

Negotiating Dalit Womanhood: Resistance, Identity, and Agency in Bama's Sangati

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ABSTRACT

This article undertakes a comprehensive critical study of Dalit womanhood, collective resistance, and ethical agency as represented in Bama's *Sangati*: Events, a seminal text in Indian Dalit feminist literature. Situating *Sangati* within the intersecting frameworks of Dalit feminist theory, intersectionality, postcolonial studies, and feminist ethics, the study examines how Dalit women's lived experiences are shaped by the mutually reinforcing structures of caste, gender, labor, and religious discipline. Departing from dominant feminist narratives that often privilege individual emancipation, the article foregrounds collective survival strategies, relational agency, and everyday resistance as central to Dalit women's self-articulation and political consciousness. Through a qualitative textual methodology and close thematic analysis, the study explores how Dalit women negotiate gendered violence, moral surveillance, and institutional hypocrisy, particularly within familial, communal, and religious spaces. Bama's narrative strategy—rooted in oral storytelling, episodic structure, and communal memory—emerges as a powerful counter-discourse that reclaims voice, silence, and ethical reasoning as tools of resistance. The article further argues that labor, often framed as a site of exploitation, simultaneously functions as a terrain for collective bonding, identity formation, and moral authority among Dalit women. By engaging critically with scholars such as Gopal Guru, Sharmila Rege, Uma Chakravarti, and Shailaja Paik, this article identifies a significant gap in existing scholarship regarding the ethical and relational dimensions of Dalit women's agency. It posits that *Sangati* not only documents systemic oppression but also theorizes an alternative feminist epistemology grounded in communal resilience, lived ethics, and counter-spirituality. The study concludes that Bama's representation of Dalit womanhood challenges both Brahmanical patriarchy and mainstream feminist frameworks, offering a nuanced understanding of resistance that is collective, contextual, and ethically informed. This article thus contributes to ongoing debates in Dalit studies, feminist literary criticism, and Indian English literature by re-centering marginalized voices as producers of knowledge, ethics, and transformative social critique.

Keywords: Dalit Christianity; Dalit Womanhood; Ethical Agency; Bama; Intersectionality; Dalit Feminism..

1. INTRODUCTION:

Dalit women in India occupy a position of acute social marginalisation, subject to intersecting oppressions of caste, gender, and class, which render their experiences both politically urgent and socially silenced (Guru 2549; Rege 6). Within this context, literature becomes not merely an aesthetic expression but a site of critical intervention, where lived realities of oppression, resilience, and ethical agency can be articulated. Bama's *Sangati* (2005), a seminal text in Dalit feminist literature, exemplifies such intervention. Composed as a series of narrative vignettes, it foregrounds the collective lives, struggles, and everyday victories of Dalit women in a small Tamil village, chronicling the ways in which caste, patriarchy, and religious institutions intersect to shape experiences of marginalisation and agency (12–15).

Unlike mainstream feminist literature, which often universalises women's oppression, Bama's work insists on contextual specificity: Dalit womanhood cannot be

understood outside the structural constraints of caste (Rege 3; Chakravarti 17; Thakur 117). Her narratives document the dual oppression—both gendered and caste-inflected—that governs daily life, from labour and domestic responsibilities to participation in public and religious spheres (Thakur 155). In doing so, *Sangati* positions Dalit women as ethical and political subjects, capable of resistance, solidarity, and self-assertion despite systemic constraints. This article seeks to explore how *Sangati* constructs collective resistance, ethical agency, and identity formation among Dalit women. By examining the intersection of caste, gender, and religion, the study highlights the mechanisms of discipline, moral surveillance, and silence, while emphasising forms of counter-spirituality, everyday resistance, and reclaimed voice. The central premise is that Bama's narratives are not mere accounts of victimhood but are sites of epistemic intervention, producing knowledge about social injustice and the moral possibilities of resistance.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Scholarly engagement with Bama's works has largely emphasised autobiographical dimensions, Dalit identity formation, and feminist critique, yet few studies have examined the collective and ethical dimensions of Dalit womanhood in *Sangati*. Sharmila Rege, in *Writing Caste/Writing Gender*, underscores the epistemic authority of Dalit women's narratives, arguing that lived experience constitutes an alternative knowledge system that challenges both upper-caste feminism and mainstream historiography (Rege 6–7, 91). Rege emphasises that Dalit women's narratives combine personal testimony with collective voice, foregrounding shared struggles and solidarity rather than individual heroism (Rege 102).

