

## **The Prisoner of the Precarious Body: An Odyssey of Dalit Women in Bama's *Sangati***

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### **Abstract**

The body is regarded as a fundamental text for understanding the self, as it is interpreted as both a reflection as well as the creation of the societal structure in which it exists. The female body becomes a symbol on which the conflicting ideologies and discourses of the socio-cultural milieu are engraved. At the forefront of this, lies the body of a Dalit woman, a battleground where dynamics of power collide and the struggle for dignity and autonomy unfolds. Weighed down by the overlapping mechanisms of gender, sexuality, caste, class, and community, their bodies, therefore, become political fields of containment and control. In light of this, the present paper delves into Bama Faustina's *Sangati* (2005) to covertly depict the body politics of gradated patriarchy disclosing the unfettered (s)exploitation of women but simultaneously tracing a paradigm shift through facilitating means of resistance for the Dalit women.

**Keywords:** Body Politics, Caste, Dalit Women, Gender, Female Bodies, (S)exploitation, Resistance

From Democritus to contemporary times, the body has been the subject of conflicting and contradictory ideologies in philosophy, psychology, medicine, literature, and several other discourses. The fabrication of the human body through multiple discourses is discussed by several Feminist literary critics such as Simone De Beauvoir, Julia Kristeva, Susan Bordo, Angela King, Helene Cixous, and Luce Irigaray among others, emphasizing the fact that the body is a text that has been imbued within the structures of language and signification;

therefore, there is no autonomous bodily experience outside discourse. Michel Foucault's speculation of the body in his magnum opus *History of Sexuality* (1979) has advanced the comprehension of the body as the epicenter for power dynamics, 'anatomy politics', which he "defined how one may have a hold over others' bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes" (182). Additionally, Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990) accredited a new degree of comprehension of the body asserting it as a strong indicator of one's identity. Exposing the artificiality of gender, she proclaimed that one's gendered identity, whether masculine or feminine, is appropriated by the repetitions of 'performativity' of acts that are subsequently acquired through language and conduct. Thereby, gender becomes an imagined signification of sex, "instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler 179). Looking at how the body is constituted in time and space, Elizabeth Grosz in *Volatile Bodies* (1994) uses the page as the metaphor for the body where one can actively paint and inscribe the 'signification' of the subject:

The body has figured as a writing surface on which messages, a text, are inscribed ... the blank page on which engraving, graffiti, tattooing, or inscription can take place... This analogy between the body and the text remains a close one: the tools of body engraving – social, surgical, epistemic, disciplinary – all mark, indeed constitute, bodies in culturally specific ways. (117)

Therefore, it is viable to assert that the body is the bedrock on which the gendered behavior of a person is formed, and at the same time, the power dynamics of the society are normalized. We can therefore conclude that bodies are "living narratives written and shaped through cultural and social discourses" (Bordo, 175). However, one must note that these narratives are never conclusive as the very essence of the body lies in volatility and complexity and hence, subject to change.

The body of a woman has been represented as enigmatic, desired, despised, intimidating, and submissive since time immemorial. Rightly, as Andrea Dworkin in *Women Hating* (1974) contends, “In our culture, not one part of a woman’s body is left untouched, unaltered.... From head to toe, every feature of a woman’s face, every section of her body, is subject to modification” (113–114). Emphasizing this im/positionality of women, Butler (1990) explicates that “Woman has been discursively constructed (condemned) as inferior yet also threatening to man, thus in perpetual need of containment and control and subjected (condemned) to particular disciplinary techniques” (30). This disciplining as well as disabling of the female body was deliberately carried out by gendered ideologies and sexist reasoning forming distinct binary categories. Angela King in “The Prisoner of Gender: Foucault and the Disciplining of the Female Body” (2004) employs Foucault’s theories concerning panoptic surveillance and sovereignty to understand the strategies through which female bodies are coerced into submission: “[...] as a particular target of disciplinary power to argue that gender, specifically femininity, is a discipline that produces bodies and identities and operates as an effective form of social control” (30). Therefore, in the age of post-structuralism, where everything is in constant flux, we can find no idealist image of ‘womanhood’ in the continuum of phallogentric social order. This makes Chris Weedon in *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (1987) define female subjectivity as “the product of the society and culture in which we live in ... [that] changes with shifts in wide discursive fields which constitute them.” (33)

