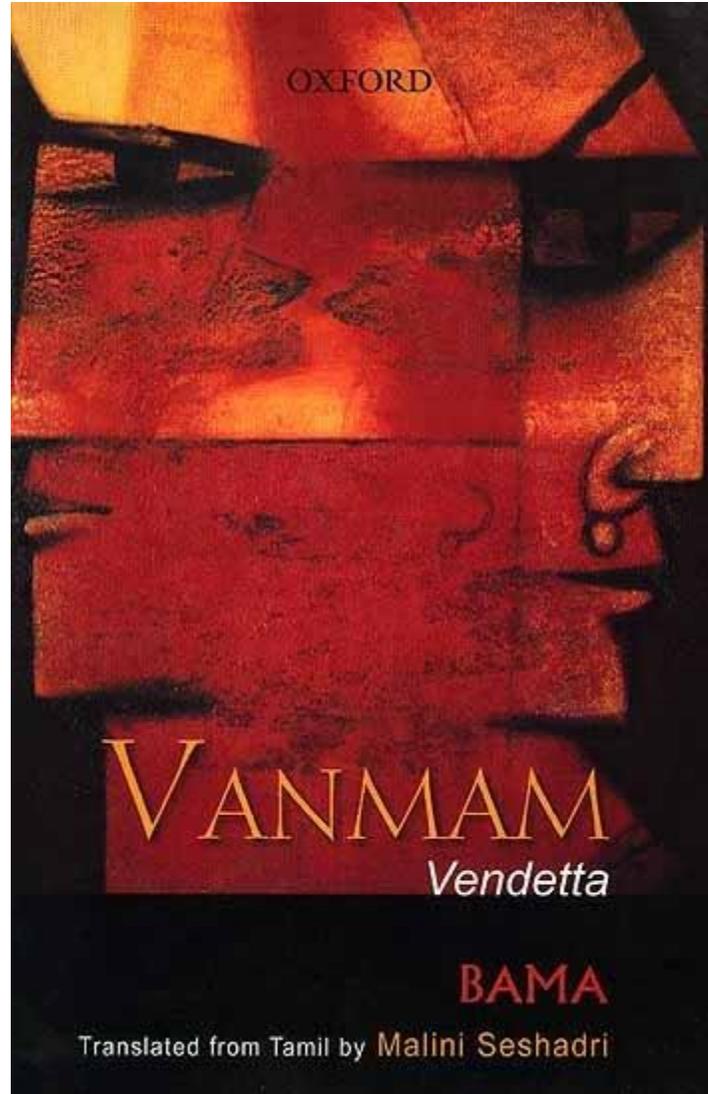


Struggle for Empowerment: A Critical Study of Bama's *Vanmam*

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Abstract

The aim of the present paper is to analyse the literary representations of Dalit women in Bama's *Vanmam*. The present study aimed at probing the dynamic intersection between gender and caste in *Vanmam* with a specific focus on their representation of Dalit women. The second half of twentieth century, marked by a vibrant production of literary works by Dalit writers in

Tamil, is considered to explore the writers' response to issues pertaining to caste identity of Dalit community and its traffic with a gendered social matrix. The novel under study reflects a decade of active intervention in Tamil literary discourse that engendered a new, vibrant voice that interrogated literary, cultural stereotypes, setting up new yardsticks and forging fresh views on literary paradigms. Dalit women are shown to be constantly lamenting, shedding tears, yearning for male protection, cursing their womanhood, bemoaning their inability to guard their chastity on their own. They are shown as victims rather than as fighters as in the novels of Bama. Sexual violence against Dalit women is documented at great length in her novels. She focuses on sexual violence against Dalit women in society as well as violence against them by Dalit men.

Keywords: Dalit, Cultural Stereotypes, Victims, Sexual Violence

Dalit Women as Workers

Bama's novels represent Dalit women primarily as workers - honest, hardworking, poorly-paid and exploited workers. Her novels record economic and sexual exploitation of Dalit women and argue that their Dalit identity renders them more vulnerable to injustice than other women workers. At the same time, they also point out that Dalit women are subjected to violence, brutal oppression not only by upper caste, male landlords or state administration but also by Dalit men. There is thus a see-saw movement between their characters' Dalit identity and their position as women in a stratified society. Bama critique patriarchal structure as much as they protest against casteist division in society.

Beating Women

In Bama's fiction, Dalit women are beaten-up by their husbands or brothers at home and ill-treated at work by upper-caste landlords. She presents a spirited fight put up by Dalit women against male-highhandedness. While she locates violence against women as an essentially patriarchal mindset, she also shows how Dalit women can subvert it through their humour, hard work or more importantly through access to education. She celebrates shrews who use their tongue to overcome male brutality or single women who rely upon education to carve out a life free from male authority. She also posits education and collective organized efforts to counter a violent, casteist structure.

