

A DISCOURSE ON CASTE CLASHES AMONG DALITS IN BAMA'S VANMAM (VENDETTA)

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ABSTRACT

Dalit Literature is a literature of protest, pain and agony. Its beginning can be traced back to the undocumented oral folklore and tales of the past decades. Most of the Dalit Literature is the voice of the voiceless in the caste-rooted Indian society. A commendable effort has been made by the Dalit writers in India. Bama is one a celebrated dalit woman writer in Tamilnadu. Vanmam (2002) is the third novel of Bama which brings out the issue of caste and instigated animosity by the upper-caste Naickers between the two castes within Dalits-Pallars and Parayars at Kandampatti village in Tamilnadu. The loss on both sides makes them understand the role of the upper castes and state machinery, especially the police in perpetuating their animosity. Towards the end of the novel the sub-castes of Dalits put an end to their Vendetta. Now they are united. They went for Panchayat polls united and captured power for the very first time from the entrenched uppercaste leadership. Since then they lived together in mutual tolerance and friendship. The novel mirrors inter caste rivalry in Dalit communities in India in general and in Kandampatti village in particular. My paper aims at the caste clashes among the Dalits and how they are used by the uppercaste people in promoting the animosity among themselves.

Key words: Dalit literature, Vanmam (Vendetta), Caste, Pallars and Parayars, Bama

Bama is the pen name that doesn't have any particular meaning except for a rejection of her original Christian-Muslim name. She is one of the Dalit women writers, who has been actively involving in social issues, particularly Dalit issues in India. This novel is differentiated from her earlier novels as it focuses the involvement of the church and Christianity which empowered the Parayars community towards the rational thinking. Bama retains her critique of casteism in the church and also portrayed the Dalits as more assertive in this novel than the earlier ones.

In Indian writings in English, the last decade of the 20th century witnessed the emergence of highly talented Dalit writers who explore the miseries and misfortunes of their own

communities with utmost commitment. Among the contemporary Dalit writers, Bama, the nun- turned social activist has carved a niche for herself as a powerful voice of the voiceless underdogs. Bama in her popular autobiographical novel *Karukku* (1992), records the harrowing experiences she has undergone as a woman as well as a Dalit nun. What is the most appalling in the work is her startling revelation of discrimination in the Church and the institutions, a subject hitherto unexplored. Her other major works are *Sangati* (1994) and *Kusumbukkaran* (1996). Bama's *Vanmam* (meaning vendetta) translated into English by Malini Seshadri, strikes a chord in Dalit writing. Unlike her earlier works, many of the Dalit writings, in *Vanmam*, Bama instead of blowing up the agonies and sufferings of the downtrodden, she loudly raises her voice and vehemently asserts the need for the unity and solidarity of the suppressed for a better future.

Bama's *Vanmam* (Vendetta), which first appeared in Tamil in 2002, is not the usual novel of atrocities against Dalits, though atrocities are depicted, particularly the brutality of the police against women when they cannot vent their rage on the absconding men. But rather than focus on violence, it strikes at the heart of one of the most problematic aspects of Dalit identity: the enmity that frequently exists among different Dalit castes themselves. The protagonists here are two Dalit castes, Parayars and Pallars, in kandampatti village of Tamilnadu. The Parayars are Roman Catholics and the Pallars are Hindu, identifying themselves as DKVs or Devendra Kula Vanniyars. The Parayars' Christianity influences them to the extent that they are on the one hand more assertive, and on the other hand appear more ready than the Pallars to talk of humanity, forgiveness and compromise. The Pallars are portrayed as the victims of Hindu discrimination and caste feeling which make them susceptible to being used by Naickers, the dominant caste.

The other large Dalit community, the Chakkuliyars, appear only by name; they are not portrayed in all the events that are depicted. The Naickers appear occasionally, but they almost never directly confront the often assertive Parayars. The Naickers stoke the fires of conflict and try to provoke the Pallars into action. In a way, they are the promoter of quarrels. Bama makes it clear that it is the very structure of caste, which inherently involves hierarchy and enmity that lays the ground for the vendetta depicted in the novel. In novel Parayars and Pallars viciously and suicidally attack each other. The heroes of the story appear to be the young, educated Parayar youth. They are depicted in all their mischievousness and haughtiness. Jayaraju, who begins as arrogant with his airs of cleanliness and scorn for the dirt and smell of the Dalit street, but is drawn in as a leader of an active youth association; Anthony, full of tricks but concerned for justice; and many others. Neither Jayaraju nor Anthony is mentioned much in the latter half of the book, and references are mainly to the youth as a group, both among Parayars and Pallars.