Gopal Guru's analysis of Dalit women's discourse similarly emphasises the importance of voice in contesting social hierarchies, noting that silence imposed by caste and gender oppression constitutes a form of epistemic violence that limits recognition and agency (Guru 2552–53). Guru's framework situates Dalit women's narratives as critical interventions in knowledge production, a lens through which *Sangati* can be read not merely as a literary text but as a site of political theory. Feminist theological scholarship has also engaged with Bama's work, particularly regarding Christian institutions in South India. Rosemary Radford Ruether critiques institutionalised religion for sanctioning gendered labour and moralising women's suffering, while David Mosse examines the intersection of caste and religious authority in shaping everyday practices in Christian communities (Ruether 41–42; Mosse 213–16).

However, most theological analyses focus on institutional critique and rarely consider the ethical, everyday, and collective resistance articulated by Dalit women themselves (Bama, *Sangati* 36–40; Holmstrom xvii–xix). Despite these contributions, existing scholarship presents significant gaps. Much of the literature privileges autobiographical or individualist interpretations, often neglecting the collective, relational, and ethical dimensions of Dalit womanhood. Furthermore, while caste and gender are frequently analysed, their interaction with Christian institutional norms and the mechanisms of silence, moral surveillance, and ethical resistance remain underexplored (Paik 44; Rege 118).

3. RESEARCH GAP

The review of literature identifies three key gaps that this study addresses:

Collective Ethical Resistance: Previous research often emphasises individual agency or survival but underplays the collective strategies Dalit women employ in resisting social and institutional oppression in *Sangati*.

Intersection of Caste, Gender, and Religion: While caste and gender oppression have been explored separately, the synergistic interaction of caste hierarchies, gendered labour, and Christian institutional authority remains insufficiently theorised.

Everyday Epistemology and Moral Knowledge: Few studies examine how everyday practices, narratives, and communal solidarity in *Sangati* generate ethical

knowledge and moral critique, offering insights into non-institutional forms of feminist and social epistemology.

This study, therefore, positions Bama's text as a critical site for examining Dalit feminist epistemology, moral agency, and ethical resistance within religiously structured social hierarchies.

4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

To explore the collective resistance and ethical subjectivity of Dalit women in *Sangati*.

To analyse how caste, gender, and religious institutions intersect to shape oppression, survival strategies, and agency in everyday life.

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative, textual, and thematic approach, combining close reading of Bama's *Sangati* with critical secondary sources in Dalit feminist theory, feminist theology, and postcolonial studies. The methodology involves:

Primary Textual Analysis: Close reading of *Sangati*, focusing on vignettes that highlight labour, social interaction, religious practice, and community solidarity.

Theoretical Framework: The analysis is guided by Dalit feminist standpoint theory, feminist theological critique, and postcolonial perspectives on caste and religious institutions.

Thematic Coding: Identifying recurring motifs of collective resistance, moral surveillance, silence, ethical knowledge, and agency.

Critical Triangulation: Linking primary narrative evidence to secondary scholarship to substantiate claims about caste, gender, and religion in everyday life.

The methodology ensures a systematic, theoretically grounded approach that highlights both the literary and epistemic significance of Bama's narratives, situating *Sangati* as a text that simultaneously documents oppression and theorises ethical resistance.

Collective Resistance and Dalit Womanhood

In *Sangati*, Bama presents Dalit women not as isolated victims of oppression but as agents of collective resilience, whose everyday actions, shared experiences, and mutual support form a web of resistance against social, economic, and religious marginalisation (Bama, *Sangati* 12–16; Rege 102). Unlike narratives that focus solely on individual agency, *Sangati* foregrounds communal life, illustrating how survival, solidarity, and moral courage emerge through interpersonal networks among women in the village community. These networks function as both practical support systems—sharing labour, child-rearing responsibilities, and economic resources—and as moral and epistemic scaffolding, fostering shared understanding of oppression and the ethical imperatives of resistance (Guru 2549–50; Holmström xviii).

The collective ethos is particularly evident in the way Dalit women respond to structural inequalities embedded in caste, labour, and education. Bama illustrates how

women organise informal groups to address injustices, whether negotiating wages, resisting discrimination in religious or civic spaces, or ensuring mutual safety and wellbeing (Bama, *Sangati* 28–32). These acts of solidarity challenge the individualised models of resistance often celebrated in mainstream feminist literature, revealing the socially embedded nature of Dalit women's agency (Rege 103–104; Chakravarti 19). Resistance is therefore not only an ethical stance but a collectively sustained praxis, arising from shared recognition of systemic oppression and a common commitment to survival and dignity.

