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Dynamics of Gender Relationships in Ashapura Devi's *Subarnalata* and Bama's *Sangati*: A Comparative Study

Dr. V. Hema

Assistant Professor

Department of English, S.I.V.E.T. College, Chennai, India

Abstract

The husband-wife relationship constitutes a central component of the family structure and has undergone significant transformation over time. This paper examines the dynamics of man-woman relationships as portrayed in Ashapura Devi's *Subarnalata* and Bama's *Sangati*, two works emerging from distinct socio-cultural and historical contexts. While *Subarnalata* reflects the predicament of upper-caste Bengali women in a patriarchal household, *Sangati* presents the lived experiences of Dalit women subjected to caste and gender oppression. Both writers foreground women's suffering within male-dominated societies and expose how marriage functions as an institution that restricts women's autonomy. Despite belonging to different regions and communities, the protagonists in both texts engage in an un-

ending struggle to assert their unnamed identities. Through a comparative analysis, this paper highlights gender discrimination, marital subjugation, and the quest for selfhood as common thematic concerns.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Marriage, Gender Discrimination, Dalit Feminism, Identity, Subaltern Women

Introduction

The family system in India has undergone significant social transformations, profoundly influencing familial structures and man-woman relationships in the last few decades. These transformations have altered traditional interactions within the family, particularly the husband-wife relationship, which remains the corner stone of the domestic unit. From a sociological perspective, the role of women has undergone a gradual shift due to increasing awareness, education, and movements for women's emancipation. Literature has played a crucial role in reflecting and questioning these changes by portraying women's experiences and inner struggles and evolving identities. Through such representations, literary texts not only mirror social realities but also question entrenched patriarchal norms that govern gender relations within the family. As Atma Ram observes, literature seeks "to unravel the inner mystery of life, to discover the energy that nourishes the spirit and to discard pettiness, horror and hypocrisy of everyday life" (Halprin 133). Women writers, in particular, focus on both the psychological and social dimensions of female existence, revealing the silent oppression embedded within patriarchal norms.

Ashapura Devi's *Subarnalata*

Ashapura Devi's *Subarnalata*, the second novel in her celebrated trilogy, explores the theme of man-woman relationships within a rigid patriarchal framework. The novel won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1965, followed by the prestigious Jnanpith Award, underscoring its literary significance. Devi

critiques a society that privileges male freedom while denying women autonomy, portraying marriage as the ultimate destiny imposed upon women. In traditional Indian society, a female child is raised under strict parental control, conditioned to believe that marriage is her ultimate goal. Simone de Beauvoir aptly remarks, “Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society” (*The Second Sex* 452). Women are expected to obey the rules laid down by fathers, husbands, and in-laws, reinforcing their subordinate position.

Ashapura Devi poignantly exposes the rigid gender norms governing women’s lives in *Subarnalata*, where freedom of movement and speech is strictly denied to women within the domestic sphere. While men are permitted unrestricted access to the public world, women are confined to the private space of the home and subjected to surveillance and silence. They are discouraged from opening doors or engaging directly in conversation with men, including their own male relatives, and are expected to maintain physical and symbolic barriers, such as drawn curtains, to reinforce their seclusion. Even basic concerns related to health and hygiene are dismissed as luxuries, as women are not allowed to question or protest against their conditions. *Subarnalata*’s advocacy for proper sanitation in the labour room is met with resistance, reflecting a society unwilling to acknowledge women’s bodily needs or grant them agency. Thus, the novel underscores how women are reduced to functional roles — primarily reproduction — while being systematically deprived of dignity, self-respect, and autonomy within a male-dominated social order.