Valorizing Women Who Opt out of Marriage

It is significant to note that Bama valorizes educated women who opt out of marriage to escape violence and subjugation. The writer subscribes to feminist thought and Marxist analysis but significantly; argue for enlarging received theoretical orientation to include, specifically, caste related ground realities in contemporary Indian society. In *Vanmam*, intra-caste strife among Dalits is discussed and strategies are debated to resolve the same. In many aspects, *Vanmam* is a less intense or moving tale in comparison to *Karukku* or *Sangati*. Certain issues, even incidents narrated or discussed in her earlier two works are taken up again in *Vanmam*, without, however, adding a new or different dimension to the quality of discussion. The narrative is less; gripping, at places, rather tepid.

Repetition as a Deliberate Narrative Strategy

Even though Bama had employed repetition as a deliberate narrative strategy in *Karukku* and *Sangati*, she had used it to add a fresh interpretation or reveal another critical reading of the narrative material than given in her earlier treatment. This engaging trope is missing in *Vanmlam*. Disappointing as this may be, a critical study of *Vanmam* is warranted as she subjects Dalits - both Paraiyars and Pallars - to an objective scrutiny and calls for forging of unity among Dalits on social and more significantly political grounds. This aspect is explored further in an objective, social milieu in her *Vanmam* (2002) where she analyses the intra-community conflicts, caste hatred and resulting violence and mayhem among Dalit communities.

Dalit Internal Division and Caste Hierarchy

Vanmam shows how Dalits have internalised the given social system of segregation based on caste. If Paraiyars 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 Paraiyars have embraced Christianity, Pallars remain within the Hindu fold. 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 tiffs 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.

Vanmam

Vanmam opens with an account of murder of a Paraiyar farmhand, Mariyasu at the hands of Karupasami, a Pallar farmhand, over distribution of water to their respective master's lands. As Karupasami's master protects him, he gets away with Mariyasu'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.

Paraiyar vs Pallar

The Paraiyar community, thanks to education accessible through missionary-run schools, is considered advanced socially and economically. There is a greater political awareness among them and they are highly resented by upper castes for emulating Ambedkarite ideology. *Vanmam* depicts how Paraiyar youth, most of them college-educated, pursuing a post-graduate degree, organize cultural activities, sports competitions and awareness campaigns to spread Ambedkar's thought in their community, when they return home from their hostels during vacations. Hope for political unity among Dalits rests on this segment. Pallars are mostly school dropouts and their youth are shown to be either working for Naickers or unemployed but always envious of their Paraiyar counterparts. But in spite of the best efforts of Paraiyar youth, caste strife between the two communities does not get stalled, resulting in rampant police brutality, forcing young men and adult males to either flee and live incognito or rot in jails.

Paraiyar youth, although they fashion themselves as radical, are yet orthodox in their attitude towards their women. After the cultural programme, the young men want to hold a meeting at the *chavadito* discuss future action plan. But they do not invite or want women to be present. Jayarasu announces, “We shall continue with our cultural programme. As a meeting is scheduled to be held at *chavadi*, women are asked to return to their homes quietly” (80). The educated girls protest, but to no avail. Selvarani observes, “these boys call themselves great reformists. But if there is a ‘village meeting’, they ask us, women, to go home. What kind of justice is this?” (80) Older women explain to the girls, “Oh, come on. Men shall be men and women shall remain women” (80). However, when the police swoop on the men, killing them or arresting them indiscriminately, Paraiyar women, young and old stand but them, protect them, nurture them, take over their chores, run the household single-handedly and also arrange for their bail or professional help.

Similar to Cemetery Feud

In fact, the section in *Vanmam* on Paraiyar women’s management of the crisis following Paraiyar-Pallar riot is almost a re-narration of Bama’s representation of women’s response to cemetery feud between the two communities in her earlier works. Young women accost the police, drive carts to carry their dead and dig up a mass grave and bury the men. Police excesses on women during the raid on the village are largely sexual intimidation, molestation and physical violence. When women are not allowed to leave the village for work, they survive and nurture their children by selling milk of their cattle. They also stay together at one house by turns and subvert police repression through their gendered bonding. But when the situation normalises, while Dalit boys return to their college by borrowing money, girls are forced to give up their studies and stay at home. Thus, the impact of caste-strife on women is more acute. Even pregnant women, lactating mothers, old women and school going girls are rounded up, jailed and severely beaten up by the police. When Paraiyar boys plan a counter strategy to avenge the Paliars’ murder of innocent Paraiyars, Rosamma points out,

