

Socially Gaslighted Women in Bama's Sangati

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Abstract

Gaslighting is a systematic psychological manipulation of behavior. Manipulative influence is exerted on a targeted individual or group to have desired behavior. This research paper applies the term gaslighting in the social context. The marginalized, especially women are socially gaslighted by the power structured social system. This paper studies Bama's *Sangati* which deals with many gaslighted women by narrating interconnected anecdotes. The conceptualized feminine ideology becomes a weapon for the degradation and elimination of women from the center. The impact of gaslighting on the older generation is so powerful that one cannot trace any sign of shattering it. The younger generation, in spite of the awareness of their abuses and psychological and social influences, cannot overcome gaslighting as they are oppressed by many tactics like placing them in a shameful situation, depriving their rights, denying them their respect. They cannot escape from being victims of gaslighting as they are tied up by family responsibility and their innate tendency for motherhood.

Keywords: Bama, Sangati, Gaslighting, Psychological manipulation, Gender ideology, Patriarchal society, Oppression.

Introduction:

Bama is a Tamil Dalit Feminist novelist. Her major concern is to portray the Dalit Feminist consciousness in her narratives. She brings to limelight how Dalit women are exploited, humiliated, gaslighted and oppressed at two levels – as Dalits and as Women. Her first novel *Karukku*, an autobiography depicts her struggle at multiple levels. It is her quest for identity as a dalit, as a women and as a christian. Sarah Beth aptly comments on Dalit writing:

When a community, subjugated and oppressed for ages, start taking part in cultural and political spheres of the social life through writing, their first impulse is perhaps to narrate their painful experiences as low caste and excluded Other. Whether the writing takes the form of a novel or an autobiography, it is always

about the 'unique' experience of being a Dalit and invariably stories of the resistance of the community against caste oppression. Hence, Dalit literature has this innate feature that it is always the story of the larger community. (qtd. in Ray)

As Sarah Beth rightly observed, Bama's second novel *sangati* unlike *karukku* deals with the sufferings of women of *paraiya* community. *Sangati* means events or happenings or news. The novel *Sangati* consists of interconnected anecdotes of many women. Their struggle is the thread that weaves their anecdotes together. It projects the perception of *paraiya* women.

This article focuses mainly on socially gaslighted women in Bama's *Sangati*. Gaslighting is a term that describes the act of exerting influence over a targeted individual or group to have desired behavior. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the term as follows, "To manipulate someone psychologically such that they question their own sanity, particularly by leading them to doubt their own experiences or perceptions of reality". The term gaslighting has its origin from the stage play *Gaslight* in 1938 by Patrick Hamilton. The term gained its currency from the film adaptations in 1940 and 1944. The Wikipedia gives a very clear definition of the term:

Gaslighting is a form of psychological manipulation in which a person seeks to sow seeds of doubt in a targeted individual or in members of a targeted group, making them question their own memory, perception, and sanity. Using persistent denial, misdirection, contradiction, and lying, gaslighting involves attempts to destabilize the victim and delegitimize the victim's belief. (Wiki)

The term 'gaslighting' is often used in the field of psychology and psychiatry. In this paper, the term is applied in the social context. In the creation of God, there is no center and margin. Only the biological and economic differences facilitate man's innate tendency for domination. In the process of civilization, which is planned for providing safety, security, fear-free land, peace and development, labour is shared and divided. In due course, labourers are divided and labeled based on their labour. Caste system comes into existence. As Ambedkar writes, "Caste is not just a division of labour, it is a division of labourers." (qtd in Dasarathi).

