

## A Comprehensive Analysis of the Struggle of Identity in Bama's Sangati

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### Abstract:

*This paper presents a comprehensive analysis of the struggle of identity in Bama's Sangati (1994; trans. 2005), a landmark text in Dalit feminist literature. Through its unique structure of anecdotes, oral traditions, and collective storytelling, Sangati amplifies the voices of Dalit women who face the dual oppression of caste and gender. The text critiques entrenched patriarchal and caste hierarchies while simultaneously celebrating resilience, solidarity, and everyday acts of resistance. Central to Bama's narrative is the role of education as a transformative force, enabling women to move beyond inherited oppression and assert dignity, autonomy, and agency. By foregrounding subaltern women's lived experiences, the study situates Sangati within the broader frameworks of Dalit studies, feminist criticism, and postcolonial literature. It argues that Bama's work serves not only as testimony but also as a manifesto for social change, linking literature with identity politics and activism.*

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### Introduction:

Dalit women's literature occupies a crucial and transformative space in contemporary Indian literary discourse, as it amplifies voices that have long been suppressed by the intertwined structures of caste and patriarchy. This body of writing not only narrates individual struggles but also embodies a collective assertion of identity, resilience, and resistance against systemic marginalization. Among the pioneering and influential voices in this tradition, Bama Faustina Soosairaj—widely known simply as Bama—emerges as a formidable figure who has redefined the contours of Dalit feminist thought through her works.

Her 1994 Tamil novel *Sangati* ("Events"), translated into English in 2005, is more than a literary text; it functions as a socio-political document and a testimonial archive of Dalit women's lived experiences. Unlike linear autobiographies, *Sangati* is woven together through fragments—anecdotes, oral histories, folklore, and everyday conversations—that collectively portray the rhythms of Dalit women's lives. Through this unconventional narrative form, Bama captures the essence of communal storytelling, a mode deeply rooted in oral traditions, which in turn underscores the collective nature of Dalit identity formation.

Central to *Sangati* is the exploration of identity, a theme that manifests in multiple layers. On one hand, Dalit women are compelled to navigate caste-based oppression that denies them dignity and social

recognition. On the other, they struggle against patriarchal structures that restrict their agency within both Dalit and non-Dalit communities. This “double marginalization,” as scholars often describe it, is powerfully rendered in the novel through depictions of labor, marriage, religious practices, and education. Bama portrays how Dalit women, despite being the backbone of their families and communities, are relegated to invisibility in dominant narratives.

The quest for identity in *Sangati* thus becomes inseparable from the quest for dignity and justice. By asserting the value of Dalit women’s experiences, voices, and bodies, Bama challenges the hegemonic discourses that have long excluded them. The narrative insists that identity is not a passive inheritance but an active struggle—shaped through resistance, solidarity, and the refusal to remain silent. In this sense, *Sangati* not only speaks for Dalit women but also demands that they be recognized as agents of change within the broader project of social transformation.

### **Significance of the Study:**

The study of identity struggle in Bama’s *Sangati* is highly significant in Dalit studies, gender discourse, and Indian literary criticism. As a landmark text in Dalit feminist literature, it not only narrates suffering but also critiques caste and patriarchal structures. By centering Dalit women’s voices, *Sangati* highlights their intersectional struggles and preserves oral traditions that serve as cultural archives of marginalized identities. It emphasizes education as a tool of empowerment and social transformation while remaining relevant to ongoing movements for justice and equality. Furthermore, it enriches the Indian literary canon by challenging elitist narratives and establishing Bama as a crucial feminist and postcolonial voice. Ultimately, the text demonstrates how literature functions as testimony, resistance, and a means of redefining identity for empowerment.

### **Collective Identity and Oral Tradition:**

Unlike her earlier autobiographical work *Karukku*, *Sangati* transcends individual experience and focuses on the collective identity of Dalit women. The narrator, reflecting on her community, recalls:

“Our people have always been exploited. The upper castes trample us under their feet, and even among us, the men oppress us women.” (*Sangati*, p. 6)

This statement encapsulates the **intersectional oppression** that Dalit women endure. By drawing from oral tales, gossip, songs, and folktales, Bama builds a textual space where Dalit women’s voices—often dismissed in mainstream narratives—acquire permanence. Their oral testimonies themselves become acts of resistance, asserting their identity against systemic silencing.

### **Struggle Against Caste Oppression:**

Caste-based marginalization is at the core of Dalit women’s identity struggle. In *Sangati*, everyday life reflects humiliation: the Dalit women are forced into menial labor, face insults, and are excluded from public spaces of dignity. One woman recounts bitterly:

“They treat us worse than animals. We must not sit with them, we must not eat with them, we must not even walk the same street.” (*Sangati*, p. 42)

Such testimonies highlight how identity is shaped in opposition to exclusion. The Dalit woman’s selfhood becomes both a burden and a site of resistance, where survival itself is a form of defiance.

