

Unheard Voices: A Study of Bama's Sangati as a Narration of Cultural Violence

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Abstract

The voice of the writers in a work of art is important to the understanding of the works that they create. Bama is one of the very few voices of recognised Indian writers from communities that have been oppressed. Sangati is an autobiography of Bama which unfolds the culture of violence against women and the tribulations of women in her community. The present study ventures to explore the intricacies of women lives as a dalit and also examines the violence imposed on women's bodies as an embodiment of suppression from the prism of cultural violence. It further extends itself to trace the normalised and legitimised violence that a society permits to be exercised on its people.

Keywords: Dalits, Cultural Violence, Suppression, Domestic Violence.

INTRODUCTION

“Each caste is a social and cultural entity and is expected to remain so and to occupy a rank position commensurate with the culturally prescribed evaluation of its distinctive attribute”. (Berreman 355)

The Indian caste system is one of the biggest complicated social phenomena which is also asymmetric when it comes to gender. Though caste and sex are defined by birth, the emergence of caste and gender discrimination are seen as the result of anxiety of racial purity and superiority. The Indian caste system largely depends on Manusmriti for its class division. Indians were divided into four classes and most of the chapters are concerned with the life and purity of Brahmanical high caste. “The Untouchables or Ati-Shudras are called Avarnas, those who have no Varna. Logically, the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras are within the Chaturvarnya. Logically, the Untouchables or the Ati-Shudras are outside the Chaturvarnya.”(Ambedkar 36). Therefore the untouchables form the fifth varna called *avarna*, which was not originally developed by Manu.

In the annals of Indian history, dalits were referred to with different nomenclatures – like Chandalas, Avarnas, Achhuts, Namashudra, Parihas, Adi-Dravida, Ad-Dharmis, depressed classes, oppressed Hindus, Harijans, etc. – at different point of time. However, after the emergence of the Dalit Panther's movement in Maharashtra in the 1970s, they preferred to be called as dalits. (Kumar 516)

The present study employs the autobiography of a dalit woman writer. But Manusmriti, the law of dharma on which the Indian caste system leans for stratifying the society considers women as always dependent and contemptible by the society. A translation of *The Laws of Manu* by G. Bühler says,

In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband,
when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent. [v.5.148.]
She must not seek to separate herself from her father, husband, or sons; by
leaving them she would make both (her own and her husband's) families

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contemptible. [v.5.149.] (Bühler 83)

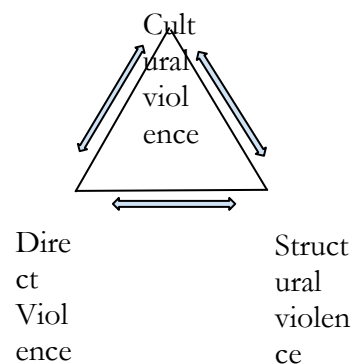
In the Indian mainstream society, the Indian women become the other to the Indian men, likewise a dalit woman becomes the other to the dalit men. In the society she was marginalized because of her caste and inside her home she was subjugated because of her gender. Therefore a dalit woman stands at the intersection of caste and gender. The patriarchy that works with the high caste people is being internalized by the dalit men in their own community, thereby forming the dalit patriarchy. “Dalit patriarchy not only exists in a powerful form, it often operates from within while keeping itself veiled under the larger notion of the dalit as a singular, fixed category where caste becomes the only determining factor of analysis.”(Still 35)

Though Manusmriti had only a few words on the low caste, this paper aims at studying the dalit community, the *avarnas*, which implements the laws of Manu in their own community by adding a few more laws or by cutting down a few at their own convenience and thereby dominates the women and uses violence as a cultural system. “The literature on Dalit women focuses on Brahmanical patriarchy but says little about the less visible (and more controversial) forms of domination exercised by Dalit men”(Still 16) and this paper explores the cultural violence in the family and in their own community through Galtung’s violence triangle.

The book taken for the study *Sangati* is an autobiography of a dalit woman, who narrates the life struggle of the women in her community. Dalits write autobiographies to form their own self identities which are marred by the imposed identities given by the society. “Dalit literary expression has thus continued in conjunction with dalit movements in unveiling the different ways caste oppression pervades contemporary India.” (Pan 69-70) Though dalit writings and dalit movements voiced the oppression faced by the dalits, the oppression faced by dalit women from their own men was never seen with mainstream feminism.