You men will kill and run away and dodge the police. Here, we women are beaten up by the police and intimidated by the Pallars as well. We can neither go to work nor cook and eat in peace... lord... what a life... worse than a dog’s... we can neither live... nor die... (134-35)

Punishment Meted Out to Women

Vanmam depicts how women get punished and suffer on account of caste-strife engendered by men. They do not want it. They do not precipitate it. Yet they become its worst victims. *Vanmam* posits an important caveat to the issue of identity of Dalits. Non-Dalits tend to homogenise Dalits, erasing out differences, contradictions and anomalies that prevail among various Dalit communities. To the outside world, they are dumped as a common heap - a homogenised, monolithic category of untouchables.

Inability to Overcome Caste Divisions within Dalit Group

Vanmam alerts us to this disturbing facet of Dalit life, where while they accept a unified, singular political identity as Dalits, culturally, they are unable to overlook or overcome differences that exist amongst them. While the upper castes mock at them and use this dimension of their social identity to exploit them politically, it is worth remembering that the heterogeneous

character of Dalit community is a reflection and extension of our pluralistic society where homogenisation is unwelcome as well as unfair. However, for purposes of political empowerment, Dalits would have to sink cultural, regional differences and work together under a common banner. Unity among Dalits is a pre-condition to a successful overthrow of upper caste hegemony in society.

Vanmam reiterates this in each of its twelve chapters. Paraiyars initiate negotiations to arrive at peace between the two communities. Paraiyars have lost more in terms of human loss, economic set-back and pending court cases. While Naickers fume, Pallars and Paraiyars agree to withdraw cases against each other and put up a common candidate for the panchayat board election. The newly elected Dalit president Kaalaiyan (belonging to Pallar community but voted to the post by both Paraiyars and Pallars) foregrounds the need for unity among Dalits if they wish to defeat upper-castes' domination over them. He also promises to work for victory for Dalits at the State assembly and Parliamentary elections.

Seeking Political Power

A democratic resolving of intra-caste differences becomes the accepted mantra at the end of the novel, much to the discomfort of Naickers. Kaalaiyan comments, "As Ambedkar pointed out, we need to capture political power first. Let the Panchayat election be the first step towards that goal" (158). The novel concludes with a typically Bama's optimism, hoping for a result-oriented future for "though there are fears lurking in our minds, there exists clarity of thought and a strong will as well." (157)

To Conclude

Bama's fiction has won critical acclaim steadily over the years. If initially, her use of Dalit vocabulary and unconventional use of language was criticised by mainstream writers and critics. Bama's reformulations of genres, narratorial innovations are attacked by critics. In *Storylines: Conversations with Women Writers*, Bama recounts,

In literary circles there were some who discounted it as not being literary enough... not keeping to the generic definitions of novel or autobiography. Some of them were upset by the obscenities used and found them un-parliamentary. But there were also those who welcomed it as new and experimental... once they commented on the language and called it vulgar and obscene, I was all the more convinced that it was my language, our language. (15)

Bama's writing indicates a conscious choice in terms of form, language, mode of narration, tone, characterisation and content. The primary motive of Dalit literature is the liberation of Dalits, in particular, and the liberation of the oppressed, in general. It is fundamentally a cultural activity coming under the broad movements of Dalit political liberation. It is cultural politics. It takes the form of protest.

Bama's writing embodies an activist agenda. As a Dalit, writing has empowered Bama. Her entry into academy, her presence at literary meets, conferences in Indian metros and abroad, her continued contribution in the sphere of education as a school teacher are various facets of her social empowerment. In turn she employs her writing to implore Dalits to adopt education as a

sure strategy for self-empowerment and acceptability in society. Her writing while using spoken Dalit women's vocabulary is addressed to non-Dalits who need to be educated and sensitised about Dalits' struggle for a dignified existence. At the same time it also shows possibilities of success to her Dalit reader.

In all her works, a feminist narrative on Dalit women's lives, *Vanmam*, a novel, Bama reiterates and calls upon Dalits to organise and help themselves, who would come forward to aid us? We would have to help ourselves is her repeated reminder. In *Vanmam* forging of unity among Dalits is stressed upon most forcefully. Education for Bama is not limited to formal education. She lays equal emphasis on spiritual education but wants this to be free from interference from ecclesiasts and officialdom. Dalits have to gain enlightenment in a political sense, rather than merely accumulate university degrees.

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