

## **Dynamics of Gender and Health in Bama's *Sangati* and Kadeeja Mumtas' *Barsa***

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### **ABSTRACT**

Gender and health are two separate disciplines having a strong connection with each other. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), gender is a core social determinant of health and health inequalities. These health inequalities are associated with the lifestyle, accessibility and care provided to men and women. In most Indian societies, women are perceived as child-bearers, caregivers having no say in the communities they live in. Moreover they have been shoved into margins and an indifferent attitude is formed for them. From the viewpoint of gender, class or ethnic disparities women in India face a multitude of health and hygiene problems. This marginalization causes inequitable access to essential human needs such as water, proper health and sanitary facilities. Consequently women have poorer health than men. Another form in which women are suppressed and oppressed are sexual harassment, violence, physical abuse, occupational and environmental hazards due to which they not only suffer from physiological problems but it also affects their mental health like psychological stress and strain. These health issues deteriorate their well-being. Due to casteism prevalent in our society the so-called power holders exploit Dalit women treating them as lower than humans and 'other'. Bama's *Sangati* is a look at the part of the lives of those Paraiya women. Kadeeja Mumtas' novel *Barsa* is a commentary on the position of women in Muslim society focusing on the illegal practices like circumcision. This paper aims to examine the issues which the Tamil Christian Dalit women and Muslim women face in terms of health and sexuality as discussed in Bama's *Sangati* and Kadeeja Mumtas' *Barsa* through depicting a critique of several generations of women.

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## Introduction

Works in translation are always meant to gather wider readership of the work. Bishara M. in his paper titled, “A Feminist Reading on Khadeeja Mumtaz’s Barsa presents the practices related to marriage and sexuality in the society which subjugate women whereas Rajesh V. Nair discussed the malayali diasporic representation of displacement and memory in the Gulf in his chapter titled, “Displacement and Memory in Benyamin’s Aadujeevitham and Khadeeja Mumtaz’s Barsa”. In the article, “The Many Riches of Human Flourishing: On the Veiled Agent in Veil Narratives” Muneer Aram Kuzhiyan examines about the trope of unveiling with Agency. Another article, “Images of Cultural Ambivalence and Double Consciousness in the novel Barsa depicts the author’s inner juggling towards the Muslim society at large. Similarly, many researchers, academicians have extensively worked on Bama’s Sangati. In the paper titled, “The Story of Oppressed Dalit Women” Sanjay Kumar analyzes the novel as a Dalit feminist narrative carrying autobiographical elements. Kanwar Pal Singh in his paper titled, “Bama’s Sangati: A Traumatic Chain of Gender Discrimination” which examines the events of gender discrimination resulting into subjugation and marginalization of Dalit women. Elements of isolation, humiliation in context to subaltern study of the novel are looked at by Atish Chakraborty. “A Marxist Reading of Bama’s Sangati” is also done by Abhijith M.S. Yogisha and Nagendra Kumar explored the life condition of Dalit females as they are caught in the vortex of caste, gender and class in the paper entitled, “Stepping out of the ‘Differences’: Discerning the Dalit Female Standpoint in Bama’s Sangati published in Sage Journal. After reviewing the literature I found that numerous research papers, chapters and articles are being written on both the novels but this paper attempts to look at the select works from the perspective of how gender and health are interconnected.

The distinction between gender and sex is that sex is a biological and physiological construct while gender is a social construct. The duties, actions, and identities that come with being male or female in society and culture are collectively referred to as gender. The anatomical and physiological distinctions between the bodies of men and women are referred to as "sex." Society shapes gender of a person but sex is an independent entity i.e. whatever sexual orientation a human being is born with cannot be predicted. We give prime importance to

gender of a person rather than sex of a person which causes deterioration in a person's well-being as gender determines roles in society which impact health especially women due to gender inequality. The stereotyping of gendered roles functions so deeply that it influences their accessibility to hygiene, sanitation and healthcare amenities. According to WHO, "Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." Women belonging to several communities across the globe are not in a healthy state of mind and body because they have been discriminated on the basis of gender, caste, class and religion. Not just in the Indian society but in most societies differentials are present in gender roles, norms and in power relations as a result women and girls face high risks of malnutrition, mental health issues amongst others. In the case of women, their gender leaves them with constrained choices as per the societal norms.

