

RESEARCH ARTICLE



## TOWARDS A NEW DAWN: REFLECTIONS ON BAMA'S VANMAM

Dr. J. G. DURESH

Prof and Head, Department of English and center for Research, Scott Christion College, Nagercoil, Kanyakumari, Tamilnadu.



### ABSTRACT

This paper thematically analyses Bama's *Vanmam* which strikes a new chord in Dalit literature. Instead of highlighting Dalit victimhood and the miseries of the underdogs, *Vanmam* calls for the solidarity of the oppressed. Citing the happenings in a village called *Kandampatti* in Tamil Nadu, Bama has established that the solidarity of the subaltern alone can make their dream of equality a reality.

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Despite India's marvelous achievements in science and technology, rapid changes in the spheres of education and the blooming of Parliamentary democracy, the monster casteism hampers social development, eats up the vitals of the nation and crushes down a considerable number of Indian population. Ironically, the constitutional safeguards and the laws of the land fail miserably to ensure equality to the Indian masses. Like the Blacks in America, natives of Canada and the aborigines in Australia, the Dalits in India are pushed to the margin and looked down as non entity. Moreover, due to the exuberant hegemony of elite in literature and history, the precarious existence of Dalits was not registered properly in the literary canon and the subaltern could not find due space in literature in

the colonial era. Arun Prabha Mukherjee rightly observes, "Untouchables were either mostly absent from literary representations or shown as victims in need of saviors, as objects with voice and agency" (XI). However, in the post colonial period, strengthened by postcolonial tendencies and theoretical underpinnings, there has been an incessant movement of the margin towards the center. J. M. Waghmare points out that "Those who were marginalized have assumed mainstream relevance, and those who were privileged appear to have marginalized" (26). Consequently, the subaltern who have been silenced and subjugated for ages find due space in the domain of literature and articulate their harrowing experiences. Thus the minority and marginalized authors across the globe

make optimum use of the medium of writing to bring about a positive change in their life and to expose the nobility of their legitimate demands.

In the Indian literary milieu, the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed, the emergence of highly talented Dalit authors who explore the miseries and misfortune of their communities with utmost commitment. Among the contemporary Dalit authors, Bama, the nun turned social activist, has chiseled a niche for herself as a powerful voice of the hapless underdogs. Bama in her popular autobiographical novel *Karukku* (1992) fathoms out the harrowing experiences she has undergone as a woman as well as a Dalit nun. What is 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) published in 2008 in Tamil, translated into English by Malini Seshadri, strikes a chord in Dalit writing. Unlike her earlier works and many of the Dalit writings, 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.

In *Vanmam*, the plot is a rather weak one as it merely dovetails the events involving 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.

The Parayars and Pallars of the village are labourers 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 writes, "The Parayars toiled hard day and night to turn even barren land into fertile fields" (6). Unfortunate, their hard labour does not guarantee them sufficient 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 job with the empty stomach.

Added to starvation they have to live in constant fear of the atrocities of the landlords and the communal clashes which may erupt any time. While dileneating the precarious existence of the Dalit, Bama avers, "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 valid reason and its source is not clearly known. The earliest instance of violence 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 get along well.

In another occasion, Marraasu, 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 Marrassu. These are isolated incidents which do not affect the cordial relationship between the Parayas and Pallars and they celebrated festivals together and took part in common functions and programmes.

By the time some of the educated youths of Parayar streets formed the "Kalani Arts Club" and conducted various cultural events. These developments on the Parayar street make the Naickers grew 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. 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.

Goaded by the Naickers, some of the Pallars demanded to return the money donated for the statue. The corporate life of the Parayars and Pallars faced a serious setback over the issue of putting up a flagpole 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 instigated the Pallars. "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 Parayas who could not get support either from the Government or from the Church, whereas the Pallars enjoyed the favours of the landlords and 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 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 Parayar women were more scared of the police than of the riots. The women who were taken to the police station were subjected to more 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).

Kandanpatti was under 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 there 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 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 prevail among the Dalit youths. When the men were hiding to avoid arrest, the Paraya woman 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, to 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 attribute more significance to education as they believe that only through education they can liberate themselves from bondage and improve their 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). Ten years ago, the educated youths of Parayar community forced the elders to stop the practice, eventually which was followed by Pallars also.

Bama's ultimate concern in *Vanmam* is to edify the subaltern the need of solidarity and unity. 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 an education. We should be aware of social realities. We must realize how society has marginalizes 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. (6)

Similarly, in the author's note of the novel, Bama confesses her aim in the novel. "Marginalized people, those when 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 validate her arguments 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 Kaaliyan of the Pallar Street as the joint candidate. The Parayars and Pallars campaigned together for Kallaiyan which

enabled him to win the election. Bama avers 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 them 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).

As authorial voice Anthony on the day of inaugurating Ambedkar's stature declares the need for the solidarity of the marginalized. Only through unity and consorted efforts the downtrodden much cherished dream of liberty and equality 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).

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