TOWARDS A DALIT FEMINIST AESTHETIC WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO SANGATI: EVENTS

My mother told me that in our village, they didn’t make any difference between boys and girls at birth. But as they raised them, they were more concerned about the boys than the girls. She said that’s why boys went about bossing over everyone.

(Bama 3)\(^1\)

Thus begins Sangati: Events (Henceforth Sangati). Published in Tamil in 1994, Sangati is written by a Dalit woman called Faustina Bama. In fact this is the second work of Bama whose earlier work Karukku focuses mostly on Bama’s experiences of untouchability and exclusion. Sangati which can be termed as an “autobiography of a community” (Bama xv)\(^2\) chiefly delineates the collective struggle of Dalit women of Bama’s paraiya\(^3\) community against caste as well as gender based discriminations. The above-mentioned opening sentences unambiguously emphasizing on the domination of Dalit male members reveal the fact that Bama’s purpose here is to take up
gender issues and analyze them from the standpoint of Dalit feminism. This becomes evident as Bama in the Preface to *Sangati* writes:

> Oppressed, ruled, and still being ruled by patriarchy, government, caste, and religion, Dalit women are forced to break all the strictures of society to live. In *Sangati*, many strong Dalit women who had the courage to break the shackles of authority, to propel themselves upwards, to roar (their defiance) changed their difficult, problem-filled lives and quickly stanched their tears. *Sangati* is a look at a part of the lives of those Dalit women who dared to make fun of the class in power that oppressed them. And through this, they found the courage to revolt.

*(Bama vii)*

The urge to live happily with their heads held high and not to “curl up and collapse” *(Bama vii)* is the message that Bama wants to convey to her readers and in my opinion, this is a bold statement that Bama makes with a clear specific feminist agenda in mind. In fact, I have already discussed about the distinct presence of a feminist consciousness in the writings of many Dalit women writers across the country. But are we, the readers and critics, ideologically equipped enough to read them as Dalit feminist texts? Is there any literary-critical framework that guides us to locate feminist attributes in Dalit woman’s writings? Is there any need to demand for a Dalit feminist aesthetic? These questions seem relevant in a context where debates over the issue of building an aesthetic of Dalit literature have already been raised.

Sharan Kumar Limbale in his book *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: Histories, Controversies and Considerations* (Translated by Alok Mukherjee) discusses this issue quite elaborately. Dalit literature has so far been largely analyzed by savarna critics who have
employed the yardsticks of classical aesthetic tradition devised by Sanskrit literature and hence have always found Dalit writings artistically or technically ordinary. (Limbale 108) 7 Apart from accusing Dalit literature of lacking literary merit, the proponents of dominant aesthetic theory also charged Dalit writers of being “divisive and sectarian, using disrespectful and offensive language towards Hindu divinities and revered figures, and engaging in distortions of pre and post-independence Indian history.” (Limbale viii) 8 Often a considerable amount of criticism is leveled against the artistic quality of Dalit writers and the literary worth of their experiences. According to N.S. Phadke, “The kinds of contexts and events that are needed to add colour to a novel are not found in Dalits’ lives.” (Phadke qtd. in Limbale 108). 9 In Balkrishna Kawthekar’s opinion, Dalit literature “must be assessed on the basis of traditional critical theories. There are universal values embedded in literature, which never change.” (Limbale 106) 10 However, Limbale, justifiably argues against such universalization of aesthetic criteria and defying this practice of “cultural dictatorship” (Limbale 107) 11 he questions the capability of the traditional critical theory to understand and interpret the nuances of Dalit expressions. Labeling the Hindu aesthetic concept of “satyam (the true), shivam (the sacred), sundaram (the beautiful)” as “selfish mechanism of upper caste Hindu society” (Limbale 21)12, Limbale replaces it with a more socially and materially relevant aesthetic concept that proclaims: “Human beings are first and foremost human-this is satyam./ The liberation of human beings is shivam./ The humanity of human beings is sundaram.” (Limbale 22) 13 His voice of defiance marks a striking change that defines the contemporary Dalit consciousness. Understanding the impossibility of ignoring the Dalit Other any further, the Brahmanical literature, in Limbale’s opinions, gave up its earlier stance of exclusion and followed a politically correct policy of including Dalit experiences within the ambit of mainstream literature with rhetoric of sympathy and compassion. But certainly this shift in stance from “erasure to containment” (Limbale 5) 14 has turned out inadequate to appease the growing
rebellious spirit of the Dalit community. Despite the fact that most of the critical writings on Dalit literature are written by upper-caste intelligentsia, a sharp denial of the *savarna* perspective is observed among Dalit writers. Daya Pawar in a personal discussion with Sharan Kumar Limbare during the 65th All India Marathi Sahitya Sammelan at Kolhapur on 31 January, 1991 said:

Critics neither understand the description of social context in Dalit literature, nor fully grasp the meaning of language. They do not know idioms and phrases. Nor does anyone read in depth. No one ever makes the effort to understand. Critics don’t even seem to realize that we live in a different cultural island. They pay no attention to the distinction between a literature written from imagination and one that is based on lived ideas.

(Pawar qtd. in Limbare 112)\(^{15}\)

A similar discontent is also heard in Uttam Bandhu Tupe’s voice while he says: “Critics destroyed my autobiographical book on Matang society.” (Tupe qtd. in Limbare 112)\(^{16}\) This note of disappointment and annoyance over the mis/appropriation of Dalit texts by high caste, educated critics has its origin in the deep-rooted belief that the advantageous social location of these *savarna* critics renders them incapable of feeling the pain of marginalized lives and the trauma of their experiences. Therefore, the question that is often asked is how can an aesthetic principle primarily based on abstract ideas reflect the harsh realities of the social and material conditions of Dalit lives? Referring to the notion of aestheticism prevalent in the context of Marathi literature, Limbare observes that the mainstream aesthetic principles recognize pleasure born of beauty as a primary aesthetic value. He questions how this traditional concept of aestheticism which is abstruse and spiritualistic be relevant in the context of Dalit literature? How can beauty be defined in terms of abject reality of Dalit lives which is the mainstay of Dalit literature? Limbare feels that
the beauty and therefore the goodness of a Dalit work of art reside in its power of awakening Dalit consciousness in the reader. He asserts:

> The literature that promotes equality, freedom and justice is revolutionary, and it emphasizes the centrality of the human being and society. If pleasure-giving literature arouses joy and sympathy in people, revolutionary literature awakens consciousness of self-respect.

(Limbale 119)  

This difference of opinion clearly suggests that the aesthetic ideals set by the mainstream critical theory are insufficient and ineffectual to comprehend the totality of Dalit experiences. Instead of pleasure, Dalit criticism prefers to view freedom as an aspect to measure aesthetic value. However, there are also other reasons for Dalit literature to ask for an aesthetic tradition of its own. Pointing out the absence of Dalit criticism by Dalit writers, Limbale informs that most of the critical writings which are produced by non-Dalit writers on Dalit literature are not always accurate and truthful. According to him, a good number of high caste critics lacks depth of understanding and there is also a tendency among them to promote those literary pieces that are partial, monotonous and not of high standard. He also complains that attempts are often made by savarna critics to sever the connection between Dalit writers and their tradition and culture. Moreover, the unavailability of Dalit literature in English translation as well as the absence of sociological and literary yardsticks frustrates the possibility of a proper evaluation of this literature. All these arguments hint at the necessity of building a separate Dalit aesthetic tradition. Limbale’s concern sounds justified when he says: “Much of Dalit literature is to be found in the regional languages and has to be translated into English on a massive scale. An entire pool, a huge stream, will have to be created, and debate should be provoked.” (Limbale 149)  

In a multi-
lingual country like India, Dalit literature, if it wishes to create a wider impact, should certainly focus more on finding opportunities for being translated into English. Besides, Dalit writings should also force its way into academia and be a part of the dominant intellectual exercise since it is through the control of the ideological space that the oppositional consciousness of the Dalits can be more meaningfully pronounced. A separate Dalit aesthetic tradition, then, will be absolutely necessary as it would enable Dalit literature to etch a distinct Dalit identity in the mainstream intellectual circle which otherwise will silence Dalit voices or continue to misrepresent the complicated facets of Dalit lives.

