

## **Reimagining the fact through Creative non-fiction: A study of the Representation of Violence in Bama's Sangati**

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**Abstract:** Narrating the facts in the form of creative nonfiction is a new genre in which facts are presented with authenticity without affecting the life of real people. This paper is a study of violence faced by the prime characters of Maariamamma, Maikkaanni and Ezaki in Bama's Sangati relating the conflict between two opposite forces named the exploiters and the exploited, the powerful and the powerless which have been experienced by Maariamamma, Maikkaanni and Ezaki in their life. The novel reveals endless miseries, inhumane victimization and shocking discrimination. Sangati runs through many individual stories but it is the story of Bama's community, which highlights the struggles of Paraiya women dealing with several generations of women. The older women are the narrators who narrate the grandmothers generation, Velliamma Kizhavi's generation and downward generation. The author personally experienced the marginalizing condition in her life. Therefore, she wants to bring out the oppressed condition of her peoples' life to the mainstream's knowledge through creative nonfiction.

**Keywords:** Dalit, sufferings, oppression, inquiry, punishment, forgiveness, victimization

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

"Nonfiction is creative when it presents concepts or information in an entertaining manner." (Reynolds as qtd in Jena 2015) Creative nonfiction is presenting the facts with the touch of imagination. Here, the author applies his or her intelligence, emotion, ideology, mind and imagination to make the facts more creative and reliable so that the reader can maintain the feel of fantasy as fiction. The intention of the creative nonfiction is to read like fiction as a result the reader may get attached with the facts. John Mcphee says "Creative nonfiction is not making something up, but making the most of what you have". The writers of this tell the story to the best of their knowledge in a truthful way. Genuinity must be maintained in the whole writing. The facts must be in fictional form. However, there is a possibility of raising a question that does the writer write the fact with or without exaggeration? Certainly not, he or she must be biased.

Nonfiction is presenting the facts with the touch of truth. It is about real events involving real people, places and events. Whatever information given here is true. History writing, biography, autobiography, journalistic writing, essays and factual narratives are the best examples for nonfiction. Metafiction is a fiction about fiction. It is a novel in which the writer intentionally draws attention to the fact. In Meta fiction the writer appears as a character in his or her novel using the real name or the other name. Ex. Salman Rushdie's "Mid Night Children" the main character Salim is none other than the author. However, in creative nonfiction the name of the characters are mentioned with their real names. To contrast this, Lee Gutkind, founding editor of creative nonfiction, regards name changes – "whether to protect the innocent or the guilty – as the slippery slope of fiction; once you change a name, what else have you changed?". If I do it, he says, "then my reader has a right to doubt my credibility". ( Gutkind as qtd in Bloom, 201-202)

Sangati<sup>1</sup> was written in Tamil then translated into English by Laxmi Halmstrom. The word Sangati means events. It brings an autobiographical element in their narrative but it is the story of a whole community and not an individual. The condition of dalits was very bad as they were not allowed to enter into temple and schools for education. Sangati (Events) projects the life of dalit women who are suppressed, humiliated, exploited, discriminated and marginalized. This novel opens with events leading up to the familial and societal violence that is faced by the dalit women regularly in their life. A woman belongs to dalit community; she has to face the violence in two ways as Afro - American women faced. Generally they face the violence that is one from the white men and the other from the hand of their own men. It is clearly explained in Afro - American

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<sup>1</sup> It is a Tamil word which can be translated into English as event

literature. The best example is Tony Morrison's Pecola in "The Bluest Eye". The economic instability leads dalit women depend on the upper class land lords for financial assistance during emergency. Their financial requirement makes dalit women to be silent when they have been physically abused by the upper class men. Violence is the major theme that is faced by all the characters in this novel especially from their fathers, brothers, husbands, from their own community men and upper class land lords. Raj Gauthaman in his book *Dalit Panpaadu (1993)* says, "Dalit<sup>2</sup> literature describes the world differently, from a Dalit perspective. Therefore it should outrage and even repel the guardians of caste and class. It should provoke them into asking if this is indeed literature". (98) Bama's novel *Sangati* (events) portrays various forms of violence faced by women due to their poverty and inability.

