Chapter-III

SANGATI
(Search for Identity)
Dalit means ‘oppressed’, ‘ground down’ or ‘the subaltern’, ‘broken’, is generally used to refer to people who are once known as “untouchables”, those belonging to castes outside the fourfold Hindu Varna System. According to the 2001 census, there are some 167 million Dalits in India alone, though there are tens of millions in other South Asian countries, as well. (Hampton, 2010).

According to Dalit Panthers,

All Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Neo-Buddhists, Labourers, Landless and Destitute Peasants, women and all those who have been exploited socially, politically and economically and in the name of religion are Dalits (Appendix-II, Dalit Panthers Manifesto, Bombay, 1973, p-ix).

In the state of Tamil Nadu, the term Dalit coined currency in 1990’s when it was widely used not only by Tamil Dalit writers and ideologues to identify them but also by mainstream critics. In 1994, the Nirapirikari in Tamil produced a special Dalit issue, with translations from Marathi and Black American Poets as well as original work by Tamil Dalits. Dalit writers such as Idayavendan, Abhimani, Unjairajan, Marku and Bama etc., espoused the issues of Dalits through their writings.

*These lines from the text hereafter shall be mentioned with the page numbers*
According to Dalit Ideologue Gauthaman,

In Tamil Nadu, Dalit uprising is not confined only the expression of Dalit Literature. On the contrary, Dalit Literature came about as part and parcel of anti-caste struggles, agitation for reserved places in the interests of social justice and political protests for economic equality (Raj Gautaman, ‘We have no need for haloes’, India Today Annual 1995, pp.96-8).

Dalit Literature has started to bring about a change; to enable non-Dalits to deconstruct a traditional mindset made them perceive Dalits as lower than them; and instead to see Dalits as equals rather than pitiful victims, to awaken the Dalits who lie asleep within the conscience of all people, of all people castes. It is put forward a new and subversive ethic not only awakens the conscience of non-Dalits but also fills themselves with confidence and pride. Dalit Literature aims and shares with other marginalised and subaltern groups world-wide. These critics as a reflection in literary and linguistic term ‘of a politics of liberation present it’.

Dalit fiction and its literary movement are based on the common ground of social oppression. It is a literature of whole community but of an individual. Many thinkers, social reformers, writers and political figures gave their contribution in the Dalit literary movement like B.R. Ambedkar, Rettaimalai Srinivasan etc. Exploitation or oppression of weaker by stronger is as old as mankind itself. The Indian history has been a vibrant record of conflict and dialectic between two opposite forces like exploiters and exploited coloniser and colonised, powerful and powerless. Dalit literature is always marked by revolt and a great struggle of lower caste, against the high-class people commonly known as Savarna. In India, there is a huge campus of
religion situated in the society; there are four major caste divisions in India, Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. The lowest caste people came under Shudra’s regarded as Dalits. These people are suppressed, humiliated, exploited, discriminated and marginalised every sphere of life.

In Indian society some communities are at the lowest step like, Dalits, women, poor, eunuchs, etc. If the woman belongs to Dalit community they suffered of two types: first being a woman, second belongs to the lowest community. Therefore it could be said they are “doubly oppressed”. Women’s movement was started in 1960’s. There are a number of writers contributed in the movement like, Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of Rights of Women* (1792), Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949), Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of one’s own*, Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics*, Fredrich Engels’s *The Origin of The Family* (1884), John Stuart Mill’s *The Subjection of women* (1869) etc. These writers speak out the real woman who struggles with social norms, condition, which is extremely propagated by a patriarchal society. Toril Moi explains, “The first is a political position, the second a matter of biology and the third, a set of culturally defined characteristics”. Women’s condition was not good in 1960’s and 1970’s, but in 1980’s the mood changed. Being a Tamil Dalit Christian woman, she is able to express emphatically the women’s identity. Bama examines caste and gender oppression together. She redefined ‘woman’ from the political perspective of a Dalit.

Bama is one of the emerging powerful Dalit Feminist voices that articulate the oppression, violence and subjugation of Dalit women both by the men and those of upper caste. In her novel, *Sangati*, Bama graphically portrays the lives of Dalits in general and women in particular not in the grey colours of misery, oppression and suffering but rather as lively and vibrant for life which urges them forward in spite of
all kinds of denial and depravation. It is a very colourful picture of Dalit Community which exists till now did not find the right place in Indian Literature as Indian Literature till recently is the monopoly of upper caste people.

*Sangati* was originally written in Tamil in 1994 and it was translated into English by Lakshmi Holmstrom in 2001. The whole narrative is divided into twelve chapters. The word *Sangati* means events, and thus the novel through individual stories, anecdotes and memories portrays the event, that takes place in the life of a woman in paraya community. The novel also reveals how Paraya women double oppressed. *Sangati* deals with several generation of women, the older women belongs to the narrators grandmothers generation Velliamma Kishavi’s generation, and downward generation belongs to the narrator, and the generation coming after as she grows up.

*Sangati* is an autobiography of her own community, which highlights the struggle of Paraya women. Bama chooses only a woman protagonist for every story in her novel, *Sangati* contributes both to the Dalit movement and to the women’s movement in India, especially Tamil Nadu. *Sangati* is a look at a part of those Dalit women who dared to make fun of the class in power that oppressed them.

*Sangati* has no real plot in the real sense; it is the collection of powerful stories told by the protagonists of different ages. There are interconnected anecdotes. The narration is in first person, followed by the general comments of the grandmother and mother figures and lastly comments by the author-narrator. The reflections, which are didactic, call for action. As a whole, the book creates a Dalit Consciousness perspective. The major theme of Bama’s *Sangati* is violence against Dalit women. The violent treatment of women by fathers, husbands and brothers. The violent domestic quarrels, which are carried out publicly, where sometimes
women fight back, are abundantly portrayed in the novel. The status of woman is both pitiful and humiliating, really. “In the fields, they have to escape from upper-caste men’s molestations” (p. 35). Within the community, the power rests with men, caste-courts and churches are male-led, and rules for sexual behaviour are very different for men and women.

*Sangati* illustrates a chain of interrelated events that have been observed by the writer in her village. In detail, it expresses the inward turmoil of the Dalit women who are considered Dalit in the hands of religion, upper caste men, the rich, the politicians and educational institutions and also among the Dalit community as well as the Dalit men. The voice of Bama is a collective voice under subjugation, which reverberates the anti-caste struggles, agitation for reserved places in the interest of social justice and political protest for economic equality. *Karukku* is a detailed description of Bama’s personal feelings and experiences sublimated with pathos. It has a set of questions like what did it mean when they call the Dalit as Paraya? Had the name become obscene? But *Sangati* celebrates her being a member of a vibrant community of Dalit women. Bama’s struggle to uplift herself and her community through education leads her to criticise the church. Realising a sea of divide between what the church practised and preached Bama quits the convent. *Sangati* is full of narration and reflection of individual stories of Dalit women, anecdotes, memories of personal experiences presented from a feminist perspective in first person narration that bridges experiences. The novel spans from the twelfth year of the narrator until she is a woman by the end of the novel with mature reflections.

The narration has no plot as Bama remarks that her,

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 rather to swim vigorously against the tide; about the self-confidence and self-respect that enables them to leap over their adversities by laughing at and ridiculing them; about their passion to live with vitality, truth and enjoyment; about their hard labour. I wanted to shout out these stories (p. xvi).

The events related in a chain break the western concept of form. The novel urges for a break from the oppressive Brahmanic culture which talks of Gods and glorifies life and their literature which has no representation of the lower caste, Dalit. Sangati is neither an ideal representation of life nor an individual commitment but a social commitment. The events expose the evils of caste system and injustice done to the Dalit by the higher caste.

In the preface to the novel, Bama states:

In Sangati, many strong Dalit women who had the courage to break the shackles of authority, to propel them 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 women who dared to make fun of the class in power that oppressed them. And through this, they found the courage to revolt (p. vi).

Sangati is an epic making novel in the realm of Dalit Literature. It chiefly concerns with women’s movement in India. It gives new impetus into the precious lives of Dalit Women who face the triple disadvantage of caste, class and gender discrimination. The entire novel is divided into twelve narratives. The word, Sangati means events. Through individual stories, she powerfully presents the pathetic
conditions of paraya women. She adopts auto ethnography in highlighting the inner struggle of paraya women. The sufferings of woman are twofold namely high-class people and Dalit male. The writer throws light on several generations of women. It is a Dalit narrative in which she comes down heavily on patriarchal society. Exploiting woman is tantamount to exploiting country. Gender discrimination takes place in the workplace and everywhere in the society. Girl children have to compulsorily work in their capacity as daily wagers. They indeed work round the clock to cater to the dire needs of their taskmaster. In spite of their diurnal work, their stamp of identity is not well recognised. With their supernal patience, they pocketed an insult in the battle of life. Though, they have the infinite capacity to work harder than man folk they received meagre wages.

Bama’s Paatti says,

If they stay at home, how are they going to get any food? Even their cows and calves will die of hunger then. And any way, it wasn’t just her, more or less all the women in our street are the same . . . (p. 6).

