

ISSN 0976-8165

The Criterion



The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi-Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access Journal

August 2013 Vol. 4 Issue IV

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The Dalit Dimension: Representation of the Marginalized in Bama's *Sangati vis-à-vis Mahasweta Devi's Breast-Giver*

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Abstract

The two terms “subaltern” and “*dalit*” are widely current among critics engaged in socio-political as well as anthropological studies. Apparently the two terms sound synonymous as both refer to a group of people who are marginalized in society. But there is a subtle difference in the nuance of the two terms caused by the nature of marginalization. While the former is a term current among literary scholars and has cultural implications, the latter basically has social connotations. Both of these terms are to be understood in terms of how they are related to centre of authority and power. In the context of postcolonial literary studies, the term “subaltern” refers to a group of socially and politically marginalized clan who are outside what Gramsci describes as the hegemonic power structure. The position of the dalit is worse. The term ‘dalit’ not only indicates a peripheral social position but, because of the stigma associated with the so called lowness of the caste into which a dalit is born, the term also carries a nuance of inferiority.

By making a critical study of Mahasweta Devi's *Breast-Giver* and Bama's *Sangati*, this paper proposes to show how to be a dalit is to be more marginalized than to be a non-dalit subaltern. My argument is that the complex pattern of social discrimination in the Indian context cannot be fully understood in terms of class and gender discriminations. To grasp it fully one must refer to caste discrimination as well, for all dalits are no doubt subalterns, but all subalterns are not dalits.

Key Words: Dalit, Subaltern, Gender, *Breast-Giver*, *Sangati*, Devi, Bama

“The recognition of caste as not just a retrograde past but an oppressive past reproduced as forms of inequality in modern society requires that we integrate questions of caste with those of class and gender” - Sharmila Rege (Rege 6)

The two terms “subaltern” and “*dalit*” are widely current among critics engaged in socio-political studies of literature. Apparently the two terms sound synonymous, but there is a subtle difference in the nuance of the two terms caused by the nature of marginalization. Both of these terms have cultural and socio-political implications as both refer to a group of people occupying a space marginal in its relation to the centre of authority and power.

The word ‘subaltern’ which literally means ‘a military officer of inferior rank’ has acquired immense significance in postcolonial literary theory ever since the Italian Marxist critic Antonio Gramsci used the term in his ‘The Prison Notebooks.’ In the

context of socio-cultural theory, the term 'subaltern', as Homi Bhabha in his essay "Unsatisfied: Notes on Vernacular Cosmopolitanism" has pointed out (2006), refers to those marginalized social groups who are outside the hegemonic power structure. In his 'Preface' to *Subaltern Studies* (Vol. I) Ranajit Guha has aptly remarked:

...it is a name for the general attribute of subordination in South-Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, gender, office or in any other way. (Guha vii)

Guha who criticizes Indian nationalism for its elitist bias, considers the peasantry as the principal representatives of the subaltern. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has rightly modified Guha's proposition by making clear the relationship of the peasantry to the proletariat. Although Gramsci's concept of hegemony is fundamentally '*a generic and formal theory of social power*' (Thomas 220), Steve Jones makes a distinction between domination and hegemony:

Hegemony is a more sensitive and useful critical term than 'domination' which fails to acknowledge the active role of subordinate people in the operation of power. (Jones 54)

The term 'dalit' has caste connotations. In the context of Indian caste hierarchy, the 'lower' castes are looked upon as 'impure'. In the Hindu social order, they are 'Ali Shudras' or 'Avarnas', placed at the bottom of the hierarchy and are considered as untouchables. In public discourse, '*dalit*' is of relatively recent origin - precisely 'of the 1960s' (2001). Borrowing from a 17th century Bhakti saint Narsinh Mehta, Mahatma Gandhi tried to sanctify the so called 'untouchables' by describing them as HARIJAN – GOD'S MAN. Though Dr B.R.Ambedkar did not popularize the word 'dalit' for the untouchables, his philosophy has remained a key-source in its emergence and popularity. Ambedkar did not find any difference between the two names 'achhuta'(untouchables) and 'Harijan' as the new nomenclature really did not change their derogatory social status. Dr Ambedkar traced the origin of this discrimination to Hindu 'Shastras' which more or less legitimized the oppression of the dalits by the upper-caste people.