In Indian social hierarchy, dalits get the lowest status. Bama expresses caste and gender problems both outside and inside the community. 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. They experience a total leak of social status. Even they are not considered dignified human beings. My stories are based on these aspects of dalit culture..." (google) The first is being a woman and second is belonging to the lowest community. It focuses the double oppression of females. Women are presented in *Sangati* as daily wage earners. The money earned by male, can spend as they please whereas women bear the financial burden of running the family. They are also always victims to sexual harassment and abused in the place of work. In this novel Maariamamma tells a lot about the sexual assaults faced by dalit women and their inability to stand up against them. The physical violence is realistically portrayed in this novel like lynching, whipping and canning by fathers, husbands and brothers.

Bama expresses the psychological stress in this novel. She also says that "man can humiliate woman many times, he can disrespect a woman, it is very normal. But in this partial double minded society woman has no right to spoken out anything. This is acceptable to all". She feministically voices out the grievances of Paraiya<sup>3</sup> women. Characters like Vellaiyamma Paati<sup>4</sup> and a small girl and the narrator herself, who learn the story from her grandmother. Wherever dalit women go, they have to face the continuous questions raised by the public related to their caste especially who she is and which community she belongs to because of their appearance. Bama says in her book *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 about their passion to live life with vitality, truth, and enjoyment; about their hard labour. I wanted to shout out these stories".(73)

*Sangati* examines the difference between women and their different ways in which they are subject to apportion and their coping strategies. Bama focuses the 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 note to dalit women focusing their inner strength and vigor. The writer attracts our mind towards the education system about dalit community. She gave the example of Pechiamma belonging to Chakkili<sup>5</sup> community studied up to fifth class. Generally, the girls of that community don't go to school.

Dalits get afraid of keeping their young girls in their home and they are so reluctant to send them to school though they get the opportunities going to school. The moment they attain puberty, they are forced to get married. The author observed this silently in her life that her Periamma's (aunt) three daughters named Maariamamma, Annamma and Maikkaani (Seyakkodi) were left uneducated. Gathering firewood is one of the sources to earn livelihood of dalit women. They are at risk when they are gathering firewood and are subjected to sexual assault by upper caste men. Bama's neighbor Kaaliamma quarrels with her husband Chinnapan teasing him for taking her savings to drink. She contempts her own community men for being voiceless and walking like dogs whenever they cross the upper caste streets but when they are at their home, they speak like supreme stars.

The novel brings out the capability of Paati in attending every childbirth in the village. She can even handle the most difficult cases "It didn't matter if the umbilical cord was twisted round the baby, if the baby lay in a breech position, if it was a premature birth, or a case of twins. She delivered the baby safely, separating mother and child, without harming either" (1-2). Many people know Paati and like her very much because of this. People themselves feel that she had a lucky hand. However, the upper caste people don't approach Paati in attending the childbirth even the situation is the worst because "she was a Paraichi" (1). This Paati is looked

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<sup>2</sup> A person of a lowest caste from Hindu converted to Christianity

<sup>3</sup> A person hailing from scheduled caste, who are categorized by different cultural institutions and are given with a marginalized identity in India.

<sup>4</sup> Grandmother

<sup>5</sup> A sub caste from scheduled caste

down by the upper class people for being dalit, though she has the skill of attending the childbirths. In her time, lower caste women were not allowed to cover their upper part of the body.

Maariamamma has been sexually abused in the hands of the upper caste land owner Kumarasami Ayya<sup>6</sup>. One day Maariamamma gathered firewood as usual and returned home in the burning heat carrying her bundle. Seeing water in the nearby irrigation pump-set, she goes there to drink water. When she drinks water, Kumarasami Ayya seizes her hand and pulls her inside the pump set. When she comes and says it to her friends, they said “That landowner is an evil man, fat with money. He’s upper caste as well. How can even try to stand up to such people? Are people going to believe their words or ours?”(20). However, Kumarasami Ayya gets afraid of his reputation and so he hurries to the village and complains to the headman of the Pariah community, the Naattaamai<sup>7</sup> by saying “Just today that girl Maariamamma, daughter of Samudrakani, and that Mnukkayi’s grandson Manikkam were behaving in a very dirty way” (20). During the inquiry in the village Panchayat, Maariamamma and Manikkam come to the centre of the circle and then greet the elders by falling down and prostrate themselves at full length. Hence then, they are asked to stand each to one side with folded arms. The enquiry is done by the head -man known as Naattaamai.

