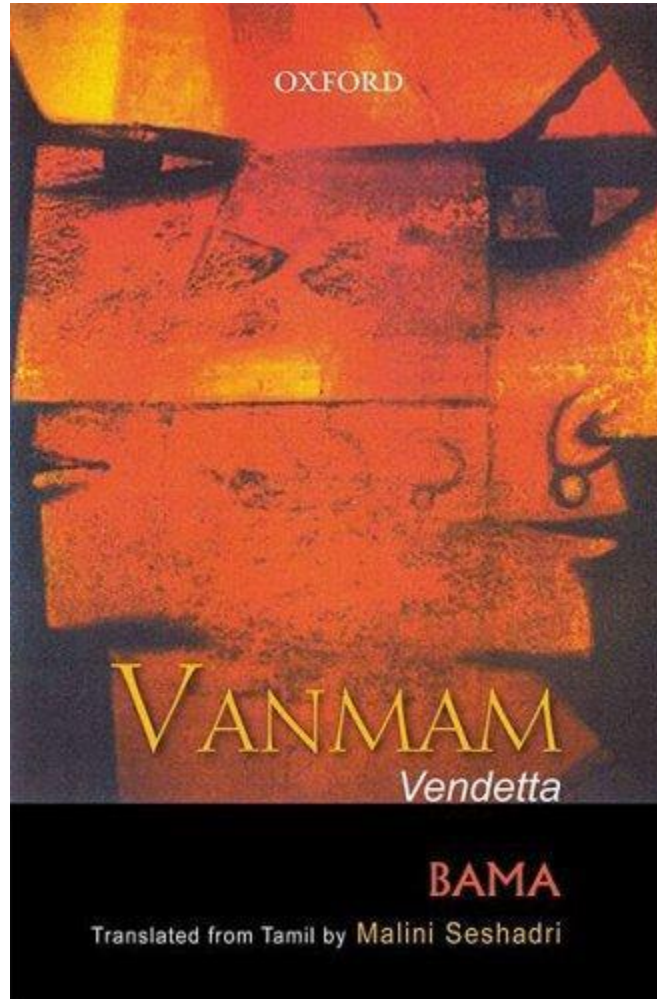


A Study on Caste Clashes Among Dalits in Bama's *Vanmam*

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Abstract

The present paper focuses on Bama's *Vanmam*, which depicts the most forceful resistance to the caste-ideology that operates so vigorously in India. The dynamics of caste and Dalit issues are closely linked with our ideas of identity and the self. Unlike her earlier works, in *Vanmam*, Bama, instead of blowing up the agonies and sufferings of the downtrodden, loudly raises her voice and vehemently asserts the need for the unity and solidarity of the suppressed for a better future. *Vanmam* delineates the story of Dalits and their struggle for existence. It also deals with the internal animosity between two castes within Dalits. Pallars and Parayars are the two Dalit castes discussed in the novel. The paper throws light on the explosion of muffled voices and how *Vanmam* calls for unity among Dalit communities.

Protest against Domination of Upper Castes

Dalit literature protests against upper caste system and their domination on Dalits. It represents a powerful, emerging movement in the Indian literary tradition. It is a genre established in the 1960's and 1970's. Ambedkar, the leader of anti-caste movement in India, used the term to characterize the exploitation, suppression and marginalization of the lower castes by the social, economic, cultural and political domination of the upper caste Brahminical order. Hence 'Dalithood' as a kind of life conditions that characterizes suppression, defines the status of the individual by birth and not by deeds that portray the strong caste system in India. Dalit literature helped in promoting cultural consciousness amongst the downtrodden class. The primary motive of the writer is to liberate women through giving voice to their suppression women through giving voice to their suppressed feelings. Bama expressed her agony and gave her voice to all oppressed women.

Vanmam – Focus of This Paper

The present paper focuses on Bama's *Vanmam*, is the most forceful resistance to the caste-ideology that operates so vigorously in India. *Vanmam* published in 2008 in Tamil, translated into English as *Vendetta* by Malini Seshadri, strikes a chord in Dalit writing. Bama, instead of blowing up the anguish and torment of the subjugated, loudly raises her voice and passionately affirms the need for the unity and harmony of the suppressed for a better future. It is exciting that many of the writings of Bama have been translated into French before English.

As Bama says,

“Oh, the French have so much regard for literature. They treasured my writing for its own quality. They didn't think 'she is a woman writer' or 'she is a Dalit.’”
(*Vendetta*, interview with the author, 156)

Centrality of the Issue of Caste

Vanmam outlines the story of Dalits and their struggle for existence. Dalits are being humiliated even today. Dalits are still humiliated in many places. Dalit's usually facing multiple oppression- economic, political, social and cultural rights. For many years, Dalits have been struggling from the problem of caste system which existed in the society. Azhgarasan remarks that “*Vanmam* occupies a unique place as it brings to the fore, the centrality of the issue of caste and not simply the atrocities against Dalits.” (2008)

The novel also deals with the internal enmity between two castes within Dalits. Pallars and parayars are the two Dalit castes discussed in the novel. Mangalam remarks that: “of animosity between them also the upper-caste men of Kandampatti preserve their prestigious caste status not only by keeping the low-caste people under their control, but also by keeping Dalit community divided.” (2008)