“Dalit woman: lacking in manners and refinement, unselfconscious, careless, indiscriminate, promiscuous, disorderly, and sexually rapacious and therefore in need of ‘civilisation’”. (Still 95) Therefore dalit women started writing to break the imposed stigma of her community women which declared her community women as impure, lustful and also about the oppression faced both by their caste and by their gender. Dalit women instead of creating their own identity, tend to bring the repressed or misrepresented identity of their community women. Bama’s *Sangati* is one such book in which Bama along with her story narrates the struggle of her community women who were mistreated by their own men and by the society in which she becomes the untouchable.

“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.” (9) And in every page, the reader is only introduced to different guises of cultural violence. Johan Galtung, a pioneer cultural violence theorist, defines cultural violence as “ any aspect of a culture that can be used to legitimize violence in its direct or structural form”(Galtung 291). He also proposes a violence strata image in the form of a triangle. The three heads of the triangle are direct violence, structural violence and cultural violence. Galtung proposes that all the three are interconnected and they become the source of each other.



Galtung describes direct violence as an event where the violence directly takes place like Holocaust and war. He calls structural violence as a process like exploitation and the cultural violence as an invariant performance which has remained the same for a longer time. A culture when it internalizes violence as a way of their living then it becomes cultural violence. "There are linkages and causal flows in all six directions, and cycles connecting all three may start at any point." (Galtung 295) Though the flow happens in all the six directions, the present study focuses on seeing the flow from culture through structure which in turn produces direct violence.

...a causal flow from cultural via structural to direct violence can be identified. The culture preaches, teaches, admonishes, eggs on, and dulls us into seeing exploitation and repression as normal and natural, or into not seeing them (particularly not exploitation) at all. Then come the eruptions, the efforts to use direct violence to get out of the structural iron cage and counter-violence to keep the cage intact. (Galtung 295)

In Bama's *Sangati*, all the three forms of violence are seen interrelated and are intricate. Since India is divided on caste and the high caste treated the dalits as untouchables because dalits were believed to be dirty, stinking and unclean. "Dalit *palli* is just an extension of the Dalit body: dirty and disordered... For outsiders, the *palli* in all its sensuously imagined stench and disease is a symbol of Dalits themselves." (Still 85) Where *palli* is the place restricted for the dalits to live. They always strived for a better identity which means otherwise. "Since Dalits have been seen for generations as uncivilised people, lacking in 'culture' and ignorant of the proper way of doing things, this is seen as an important step towards recognition and acceptance in society at large." (Still 4) Though Indian dalits have their own tradition, they also try to replicate a few of the high caste culture and tradition believing that those practices of the high caste would make them a better society. But if the customs of the dalit society is analyzed, they do not follow the culture of the high caste rigidly. They bend and turn the customs and tradition to suit their lifestyle.

"While upper-caste women spend time drawing elaborate *moogu* patterns at the entrance of their houses after finishing the morning's cleaning, Dalit women only do so in a cursory manner." (Still 86). Clarinda Still in her book *Dalit Women*, explains that dalit women forcefully follow some of the culture and tradition of the high caste to gain reputation in the society. Diwali, a festival of the high caste, was also celebrated by the dalits. The wedding ceremony of the dalits are rich with their own tradition. And there are other customs and traditions that the dalits infringe for their convenience. One example is widow remarriage about which dalits themselves are very proud. A few broad minded amendments in lifestyle and culture could be seen in dalit community but at the same time one could also see widespread cultural violence which results in direct violence.

Since this research paper mainly focuses on the violence inside a family, the direct violence is also looked at as domestic violence. "Domestic violence is any physical, sexual, or psychological abuse that people use against a former or current intimate partner." ("Domestic Violence") Most women suffer direct violence from their intimate partners which does not mean that the fathers or brothers of the family do not use violence against the women in their family.

Though the superior male ideology is the main cause of the domestic violence in the dalit families, the deprivation of their need is another reason of violence with which the male society tends to add women's purity which is something to be safeguarded.. "Violence is needs-deprivation; needs-deprivation is serious; one reaction is direct violence" (Galtung 295)

One main cause of the direct violence on dalit women from their men can also be considered as a need deprivation. A need for basic respect from the society or precisely from their employer and a need for a place to vent their sufferings. "The Dalit colonies are distinguishable from the rest of the village by their poverty. They have fewest facilities, the smallest roads and the most ramshackle houses." (Still 45) Dalit colonies are identified by their poverty and dalit men were frustrated as they were incapable of providing for their family. Dalit men who do not own any land of their own usually go for work in the high caste farm or factories where he is treated as untouchable by his employers. He is also abused verbally and physically. Beating their wives gives them a sense of power over their wives which compensates their powerlessness in the society. Therefore beating their family women is found to be a coping mechanism for men.