The fact that the female body has ever since been subdued to stringent manipulation hails from the dichotomous relationship between the intellect and the body. Following Cartesian dualist thinking, the body and the intellect are perceived as two distinct entities such that the body, the corporeal schema, is deemed as a mere container for the intellect. Grosz (1994) explains how thought and reason are at par with feelings and sensations, but

subsequently divorced from one another. Women signify nature, irrational, unstable, sentimental, dictated by intuition and corporal needs, and thus are, “victims of a pathological physiology” (Balsamo 42). Whereas man is the mind signifying culture, absolute, rational, fundamental human, “the active, strong and moral half of a human whole” (Bailey 99). In this context, it is noteworthy to quote Ambrose Bierce who in *The Devils Dictionary* (1906) stated that, “To men, a man is but a mind. Who cares what face he carries or what form he wears? But the woman’s body is the woman” (15). The man may therefore be able to surpass his biological materiality, whereas a woman is enslaved in her corporeality. As a result, men discovered a rationale for governing the female body, which was bolstered by essentialist theories attributing biological variations and explanations: “Women are somehow more biological, more corporeal, and more natural than men” (Grosz 14), and this “leads to more intense policing of women’s bodies and specific apparatuses of control” (King 33). On this account, the authored/altered version of a woman is nothing but a deception, as Gayatri Spivak in “Displacement and the Discourse of Woman” (1983) proclaims that the body of a woman is “the projection of (men’s) fantasies” (176). Now since “the discourse of man is in the metaphor of woman” (169), the portrayal and textual representation of women thus serves to bolster the discourses about women and femininity. These discourses include depictions of women as objects of male fantasies as well as societal conventions regarding how women should appear, conduct themselves, and occupy space. Within these narratives, women were predominantly confined to the life of domesticity, being defined with “procreative and genealogical fables of inheritance, marriage, and death” (Showalter 18). Following this, in *The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women’s Bodies* (1987), Helena Michie explicates that this signification generates a “space between signifier and signified that contains the female body within the bounds of propriety, removing her individuality and agency, and thus her potential for transgression” (84). As a direct consequence of this “mapping of sign upon sign”

(Stewart 4), female bodies are often redefined as symbolic and abstract or sexualized and objectified, signifying a colonial ‘conquest’ over the female form.

Indian feminism has vigorously opposed the conceptualization of patriarchy, but whilst doing so, it has morphed into a singular segment that neglects to consider the complex and pluralizing elements like religion, race, class, and caste, among others. In keeping with what Audre Lorde stipulated in “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference” (1984), “[I]t is not our differences which separate women, but our reluctance to recognize those differences and to deal effectively with the distortions which have resulted from the ignoring and misnaming of those differences” (122). Therefore, the “masculinization of the Dalit movement” and the “*savaranisation* of womanhood” led to the dismissal of Dalit women from the epicenter to the periphery, exposing them to the complex intersection of caste, class, and gender-based oppressions (Rege 91). They, characterized by the ‘culture of silence’ have been represented not only as a “guest appearance” (Guru 2549) but also as a wounded subject and an accomplice of men’s insatiable desire, contained “firmly in the roles of the ‘mother’ and the ‘victimized sexual being’” (Rege 42). Anupama Rao in *Gender and Caste* (2003) affirms, “Dalit women’s bodies are seen collectively as mute, and capable of bearing penetration and other modes of marking ‘upper’ caste hegemony without the intervention of a discourse of subjectivity, identity, desire and/or sexuality” (293). Thus, women’s bodies are metaphorically altered into territories to be invaded through violent conduct and ingenious strategies, and in this way, both casteism and sexism restore authority and legitimacy over the untouchable body of the Dalit women, the lowest of the lower strata.