In Bama's *Sangati*, originally written in Tamil in 1994 and translated by Laxmi Holmstrom in 2005 into English. She vividly recounts the life experiences of the women of Paraiya Dalit Christian community. The novel presents discrimination in a very rigid form which deprives paraiya women from the essential needs of survival- proper food and clothing to the body which is itself a matter of hygiene. Bama says in the first chapter of *Sangati* about her Paati (grandmother) that due to belonging to lower caste, women were not allowed to wear chattai (sari-blouse). She says, "My Periamma didn't wear a chattai either." (Bama 7) Women are the most neglected lot despite working equally to men. The oppression and hardships women have to face is quadruple times because women are considered as child bearing machines which is evident from the words of Bama's grandmother, "We have to labor in the fields as hard as men do...struggle to bear and raise our children...If you are born into this world, it is best you were born a man...We only toil in the fields and in the home until our very vaginas shrivel."(Bama 7) It is the ill fate of the girl child that she is never the priority of her parents over a boy child. This reminds me of Premchand's famous novel *Nirmala* in which the protagonist's mother has similar views, "Boys were the oxen pulling the plough and therefore the foundation of home and family. They had the first right to the best food...whatever was left over was given to the daughters." (Premchand) According to the report by WHO, Women, infants, children, and adolescents are at particular risk of malnutrition. There are several factors which lead to the malnutrition of the girl child right from their birth. Their needs are not catered by anyone in the family and when they grew up to their womanhood, it results in several health issues. Bama retorts in the novel:

They never let the boy babies cry. If a boy baby cries, he is instantly picked up and given milk...A boy is breast-fed longer. With girls, they wean them quickly...If the boy catches an illness or a fever, they will run around and nurse them with greatest care. If it's a girl, they will do it half-heartedly. (Bama 7)

Proper nutritious food is also not in the fate of a girl child. She is meant only for toiling and tormenting the entire life as Bama remarks- "The healthy diet is offered to the boy first..." She tells about her own grandmother-"If she bought mangoes, we only get the skin...we picked up and ate the leftover skin." (Bama 7) The mortality rate of women is higher in comparison to men not only because of inadequate medical facilities but also they have to succumb their lives to the unquenchable thirst of man's lust. A duty which women were obliged to do is to satisfy the desires of their husbands who are equivalent to monsters. The state of women is pitiful. One such horrible happening that Paati tells, "What sort of life did she have married to him? Poor wretch, she had seven, eight babies in a row and then closed her eyes... Because the man was crazy with lust...he wanted her every single day...When she refused, he practically broke her in half."(Bama 10) Women don't get proper food or drink. They rarely go to hospitals and have to deliver their children at home in a makeshift way and they lose their lives during childbirth or soon after.

The girl child is also vulnerable to sexual harassment and physical abuse. The evil male gaze of mankind is always on a woman. They are lurking in every nook and corner to grope young girls and molest them. Bama mentions it being faced by the tender age girls in the novel- "When my granddaughter Paralokam went to pull up grass for the cow, the owner of the fields said he would lift the bundle on to her head. That was his excuse for squeezing her breasts, the barbarian." (Bama 12) Such incidents cause mental health issues like depression, anxiety, stress disorders and physical effects as well.

The half of the population enjoys no better position in the household. She is merely a toy in the hands of the 'man of the house' by bearing the domestic violence meted out to her and it has become normalized to an extent that it is embedded in their folk songs and tales as if it is a part and parcel of their lives. The suffering dalits faced in their everyday lives force them to transcend their plight through songs. The song says that the husband beats her wife so much even though she was carrying a child just because she made a curry of crabs and ate it before her husband came home for his meal. She also recounts a dreadful sight she came across which was etched on her mind so strongly that it almost shook her to the core. She describes:

I could hear Thayeri weeping. As I came closer and saw what was going on, my eyes filled with tears. Thayeri's husband was beating her up again and again with the belt from his waist. Everywhere the strap

fell on her light skin, there were bright weals...the way he flung her down and was treading on her and beating her, a great shudder passes through me. (Bama 42)

The husband is the owner of his wife's body and mind. He can do anything he feels like to his wife. The woman has no authority on her body. Thaayi's husband yelled, "She's my wife, I can beat her or kill her if I wish." (Bama 42) Another incident Bama narrates which is present in the novel, "Suddenly a woman thudded past us, running as fast as she could. She was pregnant, besides. Right behind her, her husband came chasing, a stick of firewood in his hand...he dragged her along by the hair...her whole stomach dragged on the earth as he pulled her long." (Bama 62) Women suffer from mental health too. Therefore, they are possessed by pey. Bama opines the reason behind this:

I thought about the fact that only women—and Dalit women in particular—become possessed...Even if a woman's body is wracked with pain, the husband is bothered only with his own satisfaction. Women are overwhelmed and crushed by their own disgust, boredom and exhaustion, because of all this. The stronger ones somehow manage to survive all this. The ones who don't have the mental strength are totally oppressed; they succumb to mental ill-health and act as if they are possessed by peys. (Bama 59)

Unintended pregnancy is also a problem faced by women. Early marriage leave women unprotected to the complications of early and excessive child bearing. Chapter seven mentions likewise, "But soon her father became friendly with another woman...He comes home whenever he likes it...leaving her mother with a child in her belly every time. Now she's pregnant for the seventh time." (Bama 69) Women's lives are deprived of hygiene and proper sanitation facilities which is reflected in Maikkani's experience, "I went under a tree, and wiped myself with a stone." (Bama 73) Open defecation is risky for children's nutrition and the way in which Maikanni cleaned herself could also cause infection.