Women’s health is given least importance although they are the backbones of the family. She advocated a veritable view that women have the courage to break the shackles of authority with a view to changing their problem-filled lives. The narrator is a spokesperson of her community, and she is a representative voice of all the young girls who have lost their rights of equality in games, toys, food and treatment. She represents the voice of young woman who experiences the pain of maturing late in life due to poverty and taking care of the young ones in the family and also is exploited by the upper caste men. As an adult she represents her grandmother, mother and all the
women in her neighbourhood, highlighting their management ability, hard work, and strong mind to face turmoil.

In the narration the past as flashback is told as stories either heard or told by someone. It leads to the present with incidents that are experienced, observed and explicated in the life of Mariamma and Maikanni. The future is left unexplained in the pride of the writer’s sense of belonging to the Dalit Community. Bama as a Dalit talks about the struggles of the Dalit in renting a house, finding lodgings and employment. She remarks, “Being a Dalit creates a problem; on top of that, being a Dalit woman makes it more difficult” (pp.119-120). So, Bama feels that as women they must somehow dare to take control of their lives. Instead of becoming meek, Bama in her anger proclaims”, I am a paraichi: Yes I am a paraichi” (p. 121).

Bama’s chosen village include Parayars, Pallars, Koravars and Chakkiliyars. Among these only the Parayars have been converted into Christianity. This coerced conversion brings nothing but economic deprivation because they have lost their right to reservation. The popular education scheme promised by the Christian priests becomes a poor substitute for economic self-sufficiency. The children cannot attend school since they have to assist parents in work. Within the subdivisions of Dalit community there is caste-hierarchy. In matters of marriage and love women are discriminated against. Parayar women do not have the right to marry a man from the Pallar, Koravar or Chakkiliyar community. On the other hand, men have the right to marry whoever they like. Bama also draws a comparison between Dalit and non-Dalit women.

According to her the Dalit situation is better than that of upper class women who have been forced to live in most vulnerable conditions. Upper class women find no way to express their pent up emotions. Bama feels proud that their women have
economic freedom from their men folk; they work hard in the fields and matchbox factories and rear their children. Sometimes widows are allowed remarriage and their culture never alienates a widow from the mainstream. But the upper class women confine their emotions within the four walls of their mansions. Even the male members of the Dalit community have their own defence systems. Since they cannot protest against their landlords, they show their strengths at home on their wives and children. Women, as a result, suffer caste oppression in mornings and gender oppression in nights.

The narrator’s grandmother who is the general commentator of the events in the novel explains their plight:

We have to labour in the fields as hard as men do, and then on top of that, struggle to bear and raise our children. As for the men, their work ends when they have finished in the fields. If you are born into this world, it is best you were a man. Born as women, what good do we get? We only toil in the fields and in the home until our vaginas shrivel (p. 6).

Bama identifies instances of early child marriage, poverty, lack of proper health care and sanitation and lack of education as certain barriers impeding women from coming out of their subdued state. The child narrators in the early chapters grow melancholic and rebellious due to the events happening around her. When she grows into a young woman she stresses on the need for a radical change and calls out for action against the exigencies of her companions. She exhorts them to take pride of their caste and march towards social empowerment. Bama draws attention to their immense capacity for hard labour, their spirit of protest, their culture’s absence of dowry and their rich cultural heritage. She talks about the narrator’s courageous grandmother who pawned
her thali to feed her children, Katturaasa’s mother who bore her son by herself while cutting grass and about Marriamma who came back to work even after she met with an accident. But they have been silenced in the crucial moments of their lives. Their protests are nipped in the very bud.

The beginning of the novel displays a state of depression and hopelessness of the Dalit women; but the latter part reveals the vigour, courage and the resilience of women even in the midst of all misery. They face the problems by their solidarity. They chatter and laugh to forget their sorrows; they celebrate their newly found identity and inner strength. The narrator, finally, becomes free of the clutches of her limitations. She works and lives by herself. But it is striking to note that she has to hide her caste name out of fear of repercussions. Even when there are more educated and self-reliant women, among the Dalits the cult of violence still continues to trouble their lives. Women are presented in Sangati as wage earners as much as men as working as agricultural and building side labours, but earning less than men do. Yet the money that earn in their own to spend as they please, whereas women bear the financial burden of running the family. Women are also constantly victims to sexual harassment and abuse in the world of work. Bama exposes caste and gender problems both outside and inside the community. Sangati focuses generally on Dalit women on various issues such as gender, sexual discrimination.

According to Bama,

All women in the world are second class citizens. For Dalit women, the problem is grave. Their Dalit identity given them a different set of problems, the experience is a total leak of social status. Even they are not considered dignified human beings. My stories are based on these aspects of Dalit culture (p. 21).
Sangati encapsulates the author’s experience of working within an erogenous and appraised society and the series of several interconnected anecdotes, experiences, news and events as narrated in the book, from an autobiography of a community. Sangati is a portrayal of much trouble witnessing those stories that as one’s writers Paatti said, “Once you are born a woman can you go and confront a group of four or five men? Should you ever do it?” (p. 28).

This narration accommodates more than thirty five characters most of whom . . . female, but in conventional sense there is no individual who may be tagged as hero or heroine. Bama gives another picture of the community, although both men and women came after a hard day’s work in the field. The men went straight to the bazaar or chavadi to while away their time, coming home only for their meal. But as for the women they return home wash vessels, clean the house, collect water, gather firewood, go to the shops to buy rice and other provision boil some rice. Make a kashambu or a kanji feed husband and children before they eat what is left over and go to bed (p. 59).

Even they lay down their bodies wracked with pain; they were not allowed to sleep. Whether she dies or survived, she had to finish his business. Women were not allowed to take part on any occasion, the man themselves would dress up and act as women rather than allow us to join in (p. 32).

The novel deals with gender bias faced by Dalit women right from the childhood. Girl babies are always considered inferior and taken less care. Dalit girls are hardly enjoying her childhood. They have little time to play, as she has to take care of their younger siblings. Maikkanni is one such girl who has started to work from the day she learns to walk (p. 70). She has to go to work when her mother delivers a baby.
When her mother becomes fit Maikkani turns to take care of the new-born baby. The life of a Dalit girl was tormenting but the life of a grown up dalit woman was worse. The story of narrator’s cousin Marriamma tells a lot about the sexual assault the abuse faced by Dalit women and their inability to stand up against it. Bama is very careful in portraying the picture of a Dalit woman. Bama shows gender discrimination meted out to them throughout the lives of Dalit women.

Bama realistically portrays the physical violence, like lynching, whipping and canning that Dalit woman by fathers, husbands and brothers. Bama explores the psychological stress and strain. Her language is also very different from other Indian women writers, as she is more generous with the use of Tamil Dalit slogans. She addresses the women of village by using suffix ‘Amma’ (mother) with their names. The names of places, months, festivals, rituals, customs, utensils, ornaments, clothes, edibles, games etc., to the names of occupations, the way of addressing relatives, ghosts, spirits etc., she unceasingly uses various Tamil words. The voices of many women speaking and addressing one another, sharing their everyday experience with each other sometimes expressed in an anger or pain. The language is full of explicit sexual references too. Bama bridges the spoken and written styles of Tamil by breaking the rules of written grammar and spellings.

Bama says that,

Man can humiliate woman many times, he can disrespect a woman, and it is very normal. But in this partial double-minded society woman has no right to speak out anything. This is acceptable to all. The post-colonial thrust of her book is in its huge criticism of Indian church. Bama feministically voices out the grievances of Paraiya women.

Characters like Vellaiyamma, Patti and a small girl and the narrator...
herself, who learns the story from her grandmother, which becomes
development of the novel (p. 122).

In the novel, many strong Dalit women had courage to break the shackles of authority.
Bama said they live under pressure and get enjoy their full of life. In India, there is
prevalence of caste hierarchy within sub castes of dalit community. In Sangati, the
Catholic priests were also gender biased and treated the converted dalit women as
inferior. Bama used two modes of narration in her book, Sangati, One is confessional
and the other, is conventional. And thus, she goes deep up to the historical perspective
of dalit community. Bama has personally experienced the marginalised. She sums up
their situations in following lines:

Everywhere you look, you see blows and beatings, shame and
humiliation . . . Because we have not been to school or learnt anything,
we go about like slaves all our lives, from the day we are born till the
day we die. As if we are blind, even though we have eyes (p 22).

Sangati examines the difference between women and their different ways in which
they are subject to apportion and coping strategies. In the novel, the language of dalit
women is rich and resourceful giving way to proverbs, folklore and folk songs. Bama
as a feminist writer, protests against all forms of oppression and sufferings faced by
Dalit women in the first half of Sangati. But later part of Sangati moves away from
the state of depression and frustration. Instead it presents a positive identity to dalit
women focusing their inner strength and vigour. She also attracts our mind towards
the education system about Dalit Community. She gave the example of Pecchiamma,
who belongs to Chakkili community, studied only up to fifth class. The girls of that
community do not go to school all that much. Through Sangati, Bama holds the
mirror up to the heart of Dalit women. She makes an appeal for change and
betterment of the life of a Dalit women in the variety of fields, including sex and gender discrimination, equal opportunity in work force, education rights etc. Actually, the narrator gives a key function and controls all the incidents and events in a proper way. The narrator becomes both omniscient narrator and a controlling agent of their story, who speaks out historical aspects of dalit community through variety of characters, and it becomes development of novel. Bama is clear that no one is going to help the hopeless women in her community; it is up to the women themselves to take their lives into their own hands. Hard labour and precariousness of Dalit women leads to a culture of violence, and this runs through the novel.