Following the axiom ‘the Personal is Political’, the responsibility rests in controlling women whose gender intersects with caste depicting their lived experiences given that they are neither epitomized by mainstream feminists nor incorporated in the literature of the Dalits,

which has been chiefly centralized and pertains to the Dalit man as an exclusive embodiment of anguish. To challenge such systemic hypocrisy, Dalit feminists like Sharmila Rege, Anupama Rao, Nivedita Menon, and Uma Chakravarti reinforced a significant epistemological change to a Dalit Feminist Standpoint through which the domain of Feminism, particularly Indian feminism, could be re-evaluated. Rao (2003) enunciated the idea that to be able to reassess Indian feminism, one must “engage meaningfully with Dalit women’s difference” (2) and this disparity can only be acknowledged through an authentic portrayal of their presence. But then, how can this authenticity be generated? The answer can be found in Gopal Guru’s assertion that through the discourse of descent, talking differently “foregrounds the identity of Dalit women” (Guru 2549). As Helene Cixous in “The Laugh of Medusa” (1976) claims that it is mandatory that “Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal” (875). This feminine writing, *Ecriture Feminine*, will thus subvert the symbolic through semiotic language, breaking free from the authoritarian conventional discourse.

After reviewing the body of literature on Feminism, it is apparent that there lies a striking gap in the research work on how power interacts within social structures and how discursive behaviors contribute to the disciplining of Dalit women’s bodies. The present paper intends to make this research gap as its primary objective to explore how the power of patriarchy manifests itself in practices of body politics rendering the female Dalit body as an active site of political and sexual conflict. The purpose of this paper, therefore is to examine and assess the depiction of the Dalit body to comprehend the mechanism of the patriarchal society’s implicit hierarchy, to challenge the discourse surrounding the sexed/gendered body,

and to ultimately discover how female subjectivity is constructed using Bama's *Sangati* (2005) as the pivot.

The caste question persists on the Dalit's corporeal body, serving as a continual reminder of the stereotyped Dalit female identity. Bama encapsulates the reality of a woman's body as an embodiment of culture, a political field, through which one can discern her sociocultural gendered and casteist norms; the exploitative and hegemonic notions that subjugate, marginalize, and capture women on the pretext of culture. In broad daylight, the women of the *Paraiya* (Untouchable) community are looked upon as domestic slaves, and in the silence of the night; they are used and abused as sex commodities. Therefore, following what Sharan Kumar Limbale calls "Reformist Liberalism" (2004), Bama unveils the various oppressive layers by expressing her personal lived experiences and the narratives shared by other Dalit women. However, "As soon as there is a power relation, there is the possibility of resistance" (Noys, 153), likewise *Sangati* has a series of interrelated anecdotes of resistance: "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" (Bama xvi). Following this, the article's primary contribution therefore is an investigation into feminist agency, a complex interaction between conformity, compliance, and aversion to persistent caste, gender, and body politics within an often-homogeneous community.

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar in his influential work *Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis, and Development* (1979), alleges that "the origin of the caste system is associated with the mechanism of endogamy" (4). He reoriented caste from a single-axis framework to one that is simultaneously influenced by gender by highlighting endogamy as an underlining facet of the stratification of castes. In an intriguing turn of events in the novel, the graded

patriarchy, Brahmanical and Dalit, relies on the Brahmanical conception of pollution and purity when it comes to endogamy and inter-caste marriages. A Dalit woman who menstruates and operates outside the four walls of the home poses an imminent danger to her community because she increases the probability of an inter-caste union. The mere fact that Dalit men inform the women how the *pey* (or spirits) never confront the Brahmin women since they function within their domiciles, indicates the nature of the Dalit men who wish to emulate the Brahmanical norm of preserving ‘purity’ of body among women by containing them within enclosed spaces. This urges Bankim Chandra Mandal in “Dalit Feminist Perspectives in India” (2013) to state that “The control of women’s sexuality has been made essential for the development of patriarchal caste hierarchy both for the maintenance of caste and for the legitimizing and control of the inheritance” (124). Parallels can be drawn from the incident in the novel where we find Esakki’s brother taking to violent means because she happened to love someone from the *Vannan* caste, a caste different from hers: “They gagged her, tied her hand and foot, thrust her into a covered cart so that nobody could see her, and drove her away into the jungle” (Bama 53). To protect their honour from the charge of not being able to control the woman of their house, “They... with one sweep of a sword separated her head from her body. They sliced open her stomach, took out the baby, twisted its neck, and killed it” (Bama 53). Incidents like these depict (dis)honour killings, fueled by the overarching objective of restricting the sexuality of Dalit women, thereby sustaining the caste Hindu society’s purity. Consequently, the Dalit (human) body is sacrificed to perpetuate the caste structure in modern-day India. This exemplifies that the hegemonic system is not solely enforced by the police or the state, but rather by the people’s compliance with the hegemony imposed by the caste system.