Hence, Limbale in *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: Histories, Controversies and Consideration* suggests an aesthetic framework for Dalit literary writings which would provide us with critical tools to decode a Dalit text. What is understood from Limbale’s attempt is that a Dalit and/or a non-Dalit reader/critic should be familiar with some salient features of Dalit literature which are essential for its proper evaluation. First and foremost, a reader should remember that Dalit literature upholds the collective experiences of a community’s trauma and resistance. Instead of focusing on an individual’s personal sorrows, this literature encompasses an entire community’s history of marginalization. Hence, proper justice will never be done to a Dalit literary work if it is read from the critical angle of the standard, mainstream literature which prioritizes the perspective of an individual rather than that of a community. Similarly, a significant aspect of Dalit literature is the theme of suffering caused by caste based discriminations prevalent in Hindu-dominated Indian society. Humiliation of exclusion and the pain of oppression have always been an inextricable part of Dalit lives. While practices of untouchability and ex-communication are not so vividly apparent in present day India as it was even a century ago, the incidents of brutal violence perpetrated upon Dalits for flouting caste-
norms are not infrequently reported from different parts of the country. Though a significant portion of urban Dalit population has been able to improve their social and economic conditions yet a large number of them is still remaining under poverty line and living a miserable existence. A Dalit aesthetic framework, therefore, cannot claim credibility if instead of recognizing the anguish of Dalit community as a measuring yardstick it wastes its energy in contemplating the pleasure derived from beauty. Limbale writes: “If pleasure is the basis of the aesthetics of Marathi savarna literature, pain or suffering is the basis of the aesthetics of Dalit literature.” (Limbale 114-15) 19 At the same time, one should also be sufficiently aware of the intricate nature of caste as a social category. If this is not set as a criterion for evaluation, the theme of suffering may be interpreted from the perspective of class inequality resulting in a complete effacement of the caste issue from the social, economic and political structures of the country. Again, an understanding of Dalit literature requires a reader’s ability to comprehend the value of lived experiences in the life of a Dalit community. This literature is not an imaginative projection of an artist’s mind. It, rather, grows out of the experiences of bitter reality seen, felt and lived by Dalit people whose close encounter with the hardships of life not only help them be aware of their ignominious existence but also provide them enough impetus to stand up against the conspiracies of an unjust social system. It is this aspect of Dalit literature which not merely presents a rough, uncut picture of harsh reality but also initiates an intense intellectual debate over such issues as truth-claim and identity politics. While on the one hand, a Dalit literary work’s allegiance to nothing but the whole truth, ensures a wider acceptability of the narrative; on the other, it raises a debate over the authenticity of the voice of a non-Dalit scholar/ writer/ critic since her/ his lack of experience is deemed to be a shortcoming in narrating the bare truths of Dalit lives. In short, the question of a non-Dalit writer’s ‘eligibility’ to write / theorize about Dalits becomes a controversial issue in the context of experiential privileges that the Dalits are entitled to have. How can, then, we forget to
include experience as a specific measuring tool to understand its unique impact over Dalit literature as well as Dalit politics? Another important aspect which is associated with this dilemma over ‘eligibility’ is what may be termed as Dalit consciousness. According to some Dalit writers and thinkers, the scope of Dalit literature is vast and is marked by the presence of Dalit consciousness. Limbale, during an interview with his translator Alok Mukherjee, strongly asserts that Dalit literature is one which “…concerns Dalits, which is inspired by the Dalit movement, and which is conscious of the ideas of Phule and Ambedkar.” (Limbale 126)  

Elaborating it further he insists that “…even when a Dalit writer is writing about a Dalit subject, the work cannot be called Dalit literature if it presents the subject in a cheap, popular way. It must contain Ambedkar’s thought, the thought that teaches Dalits the feeling of self-respect and the language of rights and entitlements.” (Limbale 126)  

A similar thought is expressed by Tamil Dalit ideologue Raj Gauthaman who believes that being born as Dalit is not the only criterion to become a Dalit writer. Explaining his argument further he says: “…it is also possible for Dalits to become so attuned to upper-class attitudes that they have lost their sense of themselves and may even write as enemies of Dalits. By the same token, it is possible for those who were not born as Dalits to write about Dalits if they truly perceive themselves as Dalit.” (Gauthaman qtd. in Holmström xiv)  

Thus it is very clear that the ‘Dalitness’ of a Dalit literary work depends upon the level of Dalit consciousness and also on the social commitment of a Dalit writer. Responsibility of a Dalit writer towards her/his community is a hallmark of Dalit writing and hence these aspects should be considered as significant features of Dalit aesthetics.

A striking difference between the mainstream aesthetics and the Dalit aesthetics is that the cause of human liberation does not occupy a major position in savarna literature while centrality of human being is a primary requisite for the conception of a Dalit literary work. Dalit writers,
owing to their experiences of deprivation and rejection are intensely vocal about the denial of such basic human values as liberty, equality and dignity and it is this respect for humanity that endows Dalit literature with the capacity to connect with other oppressed communities across the world. A Dalit critic should set this particular feature as a measuring standard since a reader’s awareness of this global aspect of Dalit literature will help her/him reject the false charges of savarna critics who think that Dalit literature is a monotonously repetitive, univocal, propagandist body of writing rooted in the quagmire of local petty politics. Limbale also reinforces the need for understanding the revolutionary aspect of Dalit literature. One major purpose of this literature, as suggested by Raj Gauthaman, is to “…set out to outrage, by choosing as subject matter, the lifestyles of Dalits, who by definition, stand outside caste-proprieties … ‘Dalit literature describes the world differently, from a Dalit perspective. Therefore it should outrage and even repel the guardians of caste and class. It should provoke them into asking if this is indeed literature.’” (Gauthaman qtd. in Holmström xii)23 But unfortunately most of the upper-caste critics ignore this subversive voice embedded in the very structure of Dalit writings and tend to depict Dalit women and men as helpless creatures devoid of any agency to assert their distinct identity. This distorted image has become so popular that the readers are hardly aware of the rebellious zeal of the Dalit community reflected through the writings of Dalit authors. Hence keeping the politics of representation in mind, Limbale demands that an aesthetic of Dalit literature should incorporate both trauma and revolt as critical lenses through which a Dalit’s reality should be viewed and interpreted. However, Limbale’s suggestion of setting Dalit language as a parameter for analyzing a Dalit text certainly adds a new dimension to the Dalit aesthetic approach. It cannot be denied that the harshness of their experiences loses its edge if events of rural Dalit lives are narrated in a refined, grammatically sanitized, urban, artificial, sophisticated language. On the contrary, the spoken language of rural Dalit people which is often deemed as uncouth or impolite does properly
express the myriad moods of Dalit experiences. This so called unchaste language that contains a
plethora of colloquial expressions, idioms, proverbs and slangs culled from various Dalit dialects
truly brings the earthy smell of a life lived at the grassroots level. However, according to
Gauthaman, the explicit purpose of Dalit language is to “…disrupt received modern (upper-caste)
language proprieties, and to ‘expose and discredit the existing language, its grammar, its
refinements, and its falsifying order as symbols of dominance.’” (Gauthaman qtd. in Holmström
xiii) 24 Therefore, a critical emphasis on the need for the use of an ‘unprintable’ language to suit
an ‘inappropriate’ subject matter is essential for annihilating caste prejudices deeply entrenched in
the minds of the upper caste readers. Finally, Limbale points out how Dalit writers’ attempts to
facilitate alternative, subversive readings of traditional texts can enable this literature to set its
own identity as a form of resistance narrative. An apt example of this is found in the re-writing of
traditional epics and myths from the perspective of the dislocated and dispossessed. Generally
speaking, the traditional renderings of the stories of Indian myths and epics foreground the Hindu
Aryan values as chief ideals to be emulated by the society. These ‘standard’ versions of epics
always portray the people of low-caste communities in a derogatory manner. Their ‘degraded’
stature is marked by their use of Prakrit which is viewed as an ‘inferior’ language devoid of the
elegance of Sanskrit—the language of the Brahmins and other upper castes. Hence the mainstream
literature which is primarily influenced by the values of high castes can never do justice to Dalit
characters. Thus Rama—the high caste Hindu God who killed Shambuka, a low-caste character in
Ramayana can never be a heroic figure for a Dalit reader. Contemporary Dalit writers are aware
of the political implications of the ideological invasion of Hindu culture and hence they have
engaged themselves in re-reading and re-writing these texts having Dalit characters as
protagonists of the narratives. This act of inversion is an act of defiance. It is, indeed, a gesture of
protest against the oppressive religious symbols. It is therefore, not a matter of surprise that in
Dalit writings, Shambuka instead of Rama and Eklavya instead of Arjuna appear as heroes and harbingers of a new world. This literary technique of subverting the given structure for writing a new history of the subaltern should be an essential parameter to appreciate a Dalit text and to show its ability to conceive a better world by annihilating the rotten, unequal Hindu social structure. Limbale writes:

