandmothers' recollections and the group’s collective memory work to de-mystify spirit possession by revealing it to be a physical and psychological response to the sheer physicality of people’s work, the trauma associated with that work, and the double oppression of caste and class. In response to these harsh realities, the community’s work songs, community meetings, and narration of stories all provide a space in which women can reflect on the ways in which caste, class, labour, and gender oppression all work together in their lives. By juxtaposing one’s individual memory with the grandmothers' memory of history and with the community’s Ambedkarite political reflections, the narrative turns the individual's experience of suffering into a joint counter-archive. As a result, the individual woman is no longer a passive victim of history: she is a historical subject who is conscious of the historical forces that have formed her life and is able to make sense of and to resist them. In Bama's *Sangati*, caste is not simply a system of ritual ranking. It is a system of material reality, which governs the extraction of labour, the very basis of survival and of social dignity. The novel exposes the way in which the economic exploitation and the sheer physicality of the work lie at the very foundation of caste hegemony. It is only by focusing on the daily lives of the Paraiya Dalit women that this is made so clear.

In *Sangati*, caste identity is a very rigid economic assignment which determines what a person is going to do from birth onwards. Having a Paraiya identity means being totally locked into a life of landless agricultural wage labour, as well as other sorts of dangerous manual labour, including working with dynamite in the fields, quarrying rubble, digging the deep irrigation wells, and other forms of difficult industrial labour. Dalit women, however, are forced to have a double burden of labour: both the arduous field work and the equally gruelling, unpaid domestic work of household upkeep and childcare. As the narrator points out, a woman's labour begins at cock-crow and it doesn't stop even when she comes home from the fields. A man's field work, however, does stop when he leaves the land. In addition, there are traditional duties which are assigned to Dalit women on the basis of caste rules regarding purity and pollution. The example provided in the text concerns the duties of the parachi (midwife), which are performed by people like Vellaiyamma Paatti. Paatti is expected to carry out all the deliveries in the village without any medical facilities, which she does safely nonetheless. The upper

caste households will not employ her at all, except in the most extreme of circumstances, because what she does is a highly stigmatised form of reproductive labour. There is systematic wage discrimination in the community, which reinforces the vulnerability of the caste. Women do all the field work, including transplanting paddy, weeding, and carrying the heavy firewood bundles, but they are paid a lower daily rate than men for the same or even *more* difficult work. As a result, they are coerced to remain perpetually stuck at the level of mere subsistence.

In the novel, livelihood is predicated on utter material precarity due to the state of complete landlessness which low-caste people are forced to endure. The very basics of life, such as land, water, fuel, and housing, are owned and controlled by the upper-caste landowners or the mudalali. The very act of going out to gather one's daily needs – for instance, brushwood, fallen fruit, and dry cow dung for fuel – make it necessary to repeatedly enter dangerous zones of intense caste conflict and possibly even violence. Paatti tells the young girls that if they go into the fields of the mudalali to collect brushwood, they will expose themselves to the threat of sexual assault at any moment. There are accounts of the most horrific famines in history, in which women would survive by winnowing the wild grass seeds collected from the ant hills and by boiling the cholam stalks to feed their starving children. In addition, water for drinking and for bathing is strictly segregated. The story of Sammuga Kizhavi leaping into the landlord's barbed wire-fenced well on the roadside just to bathe is a case in point of how the upper castes weaponize access to water into a tool of subaltern degradation.

The novel is very much about the fundamental contradiction in the structure of the Paraiya's labour. This contradiction is centred on the irony that although their very labour is what produces all of the agricultural wealth, food security, and infrastructure claimed by the dominant classes, the dominant classes have no compunction in denying the Dalit worker any basic human dignity. The Paraiya plough the fields, dig the canals, sweep the church grounds, harvest the crops, and so on. As Paatti puts it so starkly during the elections, without the Paraiya, the life of the upper caste would be "nothing but dust". Despite the fact that the naattaamai (village council), the upper caste landlords, and the Church all benefit from the labour of the subaltern, when Mariamma is sexually harassed by a man from the landlord's family at the pump-set, the naattaamai don't take action to punish the upper-caste man. They simply fine Mariamma's family. That is the nature of village justice. It is a system which uses economic sanctions to keep the subaltern at bay and to protect the property and dominance of the upper caste.