This paper proposes to make a critical study of Mahasweta Devi's *Breastgiver* and Bama's *Sangati* to show that to be a dalit is to be more marginalized than to be a non-dalit subaltern. The argument of the paper is that the complex pattern of social discrimination in the Indian context cannot be fully grasped merely in terms of class and gender parameters. A third dimension is required to capture the essence of subalternity in the Indian context.

The notable Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi's short story *Breast-Giver* revolves round the life of Jashoda, a poor Brahmin woman. Her husband Kanganalicharan has lost his leg at an accident and subsequent gross negligence on the part of a member of the rich Haldar family. Jashoda acts as a wet nurse for the new-born children of the Haldar family just to earn livelihood for her invalid husband, her own children and for herself. Her breast, which is a gift of nature and a source of nourishment, thus becomes a commodity. Finally, Jashoda develops a lump on her breast which is diagnosed as breast-cancer. Even the surgeon is shocked to know that in her life

Jashoda has breast-fed over fifty children. She dies a painful death, thrown off both by the Haldar family and her own husband. The famous Tamil author Bama's *Sangati* (1994) is her second work, published after her autobiographical masterpiece *Karukku*. A plethora of narratives form the corpus of this work. 'Sangati' in English means 'events'. The main narrator identifiably a woman describes the events witnessed as well as heard by her in her journey from girlhood to adolescence. The work is a startling insight into the lives of dalit women who belong to 'paraiya' community and face the double disadvantages of gender and caste discriminations. Lakshmi Holmstrom, the English translator of *Sangati*, has rightly mentioned that *Sangati* '...moves from the story of individual struggle to the perception of a community of 'paraiya' women, a neighbourhood group of friends and relations and their joint struggle. In this sense *Sangati* is, perhaps, the autobiography of a community' (Holmstrom, 'Introduction' xv).

In a class divided society the empowering agent everywhere is money. Money can earn status and social respectability. Despite her upper caste birth, Jashoda in *Breast-Giver* is not in a dominating position because her family is awfully poor. On the other hand the Haldars, who hold lower position in social hierarchy, can dictate terms because of their affluence. It is her stark poverty that compels Jashoda to earn her living by breast-feeding the children of the Haldar family where the daughter-in-laws can afford to refuse to suckle their own children for keeping their figures attractive. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her essay 'A Literary Representation of the Subaltern: Mahasweta Devi's *Stanadayini* (Breast-Giver)' has justly commented on the role of economy in defining subalternity. She argues that even the Brahminical identity of Jashoda is brutalized in this story:

This ... identity is a cover for the brutalizing of the Brahmin when the elite in caste is subaltern in class. In the case of class-manipulation, poverty (is) the fault of the individuals, not an intrinsic part of a class society, in the case of caste manipulation, the implicit assumption is the reverse; the Brahmin is systemically excellent, not necessarily so as an individual. (Spivak 114)

The latter part of the story illustrates how economy prevails over other issues. When Jashoda is no longer needed to foster the children of the family, she is asked to stay with Basini, the under-caste maid-servant of the Haldar-family. Jashoda's caste does not protect her, for Basini arrogantly tells her:

You'll wash your own dishes. Are you my master, that I'll wash your dishes? You are the Master's servant as much as I am (Devi 61)

When Jashoda is diagnosed with breast-cancer, the Haldars start enquiring about her health not out of any compassion or gratitude, but only because they are afraid of the after-life, the sin of *brahmma-hatya*¹. No wonder that such a woman 'lay in the hospital morgue in the usual way, went to the burning ghat in a van and was ... cremated by an untouchable' (Devi 73). *Breast-Giver* thus finely illustrates the futility of caste purity and caste protection in a class divided society.