Thus, center and margin are created. Women and people who are assigned to do what are considered as filthy chores are pushed towards margin. The marginalized are exploited and humiliated. They are abused emotionally, intellectually and psychologically. Their behavior is systematically influenced and they are brainwashed to believe and accept their non-identity and non-existence. They are socially gaslighted by the social power structure, hierarchical caste system and societal norms and gender ideologies. Generation after generation, they have been enslaved and mesmerized. Bama, in her novel *Karukku*, traces this injustice done to the Dalits:

Because Dalits have been enslaved for generation after generation, and being told again and again of their degradation, they have come to believe that they are degraded, lacking honour and self-worth, untouchable; they have reached a stage where they themselves voluntarily, hold themselves apart. This is the worst injustice. This is what even little babies are told, how they are instructed. The consequence of all this is that there is no way for Dalits to find freedom or redemption.(Karukku 28)

The patriarchal society conceptualize the gender roles, fixes the gender ideologies and assigns socio-cultural behavior of men and women of center and peripheral. It views dominant groups as strong, decisive, rational, civilized, authoritative, courageous, didactic while marginalized as weak, indecisive, irrational, uncivilized, craven, submissive and immoral. It is entirely a social creation and a cultural construction. Hence, in the patriarchal power system, women are at disadvantages and are vulnerable to violence and other kinds of discrimination and social injustice. Women are systematically deprived, controlled, confined, later suppressed and finally socially gaslighted.

Bama delineates *paraiyawomen's* suffering, suppression, their subjection to sexual harassment and struggles at two levels – caste and gender. She makes clear her intention for the panorama of women in her acknowledgement in her fiction *sangati*:

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 life with vitality, truth and enjoyment; about their hard labour. I wanted to shout out these stories. (Sangati XVI)

But when one delves deep into the projected image of many women characters, one cannot escape from getting insight into the pathetic condition of women and how they are manipulated into doubting their own identity, potentiality, self and their rights. They are systematically and psychologically manipulated to accept their degraded status or the status of the 'Other' by denying them their rights, respect, dignity and self-worth. In this regard, it is apt to remember the words of Rajeswari Sundar Rajan: "[she] points to the instability of the notion of women's identity, and to the power imbalances which exist between different groups of women, under the blanket notion of gender." (qtd. in Sangati).

This novel delineates women of many generations and their struggles against the type of male biased social system from socio-political perspective of Dalits. It examines the impact of caste and gender oppression together and women's inability to break away and find the route for freedom from the maze of socio-cultural construction. Lakshmi Holmstrom's comment on the theme of the novel in her translation of *Sangati* adds further insight:

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. Hard labour and economic precariousness leads to a culture of violence and and this is a theme that Bama explores boldly throughout the book. (Sangati XVII)

Bama records the insidious effect of gaslighting on Vellaimma *kizhavi* in her narrative *karukku* and *Sangati*. In *Karukku*, she is working at *Naicker's* house. Once Bama has accompanied her *patti*. After completing all unpleasant chores, she places her vessel nearby the side of drain. The *Naicker* lady leans out from some distance and pours the leftover food into the vessel, as she doesn't want to touch the vessel. Unable to bear this ill treatment, she tells her *patti* that she should not subject herself to such kind of behavior. *Patti's* reply illuminates the effect of gaslighting, that is acceptance of the inferiority of her caste and the marginalized's

inability to change the system. She says, “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? (Karukku 17)

In *Sangati* also, one can easily discern how Vellaiamma *kizhavi*’s views are socially influenced by the male superiority of her own community. When Bama displays her anger at *patti*’s silence at the panchayat, regarding Mariamma’s case, even though she knows the truth about her innocence, *patti* expresses her manipulated view:

When we were little ones, if even there was village meeting, we just stayed inside our homes and drank our kanji. But just look at what goes on nowadays. Even small children and young girls turn out to watch the fun; no wonder they are chased away and take to their heels. What do we know about justice? From your ancestors’s time it has been agreed that what the men say is right. Don’t you go dreaming that everything is going to change just because you’ve learnt a few letters of the alphabet. (Sangati 28-29)

The power of gaslighting is so strong that she prizes her own compliant nature and even she questions the aspirations and changing perspectives of younger generations because of their education.