Another select novel of this paper is *Barsa* (2007) by Malayalam author Kadeeja Mumtas translated into English by K M Sherrif. It is the first Malayalam novel set in Saudi Arabia which details the life of Indian immigrants in the Gulf. The author of the novel is Sabitha who stayed in the holy city of Mecca serving as a practicing physician in a Saudi Arabian hospital for seven years from Kerala along with her husband Rasheed who is also a doctor. Sabitha has converted to Islam for her marriage. The novel is a powerful comment on religion, gender and patriarchy as the title *Barsa* is an Arabic word which means the one who does not veil her face representing a free-spirited child. One who asks questions and the one who does not bow her head. The term used by Fathima Mernisi in her work *Women and Islam*.

Through this novel Khadeeja Mumtaz strives for the eliminations of all practices that regard women's needs as secondary to men's and ultimately, it emphasizes a need for change in male attitude towards women in the Islamic world. The articulation of the problems these women are juggling with and their hopes of a space of equality, respect and mutual understanding instead of violence and coercion are brought to light in the novel through Sabitha. Women are only looked at as objects of sexual gratification. Girls and women are disproportionately impacted by gender inequality. They are subjected to harmful practices and pressure since they have less status and influence over decisions pertaining to their bodies, personal relationships, families, and communities. This is the reason the housemaids in Saudi Arabia called as Khaddama take the precautionary measures of inserting intrauterine devices. A fellow doctor tells Sabitha,

A pregnancy test and, if married, a pelvic examination—that is what we have to do for them...Arabs like them; they have clean and pleasant faces. Most of them come here after inserting Copper-T or some other implants. They are well aware of the dangers of working here...Even before these women have learnt the language after they arrive here, the men start making demands through gestures—at night don't close the door to the room. If the women don't obey they are subjected to physical abuse...an Indonesian maid who jumped out of a window to escape the amorous advances of her employer. (Mumtas 19)

Women are treated as sex slaves. But unfortunately they cannot raise their voice and could say 'No'. They are meant to silently submit their bodies to the needs of their husbands. They are not given choices and there is no such habit of asking for consent. Accordingly, they bear the pain and suffering caused due to it. (Mumtas 20) J.S. Mill rightly states in his seminal work *The Subjection of Woman*, "Marriage is the only actual bondage known to our law. There are no longer any legal slaves except the mistress of every house." (Mill 47) Sabitha tells the experience of Waheeda, a fellow doctor with her, "She did not enjoy her husband's visits. (Mumtas 20) Waheeda recounts, "The day after he arrives, I get a urinary infection. That's why I really don't look forward to his visit...The compromises we have to make! I am happy living alone. I don't have to adjust to anyone" (Mumtas 20) The orthodox beliefs and selfishness of all men are same. In their opinion a woman's life revolves around a man. She has no wishes and desires of her own. It can't be altered with the profession a man practices and doctor Hashim is one such example. Dr. Hashim said, "Docthura, she is a khaddama, a maid servant. Her husband is not here. Women should dress up only to please their husbands..." It was his way of establishing that women were nothing but objects of pleasure for their husbands." Sabitha replied, "Women dress up not only to attract the attention of their husbands but also for themselves." (Mumtas 79)