¹ "Brahmma Hatya" is a Sanskrit term denoting the "act of killing a Brahmin or Brahmins" which is considered as a major sin.

A close reading of *Breast-Giver* and *Sangati* will reveal that gender discrimination worsens the state of the female subaltern in every society. Jashoda in Devi's story is a 'gendered subaltern' *per se*. In her 'Introduction' to *Breast-Giver*, Spivak writes:

In 'Breast-Giver', it (the breast) is a survival object transformed into a commodity, making visible the indeterminacy between filial piety and gender violence, between house and temple, between domination and exploitation (Spivak, 'Introduction' vii)

In a patriarchy women are mostly treated as child-producing machines, and this makes no distinction between whether they are well off or they are economically under-privileged. The attitude of Jashoda's husband and that of the men of Haldar family are gender discriminatory in the same way. If Jashoda's husband Kangalicharan is illuminated by the spirit of Brahma the Creator, the Mistress's sons 'become incarnate Brahma and create progeny' (Devi 51). A victim of patriarchal ideology, Jashoda shows 'unintelligent devotion to her husband' and ignorantly accepts the subordinate role as natural:

You are husband, you are guru. If I forget and say no, correct me. Where, after all, is the pain? ... Does it hurt a tree to bear fruit? (Devi 50)

Towards the end of the story, she is thrown off by Kangalicharan as well as by her own children:

His mind had already rejected Jashoda...His sons are his sons. Their mother had become a distant person for a long time. Mother meant hair in a huge topknot, blindingly white clothes, a strong personality. The person lying in the hospital is someone else, not Mother. (Devi 72)

Thus, even being an upper-caste Brahmin, Jashoda is a subaltern figure because she is economically impecunious as well as gender-marginalized in patriarchy.

The plight of most of the characters in *Sangati* is also awfully miserable because they are poor and female. In her 'Introduction' to *Sangati*, Lakshmi Holmstrom writes:

Hard labour and economic precariousness lead to a culture of violence...(Holmstrom, 'Introduction', xvii)

They work away "like dogs before we can afford to buy wheat and milk-powder from the priests, and look at the good luck that falls upon those pigs!"(Bama 13). Women in *Sangati* are wage-earners as much as their male-counterparts; but they earn less than the men-folk. They don't have their own rights to spend the money they earn. In the language of Holmstrom:

Yet the money that men earn is their own to spend as they please, whereas women bear the financial burden of running the family, often singly (Holmstrom, 'Introduction' xvii)

Nowhere is a woman free from the patriarchal claw. To quote Bama:

In the fields they have to escape from upper-caste men's molestations. At church they must lick the priest's shoe and be his slaves while he threatens them with tales of God, Heaven and Hell (Bama 35)

Women are 'allowed to eat only after the men in the family have finished and gone' (Bama 29). There is an attitude of discrimination even the rearing of children. Muukamma, a village woman is seen bashing another woman Lourdu for leaving her baby-son to cry:

'Ei, sister-in-law Lourdu, haven't you got any common sense at all? There's your son screeching like a crow, having pissed all over the cradle-cloth...If it were a girl at least, you could leave her to cry. But how can you come away leaving your son bawling by himself? (Bama 31)

Dozens of other references to child-marriage, wife-beatings, labour-mortality establish the truth of Bama's words: "If you are born into this world, it is best you were born a man" (Bama 7). In fine, class, divorced from gender, cannot explain the complex pattern of subalternity in a patriarchal society.

Caste, to borrow Padma Velaskar's words, may be described as a '...specific type of feudal organization and castes are economic and political groupings with the distinguishing essence of being status groups founded on distinctions of purity' (2010). Without discussing the role of caste as an agent of oppression it is impossible to comprehend the true nature of subalternity in the Indian context. Partha Chatterjee in his thought-provoking article "Caste and Subaltern Consciousness" aptly remarks:

Subaltern Consciousness in the specific cultural context of India cannot but contain caste as a central element in its constitution (Chatterjee 169).