Victimization by gaslighting is well pictured in the anecdote of Mariamma. Not only women become victims but also Dalit men become victims of gaslighting. Mariamma, one of the grand daughters of Vellaiamma, while returning home with a bundle of firewood, goes to Kumarasamy Ayya’s pump set to quench her thirst. There Kumarasamy Ayya seizes her hand and pulls her inside the shed. Frightened out of her wit, she escapes and narrates to her friends everything. Their approach to the problem and their suggestions stand as the best testimony for the impact of constraints laid by the patriarchal society for women. Their warning runs:

‘Mariamma’, they said ‘it is best if you shut up 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 is you who will be called a whore. Just come with us quietly, and we’ll bring the firewood that you left there. Hereafter never come back on your own when you have been

collecting firewood. That landowner is owner is an evil man, fat with money. He's upper caste as well. How can we even try to stand up to such people? Are people going to believe their words or ours? (Sangati 20)

But unexpected twist takes place. Kumarasamy Ayya, being an upper caste man, is afraid of his reputation being ruined. He complains to *paraiya* community *naattaamai* weaving his own story linking Manikkam with Mariamma. He reports:

'The way' some of the youngsters from your streets carry on when they go to firewood is beyond everything . . . Just today that girl Mariamma, daughter of Samudrakani, and that Muukkayi's grandson Manikkam were behaving in a very dirty way. I saw them with my own eyes. And it's a good thing it was I who saw them. I've come straight away to tell you. (Sangati 20)

The *paraiyanaattaama* believe the words unquestioningly as he is an upper class man. A *panchayat* meeting is arranged. Manikkam and Mariamma are called and straight away they are blamed of illegal relationship and even they are denied of their rights to explain themselves. After the intervention of some, they are enquired. Mariamma, as her friends influenced, shuts her mouth regarding Kumarasamy Ayya's misbehavior; she is afraid of being called as a whore. *Naattaama* doesn't believe her words and states firmly that *Mudalaali* will not lie. Kaliaamma supports Mariamma, narrating what has happened. Her support is unable to change the direction of their hearing. Whenever women raise their voice, they will be shouted at and will be asked to calm down. It is one of the ways of gaslighting women, denying equality. Few men start shouting using insolent words, "Will you she-donkeys get out of here or do we have to stamp on you? The more we drive the wretches away, the more they come back and make trouble." (Sangati 23). Thus women are silenced.

Mariamma, overcoming the power of gaslighting, speaks the truth. The crowd shouts at her, "Do you hear that? Slut of a girl! In order to get out of it, she promptly sticks all the blame on *mudalaali*. These creatures will come and dig out your eyes even when you are awake." (Sangati 24). She is forced to beg for forgiveness. One woman among the crowd expresses her displeasure at the biased way of handling the case, freeing Manikkam from punishment and their men's inability to question *mudalaali*. Chinnathayi brings out the bitter fact that even if *mudalaali* is really at fault, it is better to keep quiet about it, as they can never win against the

upper class. Seeniamma, in concord with her, says, “After all, our men know what they are doing, don’t they?” (Sangati 25). Finally, *naattaamai*’s statements predict the enslaving social condition from which marginalized especially women folk cannot escape. Their voice against the social injustice done to them is suppressed. *Naattaamai* says, “The land owners get up to all sorts of evil in the fields. Can we bring them to justice, though? After all, we have to go crawling to them tomorrow and beg for work.” (Sangati 25). *Naattaama* fines Rs.200 for Mariamma and Rs.100 for Manikkam saying, “It is you female chicks who ought to be humble and modest. A man may do a hundred things and still get away with it. You girls should consider what you are left with, in your bellies” (Sangati 26). Poor Mariamma becomes a victim of manipulators who do gaslighting in the name of social definition of woman and gender discrimination. She is compelled to marry Manikkam to suffer in his hands till the end of her life. This is the greatest social injustice done to her by the men of her own community.

Bama in her novel *Sangati*, through many anecdotes of women like Thaayi, Rakkamma, Maikanni and many others, explores the different strategies adopted by the power structured society to manipulate their behavior and to suppress even their feeble voice against the social injustice and gender discrimination. The tactics are psychologically and sometimes physically abusive. Lack of economic resources suppress their resistance to the abuse. The narrator’s words will bring in a nutshell the impact of gaslighting: “A woman’s body, mind, feelings, words and deeds and her entire life are all under his control and we too have accepted what they want us to believe that this is actually the right way, that our happiness lies in being enslaved to men.” (Sangati 68). Bama in her narrative finds a solution to the social injustice. She says that unless women realize that they have self-worth, honor and self-respect and they can manage their life in their own way, there is no redemption or freedom.

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