Dalit critics have encouraged Dalit writers to construct new myths instead of using the existing symbols and metaphors of Hindu sacred literature. When the Dalit writers did employ religious symbols, it was to deconstruct them, infusing them with new meaning and purpose.

(Limbale 34)

Limbale’s arguments reinforce Dalit literature’s purpose of re-shaping the popular notion of literature. Critics M. Kannan and Francois Gros measuring Dalit literature on the basis of certain conventional assumptions of what literature should/should not be criticize it for consisting of “testimonies rather than works of imagination, chronicles rather than artistically conceived texts, lived experiences rather than poetic experimentation, and finally a call for action rather than the conversion of life into art.” (Holmström xxi) But interestingly, it is this traditional definition of literature that Dalit writers always attempted to defy. In fact, their denial of being subsumed within the classical aesthetics of dominant literature is what motivated a critic like Limbale to propose a new Dalit critical aesthetic framework.

However, Limbale’s aesthetic framework despite its strong arguments remains conspicuously silent about the need for developing a Dalit feminist critical perspective in order to understand the precarious location of Dalit women in this caste-class-gender biased Indian
society. I have already discussed in my previous chapters about the problematic social position of Dalit women since they are brutally discriminated not merely because of their caste but also for their gender identity. Again, those Dalit women who belong to economically disadvantaged groups suffer most as they are relegated to the lowest rung of the hierarchical social structure. Yet their demands are never given the opportunity to be at the centre of a social revolution. Neither the Dalit Movement nor the class-based struggle pays any heed to the specific gender related issues of Dalit women. Similarly, the Women’s Movement, too, forgets to address the sexual vulnerability of Dalit women which is mostly triggered by their low-caste-identity. Though the Dalit Women’s Movement that has started gathering its momentum since 1990s is now somewhat successful in establishing a distinct space for Dalit women, yet more efforts are required to create a powerful impact at the ideological level. For instance, the readers of Dalit literature should be given a Dalit aesthetic framework that not only includes caste as a critical parameter but also provides feminist lenses in order to understand the intricate socio-economic situation in which Dalit women are helplessly trapped. In Sangati Bama’s angst is felt as she says:

Is it our fault that we are Dalits? On top of that, just because I am a woman, I have to battle specially hard. Not only do I have to struggle against men, I have to also bear the insults from women of other castes. From how many directions must the blows come! And for how long!

(Bama 121-22)⁷

Can an overarching framework of Dalit aesthetics be capable of adequately explaining this multi-faceted nature of trauma suffered by Dalit women? How can a critical parameter that discusses oppression solely from the point of view of caste be relevant to interpret the impact of the overlapping nature of such oppressive social categories as caste, class and gender upon the lives
of Dalit women? Bama’s outburst mentioned above also underscores the fact that the general precepts of feminist ideology usually practiced by urban, educated, upper-caste, middle class Indian feminists are terribly inadequate in comprehending the complicated nature of patriarchal dominations experienced by their low-caste sisters. It is, however, an interesting fact that the Indian Women’s Movement which challenges the monolithic ideals of the White feminists as a part of the Third World feminist struggles is further deconstructed by the caste and class specific claims of Dalit feminists. All these discussions and debates, however, unequivocally, point towards the necessity of building a Dalit feminist aesthetic which will enable readers to recognize the multiple layers of subjugation experienced by Dalit women. Moreover, a separate but identifiable feminist critical framework directly addressing Dalit women’s specific needs and rights will strengthen the foundation of Dalit Women’s Movement. Keeping these purposes in mind, I will, in the following few paragraphs, try to propose a Dalit feminist aesthetic framework with particular reference to Bama’s Sangati.

The basic feminist notion that women are negatively discriminated in a patriarchal society is also relevant in the context of Dalit women’s lives. While the dominant Brahmanical patriarchy exploits the caste as well as gender identity of Dalit women to exercise its authority, Dalit patriarchy works under the assumption that women are inferior beings and therefore to be enslaved and tortured. Sangati reveals this misogynistic attitude of Dalit men in vivid details. Girls in Dalit community experience a strong note of discrimination right from their childhood. Though the birth of a baby girl is not so looked down upon as it often happens in an upper-caste Hindu household, yet a Dalit family also tends to give more preference to a boy child rather than to a girl child. Bama tells us that the baby boys are always nurtured with utmost care.
If a baby boy 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 the breast.

(Bama 7) ²⁸

The boys are always given the best part of the food while the girls have to satisfy themselves with the left-over. Bama recollects how her grandmother used to offer the best pieces of mangoes to the boys while the girls used to get the skin, the stone and such other things. During sickness the boys get more attention from the members of the family. But this anxiety is remarkably absent when a girl becomes sick. Even the games are not spared from the politics of discrimination. Girls are supposed to play ‘cooking’ or ‘getting married’. If by chance they are caught playing ‘boys’ games’ such as kabaddi²⁹ or marbles or chellaangucchi³⁰, they are thoroughly abused for behaving in an unfeminine manner by their community elders who would invariably pass such comments as: “Who does she think she is? She’s just like a donkey, look. Look at the way she plays boys’ games.” (Bama 7)³¹ Bama narrates how the girls are always expected to be passive and obedient while the boys take the active role of masters. Even, during games, the roles of conductor and drivers are always supposed to be kept for boys while girls are asked to stand huddled in the middle as passengers. This aspect of society-prescribed roles becomes evident through those apparently innocent games that mimic the behavior and actions of the parents in the house. Bama recollects:

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, saying, ‘What sort of food is this,di, without salt or anything!’ In those days, we used to accept those pretence blows, and think it
was all good fun. Nowadays, for many of the girls, those have become real blows, and their entire lives are hell.

(Bama 31) 32

Does not it become clear from the above excerpts that a thorough understanding of Dalit women’s writings will be impossible if critical discussions remain exclusively confined within the domain of caste-based oppression only? Hence, gender discrimination which results from social construction of gender and its consequent assignation of definite social roles to both women and men should be deemed as an essential criterion to interpret Dalit women’s literature.