Sabitha is astounded after seeing the submissive state of women. They have no say and are supposed to act as slaves according to the wishes of their masters cum husbands. “It turned out that it was their first night. He had bundled her up from their nuptial bed and had brought her to the hospital to allay his fears...Docthora my doubt is this, shouldn't there be bleeding the first time? That didn't happen. You examine her and tell me the reason.” (Mumtas 85) The well-being of the women is an unthinkable idea. The health-related beliefs and behaviours, like other social practices that women and men engage in, are a means for demonstrating femininities and masculinities. Barsa presents such beliefs of Islam. Sabitha is critical of such beliefs and practices. Men are busy in bringing new wives and impregnating them to satiate their lustful needs. They have simply no concern for their wives and an indifferent kind of attitude towards them. Women usually burn in the fire of their false manliness. Mumtas writes, “Arabs were of the conviction that having sex profusely was a sign of manhood. The number of children they had was proof of their virility. Kids were their prized possessions.” (Mumtas 104) Sabitha recounts the plight of Arab women in chapter twelve of the novel, “Sometimes, Arab women with three children would come to the OP for “infertility treatment” in case the fourth pregnancy was delayed a little. “My husband asks me why I am not getting pregnant. If I don't get pregnant soon, he says he'll marry again. Docthora, please give me some treatment so that I become pregnant soon.” (Mumtas 104) The fatal consequences faced by women in the fear of abandonment by their husbands. They willingly writhe in pain being on the verge of death. “Even after three or four successive caesarean sections, women wouldn't agree to a sterilisation. What good was a woman's body if it could not produce babies? Their men would go looking for other fertile women. A pregnant woman who had already had two caesarean sections would prefer to wait it out in her house till she was in severe labour, so that she could avoid another caesarean section and have a normal delivery.” (Mumtas 105) “I've been much relieved since her arrival, especially at night. Otherwise every night is a problem for me.” (Mumtas 105)

Research on health can thus demonstrate how the ways that different societies (historically and cross-culturally) create differential life chances and opportunities for men and women gets written on people's bodies. (Annandale and Hunt) The practice of circumcision in Muslim community is risky. Female circumcision-also commonly known as female genital mutilation or female genital cutting-is highly prevalent in Sudan. (Islam 71) Strong social pressure maintains high levels of circumcision, which is believed to promote premarital chastity among

women. They were manipulated in the powerful influence of tradition leaving them no alternative other than accepting circumcision as a necessary, and even natural, part of life, and adopt the rationales given for its existence. Sabitha tells about the forced norms of women's sexuality in the text:

Attending to the delivery of a Sudanese woman would have undergone female circumcision in their childhood...But when a woman's labia, an important body part bestowed by nature along with the flower-like clitoris was cruelly cut off by a crude instrument by traditional barbers, the logic behind it was hard to understand. It just seemed to be an excuse to forcefully suppress women's sexuality. Cutting of parts essential for wholesome sexual fulfillment seemed to be an extremely cruel form of sexual mutilation. (Mumtas 109)

She further throws light on the adverse effects of female genital mutilation, "Circumcision narrowed the birthing passage unnaturally...At the time of delivery this portion would have to be cut in the middle and flapped back to allow the baby to slide out...the narrow birthing passage posed great difficulties in identifying injuries caused during childbirth." (Mumtas 109) According to the WHO, "The practice has no health benefits for girls and women and cause severe bleeding and problems urinating, and later cysts, infections, as well as complications in childbirth and increased risk of newborn deaths. The practice of FGM is recognized internationally as a violation of the human rights of girls and women. This practice is continued to provide enjoyment to men during sexual activity as a nurse tells Sabitha, "It ensured that even after umpteen pregnancies the passage remained tight, guaranteeing everlasting happiness to men. Doesn't matter if the women were not getting any satisfaction, the men's satisfaction was guaranteed." (Mumtas 110) She narrates an incident of an uncircumcised Sudanese woman's delivery to the protagonist, "The Sudanese husband had already informed his fellow countryman (Dr. Abbas) to do the needful during the delivery...They witnessed the doctor injecting xylocaine and performing the cruel act as he was instructed to...The husband was acting on the selfish thought that he should not forgo something his countrymen enjoyed." (Mumtas 110) The American author Bell Hooks comments on female submissiveness through silence, "Within feminist circles, silence is often seen as the sexist "right speech of womanhood"—the sign of woman's submission to patriarchal authority." (Hooks 6) It is evident from the narrated incident that the Sudanese woman has to submit before her husband at the cost of her health. The nurse pitifully tells further, "What was amazing was that his wife, a graduate, had agreed to the surgery which doubled the discomforts of delivery...She had to bow down to the selfishness of her modern husband and comply with the centuries-old barbaric practice." (Mumtas 110) Sabitha poses a question to herself and to the readers leaving them



ponder over it after listening about women predicament since ages, “Was the female body an object to be sculpted to perfection for a man’s requirements?” (Mumtas 110) This hegemonic masculinity leaves no stone unturned for the perpetuation of gender inequality whether physically, socially, financially and culturally.

To conclude, it seems to me that both the novelist Bama and Kadeeja Mumtas are revolutionaries in their respective domain by exposing gender inequality thus highlighting the immense trouble women have been into because of masculine hegemony specifically their husbands. The texts discussed in the present paper throws light on the relationship between gender and health and how gender inequality affects women’s health around the world. Dalit feminine plight openly comes out through Bama’s Sangati and the predicament of Muslim women is observed through Barsa.

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