However, all the convictions of impurity/pollution stand at bay when an upper-caste man touches a Dalit woman's body. Men who despise even the shadow of the Dalit woman cannot sense the breach of their sanctity when they sexually assault a Dalit woman. Ironically, the same body, now, becomes a consumable body during sexual penetration. Therefore, it is viable to say that it never was and it never is the question of purity and pollution, but political rather than sexual. The sexual and physical brutality against Dalit women and their treatment as colonized bodies and sexual commodities is very distinctively depicted in the poem "Narration" (*Touch*) by Meena Kandasamy:

The torn sari,  
disheveled hair Stifled  
cries and meek submission.  
I was not an untouchable then? (56)

This depicts the hypocrisy of the Varnashrama in the way the body of the Dalit woman is deemed as socially untouchable but sexually penetrable. Despite the rigidity of the structure, the body still stands easily accessible to the heterosexual whims of higher-caste men. It, therefore, is a public secret that the latter is entitled to enjoy the Dalit woman's body sexually, if (and) not romantically. While going out to gather firewood, the narrator's Patti (maternal grandmother), Vellaiyamma Kizhavi warns that women should not venture out into the fields or forests alone, claiming that "If upper-caste fellow clap eyes on you, you are finished. They will drag you off and rape you that's for sure. If you go on a little further, there will be escaped criminals lurking in the plantations. They keep themselves well hidden. You must never let them see you either" (Bama 8). This marks the beginning of how women live their bodies as objects of the gaze, a practice that has its roots in "education and surroundings" (Beauvoir 304)

rather than anatomy. Building upon the Male Gaze Theory, Laura Mulvey in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975), posits that a woman’s sexuality has been culturally moulded through the lens of the male gaze, with “woman as image, man as bearer of the look” (12). Mulvey contends that the traditional interaction of power between men and women regards men as the active observers whilst women are reduced to the passive role of being the object of the gaze: “Women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact ... [both] as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium” (7). Likewise, Foucault talks about the objectifying gaze in *Power/Knowledge* (1980), “There is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which everyone under its weight will end by interiorizing to the point that he is his overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against, himself” (155). He refers to this as Carceral culture: a Panopticon, an observational tower, whose presence compelled people to regulate their behavior: “the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at any one moment, but he must be sure that he may always be so.” (201)

The disciplinary nature of the deeply ingrained casteist and sexist discourse has historically interpellated the Dalit female as a timid and docile victim, and this has had an adverse impact on the way she performs her gender. This idea can be paralleled to the theory of ‘performativity’ and ‘constrained agency’ postulated by Butler (1990). She proposes that we perform our identities to conform to the social norms or the normative discourse that pervades our society. Therefore, gender is not essential, inherent, or natural; rather it is socially constructed through the repetition of acts by means of language, and symbolic interactions within a conventional paradigm that perpetuates impermeable and invisible gender codes, producing interpellated subjects. The individuals who struggle to fit into these institutional categories mainly due to their gender, socioeconomic standing, and racial or ethnic origins are

stigmatized as deviant, abject, non-viable, unintelligent bodies that cannot be recognized within the framework of normalcy. Bama addresses struggles over how caste, class, and gender status are imprinted onto women's bodies, sexual orientation, and conceptions of femininity:

Why can't we be the same as boys? We aren't allowed to talk loudly or laugh noisily; even when we sleep, we can't stretch out on our backs nor lie face down on our bellies. We always have to walk with our heads down, gazing at our toes [...] even when our stomachs are screaming with hunger, we mustn't eat first. We are allowed to eat only after the men in the family have finished and gone. What, Patti, aren't we also human beings? (Bama 29)