Labour emerges as a crucial site of collective resistance. Dalit women in *Sangati* navigate multiple forms of economic exploitation, from low-wage work in upper-caste households to unpaid domestic labour within their own homes (Bama, *Sangati* 36–40; Mosse 214–16). By organising cooperative strategies—rotating tasks, pooling income, and sharing resources—they transform labour into a collective site of empowerment, asserting both economic and social agency (Guru 2551; Paik 44). Importantly, these practices are not framed as heroic or exceptional; they are ordinary, quotidian forms of resistance that challenge caste and gender hierarchies through routine acts of mutual care and solidarity.

Education functions as another domain of collective empowerment. Bama emphasises the role of literacy, learning, and storytelling as tools through which Dalit women articulate critique, preserve memory, and transmit cultural knowledge (Bama, *Sangati* 72–75; Rege 105). In communal learning spaces, women share experiences of caste oppression and strategies for navigating social constraints, creating a form of collective epistemic authority. This is consistent with Guru's argument that Dalit women's knowledge emerges not only from lived experience but from the shared discursive and material practices of community life (Guru 2552–53). *Sangati* thereby demonstrates how literacy, when embedded in communal relationships, transforms marginalisation into critical consciousness and ethical praxis.

Religious spaces are also sites where collective resistance manifests. While Christian institutions often reproduce caste hierarchies and gendered labour divisions, Bama's narratives reveal that Dalit women subvert these structures through communal negotiation, ritual reinterpretation, and mutual support (Bama, *Sangati* 50–55; Mosse 215–16). For instance, women collaboratively reinterpret religious teachings to prioritise ethical responsibility and communal welfare over institutional dictates, thereby creating a counter-spiritual practice that challenges ecclesiastical authority while preserving moral integrity (Ruether 41–42; Holmström xviii). These collective spiritual interventions illustrate the intersection of ethics, religion, and community-based resistance, highlighting the multiplicity of sites in which Dalit women exercise agency.

Silence and voice operate in complex relation within collective life. While institutional and caste-imposed silences often suppress individual expression, *Sangati* demonstrates that women's collective narratives create spaces for voicing experiences that would otherwise be ignored or marginalised (Bama, *Sangati* 56–60; Rege

118). Storytelling, gossip, and shared lament function as epistemic and ethical practices, documenting injustice while fostering solidarity. This approach aligns with Dalit feminist theory, which emphasises the transformative power of shared experience in producing knowledge, ethical judgment, and political insight (Guru 2553–54; Paik 46). Through these collective practices, Dalit women in *Sangati* assert both moral authority and social recognition, challenging broader hierarchies of caste and gender.

Crucially, *Sangati* situates collective resistance within a framework of ethical interdependence rather than hierarchical leadership. Unlike conventional narratives of emancipation that valorise singular, heroic figures, Bama emphasises that survival and agency are mutually constituted within the relational networks of women (Bama, *Sangati* 78–82; Rege 107). Resistance is not abstract, but rather enacted in the daily negotiations of power, labour, and moral responsibility, revealing the ways in which ethical and political life are co-constructed through communal engagement. This insight challenges both mainstream feminist paradigms and conventional Dalit studies by demonstrating that agency is relational, situated, and ethically grounded.

Finally, collective resistance in *Sangati* is inseparable from the construction of identity. Dalit womanhood is articulated through communal practices that affirm dignity, shared struggle, and ethical resilience (Bama, *Sangati* 80–85; Holmström xix). By foregrounding collective experience over individual narrative, Bama positions Dalit women not only as subjects of oppression but as agents of moral and social transformation, capable of reshaping their own lived realities within deeply hierarchical structures. In doing so, *Sangati* advances a politics of relational ethics, wherein community, memory, and solidarity are central to both survival and resistance.

Gendered Violence and the Politics of Everyday Survival

Bama's *Sangati* portrays the lives of Dalit women as marked not only by caste oppression but also by gendered violence, which pervades domestic, social, and institutional spaces. Violence is not always spectacular or physically overt; it is often structural, normalised, and internalised, shaping the contours of women's everyday existence. By rendering these forms of oppression visible, Bama highlights the intersectional vulnerabilities that Dalit women face, and simultaneously foregrounds their resilience and everyday strategies of survival (Bama, *Sangati* 28–32; Rege 103–104).

One of the most pervasive forms of gendered violence in the text is domestic exploitation and labour inequity. Dalit women are expected to undertake physically demanding work in both private and communal spaces, often with minimal recognition or remuneration. Bama recounts women labouring in fields, carrying out household chores, and supporting extended families under conditions of economic precarity (Bama, *Sangati* 36–40; Mosse 214–16). These labour expectations are compounded by gendered social norms, which cast women as morally responsible for family honour, cleanliness, and domestic propriety, regardless of their economic and physical

burdens (Chakravarti 18–19; Guru 2551). This labour regime is a subtle form of structural violence, as it renders Dalit women invisible yet indispensable, perpetuating both economic and social subordination.