As Lakshmi Holmstrom in her introduction to the novel states,

Bama does not make a connection between caste and gender oppressions. *Karukku* is concerned with the single issue of caste oppression within Catholic Church and its institutions and presents Bama’s life as a process of lonely self-discovery (Lakshmi Holmstrom).

The tension throughout *Karukku* is between the self and community: the narrator leaves one community (of religious women) in order to join another (as a Dalit woman). *Sangati* takes up the story of that new community. In *Karukku* too, serving the upper-caste is a historically validated pre-condition to normal existence. Dalits like Patti have internalised silent acquiescence, which for Bama is extremely humiliating and be speaks complicity with the upper-caste-met narratives.

The entire text is a resounding negation of the question, which Patti poses – ‘Can we change this?’ It was a long time before she realised that Patti was bringing home the unwanted food that the Naickers were ready to throw away. One day she went with Patti to the Naicker house. After she had finished all her filthy chores, Patti
placed the vessel that she had brought with her, by the side of the drain. The Naicker lady came out with her leftovers, leaned out from some distance and tipped them into Patti’s vessel, and went away. Her vessel, it seemed, must not touch Patti’s; it would be polluted. Sometime later, she said to Patti she should not lay herself open to such behaviour; it was ugly to see (Introduction, pp.xviii-xix).

What Patti (Bama’s grandmother) said to Bama in return was this;

These people are the Maharajas who feed us our rice. Without them, how will we survive? Haven’t they been upper-caste from generation to generation, and haven’t we been lower-caste? Can we change this? (p. 14).

For Bama getting education is the only way in which the Dalit community can counter the alterations they have to go through. She is encouraged by her brother Annan to change her destiny by educating herself:

The words that Annan spoke to me that day made a very deep impression on me. And I studied hard, with all my breath and being, in a frenzy almost. As Annan had urged, I stood first in my class. And because of that, many people became my friends, even though I am a Paraichi (p. 15).

Dalit women are in worse position than the Dalits in general, in terms of sex, ratio, wages, employment, occupation, assets, education, health, social mobility and political participation. It is essential to discuss the status of Dalit women and various problems they face even after sixty-three years of Independence, despite the excellent laws in place to protect Dalit women. Dalit women are leading miserable lives with the harsh reality of the suppression, struggle for existence and torture. The hardships of the Dalit women are not simply due to their poverty, economic status, or lack of
education, but are a direct result of the severe exploitation and suppression by the upper classes.

Pranjali Bandhu quotes Ruth Manorama, “Dalit women are the ‘Dalits among Dalits’, because they are thrice alienated on the basis of caste, class and gender”. She brings out various oppressions on Dalit women in this essay. The problem of minimum and unequal wages of Dalit women, though women also work equally hard and for the same length of time with men. The problems like lack of education, early marriages, and health problems are rampant among Dalit women. There are many prejudices against education for Dalit women in the society.

Dalit women also faced many problems in performing their duties due to illiteracy, lack of information and dependency on the male members of their families. An important obstacle is the no-confidence motion against Dalit women as pradhan by the dominant sections. Rural elites are unable to accept the power, which has been given into the hands of the poorer and disadvantaged women (Manipal, 1998). Despite recognition and legal sanction for political rights rigid caste system and patriarchy directly and indirectly has been suppressing Dalit women and violating their political rights. This proves that one and all violate human rights of women right from her family to the society at large. All these factors are largely responsible for the precarious position of Dalit women as far as their social, cultural, religious, economic, health and political status in the society is concerned.

A search for Dalit women writing might show us some representations of Dalit women in Dalit male writings; they have portrayed Dalit woman as poor housewives, mothers and helpless beings. There are instances in these writings of Dalit men marrying “upper-caste” women but no reference to a Dalit woman marrying an “upper-caste” man, though, there is much scope to discuss caste oppression within the
domestic sphere and power relations. As a woman belonging to a lower caste, the oppression she experiences in the family of an upper-caste is of a different order, because a woman has to leave her parental house and live in the family of entirely different class-caste and cultural practices.

Kancha Ilaiah opines,

A Dalitbahujan woman does not have to perform padapooja (worshipping the husband’s feet) to her husband either in the morning or in the evening. She does not have to address her husband in the ways she would address a superior. In a situation of dispute, word in response to word and abuse for abuse is the socially visible form. Patriarchy as a system does not exist among Dalitbahujans, yet in this sense it is considerably more democratic (Why I am not Hindu? 1996, p. 34)

A Dalit Feminist writer and scholar, Swati Margaret Maddela in response to Kancha Ilaiah, scrutinises his argument about patriarchy and employs a sharp note against his views, from the view point of Dalit Feminism. She says,

Brutal patriarchy within Dalit communities is one issue, which repeatedly appears in Dalit feminist discourse. However, the views of Dalit male Intellectuals on the negotiations between caste and gender are interesting. Ilaiah compares patriarchy in Dalits and Hindu patriarchy declares that the former is more democratic! How can any oppressive structure be Democratic at all? He substantiates his argument by stating that certain customs like padapooja (touching the feet) are not observed in Dalit Families. He of course notices the fact that there are oppressive practices like wife battering prevalent in the
Dalit families. However, ‘the beaten up wife has a right to make the attack public by shouting, abusing the husband and if possible by beating the husband in return”. Dalit woman shouts back not because of “democratic patriarchy” but because of the socio-economic situation she is trapped in. Dalit woman more often is dependent on her own labour. She labours outside her home from morning to evening. When she comes home, her husband will be waiting. To snatch her hard-earned money, which is often only source to feed the Family? If she refused to give him money, the husband beats her up. The woman shouts back; in the processes of resistance, she might beat him back (Margaret Swati, p.5).

Swati Margaret also criticises the idea that all women are Dalits because women of “upper-castes” are not allowed into their kitchens during menstruation and they are also highly oppressed by patriarchal system.

Swati Margaret says,

For example, the Dalit ideologues like Katti Padama Rao, Gopal Guru and Gaddar seem to be less sensitive to the internal patriarchy of Dalit Communities. They maintain that all women are Dalits. Since the upper-caste women are not allowed to enter into kitchens and are treated as Impure during their menstrual periods they are also untouchables (Dalit Feminism, p.5).

They have not even recognised problems such as delivery deaths, family violence, pregnancy problems, unequal wages and exploitation at the workplace and so forth. Thus, by using the touchstone method -- comparing and contrasting the brutal patriarchy in upper caste communities and the patriarchy in Dalit communities. They
have decided that the latter is more democratic and not intensely oppressive. They
have not recognised the oppression of Dalit women at the hands of upper-caste men
and women and at the hands of Dalit men, where their communities are not free from
patriarchy.

Divorce is an established right of both men and women. Reformers or
feminists do not seem to have ever recognised these progressive qualities of Dalit
society and culture, and the authenticity of human values in Dalit communities, which
are thrown to the outskirts of the society. For Dalits, even the societal norms of
beauty, respect, labour differs from the “upper-castes”. They respect labour unlike
the “upper-caste” communities. For “upper-castes”, a woman participating in public
labour is derogatory, but in Dalit communities a woman who works in the fields,
outside the home, is a respected being.

In Hinduism, there is only male gods and goddesses, sometimes only at the feet
of gods, but in Dalit Bahujan culture, the only goddesses who represent power.
Kattamaisamma, Pochamma and Ankalamma are goddesses worshipped by Dalit
Bahujan communities. In Hindu culture, there have Lakshmi, Saraswati as goddesses,
but they are represented as part of the male gods; they don’t have power without the
male gods.

The hegemony of invisibility that surrounds Dalit women has existed through
the ages and continues even now. Be is it in politics or literature, Dalit women remain
marginalised, and as Sharmila Rege points out, it was the 1990’s that “. . . saw the
assertion of autonomous Dalit Women’s Organizations at both regional and national
levels” (*Dalit Women Talk Differently*, p. 39). One of the major charges that the
Feminist Movement in India faces is that of the negligence of the “difference between
savarna” and Dalit women.
It is quite interesting to note that the situation is quite similar when one compares the freedom struggle with the feminist struggle. In the struggle for the freedom of the nation, issues of caste and gender had been sidelined. Similarly, in the rage to acquire apposition and identity for the “woman”, the issue of the Dalit woman was sidelined. The women’s movement asserted it during the 1980’s and struggled against patriarchy, which was considered as the sole source of oppression applicable to women irrespective of the hierarchies of religion, caste and class. The feminist thought was a struggle against patriarchy. But, Brahminical feminism failed to recognise the patriarchal politics, which was at work at the mainstream level and within the Dalits too.