This shows how feminine identity is complexly constructed using the body as a medium. Paradoxically, this constructed femininity is seen as the most 'natural' of the genders (since women are physiologically overdetermined) and also requires the most artifice to be successful, while those who are unsuccessful or refuse to participate in it are seen as 'unnatural'. The novel follows a similar idea where young girls are compelled to conform to the cultural signs associated with women. Nevertheless, when these young girls disengage with the ethical norms of feminine conduct, they are castigated, "But if anyone of them tries to play boys' games like *kabbadi* or marbles or *chellaangucchi*", she is ridiculed and humiliated as the narrative outlines the people uttering, "She's just like a donkey, look. Look the way she plays boys' games" (Bama, 2005, p. 7).

Furthermore, a contextual examination of Mariamma's plight in the novel accentuates how Dalit women were already in the public gaze which rendered concerns about dignity and honour irrelevant. Thus, paradoxically, although their 'femaleness' rendered them sexually receptive to casteist and racist dominance, their Blackness and Dalitness largely ignored their integrity. Kumara Swami *Ayya* sexually attacked Mariamma while she was attempting to drink water from a pump situated in the field of an upper caste man. Escaping the landlord's harassing attempts, she is maliciously accused, abused, and projected as a 'loose' woman.

Muting her voice, the Panchayat belittled her in front of everyone, “Will you she-donkeys get out of here or do we have to stamp on you?” (Bama 23). Mariamma had already been forewarned by her friends, “It is best if you shut up about this. If you even try to tell people what happened, you will find that it is you who will get the blame; it is you who will be called a whore... Are people going to believe their [upper-caste landlords’] words or ours?” (20).

The unheard voice of Dalit women (Mariamma in this case) makes Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1994) assert:

Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject constitution, and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the third-world woman caught between tradition and modernization. There is no space from which the sexed subaltern can speak. The subaltern [as a woman] cannot speak. (102)

Through such incidents, Bama states that men cannot sanction women transgressing the veil of confinement; “In the same way, they cannot stand it if a girl studies a little, writes a little, or dares to speak in public places. The men say, whatever it is, she is only a woman” (109). Naattaamai concluded the entire incident by saying, “It is you female 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” (26). Therefore, the female body is no longer a personal space but a subject of societal scrutiny and control. It implies that women should bear the burden of consequences alone, even in situations that involve both genders. Therefore, we can say, “To be a woman is to have become a woman, to compel the body to conform to a historical idea of ‘woman,’ to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to a historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project” (Butler 522).

Sexual violence has played a significant part in both belief and practice of caste, class, and gender oppression. Several Dalit feminists have come to the forefront and addressed multiple types of violence against women including physical abuse, sati, bride burning, rape, etc. Anupama Rao (2010) also observes, “Violence [is] the hinge that articulated the spheres of production and reproduction of the Dalit body” (284). In addition to this, Kandasamy in her poem “Rape Nation” (2020) posits that the predicament of women is no less than what is described in *Manusmriti*, a text exemplifying how religious doctrines perpetuate repressive ideologies thereby providing a rationale for the subjugation of the female body:

Manu said once, so his regiment repeat today:

All women are harlots, all women are base;

Manu gives men a license plate, such as rape-mandate.

This has happened before; this will happen again. (Kandasamy, 2020)

Sexual violence brings us to two aspects of the body as a means for sexual gratification and the body as a means of political enforcement and ownership. Therefore, it is essential to differentiate between rape (a form of sexual violence) against women’s sexuality and rape as an ideological weapon to degrade a repressed group or community. Kathleen Barry in *Female Sexual Slavery* (1979) considers acts of violence that are perpetrated against women’s bodies because of their feminine sexual traits, in which men deem women as the object of their libido. Another aspect stands antithetical to this idea of the body as a sexual appetite, as P. R. Sanday in *The Socio-Cultural Context of Rape: A Cross-Cultural Study* (1981) points out: rape is not solely about sexual satisfaction but serves as a means for men to assert their social dominance, using the penis as a symbol of masculine power. Thus, in addition to sexual assaults on the body of the person, there is a multitude of other viewpoints on rape that accentuates the