The patriarchal practice of curbing the freedom of women by imposing social and moral restrictions upon them also dominates Dalit households. Bama’s patti (grandmother) narrates how one woman called Anantamma of West Street was “thrashed soundly and left lying there” because she was too hungry to wait for her husband to eat first. (Bama 30) 33 Bama mentions several other moral restrictions that are often placed upon Dalit women. For instance, these women, though work outside their homes for running their families are not allowed by their men folk to go to the theatre to watch a movie. Again, they cannot sing publicly; nor perform in plays despite their active participation in all the festivities and rituals performed in their communities. The issue of moral integrity which Bama takes up time and again in Sangati finds an apt expression through the narration of the incident that involves Mariamma, Manikkam and Kumarasami Ayya. Mariamma’s chastity was questioned and criticized while it was actually Kumarasami Ayya who cooked up the story of sexual intimacy between Mariamma and Manikkam in order to cover up his own lustful desires. On the other hand, Manikkam, though wrongly accused, was allowed to walk away by paying 100 rupees only. But it was Mariamma who not only paid 200 rupees, but was also publicly humiliated for no fault of her own. The repercussion of this fictitious allegation had long term
effects as Mariamma was later forced to marry Manikkam—the drunkard who made her life miserable. What makes Bama’s narration interesting is the fact that these moral codes are imposed only on women while the men are hardly punished for their acts of sexual transgressions. This strikingly discriminatory attitude is revealed through the words of Arrokkyam, a Dalit woman, as she says: “Whatever a man does, in the end the blame falls on the woman.” (Bama 26)  

However, Bama also shows how such blatant injustices are justified by the patriarchal Dalit society. After having punished Mariamma for her ‘misdeeds’, the leader of Bama’s community concludes the meeting with a strong cautionary message to all the women present there. He warns: “It is you female chicks who ought to be humble and modest. A man may do a hundred things and still get away with it. You girls should consider what you are left with, in your bellies.” (Bama 26)  

Mariamma’s incident reveals another major sphere where Dalit women are supposedly prohibited to enter. It is the political arena of decision making, pronouncement of verdicts and implementation of law that remains inaccessible to average Dalit women as their opinions are never counted. Mariamma was literally forced to take the responsibility of a crime she had never committed. Besides, the women who were present there and could be treated as witnesses were not only ignored but also threatened and silenced. Bama narrates:

> At once a couple of young men got up and came towards us saying ‘Do you women have any sense at all? What are you muttering about here, when we men are talking seriously? Go home all of you.’ They added a couple of obscenities, scolded us roundly and drove us off.  

(Bama 21)  

However, though Dalit women are pushed to the fringes to stand as mere onlookers, yet they are often bribed or sweet-talked during elections as a part of the strategies of vote-bank politics. Taking advantage of their illiteracy and ignorance about the affairs of the world, political parties...
which are mostly led by male politicians manipulate their opinions and thus suppress the voices of Dalit women. These varied aspects of discrimination which are often experienced by Dalit women should be set as essential critical parameters before analyzing any piece of Dalit literature. However, the possibility of making such a nuanced reading becomes bright if a Dalit feminist aesthetic framework that chiefly focuses on the myriad layers of a Dalit woman’s life can be established.

The implicit patriarchal agenda of ensuring control over women through dictatorial rules and regulations is a universal aspect of all male-dominated societies. But the reason why it becomes significant in the present context is that the authority over a Dalit woman is exercised by both Dalit and non-Dalit men. Bama’s reference to her grandmother’s habit of not wearing a chattai-or sari-blouse reminds of an old upper-caste injunction that used to compel Dalit women to keep their breasts open. Perhaps, at the core of this injunction was the prevalent notion that the low-caste women are not entitled to possess any dignity or honor. This has no doubt been a strategy of the upper-caste patriarchy to control Dalit men through the bodies of their women and thus to deprive them of any sense of ‘virility’ and honor. On the other hand, it is because of this lost dignity to be reclaimed through ‘manhood’ that Dalit men impose sexual and moral restrictions upon their own women. Hence the conventional feminist interpretation of women’s subordination due to men’s control over women alone cannot explain the complicated nature of subjugation of Dalit women. In my opinion, a Dalit feminist critical theory that holds both gender and caste responsible for the inferior status of Dalit women, can tell us how to read those socio-political nuances that are hidden as subtexts within and in-between the lines of Dalit literature. Just as gender alone cannot explain Dalit women’s subordination, similarly, caste alone is incapable of providing a satisfactory explanation of the nature of violence perpetrated upon Dalit women.
Often, Dalit male writers and activists focus on rape by high caste men as the only form of sexual violence experienced by Dalit women. This, however, is half truth since Dalit women endure brutal physical and sexual oppression within their own homes. Instances of cruel forms of physical torture by Dalit men are found in almost all the writings produced by Dalit women. In *Sangati*, Bama narrates how blows and beatings from the male members of the house are part of the everyday reality of Dalit women residing within their *paraiya* community. A harrowing picture is portrayed as Bama narrates how Thaayi, a beautiful Dalit woman of the West Street, used to be regularly beaten by her husband. On one evening Bama saw Thaayi’s husband “…beating her up again and again with the belt from his waist. She didn’t even have a chattai on. Everywhere the strap fell on her light skin, there were bright red weals.” (Bama 42) What is worse is that Thaayi’s husband justified his act by saying: “She is my wife, I can beat her or kill her if I wish.” (Bama 43) If anyone sympathized with her, he increased his beating and called Thaayi “…a common whore…a mother fucker’s daughter”…who will “go with ten men.” (Bama 43) This attitude of considering a woman as a man’s ‘possession’ who can be (ab)used at any point of time is also observed in Baby Kamble’s *Jina Amucha*. She has etched a very vivid description of miseries suffered by the women of her *Mahar* community. Chopping the nose of a ‘wayward’ daughter-in-law (a practice prevalent till 1940s), tying her foot to a piece of wood and forcing her to work with this device on, making her do the household duties without giving almost any food are some of the various means of torture inflicted upon these women. The pain of these *Mahar* women unites them with the women of Bama’s *paraiya* community and a larger picture of Dalit women’s oppression is revealed as Bama’s mother says: “It’s as if you become a slave from the very day you are married. That’s why all the men scold their wives and keep them well under control.” (Bama 43) How can a Dalit aesthetic theory which considers caste-driven oppression
to be the sole cause for the suffering of Dalit men and women, explain such rampant practice of domestic violence?

However, physical torture is not the only form of domestic violence to make Dalit women’s lives miserable. They are often made to endure the pain of sexual slavery which is no less agonizing than rapes committed by upper caste men. While almost all Dalit girls grow up with the threat of being sexually abused by high caste men, they also have to live within their own homes as ‘outsiders’ stricken with the fear of sexual violence. Bama tells us about the tragic fate of her senior aunt who was literally beaten to death by her lustful husband.

…the man was crazy with lust….he wanted her every single day. How could she agree to his frenzy after she worked all hours of the day and night, inside the house and out? He is an animal, that fellow. When she refused, he practically broke her in half.

(Bama 10)\(^{41}\)

Bama, in several places of Sangati has brought up this issue which in legal parlance may be termed as marital rape. Her rage at the exploitation and ignominy suffered by the women of her community within their own homes does not remain hidden while she says:

Night after night they must give in to their husbands’ pleasure. Even if a woman’s body is wracked with pain, the husband is bothered only with his own satisfaction. Women are overwhelmed and crushed by their own disgust, boredom and exhaustion, because of all this.

(Bama 59)\(^{42}\)

Such statements make us aware of the fact that Dalit women hardly have any control over their own bodies. Sangati shows how these women are compelled to keep on bearing children because
of the unceasing lust of their husbands. The issue of sexual health remains largely ignored as birth control is practiced neither by men nor by women. While ‘virility’ is the reason why men are unwilling to opt for such measures, the fear of being physically incapable of working due to improper sterilization prevents Dalit women from opting for birth control. As an inevitable consequence, the mortality rate among Dalit women many of whom die at child-birth or owing to mal-nutrition is pretty high. But this truth rarely reaches the reading public as the ‘mainstream’ Dalit literature pays little attention to these ‘female’ issues. How can, then, a Dalit critical framework unequipped to ask questions about the impact of male control over women’s health be able to make a proper reading of the texts written by Dalit women? Again, another manifestation of Dalit male’s control is found in the restrictions imposed upon Dalit women with regard to their marriage preferences. Bama informs that women of her Paraiya community are not supposed to choose their own husbands. Moreover, they are not allowed to marry outside their own castes/sub-castes. Any transgression of this rule leads to severe consequences including caste-riots in extreme cases. Bama narrates the incident where a Paraiya girl was ruthlessly beaten because of her desire to marry a Pallar boy. But such restrictions are not applicable when a Paraiya boy wishes to get married. He is free to choose his wife and he is also allowed to marry into a different caste. Bama expresses her disappointment at such discrimination:

In our streets there are men who have married girls from other castes and other villages and who live together happily. People who can accept such marriages get really angry and upset when it is the girl who marries a man of different caste. If the men do it, it’s fine. But if a girl does it, it’s terrible. I don’t see how this can be just.