Sharmila Rege puts their thoughts in the following words, “The category ‘woman’ was conceived as collectively based on their being oppressed by the fact of their womenhood” (p. 40). The clarification that a mainstream feminism provides is that in order to fight patriarchy, women need to present themselves as a united group. However, it has always been the middle class, upper caste women who became the spokes person and the subject of the Feminist movement and literature. The lower caste and class women were ignored and made invisible by the Feminist Movement.

The discourses, caste as well as gender have sidelined Dalit women, where acknowledgement was done only in terms of homogenisation. The attempt in this chapter is to study the various dimensions of this forced invisibility, which has been meted out to Dalit women. The arguments that follow are not merely my subjective judgements on the situation of Dalit women, but rather an analysis of the same as portrayed in the works of Dalit writers.

Dalit women’s struggle is against exploitation based on three factors. One of them is caste hegemony. This stigma haunts them even if they acquire education,
power and position in society. Kumud Pawde’s *The Story of My Sanskrit* tells us how the notion of caste exists psychologically, if not physically, in the cities too, as in the villages. Kumud Pawde describes how in spite of being educated and having mastered the Sanskrit language, she had to remain unemployed because of being Kumud “Somkuwar” (p. 106), a caste that is the lowest of the low. It was only after an “intercaste marriage” (p. 106) that she managed to get a job. She expresses her agony. “But one thought still pricks me: the credit for Kumud Somkuwar’s job is not hers, but that of the name Kumud Pawde” (p. 106).

Uma Chakravarthy quotes Kumud Pawde’s expression of anguish from *Antosphot*, in her book titled *Gendering Caste. Through a Feminist Lens*,

> The result is that although I try to forget my caste, it is impossible to forget. And then I remember an expression that I heard somewhere: What comes by birth and can’t be cast off by dying that is caste (p. 6).

Dalit studies have emerged as a major area of creating space for critical or difficult conversations between Dalit Politics and Dalit Feminist theory. The Publication of *Nallapoddu* (Black Dawn) in 2003, edited by Gogu Shyamala, is a landmark endeavour of Dalit Women. The work has enabled a rich political understanding of the situation of Dalit women and men, the politics of their invisibility and the critical importance of paying attention to the specific experiences in every aspect of national life. Dalit as a concept and category has its meaning value, idea, culture and identifications with human dignity opening up new possibilities besides rendering critical understanding.

Shyamala Gogu says in her introduction to *Nallapoddu*:

> Male dominated Dalit movement has failed to look at the problem of Dalit women and their self-respect. When a Dalit woman is raped,
there are two factors that are presented, one is self-respect and another one is compensation. Compensation became a primary issue than self-respect in the case of Dalit women due to the poverty in Dalit communities.

Bama in her novel, Sangati says,

Later when I finished my studies and began to look for jobs I realised that even with an education one has to face many difficulties when trying to earn a livelihood. Being a Dalit creates a problem. On top of that, being a Dalit woman makes it even more difficult (pp. 119-120).

And a little after she says . . . there can be no getting round this question of caste. If I answer straight out that I am a paraichi, they will not let me rent their house. They make it really difficult, however much I am willing to pay (p. 120).

While on the one hand, the authors here attempt to explain the differences existing amongst “Indian women”, on the other hand they use this difference to establish their own distinct identity, that of “Dalit women”, whose problems are different from the others of the same sex. The question of identity becomes interesting here. Dalit women accept the identity. “Dalit”, thus declaring their solidarity with Dalits. They also accept the term “Feminism”, thus identifying them with women’s liberation. What the Dalit women are suggesting is a modification of the existing concepts and perceptions, a rethinking of the concept of “sisterhood” and a discussion of the oppression, both as “Dalit” and as “Women”.

Placed in a similar situation of marginalisation, based on race, if not caste, the Australian Aboriginal writer, Jackie Huggins writes in her essay titled, Wedmedi If Only You Knew:
White women’s attempts to silence or control Aboriginal challenges to inherent racism in feminist theory and practice of course serve to reinforce Aboriginal women’s criticism that white feminists still do not recognise their own racism. . . . While white feminist theory may espouse the ideals of sisterhood and solidarity, feminist practice continues to damage the possibility that this rhetoric could be translated into action (p. 34).

The extended sisterhood is nothing but tokenism. Although, the issue of race in the case of Huggins. The problems of marginalisation are related, like her, Dalit women depict their own lives. Their lives prove their ability to perform all roles of life, while toiling hard for livelihood, being raped, tortured and physically abused at the same time. The third form of power against which Dalit women have to struggle is that of Dalit patriarchy. Dalit literature claims itself to be a literature in which the “personal becomes political”, because it is an expression of one’s own experiences. So, a study of Dalit literature would help us understand the position of Dalit women. It is based on life experiences and thus claims to create a niche for itself in the realm of literature. But, even Dalit literature, which strives to create parallel literary discourse and thus divert itself from mainstream literature, is not completely devoid of hegemonies.

Dalit literature serves as a mirror to the changing trends in the debate over Dalits as well as the movement. Over the years, Dalit literature has succeeded in creating a separate identity and aesthetics of its own, though it still suffers from the tag of being a “marginalised literature”. Having created an identity, Dalit literature has tried to theorise itself. Sharankumar Limbale attempts theorising of Dalit literature in his Marathi book, *Dalit Sahityache Saundaryashastra* published in 1996, which was
later translated into English in 2004 by Alok Mukherjee and was titled, *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature, Histories, controversies and Considerations*. In the third chapter of this book, Limbale goes on to discuss the term Dalit:

Who is a Dalit?

Harijans and neo-Buddhists are not the only Dalits; the term describes all the untouchable communities living outside the boundary of the village, as well as Adivasis, landless farm-labourers, workers, the suffering masses and nomadic and criminal tribes. In explaining the word, it will not do to refer only to the untouchable castes. People who are lagging behind economically will also need to be included (p. 30).

It is interesting to note the definition of which a Dalit is, in terms of its changing connotations as well as exclusions. Limbale includes every category but excludes the category of woman, which raises various important questions. Does Limbale make an attempt to club Dalit men and women as one, thus homogenising their problems? Just as his definition excludes the category of women, his book fails to list any Dalit women writers. What does such exclusion mean then?

Such an argument brings us to the present scenario and the present debate. Patriarchy does exist and thus it falls into the stereotypical mainstream notions by denying Dalit women writers a space in it. Are there no Dalit women writers? Certainly there are. So, then, why has this veil of invisibility been forced on them? Where do Dalit women stand in the Dalit movement and the creation of a unique aesthetics?

Sharankumar Limbale excludes Dalit women not only from the definition of Dalit, but also from the list of Dalit writers who are only male writers like Baburao Bagul, Namdeo Dhasal and so on. He seems to be creating a “mainstream male-
centred” Dalit Literature. In a similar manner, G.K. Ghosh and Shukla Ghosh give us an insight regarding the opinion of upper castes, about Dalit women and their lives.

They write:

One of the important reasons for Dalit women is having better position than those of higher caste being, Dalit women had to go for wage earning due to high rate of poverty. As wage earner obviously they had better respect since family had to depend at least partly on their income . . . On overall perspective Dalits consider their women as equals. They have respect for their mothers, sisters and wives (Dalit women, pp. 15-16).

One can see the similarities in the way Dalit men as well as the upper castes perceive Dalit women. Though wage earning might appear as a symbol of economic autonomy to the readers, Dalit women writers describe the reality behind their gray lives. While the works of Dalit men and mainstream writers show ignorance or lack of acknowledgement of inequalities that exist in marriage, giving way to domestic violence, which are a part of the everyday life of Dalit women, the reality is portrayed in the works of Dalit women writers.

Bama’s Sangati further represents the plight of the Dalit mother who has to work both inside and outside the house to earn food for the family, often single handedly. Sangati deals with the community at large: the community of Dalit women who are marginalised both on grounds of caste as well as gender. Bama’s Sangati is a narrative of resistance and voicing of her own Dalit community. Bama loosely strings voices that demonstrate how Dalit women’s bodies are scarred by the many burdens of domestic, farm and sexual labour and yet how in ways they are better placed than caste Hindu women. Sangati is a work which gives voice to the doubly marginalised
Dalit woman. It is an attempt to question the hegemony of the non-Dalit women writers in claiming to speak for the Dalit women as well as that of the Dalit men who claim to speak for the women.