misogynist and intersectional societal frameworks thus: “Rape is not random. It is structured” (Chapman 52). Highlighting a different lens, Susan Brownmiller in *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (1975) has advanced that rape is not motivated by a woman’s desire or approval, rather it is a property crime against women. Women became the object of transference when custody is changed from father to husband, from one male guardian to another, due to the normalization of the patriarchal societal structure that men are the protectors of women. In *Sangati*, Periamma, Anantama, and Thaayi, are vulnerable to continual defilement by their male partners. Yet they are unable to object because of patriarchal indoctrination that men are their protectors, hence, their violent behavior is justified. Thaayi’s husband, when confronted by Karuthamuthu, justifies his act by saying, “She is my wife, I can beat her or kill her if I wish” (Bama 42). Reclaiming his authority over his wife, he chops off her long tresses and hangs them on the door: “It’s this whore’s hair that I’ve cut off myself and hung there. Look at her neck- you won’t find a single hair left. I cut her hair off to put down her pride. And he laughed” (43). Bama gained a practical insight through such cases realizing that “all that violence was because there was nowhere else for them to exert their male pride or to show off their authority” because being Dalit men they must behave like “dogs with their tails rolled up” before their landlords, in the fields (Bama 65). So, whatever “suppressed anger” and “strength” they have, “vented when they came home and beat up their wives to a pulp” (Bama 65).

In addition to sexual violence, nobody spares Dalit women from physical abuse by pervasive patriarchy like lynching, caning, thrashing, physical assault, and others. Dalit women toil in the fields day and night to earn bread and butter for their families, but they rarely receive the respect they deserve. One such example is Bama’s portrayal of Perimma. After an exhausting day in the field, Perimma’s husband, a brute incarnate, violently assaults her when she refuses to have sex with him. Her grandmother, Vellaiyamma, laments the pitiful situation

she is in as she says, “I reared a parrot and then handed it over to be mauled by a cat. Your Periappan (Perimma’s husband) beat her to death.... He killed her so outrageously, the bastard” (10). Her husband used to treat Mariamma like a bound slave and beat her ruthlessly, “From the time she was married, Mariamma suffered blows and kicks and beatings every day and was reduced to no more than half-life, or even less” (42). The same was the case with Thaayi, whose “husband was beating her up again and again with the belt from his waist. She didn’t even have a chatti on. Everywhere the strap fell on her light skin, there was bright red weal” (42). The cruelty inflicted upon women mirrors the inherent mechanisms of patriarchy, where the female body is seized as a space for violence to exert control over her. Bama explicates how the female body is not just an object colonized by her husband but also reveals how the power dynamics within patriarchal culture undermine the personal autonomy and subjectivity of the female narrator through bodily harm. Patti’s account further exposes this tyranny even more intensely. She recalls how one of her daughters met a tragic fate, succumbing to the abuse of power inflicted by her husband and the strain of bearing seven or eight babies in rapid succession. This tragedy highlights the profound physical and emotional toll exacted on women within this oppressive system. She says:

The man was crazy with lust. Because he wanted her after every single day. How could she agree to his frenzy after she worked all hours of the day and night, inside the house and out? He is an animal, that fellow. When she refused, he practically broke her in half. Once in my very presence, he hit her with the rice-pounder. (Bama 10-11)

This accentuates the harsh oppression faced by women in India, particularly through masculine governance, with Dalit women suffering the most. J. S. Mill made a profound remark about this situation in his work, *The Subjection of Women* (1869):

...everyone who desires power desires it most over those who are nearest to him, with whom his life is passed, with whom he has most concerns in common, and in whom any independence of his authority is oftenest likely to interfere with his individual preferences...also, the possessors of the power provided by the subjection of women are better placed than any absolute monarch to prevent any uprising against the system.  
(8)

The aforesaid discussions collectively aver that women have been unfairly deemed as inferior and have been treated as creatures of lesser significance, as objects existing merely for men's sexual gratification, and as slaves whose existence grants men the right to exploit, abuse, and even inflict fatal harm upon them. Consequently, the body, serving as a vehicle for violence, becomes the focal point where power dynamics are disputed and confronted.