Subarnalata is the story of a particular time whose shadow still hovers over our social system. The protagonist is a symbol of the helpless cry of an imprisoned soul. She satisfies her husband in all the time but her husband cannot fulfil even her mere desire. As Wollstonecraft writes:

Women are told from their infancy and taught by the example of their mothers that a little knowledge of human weakness justly termed cunning, softness of temper, outward obedience and scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain from them the protection of man: and should they be beautiful, everything else is needless for, at least twenty years of their lives. (Wollstonecraft 586)

Subarnalata is married at the tender age of nine, reflecting the customary practices of her time. Her life is confined to domestic spaces — the kitchen, bedroom, and inner courtyard — where she is expected to fulfil desires of all the family members. She becomes the mother of ten children, her identity reduced to that of a silent caregiver. Her desire for ‘a veranda’ symbolizes her yearning for freedom and connection with the outside world, yet even this modest wish is dismissed as unreasonable. Though her husband wants to satisfy his wife, only obstacle is his own mother Muktokeshi, “Your wife wants a Veranda? Give in to her now, my son and she’ll ask for the moon” (*Subarnalata* 10). Thus, Subarnalata’s life epitomizes the imprisonment of women within domestic boundaries.

Bama’s *Sangati*

Bama’s *Sangati* presents a starkly different yet equally oppressive reality — that of Dalit women subjected to both gender and caste discrimination. The novel exposes how Dalit girls are denied childhood joys and burdened with responsibilities from an early age. They are expected to care for siblings, assist mothers, and engage in wage labour, leaving little room for education or play. Gender games play as effective tools to achieve this goal. As a young girl, Bama learns that the boys have all the rights to play any role in the games. The games like Kabadi and marbles are meant for boys whereas girls play games like cooking, getting married and other domestic matters.

*Even when we played “mothers and fathers”, we always had to serve the mud ‘rice’ to the boys first. They used to pull us by the hair and hit us says, ‘what sort of food is this di, without salt or anything!’ (*Sangati* 31)*

Bama vividly portrays the physical violence inflicted upon women by fathers, brothers, and husbands. Dalit women work alongside men in the fields, yet after returning home, they must shoulder domestic chores while men take rest. Gender bias is ingrained even in childhood games, reinforcing male dominance and female subservience. As Bama notes, boys are considered permanent members of the family, while girls are treated as temporary, destined for marriage and departure. The restrictions are thrust upon the names of tradition, custom and culture. Dalit girls are hardly enjoying their childhood. The works have been allotted to them as they have to take care of younger siblings and help the mother when she delivers a baby. Maikkanni is one such girl who should take care of the new born baby. *Sangati* deals with several generations of woman from child to old who are suffered by physical violence like lynching, whipping and canning that they are suffered by their men. Bama realistically explores the psychological stress and strains of women. Unlike Subarnalata's silent endurance, *Sangati* emphasizes resistance and collective awakening. Bama calls for social change by urging women to question oppressive traditions and assert their rights.

Comparative Analysis

Although *Subarnalata* and *Sangati* emerge from different social milieus — upper-caste Bengali society and Dalit Tamil community respectively — both novels reveal the pervasive nature of patriarchy. Marriage serves as a mechanism of control, reducing women to objects of convenience and reproduction. Subarnalata is imprisoned within the domestic sphere, while Dalit women in *Sangati* face exploitation both inside and outside the home. Ashapura Devi highlights the psychological suffocation of women trapped within tradition, whereas Bama foregrounds physical violence and collective resistance. Despite these differences, both protagonists symbolize the “bonded existence” of women in a male-dominated society, struggling to establish an identity beyond prescribed roles.

Conclusion

The comparative study of *Subarnalata* and *Sangati* reveals that women's oppression transcends class and caste boundaries, manifesting in varied yet interconnected forms. Both Ashapura Devi and Bama expose the deep-rooted patriarchal structures that deny women freedom, dignity, and self-hood. While *Subarnalata* underscores silent suffering within domestic confines, *Sangati* articulates protest and resistance. Together, these texts contribute significantly to feminist discourse by amplifying women's voices and challenging societal norms that perpetuate gender inequality.

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