Dalit women's work in industry has eroded Dalit men's 'provider' role and in response, Dalit male youth attempt to reassert their domination in other ways: by taking their mothers' and sisters' factory-work earnings to fund consumption habits, by controlling and surveying women's movements, and by beating them if they suspect them of misdemeanor. (Still 164)

In many dalit families the women suffered direct violence like beating and kicking almost everyday. The husbands believed that they had the right to beat their wives, so that the wife behaves well. "She is my wife. I can beat her or kill her as I wish."(43) And women tend to tolerate all the violence because dalit community believes that it is their culture to respect their husbands and to tolerate the abuses.

"Dalit men think that women should have a fearful respect for their husbands. Since this is rare in practice, they must use a firm hand to keep women in check"(Still 172) However it is also seen in the Manusmriti that it is the foremost duty of any wife to respect and worship her husband. "Though destitute of virtue, or seeking pleasure (elsewhere), or devoid of good qualities, (yet) a husband must be constantly worshiped as a god by a faithful wife. [v.5.154.]" (Bühler 84) Respecting and worshiping even the abusive husband is feigned to be the culture of Indian society, therefore the men of the dalit community exercise direct violence which in turn becomes the structure of the society soon to form a culture of violence.

"A wife, a son, a slave, a pupil, and a (younger) brother of the full blood, who have committed faults, may be beaten with a rope or a split bamboo, [v.8.299.]" (Bühler 136) The law given to the high caste people states that a husband can beat his wife to correct or to tame her. This right to beat one's wife was taken by the dalit men and they made it a custom to beat their wives whenever they wanted to feel their superiority over their women. Dalit men think that their women are dumb and therefore these women were never brought in for a discussion whenever a decision has to be made.

Unlike the high caste men, dalit men are deprived of the headship of the family mainly because dalit women work and take care of the families while most of the men in their families spend their money on drinking. In *Sangati*, Bama narrates the story of a eleven year old girl Maikkanni who is "so small and shrunken" (69). Maikkanni was the eldest of the five children and she happens to take care of the children when her mother delivers another baby and when her mother gets well, she goes for work to a match factory. But all her money is robbed by her own drunkard father. "Perimma, my Ayya beat me today because I took a rupee out of my wages and spent it".(71) She calls her own father respectfully as 'ayya' because a man is considered superior and the head of the family.

Violence was a weapon used by most men in the dalit community to establish their superiority. Abusing their wives is direct violence but when repeated it becomes structural violence, forming a pattern of oppression which indirectly teaches the society that even though they earn for their living and take care of the family, the headship and decision making are still in the men's hand which ends up as the culture of violence. "...and all this torture because she caught some crabs from the wet fields and made a curry and ate it before he came home for his meal."(30) Bama's grandmother gives her the story of Anantamma, a pregnant lady who was beaten and kicked by her husband because she ate before her husband. Eating before her husband is treated as a kind of disrespect to her husband. And she silently received the blows as she also believes that what she did was wrong. Even though she was pregnant, she was not spared. That is how violent the dalit men are when they try to fix their wives.

This tradition of accepting the violence from their husband has been their culture of being the husband and the wife. Bama makes this clear by the game she played in her childhood called '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, saying, '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 and fun."(31) Children who were grown seeing the difficult and abusive relationship of their parents see those abuses as the way of living and incorporate the same in the games where they get to live their future. Thus the direct violence instituted by the dalit men on their women forms a structure and pattern to be followed by the generations to come and thus making it as their cultural violence.

Bama gives realistic examples of the structure and pattern of violence prevalent in her community. When she was resentful of this discrimination even in her childhood, her grandmother retorted “Do you think it’s been like this just yesterday or today? Hasn’t all this been written about in the books as well, haven’t you read about it?”(29) When Bama pestered her more about the book which her grandmother mentioned, she did not get any proper answer. When Bama’s grandmother mentioned the book, it must be a book of law because she adds that the male domination and oppression of women is considered a natural phenomenon or a complexity built by the law of the society. Though she was unsure of the book, she was sure of legalization of violence on women by men.