Finally, Maariamamma falls down and asks for forgiveness and so the Naattaamai asks her to pay two hundred rupees as fine and Manikkam only hundred rupees. From this, it is clearly understood that women are given secondary status in dalit community. The Naattaamai ends the proceedings by 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” (26). There is a foolish belief in their society that whatever men say is bound to be right and whatever women say will be always wrong. When girl’s stomachs are screaming with hunger, they must not eat first. They are allowed to eat after men have finished and gone. It is the acceptable truth in dalit community. The position of women is pitiful and humiliating. In the fields, they have to escape from the upper caste men’s molestation and in their homes they must submit themselves to their husbands.

As a feminist writer Bama’s feminism is focused in the dalit community. Though women are powerless, they accept the patriarchal role of men in their life. All her women characters are never empowered with education. Therefore, they are treated as social victims and easy to attack by whoever wishes. As Prasanna Sree says “Through the centuries, women in Hindu tradition are depicted as silent sufferers; they have been given a secondary status both in the family and society”. Maariamamma and Thaayi have faced inexplicable shame in their family life. Their husbands regularly beat them up and also feel that it is their birthright to humiliate and kill their life partners. Maariamamma is unlucky in her whole life. When she was with her parents, she didn’t get the love and affection that she expected for. She began to cry when her marriage was arranged with Maanikkam who is a drunkard and does not go for a job and often goes to jail. When Maariamamma knew his character, she refused a lot to marry him. Finally she was compelled to accept him. Since she got married with Maanikkam, she suffered with beatings every day. She was completely made as a scapegoat that people watched helplessly. The Paraya men were speechless when she was victimized for molestation by Kumarasami Ayya. They get afraid of losing their favours especially jobs and don’t have the power to question the upper class person. So, Bama Says in her book Sangati “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, we must strengthen our hearts and minds in order to survive”(59).

The inconsolable sufferings faced by eleven years old little girl is named Maikkanni. Perhaps she was born unlucky soon after her birth, her father becomes friendly with another woman and so the family responsibilities fall on her shoulder. Her mother is pregnant for the seventh time therefore she finds very difficult to go for a job. However, if she is laid up at home, the children will starve to death. She says that when “Maikkanni has grown up a bit, and can go out to work”(69). The day Maikkanni learns to walk, she starts to work as well. When her mother goes out to work in the fields, it is Maikkaani who looks after all the tasks at home. She is named Seyarani in the novel. “From the time she woke up, scrubbed the cooking pots, collected water, washed clothes, gathered firewood, went to the shops and cooked the kanji.<sup>8</sup> She did it all, one after the other”(70). Whenever her mother has a baby, Maikkaani goes to work in the neighboring matchbox factory in the town because her mother cannot go for a job. The family is managed on what she earns. In the factory, she is beaten for wrongly pasting two labels. As a child of oppressed labourer, she suffers a lot and has been assaulted naming her as Paraya by other workers. After her mother delivered a baby, she goes to work and Maikkaani takes care of the children. “It was Maikkanni who brought up all the five children who were born

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<sup>6</sup> An old respectable person

<sup>7</sup> English translation of Naattaamai is Village chief

<sup>8</sup> Food made by rice in liquid form

after her; her mother delivered them into the world and could do no more. Just as soon as one child began to walk, she was ready to deliver the next”(73).