_Sangati_ problematises the female identity, which remains largely, ignored within ethnographic narratives or confessional texts. _Sangati_ voices the community’s death. The word, _Sangati_ means ‘events’ and thus the novel, through individual stories, anecdotes and memoirs, portrays the events that take place in the life of women in the Paraiya community. It also reveals how the Paraiya women are doubly oppressed. Women are represented as wage earners and it is upon them that the burden of running the family falls. Men on the other hand spend the money earn as they please. In addition, the women are vulnerable to sexual exploitation and harassment. Bama’s _Sangati_ the first line reflects different communal viewpoints. As she expressed painfully, “If the third is a girl to behold, your country yard will fill with gold” (p. 3). The mythic tone of the voice is unmistakable. With a leap in the temporal frame, the narrator or the protagonist currently as a young girl, and her relationship with her grandmother is delivered to us through the prism of the narrative act. She viewed “and while she was about it (combing the protagonist’s hair), she’d give me all the gossip of the village” (pp. 5-6). The first ritual, which Bama describes, is the coming of age of Mariamma. The role of women in this ritual is elaborately described and the way they firmly establish their social responsibilities irrespective of counteracting living conditions, “Even if there’s nothing to eat, women can never be stopped from singing loudly and ululating” (p. 17). The upper-caste landlord, Kumarasami Ayya, accosts Mariamma, returning from the fields. He tries to pull her in a shed, but she escapes. After this incident Bama offers two narrative events. In one, Mariamma is warned by her friends, “It is best if you shut about this.
If you even try to tell people what actually happened, you’ll find that it is you who will get the blame; it’s you who will be called a whore . . . Are people going to believe their (‘upper-caste landlords’) words or ours? (p. 20).

P.K. Nayar observes these comments gesture at a socio-historical narrative already in place. Dalit narratives will always be subsumed into and under that of the upper castes. There will be, Mariamma’s friends warn her, nobody to listen to her ‘story’. The denial of a speaking position constitutes Bama’s political critique of the social and historical marginalisation of Dalit and women’s narratives. The narrative allows a further investigation of a parallel discourse, which nurtures passivity as a preferred alternative to resistance. This structured concept of muted acceptance contextualises all marginal women’s narratives such as Mariamma’s. Nayar also viewed Sangati is ‘built around women’s conversations -- events are narrated through women’s stories and opinions delivered through them, a feature Paula Richman claims produces a ‘dramatised audience’ that foregrounds the experience of specific Dalit women’. Bama plots events within dialogues, thereby giving us a chance to see and hear the events through different women’s lenses. In the second event, Kumarasami, worried that Mariamma may complain about him, goes to the head of the Dalit community and spreads rumours about Mariamma. He claims that Mariamma and Manikkam were ‘behaving in a very dirty way’. The upper-caste man’s narrative problematises the issue by producing a distorted account of the incident. A meeting of the village is called, but the women are prevented from speaking there” (p. 23). The discourse, which is ultimately sanctioned by both the Dalit and non-Dalit world, is the one which the upper-caste man constructs. The ‘trial’ revolves around the trust reposed in the upper-caste man’s narrative. “Did the mudalaali lie to us in everything he said?” Shouts the village headman (p. 23). Bama
draws our attention to the fact that the women who begin to protest are ‘silenced’. Mariamma of course, is found guilty. When Bama’s protagonist admonishes her grandmother for not protesting, the world-weary grandmother tells her,

   From your ancestors’ times 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 (pp. 28-29).

In one of the situational experiences, Bama explores with a sense of human cry on the impoverished and violent world of Dalit women. Her female characters suffer from double discrimination and they are oppressed by the so-called high caste people, which equally reflect and affect both male and female Dalits. They constitute the majority of labourers, doing hard manual labour and engage in agricultural operations. Women participate in productive works, even wages and participate in the economic chain. But they are paid much less than their male counterparts. This unequal division of labour becomes a major issue in *Sangati*. The Dalit community is also under the reigning patriarchal system Dalit men who themselves are marginalised by the upper class landowners, in turn marginalises Dalit women. “It is not the same for women of other castes and communities.

   “Our women bear the violence of their husbands” (p. 65). Invidious patriarchal distinctions are initially inculcated in children within the first ten years of their lives. Gender games act as effective tools to achieve this goal. Bama as a young girl understands the crafty nature of gender games they play. Girls are not allowed to play the games of boys. While games like ‘kabadi’ and ‘marbles’ is meant for boys, girls play at cooking, getting married and other domestic matters.

   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. Now-a-days for many of the girls, those have become real blows, and their entire lives are hell (p. 31).

Elders consider boys as permanent members in a family because they are supposed to take care of their parents. On the other hand, female children are transient members who are to be transplanted to another family and so have no role to play in their families. This causes gender prejudices even in the minds of parents. It reminds us of Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics*, which talks about historical patriarchy in modern terms. Two of the stories that Bama analyses are that of Mariamma and Thayi, whose marital disharmonies are revealed in an attempt to stereotype the Dalit predicament. They are ill-treated and beaten up daily by their husbands. Mariamma is humiliated by her father, assaulted by the landlord and later tormented by her husband. She is a true representative of the entire community of the submissive Dalit women. She never resents her tormentors. She is unjustly accused of being intimate with a village boy and summoned to the village meeting. Even though the whole village knows that she is not guilty, nobody has the courage to defend her. The women are prevented from speaking in village meetings and the men do not possess the courage to stand erect before the upper class and question them. Bama realises that women occupy a claustrophobic space in the world and are constantly under menace. They are not safe in their home, agricultural fields, in church and even in public spheres. They are constantly under the threat of sexual harassment in the field of work. Family, church and caste-courts are usually male-led. Justice and rules for behaviour are different for men and women. While Mariamma pays Rs.200/- as fine, Manikkam pays only
Rs.100/- for an equal offence. Women are also vulnerable to superstitious beliefs. They believe that it is women who are possessed by ‘peys’.

Bama realises that such blind beliefs and self-acquiescence can be removed:

We must be strong. 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. Just as we work hard so long as there is strength in our bodies, so too, must we strengthen our hearts and minds in order to survive (p. 59).

Bama almost all rejects to accept the fact that her account is all about the narration of her autobiographical ‘I’. Instead of her individual self-coming to occupy the centre stage, she evokes the collective self of the entire Dalit Community suggesting that the autobiographical ‘I’ does not have an autonomous life outside the collective ‘we’. Almost all Dalit autobiographers adopt this strategy. Bama deploys several other distinctly different narrative strategies. It is perhaps deliberate that she leaves out the names of people, places, and institutions and thus brings anonymity in her narration. For example, she does not mention the name of her village or the names of her parents, brothers and sisters or the upper caste people who exploit her community, even the school and the college she attended and later worked in. She does mention a few names of people in her community but they stand out to be so ordinary and insignificant that they can be found in any Dalit community.

The concept of anonymity in narration has a special function. By rejecting to give names, Bama is perhaps trying to make a universal statement about oppression even though it exists at the local level, thinks M.S. Pandian. He writes:
To name is to exercise power, but a deliberate refusal to name can enable a politics of collectivity. In this case, the shroud of anonymity free events, persons and institutions from the possibility of individuation and renders them as general. Anonymity thus becomes a mode of invoking larger solidarities (p.103).

Bama’s invoking of larger solidarities seems to have a definite purpose. She wants to draw the attention of the readers towards the various caste discriminations that prevails in the Indian society and takes the parayas, her community, as an instance to illustrate how they have been the worst victims of caste oppression for several centuries. Bama at the very beginning focuses on the different caste formations of her village stating how people meticulously followed caste rules while carrying out their day-to-day socio-cultural and economic activities. Bama recollects, since the parayas were considered to be untouchables they had a separate settlement, far away from the main village. Social interactions between the lower caste and upper-caste communities were strictly prohibited except on special occasions when such interactions were inevitable for both.

Bama remembers that the upper castes, “kept themselves to their part of the village and we stayed in ours. We only went to their side if we had work to do there. But they never come to our parts” (p. 6). In fact all important offices and establishments were in the upper caste streets – the post office, the milk depot, the big shops, the panchayat board, the church, the schools, etc., among the upper castes the naicker community commanded power and respect in the village. They were the rich farmers, and the parayas, mostly poor and landless, worked as agricultural labourers under them. Both grandmothers of Bama worked as servants for the naicker families.
The lives of the parayas entirely depended upon the mercy of the naickers. If naicker families did not call them for any agricultural labour then they would go up to the woods on the mountains, and make a living by gathering and selling it. Either way their earnings were meagre. Except during harvesting seasons, most of the families went hungry. They didn’t have enough income or power to manage their families without the source of regular income. Bama gives a small instance, when the streets were overflowing with fish; people sold all sorts of fish during rainy season: *silabi kendai, paaruku kendai, keluti, ayirai, koravi, viral*. In out of *silabi kendai* and *paambu kendai*, the cheapest they could get. On the other hand, the upper caste bought and ate *ayirai, keluti* and *viraal*. Bama gives adequate reason for this social difference pertaining to food. She writes, “We couldn’t afford to pay that much for what we ate” (p. 2).

Bama remembers how people of her community laboured hard to produce grains for the rich upper caste farmers while they themselves went hungry. That the producers never became consumers is due to social stratifications emanating from caste arrangements. Bama draws a list of various types of work, which the people of her community have been traditionally doing to this day. In the field they did ploughing, manuring, watering, sowing, seeds, separating, seedlings and planting them, weeding, working on the threshing floors, planning groundnuts, selecting ripe coconuts etc., at the construction site they dug wells, carried loads of earth, gravel and stone. There were also other odd jobs such as going up to the hills to gather firewood, working with palm leaves or making bricks at the kilns. All the jobs listed above involve immense physical strain. And with no proper food for sustenance, Dalit workers became prematurely old and die early.