### **Gendered Dimensions of Identity:**

Bama emphasizes that Dalit women face a double burden—the oppression of caste and the subjugation of patriarchy. The men in their own community often replicate structures of dominance. As the narrator observes:

“Our men trample all over us without thinking, just as the upper castes trample all over them.” (*Sangati*, p. 69)

This stark realization positions women’s identity in conflict not only with external casteist structures but also within the intimate spaces of family and community. Women must negotiate their existence as workers, mothers, and wives while asserting their dignity against everyday violence.

### **Work, Labor, and Identity:**

In *Sangati*, the question of labor forms a critical dimension of women’s identity. Dalit women sustain households through physical labor—agricultural work, construction, domestic service—yet they remain underpaid and unrecognized. Bama highlights this paradox:

“We break our backs working like men, yet we are paid half their wages. And still, we are expected to cook, clean, and bear children.” (*Sangati*, p. 81)

Here, identity is defined through exploitation and erasure, but also through resilience. The very act of labor becomes an assertion of survival, positioning Dalit women as indispensable contributors to both family and society.

**Education as Identity Transformation:** A recurring and deeply significant theme in *Sangati* is the transformative potential of education in shaping and redefining Dalit women’s identity. For Bama, education is not merely a tool of literacy or economic advancement but a radical instrument of liberation from the shackles of caste and gender hierarchies. Within the narrative, education emerges as the single most effective means by which Dalit women can break cycles of oppression, claim dignity, and assert agency in a society that constantly attempts to silence them.

Bama makes this conviction explicit when she declares: “*If only we study and learn, we can stand on our own two feet. Otherwise, we will be slaves all our lives.*” (*Sangati*, p. 123). This powerful statement encapsulates her vision of education as the cornerstone of self-respect and independence. It reframes identity from being a passive inheritance of caste-based inferiority into an active project of self-determination and empowerment. Through education, women are no longer mere victims of tradition but conscious agents capable of reshaping their destinies.

The emphasis on education in *Sangati* is also deeply political. For generations, Dalit communities were systematically denied access to formal learning by caste-based exclusionary practices. In this context, the act of pursuing education itself becomes a form of resistance, a challenge to the historical monopoly of knowledge held by upper castes. Bama portrays educated Dalit women not only as individuals who achieve social mobility but also as figures who disrupt entrenched hierarchies by demanding recognition and equality.

Furthermore, education in *Sangati* is framed as an intergenerational aspiration. The narrative often reflects the sacrifices made by older women—trapped in cycles of hard labor, child marriage, and subjugation—who nevertheless dream of a different future for their daughters and granddaughters. Their insistence that the

younger generation must be educated signals a collective reimagining of identity that extends beyond individual upliftment to communal transformation.

In this way, education operates as a site of both personal and collective identity formation. It symbolizes a reimagined selfhood where Dalit women transcend inherited oppression and claim new possibilities of dignity, individuality, and empowerment. By foregrounding education as a pathway to liberation, Bama affirms that identity is not fixed by birth but can be reshaped through struggle, knowledge, and resilience.

### **Assertion Through Speech and Anger:**

One of the radical aspects of *Sangati* is the valorization of Dalit women's anger, speech, and resistance. Their refusal to remain silent becomes a marker of identity. As the narrator asserts:

"We must not keep quiet when we are trampled on. If we keep quiet, they will crush us more. Only if we shout out will they realize we too are human beings." (*Sangati*, p. 97)

In this moment, identity shifts from passive suffering to active struggle. Bama positions women's voices—often dismissed as "noise" or "quarrelling"—as vital political tools in reclaiming their subjectivity.

### **Religious Identity and Critique:**

Bama, herself a Christian, does not shy away from critiquing the role of religion in perpetuating caste and gender oppression. In *Sangati*, even within Christian institutions, Dalits face discrimination. One woman laments:

"Even in church, we are made to sit separately. What kind of God is this, who lets us be treated like dogs?" (*Sangati*, p. 111)

This reflection highlights the contradiction between faith and social practice, forcing Dalit women to redefine their religious identity in terms of resistance rather than submission.

### **Redefining Dalit Women's Identity:**

At its core, *Sangati* is a political text of identity formation. Dalit women, though oppressed, carve out dignity in small ways—through solidarity, storytelling, laughter, labor, and defiance. Their shared suffering becomes the foundation of a shared identity. Bama insists that women should not accept the roles imposed on them:

"Why should we put up with so much? Are we not human beings too? We must change our lives with our own hands." (*Sangati*, p. 134)

Here, identity is not merely inherited but actively constructed through resistance, education, and collective struggle.

### **Conclusion:**

Bama's *Sangati* is more than a narrative—it is a manifesto of identity, dignity, and resistance. The text foregrounds Dalit women's struggle for recognition in a society that denies them humanity at the intersections of caste and gender. By employing oral traditions, first-person testimonies, and collective voices, Bama transforms fragmented experiences into a collective identity of resistance. Ultimately, the struggle of identity in *Sangati* is not only about survival but also about transformation: the reclamation of voice, dignity, and selfhood against centuries of marginalization.

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