Bama also exposes sexualized violence and harassment as persistent threats in Dalit women's lives. Upper-caste men and even community elites frequently enact forms of sexual coercion, intimidation, and verbal abuse, underscoring the interconnection between caste hierarchy and patriarchal power (Bama, *Sangati* 42–46; Guru 2552). These forms of violence are rarely addressed in institutional or legal forums, reflecting the double marginalisation of Dalit women, whose victimisation is both socially normalised and institutionally ignored (Rege 106; Paik 44). By documenting these realities, Bama insists that everyday survival for Dalit women is inseparable from navigating pervasive threats to bodily and social integrity.

Religious and educational institutions, which are often positioned as sites of moral and social upliftment, can simultaneously reproduce forms of gendered violence. Bama illustrates how Christian convents and schools enforce strict codes of conduct, moral surveillance, and caste-biased discipline, disproportionately affecting Dalit girls and women (Bama, *Sangati* 50–55; Mosse 215–16; Ruether 41–42). The imposition of silence, obedience, and ritual compliance functions as a mode of controlling female bodies and behaviour, ensuring that women internalise structural hierarchies as moral imperatives (Bama, *Sangati* 56–60; Foucault 202; Rege 118). Such moral and institutional surveillance constitutes a form of symbolic violence, subtly undermining confidence, autonomy, and collective action.

Despite these pervasive pressures, *Sangati* demonstrates that Dalit women develop adaptive strategies for survival, which range from everyday negotiation to subtle subversion. Women employ humour, storytelling, and coded communication to resist domination while maintaining social relationships and safety (Bama, *Sangati* 62–68; Holmström xviii). These strategies illustrate what Rege terms "ethico-political survival practices," where ordinary actions—helping a neighbour, sharing scarce resources, or circumventing institutional restrictions—constitute forms of resistance and agency (Rege 107–108; Guru 2553). In this way, survival is not passive endurance but a deliberate, ethically informed negotiation of oppressive structures. Economic survival is another arena where gendered violence and collective agency intersect. Dalit women in *Sangati* often engage in informal labour networks, pooling resources, sharing labour, and collectively negotiating wages (Bama, *Sangati* 72–75; Mosse 216; Armengol 848). These networks serve both practical and protective functions, enabling women to navigate exploitative labour relations while maintaining social solidarity. The text highlights that these strategies are learned and transmitted communally, reflecting the intersection of survival, collective knowledge, and moral reasoning (Guru 2551–52; Paik 46).

Education and literacy emerge as further tools for negotiating violence and asserting agency. Women's informal learning circles, cooperative teaching, and

storytelling empower participants to articulate experiences, analyse injustice, and challenge hierarchical norms (Bama, *Sangati* 78–82; Rege 105). In this context, knowledge is both protective and emancipatory: it mitigates vulnerability, fosters ethical reasoning, and strengthens collective resilience. By foregrounding these practices, Bama reframes survival not as passive adaptation but as active, communal engagement with structural injustice. Bama's depiction of gendered violence in everyday life is also deeply emotional and ethical. Narratives of suffering are intertwined with expressions of courage, solidarity, and moral reflection (Bama, *Sangati* 85–90; Holmström xix). Women's laughter, storytelling, and small acts of rebellion are ethical assertions of dignity, signalling that survival entails both pragmatic strategies and the reclamation of moral and social agency (Rege 107; Guru 2554). In doing so, *Sangati* challenges reductive frameworks that treat Dalit women solely as victims, emphasising the complex interplay of vulnerability, resilience, and ethical action.

Finally, Bama's work situates gendered violence within a broader socio-political and historical matrix, linking local struggles to systemic patterns of caste and gender discrimination. By documenting everyday oppression and collective strategies, she transforms ordinary experiences into a critical commentary on social inequality and institutional failure (Bama, *Sangati* 90–95; Mosse 217). Gendered violence is not merely personal or isolated; it is structurally embedded, yet it is simultaneously the site of resistance, solidarity, and ethical knowledge formation.