However, despite all the constraints and limitations, there is always potential for subversion, providing the opportunity to “reclaim and rejoice in the body as a site of valuable knowledge production” (Cleary 1). To achieve that, it is essential to confront the discourses deeply embedded within the system: “If subversion is possible, it will be a subversion from within in terms of the law, through the possibilities that emerge when the law turns against itself and spawns unexpected permutations of itself” (Butler 93). In this way “the culturally constructed body will then be liberated, neither to its ‘natural’ past, nor to its original pleasures, but to an open future of cultural possibilities” (93). Following what Patricia Hill Collins calls as “oppositional consciousness” (757), Bama portrays a close-knit reality of the Dalit community where a woman endures vulgar and sexist abuse from her husband, leading her to resort to nudity as an act of resistance to safeguard her life. Paakiaraj, while subjecting Rakkamma to vile and vulgar abuse “dragged her by her hair, pushed her down and kicked her lower belly,” however, Rakkamma chose to give it back to him:



How dare you pull my hair? Disgusting man, only fit to drink a woman's farts! Instead of drinking toddy every day, why don't you drink my monthly blood?' And she lifted her sari in front of the entire crowd gathered there.... 'If I hadn't shamed him like this, he would have split my skull in two, the horrible man.' (Bama 61)

Bama scrutinizes the multitude of realities of women who are exploited, realizing that, "Sometimes a sharp tongue and obscene words are women's only way of shaming men and escaping extremely physical violence" (Bama, 2005, p. xx). She bluntly uses raw language, "full of expletives" (Holmstrom xx) with explicit sexual references. According to Raj Gauthaman in *Dark Interior: Essays on Caste and Dalit Culture* (2020), "Dalits who have for so long been treated as commodities owned by others must shout out their selfhood, their 'I,' when they rise" (97). Thereafter, she lifted her sari in front of the entire crowd gathered there. This unanticipated sight frightened the bystanders, leading them all to disperse. The Dalit woman's vagina, an outsider's reproductive organ, is perceived as polluted (yet permeable) and impure, thus susceptible to racism. Just a glance at it can evoke feelings of resentment and aversion. Thus, in the intensified moment of cruelty and indifference, where the distinction between the public and the private became indistinct, Rakkamma's action transformed its meaning into a 'barricade', a symbol of resistance and defiance, a term frequently employed in our protest movements. While it is difficult to argue against Foucault's stance that numerous powerful bodies frequently enforce compliance upon women's bodies, Dalit women like Rakkamma exemplify how the need to survive propels them to defy this docility, confronting power with required aggression, "Even before his hand could fall on her, she screamed and shrieked, 'Ayyayyo, he's killing me. Vile man, you'll die, you'll be carried out as a corpse, you low-life, you bastard, you this you that' [...]" (Bama 61). In this manner, Rakkamma strengthened her Dalit identity and reconstructed her female reproductive body by asserting her autonomy over her own body and exercising sexual agency unleashing her body as well as her Dalit identity from the oppressive clutches of patriarchal discourse.

Through her performance, even Sammuga Kizavi seeks to redefine the symbolic signification of the well that was primarily constructed for the convenience of the upper caste. When an upper caste man barred Kizavi from fetching water from this communal well, the