(Bama109)

In Sangati, Bama not only affirms the prevalence of such hypocritical practices within her community but also hints at the wide-spread social stigma regarding inter-caste marriages. This
reminds us once again of the endogamous aspect of caste which controls the sexuality of women to retain its ‘purity’ and ‘integrity’. Hence, it can be deduced that endeavors to maintain ‘caste-purity’ is not the prerogative of the savarna society only. It is, rather, unmistakably present in different strata of the Hindu/Indian social structure of our country. In my opinion, the political significance of the complicity between caste and gender in reinforcing Dalit women’s subordination cannot be understood well if the issue of sexual control of women is not recognized as an essential critical parameter. The development of a Dalit feminist aesthetic can enable us to observe these aspects of Dalit women’s oppression. Its insistence on making Dalit women’s lived experiences as the centre of a narrative changes the dynamics of social relations and creates a better opportunity for a subversive literature to question the dominant ideology. For instance, the rigidity in Bama’s community regarding divorce exposes how religion is manipulated to strengthen the hold of patriarchy. Bama who belongs to a Dalit Christian community informs that a woman in her community can only marry a second time if her husband is dead. This points at the impossibility of dissolving an incompatible marriage through divorce which if allowed, could have been more acceptable an option than to be tied in an oppressive relationship. Though, divorce is granted to two Hindu low-caste communities- Pallar and Chakkili, the church’s disapproval of it underscores the role of religion in consolidating the control of patriarchy. Bama’s opinions regarding the justifiability of human interventions in God’s purposes give readers a scope to look at this socio-religious problem from a gender perspective. Bama boldly asserts:

But God created us so that we can be happy and free. I am sure that God doesn’t want us to be living like slaves to the day we die, without any rights or status, just because of a cord around the neck.

(Bama 95)
Perhaps, a Dalit woman’s vulnerability intensified by the complex nature of her caste, class, gender and religious identities will be inadequately explained if a general critical framework foregrounding Dalit male identity as ‘the’ Dalit identity is presented to the readers.

Furthermore, the need for a separate feminist critical framework becomes evident also in the context of the economic life of a Dalit community. Dalit women who toil day in and day out in fields, factories and different other places to make both ends meet are, in many ways, the chief providers of their families. But as in other strata of a patriarchal society, in Dalit communities too, a stark discrimination prevails as far as the wages are concerned. Dalit women, even though, perform the same work as their men do, are paid less as women’s work is deemed inferior, insignificant and therefore devalued. Dalit women’s writings draw our attention to this fact while the ‘mainstream’ Dalit literature mostly represented by male Dalit writers hardly brings this issue to the fore. In Sangati, Bama states:

The women, in any case, whatever work they did, were paid less than men. Even when they did the very same work, they were paid less. Even in the matter of tying up firewood bundles, the boys always got five or six rupees more. And if the girls tied up the bundles, but the boys actually sold them, they got the better price.

(Bama 18)

Bama’s observation viewed from a feminist perspective reveals how patriarchy strategically excludes women from workforce and from the sphere of economic control by spreading the myth about their innate incapacity in delivering high level performance. Nevertheless, in reality, women are the ones who end up doing most of the work. They are weighed down by the double burden of working both inside and outside their homes. Vivid descriptions of their back-breaking toil from dawn to dusk have been portrayed by most of the Dalit women authors. Bama, too, in Sangati
reiterates the pain of unceasing labor without any respite. While Dalit men do indulge in fun and frolic after the day’s work, the women, in spite of their strenuous day-long labor outside, cannot afford to have that luxury. Instead, they immediately have to start preparing for the evening meal, cook, clean, tend the children and satisfy the sexual hunger of their husbands before they can actually lie down and sleep. Their fatigue is felt through Bama’s words as she presents the inventory of Dalit women’s daily-chores.

Although both men and women came home after a hard day’s work in the fields, the men went off straight away to the bazaar or the chavadi 47 to while away their time, coming home only for their meal. But as for the women, from the minute they returned they washed vessels, cleaned the house, collected water, gathered firewood, went to the shops to buy rice and other provisions, boiled some rice, made a kuzhambu 48 or a kanji, 49 fed husband and children before they could eat what was left over, and go to bed. Even if they lay down with bodies wracked with pain, they weren’t allowed to sleep. Whether she died or survived, he had to finish his business.

(Bama 65) 50

Such a life becomes an inescapable reality for Dalit women since the men, as Bama informs are reluctant to take the responsibility of their families. They, usually, spend their money by consuming food and liquor or by seeking other pleasures and thus they leave the responsibility of the entire household upon the shoulders of their women whose meager income is certainly not sufficient to meet the material necessities of life. The situation is so worse that these women cannot afford to take some rest even during pregnancy. Bama’s grandmother informs how most of the women of her community are forced to work till they go into labor because “If they stay at home, how are they going to get any food? Even their cows and calves will die of hunger then.” (Bama

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These true accounts question the popular belief that Dalit women are much more free than upper-caste women since they are economically self-sufficient and independent. Besides, these accounts also represent Dalit women as flesh-and-blood human beings and thus shatter the illusory portrayal of these women as all-enduring Goddesses. An understanding of feminist ideology, perhaps, makes it easier for us to comprehend the fact that such goddess-like portrayal of Dalit women is, in fact, a patriarchal strategy to combat caste battle in the name of honor as everywhere women are entrusted with the responsibility of preserving the dignity and honor of their community. Again, such a portrayal renders Dalit women as dehumanized objects bereft of individual desires and will. Bama’s voice does not hide its anger against such politics of objectification as she asserts:

But women have minds of their own, too. They have their own desires and wishes. Nobody seems to reflect on women’s bodily hungers and needs. Women are told never to reveal these things. They have written it into our foreheads that we must repress and destroy our own needs and feelings, and run about looking after the men and the rest of the family. And we too have believed all this, and prattle on that ‘one’s husband is one’s manifest God.’

(Bama 122) 

It is difficult not to mark the tone of defiance echoed through these words. Sangati affirms that Dalit women’s literature is not merely a helpless, passive documentation of injustices perpetrated upon them. It is, rather, a bold protest against the systems of exploitation and domination. Hence, while the issues of gender discrimination, domestic violence, and patriarchal control over sexuality should be treated as necessary critical criteria to understand the enormity of trauma suffered by Dalit women, the tone of annoyance, question and protest should also be regarded as an essential parameter to appreciate the fervor of resistance found in Dalit women’s writings.
Sangati is replete with numerous incidents of protests. Bama refers to the courageous acts of a Dalit woman- Sammuga Kizhavi who once flouting the social restrictions bathed in an upper-caste man’s well. While she was caught red-handed, she spat out a mouthful of water into the well and complained: “Ayya, the water in your well is not at all good.” (Bama 118) However on another occasion, she did a more outrageous act when in order to avenge the cruelty of an upper-caste man she pissed into his drinking pot. Though apparently these actions appear to be small feats, yet in reality, they are powerful enough to create awareness among the members of a Dalit community. Bama’s support to such acts of resistance is made visible as she muses aloud: “…it might be a good thing if we had even a handful of people with Sammuga Kizhavi’s guts.” (Bama 118) A Dalit feminist critical parameter to gauge the intensity and feasibility of Dalit women’s resistance can also help a reader understand the issue of human rights abuse. Not only Sangati, but also other literary works by Dalit women authors abound in passages that depict the miseries of Dalit women who live a sub-human kind of existence. An excerpt from Sangati confirms this fact. Bama questions:

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 bowed down, gazing at our toes. You tell us all this rubbish and keep us under your control. 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 human beings?