It is the nature of women to seduce men in this (world); for that reason the wise are never unguarded in (the company of) females. [v.2.213.]...(When creating them) Manu allotted to women (a love of their) bed, (of their) seat and (of) ornament, impure desires, wrath, dishonesty, malice, and bad conduct. [v.9.17.] For women no (sacramental) rite (is performed) with sacred texts, thus the law is settled; women (who are) destitute of strength and destitute of (the knowledge of) Vedic texts, (are as impure as) falsehood (itself), that is a fixed rule. [v.9.18.](Buhler 97)

The scriptures of other high castes believe that women are nothing but an unintelligent seductress who should be tamed so that she could be a helper to the man. The same was reciprocated in dalit society, though dalit women work very hard to feed their children and to take care of their family, they were always marginalized as the other, the unintelligent by the dalit men. This was so strong that even the dalit women were part of this structural discrimination and oppression. The discrimination between men and women which is evidently a structural violence is seen right from the childhood of the female children. Bama writes,

When they are infants in arms, they never let the boy babies cry. If a boy baby cries, he is instantly picked up and given milk. It is not so with the girls. Even with breast-feeding, it is the same story; a boy is breast-fed longer. With girls, they wean them quickly, making them forget breast. If the boys catch illness or fever, they will run around and nurse them with greatest care. If it’s a girl, they’ll do half-heartedly.(07)

A girl child was unwelcomed in the dalit houses but when the family is analyzed it is only the girl child who works hard for the family. Like in the case of Maikkanni, there are so many other girl children who were swindled of their childhood saying that it is the duty of any girl child to help the family while the boy children can wind away their time by playing games on the streets. “In our streets girls hardly ever enjoy a period of childhood. Before they can sprout three tender leaves, so to speak, they are required to behave like young women, looking after the housework, taking care of babies, going to work for daily wages.”(75) On the other hand Bama remarks “...you’ll see that it’s only the boys who can be seen at play”(78)

Another structural violence experienced by the dalit women is evidently seen in the workplace. Especially when a dalit woman works in the fields of the upper caste men, they are paid low and many a times become the victim of sexual assaults. The aggression of the structural violence is evident when the victim is blamed for the assault and all the time the high caste men are found innocent. Furthermore, when dalit women are brought to the village court on sexual assaults, it is always the women who are supposed to pay more fine than the men. Bama speaks of her own cousin named Mariamma.

Though Mariamma escaped the assault from a wealthy landlord, she was accused by the landlord as explicitly having an affair with a man from her own community. The village court summoned both Mariamma and the boy who is supposed to be in an affair with Mariamma. She did not try to bring the landlord’s name to the court because her whole community depends on these wealthy people for their livelihood.

“Suppose these fellows go and question upper caste men. What if those rich men start a fight, saying, how dare these paraiyar be so insolent? Who do you think is going to win? Even if the mudalali was really at fault, it is better to keep quiet about it and fine these two eighty or hundred.”(25)

Mariamma was forced to fall in the village heads’ legs and beg for pardon. She was beaten to a pulp by her father and finally, the village court fined her hundred and the accused boy fifty. The landlord, to safeguard his name,

spoiled the whole life of a young girl and he was never guilty. Later she was given in marriage to the same boy who was a drunkard and she had a miserable life. "From the time she was married, Mariamma suffered blows and kicks and beatings everyday,..."(42)

In the same story of Mariamma, it is only the women of their community who know the truth. There was even a witness who saw the landlord trying to abuse her. But the men hushed them down saying "Will you she-donkeys get out of here or do we have to stamp on you?"(23)

Women were seen as the embodiment of the culture of that community to which they belong. A woman's purity is considered as the pride of her family. "To a certain extent, honour is malleable. However, one aspect (women's respectability) seems to be fundamental. This has to do with the role of women as key markers of group identity..."(Still 214) And the purity of their blood and the honor of their women are preserved by endogamy. Endogamy marriage which tries to safeguard the purity of the blood has been advocated by Manusmriti.