Bama is very clear that caste oppression can't be understood simply as an ideology or a set of cultural beliefs. It has to be understood in terms of the material mechanisms of oppression. The notions of ritual pollution, karma, and caste hierarchy are essentially just the surface-level ideology that covers up the underlying reality of material exploitation, providing a constant stream of cheap, dependent, and landless labour. The oppression is literally in the body: the dynamite blasts in the fields which go on to blind and kill young workers, the injuries the workers get from digging deep wells, the fumes in the match factories that affect children like Maikkanni, and the sheer physical exhaustion that leads to chronic stress in the community. By emphasizing these harsh realities, Sangati makes the point that liberation can only be achieved through land ownership, fair wages, access to education, and decent housing. One can't fight caste without also fighting the material monopolies that keep subalterns in a state of economic dependence and prevent them from becoming full citizens.

Sangati portrays caste as a material reality which determines work, survival, and dignity. The Paraiya identity entails a life of landlessness and, in the case of Dalit women, a life of both field and domestic labour. Since the traditional role of the Dalit woman as a midwife is looked down upon, women are subject to wage discrimination, which keeps them stuck at the level of mere subsistence. Livelihood for them means landlessness and the policing of resources by the upper-caste landowners. Getting access to the most basic things becomes a very dangerous proposition and is highly segregated along caste lines. Access to water, in particular, is used as a weapon to maintain the subaltern's degradation. Intergenerational accounts speak of famines and the ways in which women survived them. By emphasizing such things, Bama argues that caste oppression is not just an exclusively cultural phenomenon but a material one, maintained through economic exploitation and violence. For that reason, liberation can only be achieved through gaining land, fair wages, education, and housing, but all of this requires the destruction of the material monopolies that were established to prevent equal citizenship.

Bama's *Sangati* questions the usual distinction between individual testimony and collective history by moving from the "I" of the traditional autobiography to the "autobiography of the community". Instead of following a single heroic trajectory, the novel works through the lives of a number of different women among various Paraiya generations. The individual stories about personal traumas, such as Mariamma's unjust trial before the naattaamai or young women going through spirit possession, are offset by the more general observations of the grandmothers and the

narrator's own wider reflections. In this way, the private is made into a collective subaltern archive, which shows how the pain of the individual is embedded in the broader structures of caste and gender.

Sangati's very structure is a direct challenge to the erasure of Dalit lives from the mainstream historical record through a radical subversion of language and form. Bama completely eschews classical literary Tamil (sen-Tamil) and opts instead for the spoken Dalit Tamil (kodu-Tamil) of the community for both narrative and dialogue. She incorporates a range of oral forms into the novel: mourning songs (oppari), lullabies (rorattu), work songs (elappattu), the acerbic wit of the banter (killaakku), and the rawness of the spoken word. This is an alternative aesthetic which gives legitimacy to subaltern speech as a way of recording history. It is a direct challenge to the upper caste monopoly on historical truth, since it places the subaltern woman at the centre of the narrative. *Sangati* is not simply a record of the discrimination of wages, the lack of land, and the physical violence meted out to Dalit women. It is a record of their vitality, their truth, and their enjoyments. Their agency is not something that is simply inferred but is shown by acts of physical and verbal defiance. Sammuga Kizhavi leaping into the well owned by the landlord to claim her right to bathe is one particularly vivid example of this. Through gaining economic independence and taking pride in their work, they can hope to overcome constant and effective ridicule of the caste authorities and live their lives in states of resistance.

Works like Bama's *Sangati* have to be read as both creative literature and as radical interventions in the way history is written. As Dalit critics M. Kannan and François Gros have pointed out in "Tamil Dalits in Search of a Literature", subaltern literature destroys the distinction between pure art and political critique. The novels re-imagine history through the lens of the community's multi-generational narrative and, in doing so, they show how the archives of the upper castes have systematically erased the contribution of subaltern labour and struggle. They prove both that fiction can be a potent form of counter-archive and that the subaltern community is the real foundation of historical process. They transmit the techniques of survival, the memories of famine, and the memory of labour struggle across the matriarchal line. They are the product of the ongoing process of material deprivation, job segregation, and body policing by the upper-caste, landowning class and the village councils. They are subversive with regard to the formal grammatical norms of the language, preferring instead to create a collective oral aesthetic that is rooted in the spoken dialect (kodu-Tamil). They operate through the day-to-day work, through the sharp humour (killaakku) and folk songs of the people and through an uncompromising sense of self-respect. Likewise, *Sangati* makes a historic contribution to Dalit literary criticism, in that it establishes a Dalit feminist standpoint that serves as a framework for analysing the ways in which caste, class, labour, and gender oppression intersect with one another in the lives of subaltern women. It is important to recognise *Sangati*'s contribution without thereby treating the novel as a totalising representation of all Dalit experience. The subaltern reality is of course heterogeneous and varies from region to region, from language to language, from region to region, and from caste to caste.

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