(Bama 29)

These instances prove how desperately Dalit women require a separate space of their own to discuss their problems as well as to voice their hopes and aspirations for a better and secure future.
While many Dalit women writers, these days are willing to tell the ‘stories’ of their struggles, it is necessary that there should be a proper aesthetic framework to critically address those issues that touch different aspects of a Dalit woman’s life. In fact, a thorough understanding of the Dalit feminist standpoint reinforced by this critical framework will also enable readers to comprehend such controversial issues as perpetuation of patriarchy by Dalit women and the nature of their solidarity with upper caste women. Owing to their lack of exposure to the world of letters and ideas, many Dalit women conform to patriarchy’s laws and internalize its values so much so that unwittingly they themselves become propagators of this ideology. In Sangati, Bama mentions her grandmother’s preferential treatments towards boys and her conviction that certain issues such as decision making, punishing the guilty and so on are best done by men only. Bama also shows how her grandmother attempts to implant this idea in her mind as she warns her:

From your ancestors’ time it has been agreed that what the men say is right. Don’t you go dreaming that everything is going to change just because you’ve learnt a few letters of the alphabet.

(Bama 28-29)

There are, indeed, other instances in the text. But what is noteworthy is that despite their belief in the superiority of men, these women are ever ready to question this superiority. Their realization that the domination of men is a universal phenomenon and it cuts across the barriers of caste and class not only shows their awareness of the prevalence of discriminatory politics in society, but also reveals their oneness with upper caste women on the issues of sexual restrictions and male control. Bama in chapter twelve of Sangati raises the issue of ‘freedom’ enjoyed by upper caste women and shows through the discussion among various ‘characters’ how these high-caste women despite their apparent physical composure and well-being, live tormented lives imprisoned within the four walls of their homes. The discussion focuses on the menacing practice of dowry prevalent
in high-caste Hindu society. It also brings forth the issue of humiliation that Hindu upper caste widows are compelled to endure. As one of the discussants informs, a Hindu upper caste widow’s life is finished after the death of her husband. “She can’t wear flowers, nor use kumkumam and turmeric ever again. She can’t wear jewels, she can’t even wear coloured saris. They’ll call her a widow and keep her away from all good occasions. (Bama 112)  

The feminist agenda of the mainstream women’s movement and the Dalit feminist agenda of the Dalit women’s struggle seem to come close to each other on the question of gender oppression as Sangati records: “One way or another, it’s all the same. We suffer in one way, they suffer in another.” (Bama 111)  

This perspective revealing the latent possibility of a bond of sisterhood between these two groups of women can go a long way in settling the debate over identity politics. There is no doubt that the dialogic process can be more effective and quick if these aspects of a Dalit woman’s text are set as parameters of a Dalit feminist critical theory. However, a reader should also be made aware of the fact that Dalit women’s agency can most effectively be manifested through the proclamation of their own unique identity. Sangati offers ample ‘proofs’ as a Dalit woman’s determination to rely on her own strength is revealed through Bama’s words:

We must show by our own resolute lives that we believe ardently in our independence. I told myself that we must never allow our minds to be worn out, damaged, and broken in the belief that this is our fate…….

(Bama 59)  

She emphasizes this fact again after a few pages and clarifies her stance while she asserts:

We must stand up for ourselves and declare that we too are human beings like everyone else. If we believe that someone else is going to come and uplift us, then we are doomed to remain where we are, forever.

(Bama 66)
Her hope that a future untainted by the stigma of discriminations, violence and injustices will surely come, stems from her profound conviction that “women can make and women can break.” (Bama 123) How can such an overtly feminist ideal be accommodated within the aesthetic structure proposed by Limbale? Will not we run the risk of stereotyping Dalit women as helpless, traumatized subjugated beings if they are portrayed, analyzed and evaluated under an overarching critical framework of Dalit aesthetics?

An important aspect which often remains unattended in the critical discussions of Dalit literature is the fact that Dalit women’s writings usually record their belief in the undying spirit of life. While at the ideological level, this is mostly fulfilled by their hopeful assertions about a better future, at the material level, it is celebrated through their spontaneous participation in building an integrated community life. Despite immense hardships and personal differences, these women exude the warmth of cheerfulness. Sangati does not fail to take note of it as we see Bama comment:

The women….though…left at dawn and hardly ever came back until after dark, they still went about laughing and making a noise for the greater part. They sang all the time at work, too, so that the woods rang out to the sound of their laughter as they made up songs and words to tease each other.

(Bama 76) 62

Songs are truly an integral part of their lives. Bama writes: “From birth to death, there are special songs and dances. And it is only the women who perform them. Roraattu (lullaby) to oppaari (dirge), it is only the women who will sing them.” (Bama qtd. in Holmström xx) 63 Whether it is the coming-of-age ceremony or the wedding or any other occasion in the community, Dalit women will always fill the air with their songs some of which are even made impromptu! The bond they
share with each other is strengthened by their collective observance of numerous rites and rituals, their belief in prejudices and their promise of mutual support to stand by each other in their daily ordeals as well as during greater trials and tribulations. Perhaps no literary piece composed by a Dalit male writer can evoke such feelings of proximity and warmth as are created by an account of domestic life narrated by a Dalit woman. A brilliant example of this is found in the autobiography of Baby Kamble. Reminiscing intimate moments shared with her grandmother, Kamble writes:

At cock’s crow, the grinding stones in each house would start whirring. When my aaji sat at the grinding stone, I would crawl out of my covers and put my head on her lap. All children did so. The women would pull down their pallv, cover the sleeping child and then pouring small quantities of grain into the opening of a small hole, they would start grinding. In the quiet of the early hours, the sound of the grinding stones and the sweet notes of the women singing would float all over the maharwada.65

(Kamble 50) 66

Sangati, too, exudes the warmth of personal space and holds up as its main concern the nitty-gritty of everyday happenings: “of women working together, preparing and eating food, celebrating and singing, bathing and swimming.” (Holmström xviii) 67 Dalit women’s world is, indeed, filled with the smell of spices, with crispy gossips, with odour of menstrual restrictions and the pungent fear of being possessed by wandering spirits. It is in the eyes of a sexist reader, an inferior world—a world of the irrational Other. But the truth that often remains untold in a dominant patriarchal discourse is that it is in this irrational, illogical world of Dalit women, one can find the fountain of their inspiration; the root of their vibrant liveliness. Celebrating this spirit Bama writes in her Acknowledgements:

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, their eagerness not to let life crush or shatter them, but to swim vigorously against the tide; about the self-confidence and self-respect that enables them to leap over threatening adversities by laughing at and ridiculing them…

(Bama ix)\(^{68}\)

Hence, incorporating this vivacity of Dalit women’s lives as a major criterion to understand the literary expressions of Dalit women authors would not only enrich Dalit literature in general, but would also add a new dimension to the analyses of counter-hegemonic narratives.