There are important differences between these two groups. The Pallars are less educated, and consequently more bitter and susceptible to being manipulated. They are depicted as the main

aggressors. In a sense that this is a common phenomenon in almost all regions of India, there are two main Dalit castes, often at odds. The Parayars like Malas in Andhra Pradesh, Mahars in Maharashtra and the Chamars across north India who have got better education and employment and have also taken active role in liberation movements and dalit politics. They have been perhaps more likely to reject Hinduism. Today, we see the other large castes — Pallars, Madigas, Matangas, Valmikiis — asserting themselves as opposed the first group, very often accepting a strong Hindu identity. It is a clear indication for the Naickers community that the dalits are reunited. Having gone through the novel, it shows that the both dalit groups realized that they should end their suffering and reap the fruits of unity. Moreover, the both Parayars and Pallars decided to elect a candidate from their community unanimously and they won.

In *Vanmam*, the plot moves around two Dalit castes in a village called Kandampatti in Tamil Nadu which may be considered a microcosm of the Indian subcontinent. It is a village surrounded by beautiful mountains where people of different communities live for generations. The Parayars of the village are Christians and their Church is in the western part of the village. Next to the Parayar streets are the streets of Pallars who are also Dalits, but Hindus. Away from the Dalit streets are the streets of Naickers, Nadars, Thevars and Chettiars. Agricultural land owned by the landlords is in the western part of the village and therefore both Parayars and Pallars have to walk through the streets of the upper class to reach the fields.

In Kandampatti village, both the Parayars and the Pallars are the labourers, working hard from morning to evening in the fields of the landlords and they are destined to lead a pitiable existence with the husk thrown by them. In spite of their hard labour, they have to remain half-fed with porridge. While commenting on the diligence of Parayars, Bama writers,

“The Parayars toiled hard day and night to turn even barren land into fertile fields” (6).

Unfortunately, their hard labour does not assure them of ample food. The poor students of the village, during vacation, would play in the ponds and come back in the afternoon.

“Sometimes they would come home hungry after their bath and look eagerly into the kanji pot. But it would be empty because their younger brothers and sisters would have finished off the food” (45).

Worse than this that they would go for menial jobs with the empty stomach.

Besides starvation they have to live in constant fear of the atrocities of the landlords and the communal clashes which may erupt any time. While delineating the precarious existence of

the Dalit, Bama writes, “What a life . . . even a dog’s life would be better . . . can’t live and can’t die either . . .” (113). The vendetta between the Parayars and Pallars does not have a legitimate reason and its source is not clearly known. The earliest instance of violence in the village is the killing of a Pallar by a Parayan named Mannangati. Mannangati enjoyed certain privileges in the village which irked the Pallars who out of envy dragged him to a brawl and tried to stab him. But Mannagatti got hold of the knife and ripped out the guts of a Pallar. Yet the Parayas and Pallars got along well.

In another occasion, Marrasu, a Parayar and Karuppuswamy, a Pallar, got into a quarrel when both were involved in watering the farms of Naicker. Following the instigation of the landlord who encouraged him “to be aggressive and promised to take care of everything” (8). Karuppuswamy killed Marrasu. These are isolated incidents which do not affect the cordial relationship between the Parayas and Pallars for some period and they celebrated festivals together and took part in common festivities, functions and programmes.

Vanmam shows how Dalits have internalised the given social system of segregation based on caste. If Parayars and Pallars are outcastes in the eyes of Naickers, Odaiyars, Chettiars, Naidus and Nadars; Pallars and Paraiyars treat each other as outcastes within their own social habitat. While Parayars have embraced Christianity, Pallars remain within the Hindufold. This fact is played up by Naickers and other upper castes to keep the two Dalit communities divided. This results in Paraiyars and Pallars getting into arguments and strifes over whose lands should be watered first. While Paraiyars and Pallars remain landless, they go to the extent of killing each other over an argument over whose landlord's lands are irrigated better. The novel, in fact, opens with an account of murder of a Paraiyar farmhand, Mariyasu at the hands of Karuppusami, a Pallar farmhand, over distribution of water to their respective master's lands. As Karuppusami's master protects him, he gets away with Marrasu's murder and surreptitious disposal of his body.