Religious Institutions, Discipline, and Moral Surveillance

Bama's *Sangati* presents religious institutions, particularly Christian churches and convents, as complex sites of both moral authority and social control. While these institutions ostensibly provide spiritual guidance and social upliftment, they simultaneously perpetuate caste hierarchies, enforce gendered labour, and discipline Dalit women's behaviour, often under the guise of moral or spiritual rectitude (Bama, *Sangati* 50–55; Mosse 213–16). This duality reflects a central tension in Bama's narrative: religious institutions are both spaces of potential solace and instruments of structural subjugation, shaping the contours of everyday life for Dalit women.

A key mechanism through which religious authority exerts control is discipline, operationalised through strict codes of conduct, ritual compliance, and enforced silence. Dalit women in *Sangati* are expected to conform to institutional expectations regarding dress, demeanour, and labour, with deviations often subject to moral censure or social ostracism (Bama, *Sangati* 56–60; Holmström xviii). Such disciplinary practices are reinforced by caste-based hierarchies within religious institutions themselves, where Dalit women occupy the lowest rungs of the labour and moral hierarchy, assigned to cleaning, menial work, or service-oriented tasks, often without recognition or remuneration (Mosse 214; Rege 118). Discipline here functions both as a regulatory mechanism and as a technique of internalisation, shaping women's sense of self, morality, and social worth (Foucault 202; Armengol 847).

Moral surveillance extends beyond formal religious instruction into everyday life, governing interpersonal relationships, social conduct, and even emotional expression. Bama depicts how Dalit women internalise institutional expectations, policing themselves and each other to maintain perceived moral and spiritual propriety (Bama, *Sangati* 66–70; Rege 119). This form of surveillance produces symbolic violence, as it normalises subordination while presenting obedience as virtue (Guru 2552; Chakravarti 19). It also illustrates how caste and gender intersect to amplify control, with Dalit women bearing the brunt of both patriarchal and caste-inflected disciplinary norms. Importantly, *Sangati* highlights that disciplinary practices are not solely top-down impositions; they are embedded in social and religious habitus. Dalit women themselves may perpetuate moral surveillance within their communities, reinforcing codes of conduct and ensuring adherence to norms of propriety, labour, and relational ethics (Bama, *Sangati* 72–75; Rege 120). Such internalisation demonstrates the complex interplay between structure and agency, where women navigate coercion while simultaneously reproducing, challenging, and negotiating institutional expectations. This dual process reflects what Foucault terms the micro-physics of power, in which control operates subtly through everyday interactions, knowledge production, and ethical self-regulation (Foucault 202; Bama, *Sangati* 76–78).

Religious institutions also function as sites of gendered surveillance of sexuality and morality. Dalit girls and women are often monitored in public and private spaces, with their bodies and behaviours subject to scrutiny both within and outside institutional boundaries (Bama, *Sangati* 80–84; Mosse 215–16). Bama illustrates that such scrutiny is enforced not only by clergy or institutional authorities but also by community norms internalised through long-standing hierarchies. The policing of female morality, framed in ostensibly spiritual terms, reproduces social hierarchies and maintains patriarchal control, effectively disciplining Dalit women's bodies, speech, and social interactions. Despite these oppressive mechanisms, *Sangati* also foregrounds subtle forms of resistance and negotiation within religious spaces. Dalit women reinterpret religious teachings to prioritise communal welfare and ethical integrity over institutional dictates (Bama, *Sangati* 85–90; Armengol 851). For example, women challenge ritual restrictions or question caste-based exclusions during communal prayer or festivals, asserting moral authority derived from lived experience rather than institutional sanction (Ruether 41–42; Rege 122). Such actions demonstrate that resistance is embedded in ethical reasoning, not merely physical or vocal protest. By navigating and subverting moral codes, women transform spaces designed for control into arenas for ethical negotiation and collective assertion.

Furthermore, *Sangati* illustrates that moral surveillance and discipline intersect with labour and economic exploitation, reinforcing the centrality of material conditions in sustaining hierarchical control. Dalit women's labour—both paid and unpaid—is monitored and morally evaluated, with diligence framed as virtue and deviation construed as moral failing (Bama, *Sangati*

90–95; Mosse 216). Here, the regulation of labour and morality converges, highlighting the inseparability of ethical, economic, and social subjugation. This convergence is critical in understanding how Dalit women navigate both visible and invisible forms of oppression, and how resistance is embedded in everyday strategies of compliance, negotiation, and subversion (Rege 124; Guru 2553). Bama's representation of religious institutions in *Sangati* underscores the multifaceted nature of oppression, combining discipline, moral surveillance, and caste-based hierarchies. At the same time, these spaces are not devoid of possibility; women exercise agency through interpretation, negotiation, and ethical subversion, asserting their moral and social authority within constrained circumstances (Bama, *Sangati* 95–100; Holmström xx). By analysing these dynamics, the study highlights the intersections of caste, gender, and institutional power, demonstrating that resistance is as much an ethical and relational practice as it is a structural or political one.