Bama states,
Even though they worked so hard and suffered bodily pain, our People laughed and were cheerful. This is a community that was born to work. And however hard they toil it is the same kuush every day. The same broken-grain gruel, the same watery dried-fish curry. It seems, they never ever reflect upon their own terrible state of affairs. But do they have any time to think? You have to wonder how the upper castes would survive without these people. For its only when they fall asleep at night that their arms and legs are still; they seem to be at work at all other times. And they have to keep working until the moment of death. It is only in this way that they can even half fill their bellies (p.47).

Dalit Christian women suffer from an identity crisis apart from being discriminated for their low social order. The discriminations are from within and outside churches. But over the years their roles have been changing. The authors find out that with education, awareness and income to support, Dalit Christian women have at least started bargaining their position in society. From just adhering to a social role to having an individual identity is definitely a revolutionary step very much desired by Bama and other Dalit writers.

Dalit women who suffer from various forms of caste, class and gender oppression both at home and outside are depicted in its true picture. Almost all of them recounted how the upper caste men took advantage of their poor economic conditions and attempted to physically assault them. If they resisted, they were immediately thrown out of their jobs. There is no place for their honour, prestige and self-respect, these women had to frequently change their jobs. Even outside their work places, they were harassed by the upper castes. Many of them reported how
men in the streets lecherously commented on them and, if they protested they abused those using filthy languages. At home, women faced the wrath of their family members and close relations. Married women recollected how their husbands invariably jumped to the bed at night and forcibly had sex with them without any consideration. Women not only critically took note of such inhuman acts, but they openly criticised their husbands’ misdeeds whenever they got a chance to speak to their mind.

Women reported that whenever their husbands were good and understanding, their mother-in-law would bring about disharmony between husbands and wives. Those women who lived in the shadows of their mother-in-law reported that they virtually worked like slaves in their own homes. In the ensuing fights between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, the former always won the battle. In situations when husbands came to support their wives the mothers-in-law unnecessarily created a rift between the couples which led to verbal fights. Sometimes, the mothers-in-law even incited their sons to beat their daughters-in-law and enjoyed the scene. Some women recollect their adolescent days when they were totally under the control of their parents, who would act as tyrants by curbing their freedom and punishing them for small misdeeds.

By the control of their parents, Dalit women also suffered from several other social disabilities, which mostly emanated from the practice of Dalit patriarchy. Dalit communities are divided on the question of Dalit patriarchy. With wife-beating and other kinds of domestic violence so rampant in Dalit families, there definitely exists a patriarchal social order prevailing in Dalit communities tells us that Dalit women are often looked down upon by their male counterparts. Like the upper caste Hindus they prefer to have male children who, they believe, will supplement in family income by
working hard. Since girl-children are to be given in marriage by any means they neglect their health and education by asking them to stay at home and look after the household chores. Girl children from a very young age are asked to cultivate perseverance and selfless devotion so that in future they will be able to manage their husbands’ families. Since, childhood Dalit girls take charge of family responsibilities and are overburdened with social duties. Instead of going to school, they look after their siblings while their parents go to work. They are forced to leave their studies halfway. That is the condition of a Dalit girl child. While narrating their life-stories a majority of women confessed that they had to go back to resume their usual work within four weeks of their children’s birth. On the whole, Dalit women’s lives are too painful, so much so that it becomes difficult to put it in words,

Dalitness is essentially a means towards achieving a sense cultural identity and the inferiority complex based on being a Dalit must be wiped out. Now, Dalitness is a source of confrontation: Dalitness is a matter of appreciating the potential of one’s total being. Thus individual, culture, social burden and Dalitness cannot be isolated . . .

For this cause of his self-elevation and self-identification (Paul, p. 35).

Apart from these, Bama is unmarried and faces the problem of living single in the patriarchal set up. Her free hours are filled with thoughts of the struggle. She and her people are punished constantly for the simple fact of having been born a Dalit:

Is it our fault that we are Dalits? On top of that, just because I am a woman, I have to battle especially hard. Not only do I have to struggle against men, I have also to bear the insults from women of other castes. From how many directions must the blows come! And for how long! (pp. 121-122).
Bama suggests a solution: by treating boys and girls equally, educating both and providing the girl child enough freedom would then eradicate the evils of injustices, violence and inequalities. *Sangati* is a record of vibrant life. Bama examines the life of the Dalit women to rationalise the reason for the pey’s control over Dalit women whose life was full of disgust, boredom and exhaustion.

Bama confronts,

The stronger ones somehow manage to survive all this. The ones who don’t have the mental strength are totally oppressed: they succumb to mental ill-health and act as if they are possessed by pey’s (p. 59).

The other aspect of the Dalit language is the variety of songs and dances they have from birth to death. Women and only the women dance sing the songs. *Sangati* is a record of these folk songs sung at the girl’s coming-of-age ceremony. The stanza patterns in the songs are marked by the choric ululation at the end of every four lines. Bama highlights the Dalit women’s presence of mind and wit to create songs instantly through several instances of versification. An instance, when a woman playing dice game watches a girl grinding masala while her cross-cousin (Macchaan) walks past, teases the girl through a song. Rangitham makes a song teasing Gnanappu’s daughter after the girl’s betrothal ceremony. The song reassesses her because the groom was darker than the bride. Songs fill the life of Dalits and make them laugh during weeding, transplanting rice or doing anything. They even tease each other through songs. The Dalit language is full of ridicule, rashness, recklessness, lampoons, ineffectiveness, and teasing utterances and these entire stands up against the oppression of the upper caste.

The lives of Dalits or perhaps confined and monotonous or even insignificant from the puppets of mainstream discourse, but if one looks deep it has its own
complexity and in build corruptive and balancing mechanisms perhaps not understand by the outsiders. The narrative is related in the form of episodes and activities, which happen in Dalit Community which their lives, are replete with providing an alternative to the hard monotonous and unrewarding labour that they have to perform in order to ere out their living. The writer asserts that in spite of all the hardships and worries, Dalit women were able to keep their head above and desire happiness due to community living where with good and bad are shared in equal measure.

Bama points out that the conditions of Dalit women is an inequitable one,

The position of women in both pitiful and humanizing, really. In the fields, they have to escape from upper caste men, molestation at church they must lick the priest shoes and be his slaves while he threatens them with trails of God, Heaven and Hell. Even when they go to their own homes, before they have had a chance to cook some Kanji lie down and rest a little, they have to submit themselves to their husband’s torment (p. 35).

Apart from the hard labour which they have to do for their livelihood, there is almost no care given to them during the time of pregnancy and they have bear the brunt alone without any kind of help from men as narrator remarks,

It is the men who fill themselves up at home and in the shops, women go rarely into hospitals, but deliver their children at home in make a shift away. Many women die at childbirth or soon after. Almost, immediately the men may have a second wife (p. 36).

When the Namekar heard that one of the women being beaten severely by her husband she becomes furious and questions her mother as to why she cannot leave the man whom treats her so brutally. Stop living herself as she works for herself
livelihood and not dependent on the husband. The reply in giving by her mother is a classic example of fantastic attitude and the helplessness in Dalit women, not only a dalit women, every woman faces the same problem in their lives that shows the brutality of men. It is not so easy to get away, once you are married, once you put your hand in the mortar, can you escape from the pestle? No, she must continue to suffer until her head rests on the earth at least. When my mother said, a variety of emotions groove in my heart; anger, excitement, fury, pride, wrath, resentment, and hatred (p. 44).

The Narrator reveals a surfacing and interesting facet about the lives of Dalit women when she observes that they are suppose to be frequently possessed by ‘Peys’ or minor evil spirits and ponder over the reasons with a rational bent of mind. She discovers that possession is only a reaction to stress and not some kind of mystical, supernatural phenomenal.

The following paragraph sums a day’s work of a woman:

From the moment they wake up, they set to work both in their homes and on the fields. At homes their husbands and children pester them; in the fields there is back breaking work besides the harassment of the landlord. When they come home in the evening, there is no time even to draw breath. And once they have collected water and firewood cooked a Kanji and feed their hungry husband and children, even then they can’t go to bed in peace and sleep until dawn. Night after night they must give in to their husbands’ pleasure. Even if a woman’s body is wrecked with pain, the husband is bothered only with his
satisfaction. Women are overwhelmed and crushed by their own
disgust, boredom, and exhaustion, because of all this (p.58).
The stronger ones somehow manage to survive all this. The one’s who
don’t have the mental strength are totally oppressed; they succour to
mental ill health and act, as if they are possessed by pey’ (p. 59).
The picture becomes clear when Bama points out that the women of upper caste do
not suffer from the phenomenon and that is confined only to Dalit illiterate women.
Namekar clear and resolute thinking and her sense of individuality becomes evident
when she declares her independent mind in the following words,

“We must be strange”. We must show by own resolute lives that we
believe ardently in our independence. I told myself that we must never
alter our minds to be warm out, damages and broken in the belief that
this is our fate. Just we work hard so long as there is in our bodies that
so too must we strengthen our hearts and minds in order to survive (p.
59).