In this way, the enmity between the two communities is nurtured and kept alive by Naickers.

“God knows when we, Paraiyars and Pallars, would stand united” exclaims a Paraiyar woman, Mekelamma.” (27).

Mekelamma's lament becomes the central refrain of the novel. One incident leads to the other. If a member from the Pallar community becomes the aggressor in one incident, a Paraiyar becomes the aggressor in another. The upper caste landlords stoke the fire of hatred and prejudice, call in the police and settle scores with the Paraiyars. The novel is written from the Paraiyar's point of view although an objective analysis is undertaken to demonstrate that Pallars are used by Naickers for their own political gain.

In the mean time, some of the educated youths of Parayar streets formed the “Khazani Arts Troup” and conducted various cultural events. These developments on the Parayar street make the Naickers grow jealous and they accused the church for encouraging the Parayars.

“ . . . They belong to the Church, they get lots of support. Also, many of them are now educated” (2).

Strengthened by the successful conduct of cultural programmes, the Dalit youngsters wanted to install a statue of Ambedkar, the Messiah of the Dalits. Further, they desired the involvement of all Dalit groups in the venture. The Pallars donated Rs. 1,000/- for the statue, which was unveiled in a colourful function. The solidarity in organizing the programme and the speeches made on the occasion infuriated the landlords who conspired to annihilate the unity of the downtrodden. Incited and instigated by the Naickers, some of the Pallars, who have not realized the evil intentions of Naickers, demanded to return the money donated for the Ambedkar’s statue. The comfortable life of the Parayars and Pallars faced a serious of setbacks over the issue of putting up a flag pole near the statue of Ambedkar. Violence erupted when a wire tied to the pole was cut by a Parayar young man. Instead of pacifying the landlords, they instigated the Pallars by saying,

“How arrogant they are to lay a hand on the wire you people have put there. Don’t let them get away with this. It’s either you or them now” (80).

In the violence that followed, innocent people from both sides were mercilessly butchered and houses and belongings were destroyed. The worst affected by the violence were Parayars who could not get support either from the Government or from the Church, whereas the Pallars enjoyed the favours of the landlords and the police. The Paraya men dispersed to different places out of fear. Under the guise of searching for men, police “enter the house of Parayas and talk vulgarly to the women and even misbehaved with them” (88). The women were dragged to street and they were beaten up brutally, “with no regard even for the infant and the aged, they kept on swirling their lathis down hard again and again” (89). They got blown everywhere in their bodies. “All the women had swellings and black bruises all over their bodies as the blood clotted and congealed under the blows” (89). The Parayar women were more scared of the police than of the riots. The women who were taken to the police station were subjected to severe torture and abuses. Chellakili, a pregnant Parayar woman was kicked in the lower belly by a policeman with his boot.

“Chellakili curled up and collapsed on the floor of the cell. As she lay there on the floor of that police lock-up, she felt a sharp pain in her belly . . . and had an abortion right there” (86).

Kandampatti was caught in the grip of fear. The following year the Parayars had to skip Christmas celebration. However, during the Easter festivities violence broke out in the village. The loss of lives, oblique poverty and tormenting experiences of violence make the villagers brood over the destruction nature of vendetta which makes them realize that nothing can be achieved through violence. They could not harvest anything but the loss of a few innocent lives, untold miseries and misfortunes. For the upper class Naickers’

“the news that the Parayar street had become a wasteland was as sweet as the sweet of nectar” (122).

When the murder of a Paraya came to trial in the Court of Law there evolved a common notion of peace between the two communities. Jayaraju, an educated Parayar young man, declared in public,

“we were just beginning to progress slowly and now these murders and court cases and police raids . . . all over people scattered about, studies ruined, not even able to attend Church . . . how long can we go on like this? (126).