Silence, Voice, and Ethical Resistance

In Bama's *Sangati*, silence and voice emerge as central instruments in the ethical and political navigation of Dalit womanhood. While silence is often imposed externally through caste, gender, and religious hierarchies, Bama depicts it as a strategic and multifaceted tool, simultaneously reflecting oppression and enabling forms of ethical reflection and communal resistance (Bama, *Sangati* 56–60; Rege 118–119). The interplay of silence and voice allows Dalit women to negotiate power, assert agency, and articulate moral critique within socially constraining environments. Silence in *Sangati* operates on multiple levels. Externally, Dalit women are constrained by caste-imposed hierarchies, patriarchal social norms, and institutionalised religious authority (Bama, *Sangati* 62–66; Guru 2552–53). These structures demand compliance and invisibility, limiting opportunities for vocal dissent or public engagement. Silence here is both a form of social regulation and a mechanism of survival, as speaking out against upper-caste authorities or institutional mandates could incur retaliation, ostracism, or economic sanction (Mosse 214–16; Chakravarti 20). By capturing these constraints, Bama demonstrates that the imposition of silence is neither accidental nor neutral—it is strategically embedded within social, economic, and moral hierarchies.

However, *Sangati* also highlights the subversive potential of silence, which becomes a space for reflection, ethical deliberation, and covert resistance. Women utilise periods of silence to analyse social injustices, strategise collective action, and reinforce communal solidarity (Bama, *Sangati* 68–72; Holmström xviii–xix). In this sense, silence is not purely passive; it is performative and deliberate, allowing women to maintain safety while cultivating awareness and moral judgment (Rege 122; Guru 2554). This duality reflects Bama's nuanced understanding of Dalit women's everyday epistemology, where silence is both a condition of oppression and a resource for ethical action. Voice, by contrast, is produced and exercised within collective frameworks, often emerging through storytelling, gossip, and communal dialogue (Bama, *Sangati* 72–78; Rege 105–106). Bama foregrounds oral narratives as ethical

acts, in which women share experiences of caste discrimination, gendered violence, and institutional neglect. Through these narratives, women generate a communal epistemic authority, creating spaces where lived experience is validated, moral critique is articulated, and social bonds are strengthened (Guru 2553; Paik 46). Voice, in this context, is inseparable from collective consciousness, functioning as both a record of injustice and a mechanism of empowerment.

Ethical resistance in *Sangati* often emerges at the intersection of silence and voice. Dalit women strategically choose when to speak and when to remain silent, balancing safety, communal welfare, and moral responsibility (Bama, *Sangati* 80–84; Holmström xix). This careful negotiation embodies what Rege describes as “ethico-political agency”, wherein actions are guided by communal ethics, experiential knowledge, and the imperative to resist systemic injustice without endangering collective well-being (Rege 124–125; Guru 2554). In this framework, agency is relational and contextually situated, emerging not from overt confrontation but from ethically informed decision-making and collective solidarity. Moreover, Bama demonstrates that voice itself is regulated by intersecting structures of power. Women’s narratives are constrained by caste hierarchies, institutional norms, and patriarchal authority, which shape what can be said, to whom, and in what manner (Bama, *Sangati* 85–90; Mosse 216). Nevertheless, Dalit women find creative means to assert their voice, employing allegory, coded language, humour, and storytelling to circumvent overt censorship and moral policing (Rege 127; Holmström xix). Such practices exemplify the adaptive and strategic nature of ethical resistance, revealing that the subaltern voice often operates through subtle, non-linear, and relational forms.

The ethical dimension of voice is further emphasised in women’s responses to injustice. Acts of speaking out are intertwined with moral reasoning, care for the community, and the pursuit of social justice, illustrating that resistance in *Sangati* is not merely performative but ethically grounded (Bama, *Sangati* 90–95; Ruether 41–42). By framing voice within ethical responsibility, Bama situates Dalit women’s agency within a moral universe where justice, empathy, and solidarity are paramount, challenging reductive frameworks that reduce resistance to acts of defiance or confrontation. Finally, *Sangati* illustrates that ethical resistance through voice and silence is inseparable from collective identity. Narratives, shared experiences, and communal reflection reinforce moral and social cohesion, enabling Dalit women to negotiate systemic violence while preserving dignity and relational integrity (Bama, *Sangati* 95–100; Rege 128; Holmström xx). In doing so, Bama presents a sophisticated understanding of Dalit feminist epistemology, wherein knowledge, moral agency, and resistance emerge through the intertwined practices of listening, speaking, reflecting, and acting collectively.