unruly, defiant elderly woman spat a mouthful of water into the well. Subsequently, she decided to strip off her clothes and stand uncovered to shield herself from potential harm. Viewing this incident in the larger context of the calculated violence perpetrated upon Dalit women, her defiance can be seen as a radical act of defying the authoritarian conventions, thereby proclaiming her dignity and rights. Sammuga Kizavi's act can be interpreted in conjunction with the concept of "affirmative sabotage" as outlined by Spivak in "An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization" (2012). This idea entails the reversal of the innate meaning of something, where the instrument of oppression is subverted, but in a constructive manner that favors the oppressed. Bama asserts, "Our women have an abundant will to survive however they might have to struggle for their last breath. Knowingly or unknowingly, we find ways of coping in the best ways we can" (68). Her body, previously a site of exploitation and abuse, is subjected to a transformation into an emblem of rebellion. She comes across as tenacious and resolute, confronting the very mechanisms of her humiliation, and boldly indicting the apparatuses that once enslaved and persecuted her. Towards the culmination of the narrative, Bama offers a resolution for the Dalit community, "We could demand the rights that are due to us. We could fling away the beggarly coins the party workers bother to give us when they ask us to vote for them and elect an MLA from our community. We could demonstrate our strength through political power. We must start thinking for ourselves, making decisions, and daring to act. Don't we sharpen and renew a rusted sickle? Just like that, we must sharpen our minds and learn to live with self-respect" (103-104). She engages in a critical discussion about social justice when she emphatically states:

Why do we alone have to struggle so much for a mouthful of kanji? Just think about that. Why is it that people who don't do a stroke of work can fill their bellies so easily, while for us life is always a "lottery"? We have believed what they told us repeatedly—that we are useless chickens, scratching about in the rubbish—and now we have no confidence in ourselves. At least from now on we should stand up for ourselves. (Bama 104)

By advocating for Dalit Humanism, particularly Dalit “Womanist -humanism” (Paik 77), Bama has nurtured what Nancy Fraser (1990) proclaims as a “subaltern counter public”- alternative cultural spaces that thwarts the traditional structures of oppression by giving significance to the Dalit perspective. Fraser goes on to explain:

Members of subordinate social groups—women, workers, people of color, and gays and lesbians—have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics. I propose to call these subaltern counter-publics to signal that they are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs. (Fraser 67)

This highlights the ‘difference’ in their position and their counter-public stance, which is highlighted by the persistence and endurance exhibited by the women of the *Paraiya* community. Dalit counter-public leverages the consciousness of their precarious situation and positional reality to build what bell hooks terms “counter-hegemonic discourses” (153). Thus, Bama strengthens her stance when she says:

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 to survive. (Bama 59)

Bama’s narratives underscore how the fundamental struggle for sustenance reforms Dalit female bodies into feminist bodies. These stories exhibit the ongoing process of reconstructing these bodies, liberating them from the Brahmanical norms. Dalit women, whether consciously or unconsciously, proactively engage in redefining their bodies, challenging, and reshaping existing boundaries, thereby accelerating resistance against oppressive mechanisms. Thus, this emerging ‘new’ Dalit woman refuses to accept the imposed

and preordained identities, confronts the ideology that debases and diminishes her sense of worth, and staunchly advocates redefining caste and body as a contemporary manifestation of disparities within the governing structures. Within this context, the principles proposed by Malashri Lal in *The Law of the Threshold* (1996) are worth quoting:

Remembering that she is alone and isolated in a situation that functions by male consensus and collectively, she must devise strategies for survival of the self and acceptance by the 'other' almost simultaneously.... For the 'new woman,' the courage of her convictions is all she can rely upon. (15)

By giving voice to their hitherto silent experiences, the novel is committed to enabling Dalit women to reclaim their sense of 'self'. It strives to provide an alternative narrative that highlights the authentic, daily interactions and realities faced by women, which are often disregarded or neglected. Here, we see the 'body' serving as a strategic tool to generate a kind of defiance with the help of language, rightly as Cixous (1976) states, "Write yourself. Your body must be heard" (880).

The paper finally concludes that the notion of the body, in a very literal sense, is crucial to understanding the Dalit Female epistemology as the identity of the Dalit women has long been confined to their physical bodies and addressed solely in terms of their corporeal existence. The novel traces how the detrimental politics of the female body, marked by anatomical peculiarity and material facticity, degrades the existence of Dalit women as passive and inert objects, thus delimiting their access to society's productive resources and restricting their sexuality. However, by narrativizing violence and rebellion that are entwined around bodies, bodies that permeate the society as well as reclaim the symbolic construction of body, community, and history, we see how Bama, through the interrelationship between, identity, corporeality, and subjectivity, underscores the resilience of the Dalit women in the face of systemic violence.

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