Detonation of Muffled Voices

The paper throws light on detonation of muffled voices and how *Vanmam* enjoins upon unity among Dalit communities. Pallars identified themselves as Hindus, and Parayars are mostly Christian converts. According to Gail Omvedt, a Dalit scholar, “In almost every region of India there are two main Dalit castes, often at odds.” (Indian Express: 2008) 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 arrive the fields. The Parayars and Pallars

of the village are labourers in the fields of the landlords and they are destined to lead a deplorable existence with the shell thrown by them. Despite their hard struggle they have to remain half-fed with porridge. Bama says that, “the Parayars toiled hard day and night to turn even barren land into fertile fields.” (6)

Modern Society and Its Contradictions

Vanmam addresses issues relating to modern society and its contradictions. The root of this novel can be understood in the author’s own words, “marginalized people have to put aside their rightful place in society.” (Author’s note: 7) *Vanmam* is about combating cruelties based on caste system with constructive strategy of empowerment. *Vanmam* begins with a question,

“Every human being should be seen as a human being, and respected as a human being. That is their goal . . . a society in which every person is equal. Will it ever be a reality?” (Author’s note” 8)

Society Portrayed in *Vanmam*

Vanmam is situated in the village called Kandampatti where people of different castes live. The houses of people are huddled based on the caste they belong to.

In order to depict the real situation, Bama gives a glimpse of Saminathan’s house which is a thatched house. They don’t even have place to sleep properly in their house:

“not all of them can stretch out to sleep inside that tiny space. Usually, Saminathan and his father go to chavadi to sleep.” (6)

Marrasu and Coworkers

The condition of Dalits is low they don’t even have two meals per day. After completion of their lowly jobs they brought only Kanji and pickle to stay alive. Marrasu, a Parayan and Kuruppusamy, a Pallar earn their living by working in the fields of Naickers. There are regular quarrels between Marraasu and Kuruppusamy, Pichamurthy, a Pallar helped them to understand that it is useless to fight for this,

“Why all this fighting amongst us? Whether the fields are dry or watered, what is the gain to you? It’s someone else who is going to reap the benefit, but it’s you two who are fighting! Let it go both of you” (10)

As things took its worst stage Kuruppusamy lifted the spade he was holding, and with the shaft of the spade he struck hard blow on the head of Marraasu. Marraasu fell to the ground with a cry of utmost agony. Saminathan felt troubled whenever he thought of how his uncle Maraasu had been murdered. The memory also aroused wrath in him.

“Because we have no money, no education, they killed and buried Chitappa in a ditch . . . As if it was all in a day’s work, as if he were a mere dog or something.” (11)

Police Atrocity

Under the guise of searching for men, police “enter the house of Parayars and talk vulgarly to the women and even misbehaved with them.” (88) The women also were dragged

to street and they were beaten brutally, “with no regard even for the infant and the aged, they kept and 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 women who were taken to the police station were subjected to more severe torture and abuses. Chellakili, a pregnant woman was kicked in the lower belly by a policeman with his boots:

“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)

Another Murder

In another episode, Pallars killed Sethurathanm and Savariappan. The nasty scene of Sethurathanam being hunted and lacerated to death still loiter in the minds of Parayars. Ultimately Jayaraju, an educated Parayar young man, affirmed in public,

“We were just beginning to progress slowly and now three 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 to a compromise between them. They collectively proclaim “After all, life is short. We work, we eat . . . we die. Why take on unnecessary problems?” (129) But Upper-class people cannot digest this peace agreement. Naickers scoff at 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)

To Bring in Harmony

To reinforce the harmony of the Dalits, Bama portrays the election held in Kandampatti after the union of Parayars and Pallars. In the history of Kandampatti, only Naickers competed for the post of President and won. The progressive Parayars and Pallars fielded Kaallaiyan of the Pallar caste as the joint candidate. The Parayars and Pallars campaigned collectively for Kaallaiyan which enabled him to win the election. Bama emphasizes that the success in Kandampatti is emblem of the triumphs of the Dalits at the national level if they stand united. One of the minor characters of the novel Kaalimuthu affirms that:

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 much capture the levers of government power. Let this be the first step towards that goal.” (134)

In the last chapter of the novel, *Vanmam*, there are answers to the questions that are raised by Bama in the author’s note of the novel, “Let the coming generations at least live without quarrels, end fights, riots and vendettas. Let them get along with one another . . . as for

the future . . . along with the hope there also lurks the old fear. But, in their minds, they know clearly what they have to do . . . where they want to go”. (135)

The novel ends on a note of enlightenment that ‘united they stand and divided they fall.’ It is for forging unity among Dalits. If *Karrukku* upholds education, *Sangati* foregrounds organized agitation, while *Vanmam* enjoins upon unity among Dalit communities. It presents a pragmatic depiction of life and struggle of Dalits and is a bidding farewell to the age old noxious practices of the upper caste people. It is a lesson to all Dalits who fight among themselves in the oblivion that united they stand divided they fall.

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