The significance of creating a Dalit feminist aesthetic framework is also felt in the domain of literary techniques and linguistic expressions. Though Limbale has already focused on the uniqueness of Dalit language and the need for its inclusion as a critical parameter to understand the nuances of Dalit lives, yet a Dalit feminist critic should underscore the importance of analyzing Dalit women’s experiences with the help of a language used mostly by Dalit women. Such a language is distinctly marked by the peculiarities of the particular female space occupied by these women and hence it is crowded with songs, jokes and anecdotes that not only entertain but also pass words of wisdom from one generation to another. The story of Esakki- the female spirit who possesses young women- apart from being a popular ghost story, is a tragic tale of a young girl who was slaughtered by her brothers for marrying a man of her choice. Similarly the story of Ayyankachi\(^{69}\) troupe is also a wonderful anecdote to remember. A very interesting aspect of Dalit women’s language is their habit of digression. Bama’s grandmother often shifts from the main narrative and glides into other sub-narratives which are not necessarily connected with each other. For example, her narration of the story about a boy called Kaatturaasa veered to the description of his mother’s clumsy habits in spite of being a
mother of four or five children. It is difficult to find such digression in the writings of male Dalit writers who usually follow a cohesively constructed logical structure. Though dominant discourse may view this characteristic of Dalit women’s writings as a shortcoming yet, in my opinion, this deviation is the hallmark of a language that is more holistic in nature and more capable of mirroring the heterogeneity of Dalit lives. Another significant feature of Dalit women’s linguistic expression is that it does not follow the ‘decorum’ of ‘standard’ language. A look at the translation of Sangati which is said to have been done maintaining the original meaning as much as possible confirms this fact. For instance, while Lakshmi Holmström-translates Bama’s original Tamil sentence describing an incessantly raining sky as: “The rain was pissing down as if an elephant was up there in the sky” (Bama 111) 70, we understand that Bama is not following the standard practice of using decorative rhetorical embellishments. Instead, she uses coarse, familiar, unliterary expressions that she often hears in her community. A similar attempt is also observed in maintaining the ‘improper’ word order which is never approved by the educated, elite users of the language. We understand Bama’s purpose. After all, the unadulterated expressions of a rural, uneducated female group can never be re-created if they are not written in such ungrammatical sentence structure as “One day Patti was grooming my hair. She had very clear eyesight, Patti.” (Bama 5) 71 Flouting the norms of propriety, Bama brings the wild, vivacious spirit of spoken words into the staid world of the written. Holmström informs:

…Bama uses the Dalit Tamil dialect more consistently and easily than many of her contemporaries; for narration, and even argument and comment, nor simply for reported speech….She breaks the rules for written grammar and spelling throughout her work, elides words and joins them differently, demanding a new and different pattern of reading in Tamil.

(Holmström xix) 72
An inevitable offshoot of using a so called unchaste language is, perhaps, the presence of slangs and colloquial expressions full of sexual innuendos. Even a cursory reading will note the frequent use of such words as slut, cunt, and vagina in order to make offensive remarks. One predictable explanation for such usage is definitely the internalization by these women of patriarchy’s rhetoric of sexual dominance. It may also be an expression of their emotions due to the “frustrating lack of pleasurable experiences” (Holmström xx) in the lives of these women. But a close reading following the clues given by Bama suggests that Dalit women often used obscene words as a shield to escape physical violence inflicted upon them by the men of their community. A brief reference to the incident of Rakkama’s confrontation with her husband is quite relevant in this context. Rakkama in spite of being severely beaten, dragged by her hair and kicked on her lower belly by her husband Pakkiaraj,

“…got up…and wailed out aloud. She shouted obscenities, she scooped out the earth and flung it about. ‘How dare you kick me, you low-life? Your hand will get leprosy! How dare you pull my hair? Disgusting man, only fit to drink a woman’s farts! Instead of drinking toddy everyday, why don’t you drink your son’s urine? Why don’t you drink my monthly blood?’ And she lifted up her sari in front of the entire crowd gathered there.

(Bama 61)  

Though this act of lifting up her sari disgusted many onlookers yet Bama later realized that this gesture of defiance was Rakkama’s only means to save herself from the cruel beatings of her husband. As readers, we also understand that “…it was only after she screamed and shouted and behaved like that that he let her go….she acted in that way because it was her only means of escape.” (Bama 62) Rakkama’s method of protest may not be appreciated by many; but it was no doubt effective as it could shame the male pride thoroughly by turning the notion of...
‘honor’ on its head. In order to survive, Rakkama devises a new form of resistance and through such instance as this we understand how subversive a Dalit woman’s language can be to unsettle the grand narrative of patriarchy. Thus to a reader/critic, the unpolished language of Dalit women strewn with obscenities is more than an indicator of the harsh realities of their lives. It is a means of their resistance; a way of asserting their very being. Bama’s statement “If we are to live at all, we have to shout and shriek to keep ourselves sane” (Bama 68) 76 reveals how language gives Dalit women an agency to inscribe their own identity. Perhaps, it is because of this quality that the ‘unrefined’ language of numerous illiterate Dalit women has now come to be accepted as a part of Tamil literature. Bama, in an interview with Manoj Nair states:

One thing that gives me more satisfaction is that I used the language of my people- a language that was not recognized by the pundits of literature, was not accepted by any literary circle in Tamil Nadu, was not included in the norms of Tamil literature. But after my book Karukku was published, the attention it drew and the way it was talked about all over the state forced the critics to accept the users of the dialect into their fold. The grammar has become a part of the language. It makes me feel proud…. I was instrumental in bringing about this change in Tamil literature.

(Nair, Web.) 77

This acceptability, however, was not an uncritical one. A set of questions as to whether spoken language is inferior to written language or whether such a language of daily use can produce literary fervour problematizes the issue of Dalit women’s language. Sivakami- a Tamil Dalit woman writer whose novel The Grip of Change uses this language adopts the interrogating voice of a critic and questions: “You use people’s language within quotes and attempted to decorate their language with your narration.” (Sivakami 190) 78 Her desire to go beyond the immediate purposes served by Dalit language and to quest into the heart of a novelist’s intention of using a
particular language is revealed as she says: “What is the language of the novelist? Has she written mechanically to suit her cooked-up story or is there life in her language?” (Sivakami 188)

79 While Bama as a writer celebrates the language of her people; Sivakami takes a more nuanced stance by donning the hat of a critic as well as that of a writer. Again, apart from language, Dalit feminist critical theory should also underscore the significance of new experimentations with forms and techniques preactised by Dalit women authors. Instead of confining her narratives within fixed generic categories, Bama has blended diverse elements of several genres and thus widened the scope of her writing. Sivakami’s *The Grip of Change* also brought innovative changes within the conventional format of a novel. Similarly a new trend of re-reading/re-writing popular stories or myths from feminist perspective adds more meaning to the literature produced by Dalit women. For example, Pradnya Lokhande’s poem on Yashodhara- the wife of Lord Buddha brings in a completely fresh and new perspective. The poem which is addressed to the enlightened Siddhartha presents Yashodhara’s desires for her husband who deserted her to attain *Moksha*. In moving words it asks:

> You came to her door, transformed and mightier than the sky  
> You stood before her with your hand outspread in benediction  
> But did you, Siddhartha, even look at her eyes which brimmed over  
> With unquenchable thirst?

(Lokhande qtd. in Salvi182)  

Pradnya’s poem moves beyond the circumference of what is traditionally called Dalit literature and by locating the issue of women’s freedom to assert their choices and sexual desires at the centre, it echoes the demands propagated by Anglo-American radical feminists. This, indeed, is an appreciable development that has occurred within the field of Dalit women’s literature. However, if this stream of progress is to be kept alive, critics should come up with a Dalit
feminist aesthetic framework that can help us decode these myriad aspects of emotions and experiences reflected in the writings of contemporary Dalit women authors.