Chatterjee urges upon us to 'look at caste ... as the level of social reality' (Chatterjee 181) presumably because even affluence and gender equality cannot redeem the marginality that one inherits by the ill-luck of being born in a so called 'lower' caste. Dalit women in India are the worst victims of the system not only because they are poor and women but more unfortunately because they are dalits. The words of Paatti which throw ample light on the precarious *dalit* state are worth quoting here:

Women should never come on their own to these parts. If upper-caste fellows clap eyes on you, you're finished. They'll drag you off and rape you, that's for sure... (Bama 8)

There is no court to appeal against the caste persecutions. Mariamma is molested by Kumarasami Ayya, an upper-caste land-owner, but as she is a dalit and therefore underprivileged in Indian society, she becomes the scapegoat and is compelled to pay fine to the tune of Rs 200/-. One recalls a similar incident in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* where Sohini, the sister of Bakha, the untouchable boy, is accosted by a Brahmin priest who however falsely accuses her of having

defiled him. Even education cannot emancipate a dalit girl, as evident from the confession of the author-narrator who has to face almost insurmountable challenges in earning her livelihood for her stigmatized caste position:

Being a Dalit creates a problem. On top of that, being a Dalit woman makes it more difficult. (Bama 120)

Where it is a question of caste, even the sisterhood of women in their collective fight against patriarchy is inefficacious. To quote again the words of the author-narrator:

Not only do I have to struggle against men, I have to also bear the insults from women of other castes (Bama 122).

What is unique about caste -oppression is that it cuts across the gender line and dalit men are not protected because they are males living in a patriarchy. True, they can exert power over women of their own caste, but they feel castrated not only before upper caste men but also before upper caste women. In a powerful article entitled "Work, Caste and Competing Masculinities: Notes from a Tamil Village" S.Anandhi mentions how the upper-caste young Mudaliar women of the village would not only call aged Adi-Dravida men by their names but even make sexual advances towards the lower-caste men:

...the sexual encounters between Mudaliar women and dalit men were a terrain of more complex negotiations with serious consequences for the masculinity of dalit men. (2002).

One agrees with Padma Velaskar that in so far as control of power is concerned, both Dalit men and women look equal in a caste-based Indian society as both of them '*...share equally the impure natural substance and occupy a shared structural location and cultural construction...in the status order of caste-hierarchy*' (2010).

In her 'Introduction' Holmstrom maintains that apart from '*submissive femininity*', in *Sangati* one comes across '*dominating femininity*':

Bama recognizes and applauds the ability of certain women in her community to undermine authority figures by ridiculing them, or playing tricks on them (Holmstrom, 'Introduction' xx).

It is true that femininity in *Breast-Giver* is exclusively 'submissive'. But it is difficult to agree with Holmstrom here because one cannot undermine authority figures merely by ridiculing or playing tricks. Dominant upper-castes, as Khare argues, "...still control and variously constrain untouchables' life events" (1995).

In our caste-based Indian society, upper-caste women, despite being women, are more advantaged than lower-caste men. But the condition of lower-caste women is worse because apart from caste-discriminations, they are the victims of gender discrimination in the domestic as well as social spheres. More so, because in most cases income, the other empowering agent, is inaccessible to most of them.

Whereas dalit men are victims of the caste-system and exploitative economy, a dalit woman is triply marginalized by the conjoined operations of caste, class and gender. A critical study of *Breast-Giver* and *Sangati* enables us to understand this complex subjugating pattern. It needs re-iteration that dalit women are the marginalized of the marginalized, for unlike upper caste women like Jashoda, they are condemned to bear the discriminatory stigma associated with their caste. The fact that they have a share in economic activity hardly counts, since most of their works is devoid of social respectability. Dalit Feminism which refuses 'to bifurcate identity in an age of Capitalism' has specially highlighted this aspect of 'caste-patriarchy'. It has shown that although dalits are by and large subalterns, all subalterns are not dalits; the dalit marginalized state is the worst.

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