It is declared that a Sudra woman alone (can be) the wife of a Sudra, she and one of his own caste (the wives) of a Vaisya, those two and one of his own caste (the wives) of a Kshatriya, those three and one of his own caste (the wives) of a Brahmana. [v.3.13.]... A Brahmana who takes a Sudra wife to his bed, will (after death) sink into hell; if he begets a child by her, he will lose the rank of a Brahmana. [v.3.17.]The manes and the gods will not eat the (offerings) of that man who performs the rites in honor of the gods, of the manes, and of guests chiefly with a (Sudra wife's) assistance, and such (a man) will not go to heaven. [v.3.18.] (Bühler 39)

Manusmriti's elaborate law of marriage states that a Sudra should only marry a Sudra. The law for a brahmin clearly states that Sudras are the lowest of the four varna. Inside the dalit community, they followed the law of safeguarding the purity of their blood very rigidly when it comes to their women. A man was allowed to marry a woman of his choice even outside his community but a dalit woman should strictly marry only within her community. Bama narrates an incident in which a woman fell in love with another caste man and was tormented by her own brothers and by her father. She was locked at home for months but she managed to marry the love of her life and started living in another village.

"In our streets there are men who have married girls from other castes and other villages and who live together happily...But if a girl does it, it's terrible"(109) Here the violence flows from the structure to the direct violence in the name of culture. But the same cultural heritage is never questioned when a man marries outside his caste mainly because, the woman will bear the child of the dalit man but in case of dalit women, if she marries the other caste man, then she becomes the bearer of another caste man's child.

One of the other discriminations is that dalit women are prohibited from wearing a blouse. "In the past, Dalit women were forbidden from wearing blouses and jewelry since these were markers of high status and men could not wear shoes through the uru." (Still 101) Though it was not enforced in Bama's time, she had never seen her grandmother wearing one. "Nor did I ever see Paatti wearing a chattai, a sari- blouse. Apparently, in her times, lower- caste women were not allowed to wear them."(4-5) To clothe and cover one's shame is the basic right of human beings but dalit women were prohibited to cover their upper body because that was considered a privilege to a woman who was born in high caste. A structural violation and discrimination taxed on dalit women because of the caste system.

Dalits, the outcast of the Indian caste system hurriedly converted into christianity in search of a better identity but never found one. "Why on earth paraiyas alone became Christians, I don't know, but because they did so at that time; now it works out that they get no concessions from the government whatsoever."(05) In India the cultural violence that are experienced by the dalit community is largely due to the class division. Though direct violence is reduced by the intervention of law, structural violence of discrimination is evident.

In August 2022, Indra Meghwal, a Dalit student from Surana village of Rajasthan's Jalore district, was beaten to death by his teacher reportedly for merely touching a drinking water pot. A similar death of a Dalit man occurred in Rajasthan's Jodhpur district in November 2022 — Kishanlal Bheel was thrashed for drawing water from a tubewell. (Waghre)

Oppression and violence demonstrated on dalits in today's India can be listed long, the above one cited describes the untouchability which is still ubiquitous in India. Water is a basic necessity and people are violently abused and murdered for the mere act of trying to satisfy their basic needs. These murders are direct violence caused by the structure created by the culture of their society. Though the Jal Jeevan Mission, a project to bring water to every citizen of India, especially to the people in rural regions is launched, no mission or project is launched to eradicate the discrimination and violence caused in the name of caste.

Though India was under the Britishers for more than a century, the Britishers left the caste system to stay intact. The reforms brought by the Britishers left the caste system untouched conveniently so that they can divide and rule the nation. After Independence, India celebrated its victory and the spirit of nationalism forgetting that every individual should be free from the clutches of oppression.

Today dalit women are educated, they work and they have support from the government. But *Sangati*, was set in a time where dalits were the outcasts. Though one could see dalit men and women empowering themselves, the caste system in India still sees them as dalits. Even there are some remote villages in India where the dalits are still oppressed. The caste system of India can be seen as a source of cultural violence. Galtung's violence triangle is seen in the dalit family and community. Galtung himself proposes a solution for this cultural violence and calls it the triangle of peace.

This triangular syndrome of violence should then be contrasted in the mind with a triangular syndrome of peace in which cultural peace engenders structural peace, with symbiotic, equitable relations among diverse partners, and direct peace with acts of cooperation, friendliness and love. It could be a virtuous rather than vicious triangle, also self-rein-forcing. (Galtung 302)

Many reformers like Dr. Ambedkar tried to end endogamy and even went to the point of burning Manusmriti. But burning books will only agitate the populace and the remedial measures taken would help the survival of the community but equality comes only with compassion, therefore one cannot use violence against another human being. There is also evidence of high caste people being compassionate to other communities and who treat every other human being equally. One such example would be Abdul Kalam's science teacher Sivasubramania Iyer. Though he belonged to an orthodox high caste, he motivated Kalam in reaching heights. The same compassion, love and friendliness when evolved in a family the culture of violence can be altered.

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