Intersectionality of Caste, Gender, and Labour

Bama’s *Sangati* presents labour as a crucial site where the intersections of caste, gender, and socio-economic hierarchy are both enforced and contested. Dalit women’s

work is inseparable from the structural oppression imposed by caste and patriarchal norms; simultaneously, labour becomes a domain where ethical agency, collective resistance, and identity formation manifest (Bama, *Sangati* 36–40). By examining labour through the lens of intersectionality, Bama demonstrates how caste and gender operate synergistically to shape both vulnerability and capacity for resistance (Guru 2551; Chakravarti 19–20). Dalit women’s labour is predominantly manual, undervalued, and socially invisible, encompassing agricultural work, domestic service, and informal wage labour. These forms of labour are not merely economic acts; they are socially codified expressions of caste subordination, wherein women’s contributions are essential yet systematically marginalised (Mosse 214–16; Qurat-Al-Ain and Thakur 101774). Gender intersects with caste in compounding these vulnerabilities: women are expected to perform physically demanding work, provide emotional and domestic care, and uphold familial honour, all while remaining compliant within hierarchically structured social and institutional frameworks (Guru 2552–53; Rege 106–107).

Bama foregrounds collective labour as a site of resistance and mutual empowerment. Women frequently organise cooperative strategies to manage workloads, share income, and support each other in domestic and public labour contexts (Bama, *Sangati* 72–75; Holmström xviii–xix). These cooperative practices exemplify what Rege terms “collective ethical praxis”, where labour becomes both a material necessity and a moral endeavour, producing solidarity, resilience, and a shared sense of agency (Rege 105–106). By emphasising relational rather than individualist forms of work, *Sangati* challenges narratives of isolated heroism, demonstrating that resistance is embedded in communal structures and everyday practice. Education and literacy intersect with labour to create further avenues of empowerment. Dalit women utilise storytelling, informal learning circles, and shared narratives as mechanisms to navigate economic constraints, contest social hierarchies, and assert ethical authority (Bama, *Sangati* 78–82; Rege 105; Guru 2553). These practices demonstrate that labour, knowledge, and collective agency are intertwined, reflecting a sophisticated understanding of intersectionality that situates survival, resistance, and moral reasoning within the same framework (Paik 46; Holmström xix).

Religious and institutional labour expectations compound these intersections. In *Sangati*, Dalit women are often assigned menial, ritualised, or morally coded tasks in religious institutions, which reproduce caste hierarchies and gendered power structures (Bama, *Sangati* 50–55; Mosse 215–16). Compliance with these expectations is monitored through moral surveillance and community scrutiny, demonstrating how disciplinary power operates at the intersection of caste, gender, and labour (Dahiya and Thakur b415; Rege 118). Women navigate these constraints strategically, balancing ethical compliance with subtle subversion, negotiation, and communal support (Bama, *Sangati* 85–90; Guru 2554). Labour also functions as a means of moral and social assertion. By demonstrating diligence, supporting communal initiatives, and sharing resources, Dalit women reclaim

authority over both their bodies and social roles, challenging assumptions of passivity or dependency (Bama, *Sangati* 36–40; Rege 107; Holmström xviii). This labour-centred agency exemplifies how structural oppression simultaneously produces sites of ethical intervention, communal identity, and resistance, reinforcing the relational dimensions of Dalit feminist epistemology.

Furthermore, Bama's narrative highlights the intersection of economic precarity and gendered vulnerability, illustrating that survival strategies must negotiate both material scarcity and social marginalisation (Bama, *Sangati* 90–95; Armengol 845). Women's economic cooperation, labour negotiation, and ethical reasoning are essential for navigating these dual pressures, revealing everyday practices as ethically informed responses to structural violence. This approach aligns with Rege and Guru's observations that Dalit women's agency is both practical and epistemic, produced through relational engagement with social hierarchies and material realities (Rege 108; Guru 2553). Finally, the intersectionality of caste, gender, and labour in *Sangati* underscores the ethical dimension of work. Labour is not merely survival; it is a site of moral reasoning, collective solidarity, and identity affirmation (Bama, *Sangati* 95–100; Holmström xix). By situating everyday labour within ethical, social, and relational frameworks, Bama presents a complex, multi-layered understanding of Dalit womanhood, in which oppression, resistance, and moral agency are inseparable.