The two groups resumed discussion which led them to compromise. They unanimously declare,

“After all, life is short. We work, we eat . . . we die. Why take on unnecessary problems?” (129).

When the upper class people heard of a peace agreement, they mocked and ridiculed both Pallars and Parayars.

“What sort of fellows are these? After so much killing . . . so much wandering around like refugees . . . they are supposed to be uniting again. Shameless fellows!” (132).

In fact, the upper class people are upset over the unity of the subaltern as they are quite sure that their domination will be questioned.

Bama has quite an optimistic vision of a very bright future for the Dalits. She finds a zest for life, courage of the Dalits and she is astonished at the resilience of the Dalit women, in particular. There is a burning desire to develop and a thirst for knowledge prevails among the Dalit youths. When the men were hiding to avoid arrest, the Paraya women stayed indoors. They carried on the routine work and withstood police brutality and threats.

“Though misfortunes and problems continued to pile up, the women faced them all resourcefully” (123).

There is yet another incident in the novel where the Dalit women themselves received the corpse of three persons killed in the violence and buried them.

“The women gathered together, took the bodies in the cart to the graveyard, dug a big grave all by themselves, and buried all three bodies in that single grave” (.....)

Bama in *Vanmam* highlights the fact that Dalit youngsters are determined to have education as they believe that only through education they can liberate themselves from the bondage of ignorance and poverty and improve their social status. There had been an age old practice in Kandampatti that the Dalits had to offer homage to the Naickers.

“On every Pongal festival, with great festivity, they would set out for the landlord’s house with their families taking with them offerings of a rooster one or two large pumpkins, four, five stalks of sugar cane, and a measure of rice” (7).

About ten years ago, the educated youths of Parayar community forced the elders to stop the practice, eventually which was followed by Pallars also. In that way, the education of the younger generation brought changes in the mindsets and attitudes which forced them to break the prevailing practices that damage the dignity and decorum of the lives of Dalits.

Bama’s ultimate concern and conception in *Vanmam* is to enlighten and edify the subaltern the need of solidarity and unity and make them enjoy the fruits of the solidarity and unity in near future. In *Vanmam* the author speaks through the character Anthony while unveiling the statue of Ambedkar, which is fit to quote:

‘Educate! Organize! Agitate’ . . . we must all get education. We should be aware of social realities. We must realize how society has marginalized us, discriminated against us. And having realized that, we must unite and fight the injustice. We must not be afraid to fight . . . we will make a new world. We will create an equitable society free of caste. (61)

Similarly, in the author’s note of the novel, Bama confesses her aim in the novel.

“Marginalized people, those who have been pushed to the very edges of society have to put aside their internal enmities if they are to reclaim their

self-respect and their rightful place in society – that was the message of my novel” (vii).

To strengthen her voice for the unity of the Dalits, Bama portrays the election held in Kandampatti after the union of Parayars and Pallars. In the history of Kandampatti, only Naickers contested for the post of President and won. The enlightened Parayars and Pallars fielded Kaallaiyan of the Pallar caste as the joint candidate. The Parayars and Pallars campaigned together for Kallaiyan which enabled him to win the election. Bama asserts that the victory in Kandampatti is symbolic of the victories of the Dalits at the national level if they stand united, Kaalimuthu one of the minor characters of the novel affirms:

“It’s not enough that we have won in the Panchayat election. The Dalit voice must resonate in the state legislature and in the national parliament . . . we must capture the levers of government power. Let this be the first step towards that goal.” (134).

In the novel *Vanmam*, Bama has vividly presented that if the Dalits are united, they proclaim Surve’s immortal lines, “now we alone are the heroes of history, of all the biographies too-henceforth... (qtd in L.S.Despande 71).

On the day of unveiling Ambedkar’s statue, Anthony with an authoritative voice declares the need for the solidarity of the marginalized in the immediate future. Only through unity and collective efforts of the downtrodden much cherished dream of liberty, equality and fraternity can be a reality.

“We must realize how society has marginalized us, discriminated against us ... we shall strive together to see that justice prevails... Arise and face the new dawn. Don’t remain docile. You have been born to rule; to live like human beings...we will make a new world” (Bama 61).

Like the great Dalit leader Dr. Ambedkar, Bama believes that education alone can uplift her people.



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