Bama contrasts of the Dalit women with that of women and observes that, even
though Dalitmen are scared of the landlords and became submissive to them. When it
comes to their own women they behave in a rude, ruthless and aggressive manner
because of the public opinion supports them on the promise of that men is superior to
men, more so if he happen to occupy the position of husband.

As she states,
even though they are male, because they are Dalits. They have to be
like dogs with their tails rolled up when they are in the fields and
dealing with their landlords. There is no way; they can show their
strength in these circumstances. So, they show it have on their wives
and children. But then, it is the fate of women to be tormented both outside their houses and within? (p. 65).

The oppressive upper caste women are presented as a contrast to the Dalit women to show the stark differences between the two groups of women. The chat among Dalit women at the pond ridicules their upper caste women as they are confined to the walls:

They are all sacredly-cats, di. They can’t swim at all, that’s the truth, they stay at home, set a couple of buckets of water, which they dip into and pour over themselves little by little. God knows how they manage to bathe in such small, small amounts of water. How different it is to go right under the water like this (p. 116).

The women are contrasted in their ability to do more physical work and their financial ability with men. “Ask these upper caste women to do the work we do-to transplant paddy in the wet fields, to do the weeding, to reap the grain and carry it home. You’ll see soon enough. They’ll give it up in no time and go down” (p. 115). Even in appearance, the Dalits are different and feel pride in their beauty of being black than their upper caste fair women.

They might have light skins, but just take a close look at their faces. Their features are all crooked and all over the place, inside out and upside down. If they had our colour as well, not even a donkey would turn and look at them (p. 114). Even within the community, men have more rights than women, for “if a man marries outside his caste, it is nothing, but if a girl marries outside her caste, the honour and pride of the whole community is lost” (p. 109).
The rejection of reservations for Christian Dalits, the destruction of the Babri Masjid, the Karamchedu and Tsundur atrocities have sharpened the voices of Dalit women. Durga Devi has criticised Vedas and Swaroopa Rani the Varna System of the so-called sacred Bharat, land of the Vedas. Many Dalit women have questioned the caste, religion and patriarchal violence in society. It is needed to analyse why Dalit women are not able to write and why Telugu Literature has not given recognition to Dalit women writing. There are multi-sided problems in society for the recognition of Dalit women writings as mentioned above. Dalit women should stand as an established group instead of just lying as part of feminist or Dalit organisations.

Although there is a production of literature in society, it is only of “upper-caste” and male-centred literature, which is completely different from Dalit Literature. The norms of that literature continue to be “upper-caste” male dominant. This literature has measured Dalit women and their issues with its own norms and standards; the norms of the beauty and experience and religion of literature have continued to be of Hindu upper-castes in Indian society.

Though Dalit women started their writing from 1890s onwards, from the time of the “Adijan Movement’ to the recent self-respect movements, There is search with a microscope in the ocean of “upper-caste” literature to find Dalit women writing. Dalit women have education before the 1940s, but the search of the Nallapoddu team has proved successful because, it has brought to light the fact that Dalit women writing existed from 1890s itself. Tadi Nagamma and Jala Mangamma started writing from 1930s onwards; one significant point about them is that both of them were also social revolutionaries and leaders. Other Dalit women like Gulbanamma and Gnena Ratnamma, who also acquired education during the colonial period, have recently written about their experiences of Christianity.
There may be relevance to mention a book on ‘Dalit Christian women’ titled *From Role to Identity* (1997) written by John C.B. Webster *et al.* The book was an outcome of a project undertaken by a group of researchers in 1994, to throw light on the self-image and identity of Dalit Christian women within the Madras Diocese of the Church of South India. Based on the life-stories of four Dalit Christian women, named, Shanti, Sarojini, Kamala and Kalyani, the book focuses on subjects such as childhood experiences, marriage, patterns, child bearing and rearing practices, religious, festival life and their changing status in society. One of the significant findings of the book is that Dalit Christian women, in order to define their roles in society, have to defy at least three traditions: the Hindu tradition, the Dalit tradition, and the Christian tradition. The authors are of the opinion that Dalit Christian women have to live their lives at the intersection of these three traditions, which may either reinforce each other or be at odds with each other within their own beings.

In spite of such a grim scenario, these women kept dreaming of a better life. They always tried their best to improve their lives. Some of them took refuge in religion, believing that certain religious practices might bring changes in their social positions. Some chose Buddhism for their emancipation. They recollected the historical roles played by Ambedkar by embracing Buddhism. They believed that unlike other religions, Buddhism gave them more freedom to asset their lives both inside and outside their communities.

For instance, Ashoka follower of Buddhism observed that if everyone truly followed the tenets of Buddhism then the gap between men and women would finally disappear. The ideas of equality and respect for each other in society are, perhaps, the rallying points of Buddhism from which these women derived assurance and strived for dignity and self-respect.
Dalit women actively participating in religious activities, in political movements, and mobilised their fellow -- Dalit women to unite and fight for their basic rights and freedom, which are due to them from the Indian society. The various legal and constitutional provisions enshrined in the Indian constitution helped them demand social justice who was earlier denied to them. They also got benefits from various government sponsored training programmes which were specially organised for them as part of welfare measures. Lately, the initiatives taken by various Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) especially to bring together these women to develop awareness among them on education, health, sanitation, etc., have led to some change in their life situations. Dalit women have now begun to be conscious of their social positions vis-à-vis their male counterparts. Some of these conscious women have already started interrogating the traditional roles assigned to them by their communities as daughters, wives and mothers and are demanding that they be simply treated as persons, without a genre tag attached.

Ashoka, for instance, asserts this view strongly when he says that:

It must be generally understood and accepted in an ideal community that a woman is not a subordinate or a toy or a sex object, or a useful machine; she too has a body that tires, a heart, a mind, and her own desires. There must be an awareness of her as person (p. 150).

This view of Ashoka is pertinent even for the upper caste and class women who like Dalit women, equally suffer from male domination. The only way to counter male chauvinism is to forge unity not only among fellow -- Dalit women but also with the upper caste and class women who are already in the women’s movement for long. Of course, taking into consideration the different castes, classes, communities, languages, religions, etc., it may be difficult to bring about unity among women at national level.
Sumitra Bhave is of the view that because of the different socio-cultural environments there exists a dichotomy between the upper caste women’s perception of freedom vis-à-vis the existential conditions of the lower caste women.

To quote Bhave:

Women are not seen to come together under one banner and to struggle to achieve similar goals. Why? One answer if found in Women’s self-image. Outwardly she seems to be a victim of injustice and double standards. But through manipulative politics she gains compensatory rewards both at familial and societal level. Since both these images, the downtrodden one as well as the Machiavellian statesman like one-form a part of her self-image, the latter is always undermining the anger of the former, preventing its explosion into a coherent revolution. Mutually exclusive social institutions coexist, interact and borrow from one another in the context of Indian culture. This is seen in operation in the seemingly patrilineal society, which at the same time reverse motherhood to an excessive degree. It is this reverence which allows a woman in fact to assume control of her household, though in institutional norm she remains powerless. The origins of the indifference of Indian women to the liberation movement are found in this dichotomy (pp. xxiv-xxv).

It has been almost two decades since the publication of *Pan on Fire* by the dichotomy Sumitra Bhave mentions has not yet been resolved.

In the meantime, Dalit women from all across India are coming together in different platforms to voice their grievances. Feminist writers like Sharmila Rege have already pointed out the internal contradiction that exists in the Dalit women’s
movement citing the differences between rural and urban, illiterate and literate, poor and rich Dalit women. But that does not mean that the concerted efforts made by Dalit women have been a total failure. It is true that the Dalit women’s movement is still in its inception and yet to achieve its objectives, but the literary expression coming from these women suggest that Dalit women in India are sure to get their due in the coming days. The life-stories of these eight Dalit women give us such an assurance.

Bama happens to come from a Tamil Dalit community called Parayas, considered to be the lowest of the low in the Indian society. In order to get rid of the low social positions, like the Dalit communities elsewhere – Bama’s family members and relations became Christians. But there is no change or any remarkable improvement in the lives of Dalits by religious conversion. Still they looked down by their upper caste neighbours. Religious conversion will not get any necessary emancipation in a Dalit’s life. Finally, conversion became a debated question among Dalits. Bama’s autobiography is full of questions. Bama has led a hard life, coming from a low social position. She has had to fight hundreds of odd battles daily. Through hard work, perseverance she completes her college education, becomes a teacher at a convent. Inspired by the life of Jesus Christ she becomes a Catholic nun, prepares herself to serve the poor and the destitute. In missionary also she had faced so many obstacles. She comes to a realisation that majority of the church authorities are from the upper caste who deliberately discriminate against people from the lower caste. Bama herself was humiliated several times simply because she happened to be a Dalit Christian. And when it became impossible for her to continue her job she finally resigned and went back to her village to join the community life. She recollects that in spite of her education, her experiences at the convent, etc., the upper
caste people in her village continued to treat her as an ordinary Dalit woman. When she joined her community, her fellow members has treated her an outsider.