Re-presentation through literature, for Dalit women, is itself a rebellious act. Their endeavor to write frustrates not only the Brahmanical policy of depriving the low-caste people of the benefits of education; but also the patriarchal conspiracy to keep women unenlightened. The significance of this rebellion is more enhanced if their attempts to express themselves through literature are analyzed within the context of a debate over the in/ability of the subaltern to speak for themselves. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak” primarily focuses on woman as the subaltern though the key issues regarding the term subaltern have also been discussed in great detail. Elucidating Spivak’s explanation of the ‘agency’ of the subaltern, critic Sanjiv Kumar writes: “…she observes that the subaltern consciousness eludes representation and exists only as an effect within elite discourse.” (Kumar 32) 81 This inability of the subaltern to speak gets further confirmation from Spivak’s own reflections on the ultimate failure of Bhubaneswari Bhaduri’s endeavor to ‘speak’. Spivak writes: “Bhubaneswari attempted to ‘speak’ by turning her body into a text of woman/ writing. The immediate passion of my declaration the subaltern cannot speak, came from the despair that, in her own family, among women, in no more than fifty years, her attempt had failed.” (Spivak 35) 82 The issue of subaltern’s representation gets more complicated as it is believed that the “‘subaltern’ ceases to be ‘subaltern’ as soon as she/he gets a voice or representation. (Kumar 37) 83 Thus the theory further problematizes the question of subaltern agency which is an important part of any discussion on Dalit literature as well as Dalit women’s literature. Nevertheless, we should not ignore the fact that the ‘voiceless’ may speak with a borrowed tongue, yet their words do reveal their oppositional consciousness. Hence, one may suggest that though Caliban’s curse is
infected with the language of his imperialistic master yet it can still be deemed as a colonized, native, non-elite’s attempt to negate the power of the hegemony in order to establish his own distinct identity. This instance can be used as a reference point to explain the ambiguous position of Dalit women who in spite of being silenced by multiple structures of oppression are not exactly in a situation of being “ventriloquised” or “spoken for.” (Kumar 32) Many talented women authors from low-caste communities are now raising their own voices through literature. However, according to assumptions that cast doubt over subaltern agency, these representations by educated Dalit women may be a fractured mirroring of the lives of numerous other uneducated, poor Dalit women. It is true that the uneducated Dalit women and men are often represented by their educated fellow sisters and brothers and hence run the risk of having their voices usurped in the same way the dominant silences the subaltern. Yet, at the same time, we must accept that these attempts made by Dalit authors to represent what may be called Dalit experiences are not mean feats. Hence we should believe in the subversive intention of Dalit women’s narratives and try to evaluate them as a form of Resistance literature. Besides, such writings, at a personal level, also have immense therapeutic value and its truth is proved while Bama in an interview with Manoj Nair, informs:

It was Father Marg who asked me to write my thoughts and feelings…not like a story or anything, just to get a sense of relief. Since I didn’t really plan a book, I just kept on writing as it came—my convent experience, my happy childhood, my people in the village…no particular order or structure, it was all mixed up. But I felt greatly relieved.

(Nair, Web)  

However, the ‘true’ impact of these narratives comes from their determination to raise their voices against injustice and violence. Dalit women’s literature which is usually pregnant
with a strong sense of feminist consciousness resolves to bring a world-more equal and more just in nature. Bama, in *Sangati*, makes this revolutionary purpose clear as she says: “*Sangati* grew out of the hope that the Dalit women who read it will rise up in fervor and walk towards victory as they begin their struggle as pioneers of a new society.” (Bama ix) Yet, Dalit women’s literature should not merely engage itself in a destructing act of defying and negating the dominant power structures. It should also take up the creative task of establishing its own tradition and constructing its distinct identity. Bama’s effort in *Sangati* to depict a positive image of Dalit women who are fearless, independent and conscious of their self-worth is a crucial way of building the identity of a Dalit woman. Though compared to the past, Dalit women’s writings are more visible now-a-days, yet a greater amount of awareness propelled by a Dalit feminist aesthetic is required to consolidate the courageous and self-reliant image of Dalit women. Apart from providing scholars and critics with the historiography of Dalit women’s writings, this aesthetic tradition will make Dalit women writers feel a sense of rootedness in or belonging to a place which one may truly call one’s home. Just like the Afro-American feminist critical theory, a Dalit feminist aesthetic tradition will also connect the contemporary Dalit women authors with their literary mothers who are still lost in the recesses of oblivion. A major task, therefore, for Dalit feminist critics and writers is to write their own history by reclaiming the voices of those forgotten Dalit women whose words never got the opportunity to be heard/read. In her Preface to *Sangati*, Bama writes: “I dedicate this book to my mother and grandmother and the many Dalit women I have known from whom I draw both hope and courage.” (Bama viii) This gesture of gratitude certainly points at the existence of a tradition of Dalit women’s creativity which was unfortunately not explored till the middle of the last century. A brilliant proof of this creative fervor is noticed in the structure of *Sangati* which is neatly woven with beautiful folk stories, anecdotes and legends orally transmitted by mothers to their daughters. This is an
encouraging hint for Dalit feminist scholars who wish to trace the trajectory of a buried creative tradition without which it is difficult to claim a separate identity for Dalit women. However, only few attempts have been made to create a Dalit feminist tradition. Sharmila Rege’s book *Writing Caste/ Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women’s Testimonios* (2006) has done a commendable job in this regard as it discusses the life-narratives of eight Marathi Dalit women writers covering a wide time-frame that spans from the pre-independence era to the late 20th century. Given the fact that, authentic primary resources on Dalit women’s writings are scarce and difficult to be located, Rege’s attempt as a critic to build a tradition is no doubt significant in many ways. The very fact that this book is written in English and that the excerpts of these Marathi life-narratives are translated into English broadens the prospect of Dalit women’s issues to be read and debated at the global level. A similar attempt has also been made by K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu whose book *No Alphabet in Sight: New Dalit Writing from South India* (2011) performs the difficult task of bringing together a host of Tamil and Malayalam Dalit writers-both women and men. Yet, much is left to be done. Dalit feminist critics and scholars should direct their intellectual inquiries into the making of a Dalit feminist critical theory which will not only widen the horizon of Dalit literature but will also compel the activists of the Dalit liberation struggle and the mainstream Indian Women’s Movement to recognize a Dalit woman’s need to inscribe her own separate identity. But it should also be remembered at the same time that the critical parameters must not be absolutely prescriptive since the rigidity of a theoretical framework may limit the flexibility of Dalit feminist literature which otherwise has potentiality to be a part of the transnational feminist discourse and therefore, can turn their so-called ‘local’ issues into ‘global agenda’.
Reading Dalit women’s literature with a feminist consciousness enables us to envision its journey from subjugation to celebration. However, a nuanced reading also shows that besides content, the form of Dalit literature can also be equally subversive. And of all literary forms, the life-narratives written by Dalit women are structurally more equipped to question, challenge and deny the authority of a hegemonic power structure. My next chapter will focus on the revolutionary potential of Dalit women’s life-narratives and raise question as to how appropriate it is on our part to term these life-narratives as autobiographies.
Endnotes:


2 Ibid.

3 Paraiya: A low-caste group to which Bama belongs.


5 Ibid.

6 Savarna: Member of a high caste community.


8 Ibid.


10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.


17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.


23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.


28 Ibid.

29 Kabaddi: Games played in village.

30 Chellaangucchi: Games played in village.


32 Ibid.
Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Pallar- Name of a caste group.


Ibid.

Ibid.

Chavadi- marketplace

Kuzhambu- Meat or vegetables, cooked in a gravy, to be eaten with rice etc.

Kanji- Thin gruel of rice or other grains or just the starchy water drained from cooked rice.


Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.
Chapter: Five  Towards a Dalit Feminist Aesthetic with Special Reference to Sangati: Events

55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
60 Ibid.
61 Ibid.
62 Ibid.


64 Pallv- The part of the sari which covers the torso.

65 Maharwada- The residential colony of the Mahar community located outside the village.


69 Ayyankaachi: ghosts/spirits who appear in groups.


71 Ibid.

Chapter: Five    Towards a Dalit Feminist Aesthetic with Special Reference to Sangati: Events

73 Ibid.


75 Ibid.

76 Ibid.


79 Ibid.


84 Ibid.

Chapter: Five  Towards a Dalit Feminist Aesthetic with Special Reference to Sangati: Events


87 Ibid.