6. CONCLUSION

Bama's *Sangati* offers a profound and nuanced portrayal of Dalit womanhood, foregrounding the interplay of caste, gender, labour, religion, and ethical agency in shaping the lives of marginalised women in Tamil Nadu. Across the text, Dalit women are depicted not merely as passive recipients of oppression but as agents of ethical resistance, communal solidarity, and moral reasoning, whose survival strategies reflect both resilience and political consciousness (Bama, *Sangati* 12–16; Rege 102–103). The narratives illustrate how oppression operates at multiple, intersecting levels—through structural caste hierarchies, gendered labour demands, moral and religious surveillance, and social invisibility—while simultaneously creating opportunities for collective empowerment and ethical intervention.

The thematic analysis reveals that collective resistance is central to Dalit women's agency. Women organise cooperative labour practices, share knowledge, and negotiate social and institutional expectations, thereby constructing communal spaces of solidarity that facilitate both survival and moral authority (Bama, *Sangati* 28–32, 72–75; Guru 2551–52). In these collective frameworks, agency is relational and ethically grounded, emphasising the interdependence of community, labour, and ethical praxis (Rege 105–106; Holmström xviii–xix). This approach challenges mainstream feminist paradigms that often valorise individual heroism, positioning Dalit women's everyday struggles as critical sites of epistemic and ethical production. Gendered violence, both overt and subtle, is a persistent feature of the social landscape in

Sangati. Dalit women navigate domestic exploitation, sexualized harassment, and institutionalised moral policing, employing strategies that are simultaneously pragmatic, ethical, and relational (Bama, *Sangati* 36–46, 62–68; Mosse 214–16). Survival emerges as a politically and morally informed practice, where women's choices are guided by considerations of communal well-being, personal safety, and ethical responsibility (Rege 107–108; Guru 2553–54). Through these everyday negotiations, Bama illustrates the ethical dimensions of resistance, highlighting that agency is enacted in subtle, persistent, and contextually grounded ways.

Religious institutions, while positioned as sites of moral authority, are depicted as mechanisms of discipline and moral surveillance that reinforce caste and gender hierarchies (Bama, *Sangati* 50–55, 56–60; Mosse 215–16). However, Bama also demonstrates that women exercise agency within these spaces through reinterpretation of religious norms, ethical negotiation, and subtle subversion, challenging institutional authority while preserving communal cohesion (Ruether 41–42; Holmström xix). This tension between control and resistance highlights the complex relationality of oppression and agency, illustrating that Dalit women's ethical authority emerges through lived experience, communal solidarity, and moral reasoning. The intersectionality of caste, gender, and labour underscores the multi-layered nature of oppression and the strategies employed to navigate it (Thakur 25, 90–95; Rege 103–104; Guru 2552). Labour is simultaneously a site of exploitation and a terrain for ethical assertion, identity formation, and collective empowerment. By foregrounding communal labour practices, cooperative survival strategies, and relational ethical reasoning, Bama positions everyday work as a critical site where structural subordination is challenged and transformed into collective resilience (Paik 46; Holmström xviii).

Finally, the interplay of silence, voice, and ethical resistance emphasizes the subtle but potent forms of Dalit feminist agency. Silence, imposed or chosen, serves as a strategic tool for reflection, survival, and ethical deliberation, while voice, enacted collectively through storytelling, dialogue, and communal knowledge-sharing, asserts both epistemic authority and moral critique (Bama, *Sangati* 56–60, 72–78; Rege 118–122). Ethical resistance emerges in the careful negotiation of when to speak, when to remain silent, and how to act in ways that preserve communal integrity while contesting structural oppression (Guru 2554; Holmström xix).

In conclusion, *Sangati* positions Dalit women as active agents of moral, social, and political transformation, whose everyday practices—labour, communal solidarity, ethical reflection, and narrative articulation—constitute resistance against intersecting structures of caste, gender, and institutional authority. Bama's work advances a relational and ethically informed understanding of Dalit womanhood, emphasising that agency is not only performative but deeply embedded in the lived experiences, collective strategies, and moral reasoning of women navigating oppression. The text thus serves as both literary documentation and critical intervention, offering a paradigm for analysing the intersection of

oppression, resistance, and ethical agency in marginalised communities. By synthesising collective resistance, survival strategies, institutional critique, and ethical reasoning, this study reaffirms that Dalit women's lives, as represented in *Sangati*, provide critical insights into the politics of everyday life, the ethics of solidarity, and the

epistemic authority of marginalised voices. These insights are invaluable for understanding the relational, moral, and political dimensions of Dalit feminist thought, demonstrating the continuing relevance of Bama's narratives for both literary scholarship and social theory...

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