There has been a superstitious belief in dalit community about a ghost. The reason for this belief is that the family had eight children. The first seven were boys and last one was a girl named Ezaki. “All the seven boys cherished the girl as if she were a flower, as if she were a gold” (57). All her brothers and family members wanted to arrange a good match for her. However, she fell in love with a fellow of the Vannaan<sup>9</sup> caste and eloped with him. Her brothers somehow came to know and outraged. When she was nearly full term, her brothers arrived at their house requesting them to return to her mother’s home. Ezaki believed and was ready to come with her brothers. However, her brothers had no intention of taking her home. Instead, they took her to very deep forest and separated her head from her body. Then they opened her stomach and took out the baby, twisted its neck and killed it in the name of honor killing. Since this incident, it is believed that there has been the ghost of Ezaki as she was killed at young age without fulfilling her desire. This has been believed for a long time in dalit community.

Bama has taken all these characters to show how women struggle for survival and hopes that the time has come when they should stop suffering in helplessness. This is what Sheela Rani Khare focuses “Feminism emerged as a worldwide movement to secure women’s rights on the one hand and love, respect, sympathy and understanding from males on the other. It focused on women’s struggle for recognition and survival and made them realize that the time has come when they should stop suffering silently in helplessness”. ( Rani 177) Though they feel the pain and shame in the hands of the upper class men and their own men, they feel pride of their economic autonomy. They also feel proud for their hard work and have the power to run a family. When they are targeted sexually, they never hesitate to call and shout at them with obscene words. Bama states that “It is not the same for women of other castes and communities. Our women cannot bear the torment of upper caste masters in the fields, and at home they cannot bear the violence of their husbands”(65). Thaayi is a fair skinned dalit woman. She married a man who used to beat her every day. He suspects that she is morally wrong because she is the most beautiful woman in his locality. However, she adjusts everything for the sake of her family life.

The upper caste men feel that dalits are the Subalterns who cannot speak as Gayathiri Spivak mentioned in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak”. Dalit women have been raped mercilessly for several generations. Their independence is completely restricted. In total all the dalit women struggle a lot to survive. They were treated as a sub-human in their society. Bama observed the social treatment given to the dalits and exposed them with pride to the world as an alert by her writing as creative nonfiction. Though the dalit women suffer a lot traditionally in the hands of their own men and upper class men, they are happy with permitting them to have the second marriage if the first marriage bond is broken. No dowry is required among them to get married.

They feel strong in terms of health and safety. Pechhiamma is from Chakkili community. She is the class mate of Bama, dropped out her schooling at fifth class and married a man from her community. He used her as a hostage in his home. Therefore, she left him and married another man. Most of the dalit women married second time if there has been a continuous dispute with the first husband. They consider it as their strength to control their men and this option is not common in upper class.

A quantitative analysis of interviews with many people having lineage with the incident was made. It is needless to multiply the names along with their views as they make the similar opinions. The legitimacy of the facts is that many of the history books especially Dr. Ambedkar’s “Annihilation of Caste” and Meena Kandasamy’s “The Gypsy Goddess” which mention the similar issues as the novel Sangati narrates. Bhatt Mayank mentions on what Sharankumar Limbale says “ The touch of dalit, the shadow of dalit and the voice of dalit treated as impure”. After the independence, dalits became aware of their self respect and equality it is because of the movement of Dr. Ambedkar. “A common man is the real hero of this literature. He revolts against inhumane oppression. He wins in his struggle of self respect. This is the real beauty of this literature”. A few lines from Limbale’s poem to show the fact of violence.

“The Church bell rang  
Every one entered in  
The ajan heard from mosque  
Every one entered in  
The bell of temple rang  
Some entered in  
And some stood out.”

After the thorough analysis of the text, it is deduced that the fact and fiction are intricately presented to establish an evocative experience for the readers.

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<sup>9</sup> A sub caste Person from scheduled caste

To conclude, Sangati narrates the facts that happened in the life of dalit women in their society. All the women in this novel especially Maariamamma, Maikkani and Ezaki suffered a lot in their life due to their ignorance, oppression and marginalization which were seen by Bama helplessly. By observing these facts in her community, Bama is still hopeful and gives her voice that both boys and girls should be given education in order to establish their life in a better way. From the readings of Sangati, the similar issues have been explored in the form of violence in many characters. Through Sangati, Bama holds the mirror up to the heart of dalit women. From the analysis of this paper, it is clearly understood that the story narration is coherent and consistent as it is reflected in their society. The literary elements used in the novel makes this narration creative nonfiction.

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