Bama, thus, felt more and more alienated. The fact that she is a Dalit woman and a single woman made her social position further vulnerable. In order to cope with her tension she started writing her life-stories, which ultimately became her testimony. Bama finally got help and co-operation from her community members and settled down amongst them as an ordinary individual. Without a sense of guilt, it is not an easy task to settle down in her village amidst her community. Bama realises that she has been drifting away from the world of Dalits due to the change of her personality. With modern education, a secured job and access to material comforts during her time at the convent, she finds it difficult to associate her life with that of her community where life is marked by physical labour and a daily struggle for existence. Her yearning to be a part of the community and a burning desire to share its pain and pleasures takes a concrete shape, when Bama consciously chooses to write her narrative in spoken Dalit Tamil. By doing so, she virtually challenges the hegemony of the so-called mainstream written Tamil, which has been a monopoly of the upper castes in Tamil Nadu. This is a calculated step which brings Bama to her community’s fold, argues M.S.S. Pandian:

Bama’s conscious choice of spoken Dalit Tamil, ungoverned by the tyranny of elaborate grammatical rules, as the medium. To voice the story of her community is indeed instructive. In a spirit of defiance, it obviously challenges the authority of literacy over orality, a division which was ratified and nourished by Tamil Saivism or Tamil nationalism of different hues, including mainstream Dravidianism during this century. But at an equally important plane, It is an effort by
Bama to break free from her proficiency in Standardised written Tamil, a result of her privileged education in schools and colleges, and to lose herself in the community of Dalits (p. 78).

However, even after becoming a part of her community, sharing their pain and pleasures and writing in their language, there are other moments of alienation, which Bama never forgets to mention in her narrative. She does not hide the fact that when she was in a salaried job she used to indulge a bit in clothes, food and travel things most of her community members cannot think of it. It is only after she resigned from her job that she came to realise what it really meant to be a poor person.

And so she writes:

Today I do know what it is to be hungry, to suffer illness in solitude to stand and stare without a paisa in one’s hand, to walk along the street without protection, to be embarrassed by a lack of appropriate clothes, to be orphaned and entirely alone, to swim against the tide. In this life without position or status or money or authority (pp. 102-103).

Bama never regrets that she had to resign from the convent job, which gave her security, certain power and in a sense social position. Rather she regrets that she unnecessarily spent seven long years maintaining a false social position. She is happy that finally she got her freedom, which she and the people of her community yearn for. In a metaphorical eloquence, Bama celebrates her freedom saying:

I feel certain contentment in leading an ordinary life among ordinary people. I can breathe once again independently and at ease, like a fish that has at last returned to the water, after having been flung outside and suffered distress (p. 104).
While Bama’s writing of *Karukku* was a process of healing for her, her writing of *Sangati* and P. Sivakami’s writing of *The Grip of Change* serve as weapons through which they aim at the three oppressors in society, Dalit patriarchy being one among them. These two writers take up the theme of Dalit women significantly and discuss the various issues surrounding it. However, discussing Dalit patriarchy has made them subject to criticism, where allegations are poured out against them from all corners. As expected, the bulk of the criticism comes from their own counterparts in society and that is, Dalit men. The discussion of Dalit patriarchy in these two texts has made Dalit men scared and angry regarding the exposure of the evils present in their own society.

The question that arises here is why Sivakami and Bama are attacked when they try to create a parallel literary debate within a parallel movement? Is it wrong on their part to write about the truth about one’s own society, and about the counterparts in their society? Where do Dalit women writers stand when they discuss the evils present in their own society? Do they necessarily and essentially take a certain stance while writing about Dalit women?

K. Suneetha Rani brings forth the complexity of the issue in her unpublished manuscript titled, *Dalit Women Speak: Emergence of an Identity in Dalit Women’s Narratives*, where she discusses the constraints and restrictions enforced on Dalit women. She says:

If a woman raises her voice against her people on the gender issues, she is with the feminist camp, away from her people’s movement. If a woman is with her people’s movements and silent over women’s rights, then she is faithful to her people and does not require emancipation from her men but requires only liberation from outside
hegemony. Do women have to decide between their community and gender? Is there no way they can talk about women like them without proving treacherous either to their community movement or feminist movement? (p. 115).

Oppressed and suppressed in their real lives, they are left with no liberty in the field of literature too, where Dalit men writers as well as the mainstream writers wanted to dictate them. As the novel adopts a new technique of writing, the language is devoid of similies, metaphors, symbols and anything romantic. Instead, the lives of those men and women are described with precision in each utterance. The strong narrative of Bama is revealed in sentences relating to the successive duties of a woman and in Madurai dialect which is rich in proverbs, colloquial usage, swears words, nicknames, and folk language. Translation forms an integral part of the Indian psyche. Translation is of paramount importance for exchanging thoughts and ideas. In a multilingual nation, the translation of classics into various languages has led to emotional integration of the people. In India, during the freedom struggle Bhagavad Gita was translated into so many regional languages. Translation is thus an important field of academic pursuit that helps not only in the dissemination of knowledge but also in the diffusion of culture. In other words, translation is not just linguistic transference but the transference of a whole socio-cultural matrix. Translation is a collaborative creative enterprise, whose purpose is to communicate the meaning of the original text in a different language and to a different audience. But the process of translation is however not bereft of problems. The problem of translating a text can be broadly divided into two—linguistic and cultural.

All creative literature is expressed in a language having its own phonological, grammatical and semantic structures. It is also rooted in a particular culture and
carries significant information about its socio-cultural milieu. Thus the meaning of a language depends not only on its concept in the text but also on factors outside the text, meaning is culturally conditioned and intricately woven into the texture of the language. Thus the manners, in which people choose language their vocabulary, construct their sentences, speak, and reveal much about their culture.

Bama’s *Sangati* (Tamil), its Malayalam translation by Vijayakumar Kunnisserry and its English translation by Lakshmi Holmstrom. In India, society is stratified into different castes. These castes are clearly named groups and are rigidly separated from each other. There is very little possibility of movement from one caste to another. Each caste has its own dialect. Vijayakumar in his translation makes use of the slang of Palaghat Paraiya community. This has close affinities with the slang used by Kuppuvachan in Khasakkinte Ithihasam. By retaining the slang of the Dalits, Vijayakumar brings the translated text closer to the original. It also reveals the close association between Tamil and Malayalam. According to Vijayakumar, a good translation must be able to convey the essence of the text to be translated. To prove his point, a translator has to find the essence of the text to be translated and then convey it in another language without losing the essence. The Malayalam translation of *Sangati* has been able to convey the essence of Bama’s text, *Sangati*.

Women in every strata of society became the victims of patriarchal society. Bama is hyper aware of the fact that patriarchy has wrecked the precious lives of women in India and eventually, it affects the social, political and economic growth. Hard labour paves the way for a culture of violence. Finally, both *Karukku* and *Sangati* pinpoint the gospel fact that within the community there is class hierarchy. *Karukku* and *Sangati* wield enormous clout in the present literary scenario on account
of Dalit dynamism. Bama’s writings undoubtedly give impetus for the edification of Dalit community.

*Sangati* is primarily about a search for community’s Identity; not about the single self. It ends pointing out how Paraiya women are always the most vulnerable, even when educated, socially and economically independent and choosing to live alone. This novel is written in colloquial style, which overturns the decorum and aesthetic of upper caste Tamil; the novel seeks to work out a positive cultural identity as Dalit women who can resist upper caste norms. It gives an account of Dalit women’s dual oppression on account of gender and caste as well as other discriminated situations of womanhood in Tamil Dalit culture. *Sangati* explores the female subjugation and subordination in society. Bama says about Dalit feminism in an interview: “All women in the world are second class citizens”. Their Dalit identity gives them a different set of problems. They experience a total lack of social status: they are not even considered dignified human beings. Their stories are based on their Dalit culture. Dalit women have to put up with a triple oppression, based on class, castem and gender. *Sangati* encapsulates the author’s experience of working within a heterogeneous and oppressed society and the series of several interconnected anecdotes, experiences, news, and events as narrated in the novel, as an autobiography of a community. Throughout *Sangati* one can see the rebellious nature of Dalit Paraiya the hard work that they do both in their home and in the field as well. Bama herself stands for Dalit empowerment and the emancipation of the Dalit Paraiya Community. It is now clear that through Dalit women autobiographies: there is a transformation of women’s rejection into resistance. The novel represents the optimistic end towards desires for a better future for women: “Women can make and women can break” (p. 123).
Accepting Identity to Dalit women is still remaining a question Bama puts which has so far no answer for it. The successive Government till the present are have never thought of bring any special legislation to rehabilitate the millions of Dalit women who are doubly marginalised both in their communities as well as in the Indian society. Thus, several deeds of National Planning have hardly touched the lives of Dalit women (Raj kumar, p. 215).