



## CLASH OF CASTES IN BAMA'S "VANMAM"

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### Abstract

The term "Dalit" was most commonly used in Marathi and Hindi, which means depressed class. Dalit literature is a literature written by Dalits for Dalits to bring out the suppression of upper caste, delineate their plight to the external world and also to uplift them. It is considered as one of the marginalized literatures and through this literature, the oppressed people voice out their pain and pathetic condition which is still prevalent in society. One of the celebrated Dalit writers is Bama Faustina Soosairaj. She belongs to Puthupatti in Madras, who is a social activist, novelist and teacher. She actively participates in social, political, economical and general issues. Her works mostly focus on caste and gender discrimination. She portrays the discrimination between Christianity and Hinduism. Her novels are *Karukku* (1992), *Sangati* (1994) and *Vanmam* (2002). She also wrote two collections of short stories: *Kusumbukkaran* (1996) and *Oru Thatvum Erumaiyum* (2003). This paper throws light on the caste clashes in *Vanmam*. It is not the usual Dalit novel which generally eulogizes on the atrocities against Dalits and exploitation of Dalits unleashed by the upper caste, though it portrays the brutality of upper caste and policemen against Dalits. But rather it focusses on intra-Dalit community violence which foregrounds in Dalit identity. The story is set out in the village, Kandampatti. The protagonists in this novel are two castes, Pallars and Parayars who identify themselves as Hindus and Christians respectively. The novel describes how the land owning Naickers instigate violence between the two Dalit communities to benefit themselves ignoring the human lives. Bama here writes about the continuing rivalry that exists between the two major Dalit communities, Pallars and Parayars.

**Key Words:** Dalits, Oppression, Identity, Caste, Dalit communities.

### Discussion

*Vanmam*, Bama's third novel first appeared in Tamil in the year 2002 and then it was translated into English by Malini Seshadri in 2008. It is not the usual Dalit novel which generally eulogizes on the atrocities against Dalits and exploitation of Dalits wreaked by the upper caste, though it portrays the brutality of upper caste and policemen against Dalits. But rather it focusses on intra-Dalit

community violence which foregrounds in Dalit identity. The story of *Vanmam* is set out in the village, Kandampatti. The protagonists in this novel are two castes, Pallars and Parayars who identify themselves as Hindus and Christians respectively. The novel describes how the land owning Naickers instigate violence between the two Dalit communities to benefit themselves ignoring the human lives spared. Bama here writes about the continuing rivalry that exists between the two major

Dalit communities, Pallars and Parayars. *Vanmam* typically portrays the internalization of Dalits within the given social system of segregation based on caste. Parayars and Pallars are outcastes in the eyes of other upper castes, whereas Pallars consider themselves superior to Parayars and Parayars consider themselves superior to Pallars; consequently, they treat each other as outcastes in their own social habitat.

A village situated in Tamil Nadu and the real-life events that take place becomes the setting of this novel. The marginalized people try to put aside their internal enmities so that they can reclaim their self-respect and their rightful place in society. The novel deals with the animosity between two castes within Dalits – Pallars and Parayars and how the upper-castes stoke the fire to keep up the enmity. The conditions brought out through incidents are true as found in Kandampatti and many such villages in Tamilnadu. It is just a narrative of events involving two Dalit sub-castes in a small village which is but a microcosm of macro world. Hence it is a wakeup call for the Dalits to be united lest their life should become precarious in the prejudiced society of upper-caste landlords. India is famed to find 'unity in diversity' which clearly means that India is diversified on the basis of religion, language, caste creed and colour. Bama exploits this situation in *Vanmam* by introducing these two groups both of whom are marginalized for their low birth order by the upper caste people.

Bama openly pictures the hypocrisy of upper caste men who adopt the strategy of divide and rule among the Dalit people. They exploit the age old division existing among the Dalits as Parayar and Pallar. She gives expression to her anger at their passivism of enduring agony for ages. She is quite hopeful that realization of their plight and willingness to overcome it are the need of hour for their emancipation. In the "Author's note" to *Vanmam*, Bama faithfully records the anger of her community thus:

My mother used to tell me very often, unrelenting anger will lead to war. I did not understand the full significance of this then. I understand it now. Starting from one

person's mind, through family, clans, groups, castes, languages, religions... From village to city to nation to continent to world, the bubble of anger swells and explodes into full-scale war. Even if the wounds caused by war are ultimately smoothed by that great healer, time, men will continue to live in fear of their fellowmen. The day grief inflicted by history is not easy to escape from the mind.( viii)

The milieu is set by Bama in the first page of the novel. In order to know the content of the letter she has received, Mekkalamma goes to chavady, a common place where people of the village assemble to spend their leisure time or to conduct any common meeting. There she sees Seeniappan who has studied up to eighth standard fifty or sixty years back. The education system of past is respected to be better than the present system. Bama's remark that "Even the present-day college students could not solve the small mathematical problems he thought up" (1), clearly indicates Bama's opinion that the elderly persons of her community had education of true enlightenment which opens the portals of common sense which, in turn, ensures a peaceful and harmonious life. The total absence of positive values of life like love, tolerance, selfless service, empathy in the present day educational system makes younger generation intolerant, infuriated, at insignificant matters. Thus, the end of the novel is hinted at in the very beginning itself. Youngsters with collegiate education are put in embarrassing situation in the end of the novel as they lose their common sense to deal with serious matters like division in the caste system. The translator of *Vanmam* Malini Seshadri, in the Introduction states:

The issue of caste is foregrounded in *Vanmam* on two levels: First, through highlighting the disaster that awaits both castes if they persist in violence and vendetta, as against the benefits that can accrue to them if they can achieve a meeting of minds, and assert their rights unitedly; second, by using the device of an omniscient narrator who reports but does not participate, thereby challenging the

stereotype that Dalit writing must necessarily deal with Dalit victimhood. (xv)

Changes are necessary in the socio-political and economical domains for the upliftment of marginalized group. Though Bama agrees with social reformers like Ambedkar and Periyar E.V Ramaswamy on the issue of extending equal opportunities to the Dalits in the educational institutions and in government services, she has her own doubts whether these alone would ensure total emancipation and advancement of Dalits. The emphasis laid on this question in this novel makes her people realize the true face of the deep-rooted caste system. In fact she is happy that Dalits have begun to knock at the doors of educational institution and even the girls have started studying.

Bama depicts the society of the Parayars and Pallars: "The Parayars are doing better these days. Little by little, through struggle and effort, their situation is improving." (6) Parayars according to her are hard working people who would excel in education if opportunity is provided. They even turn the wasteland into fertile fields. On the contrary, she points out, the Pallars are not such hardworking people. They cannot compete the Parayars in education and tilling the land and naturally feel jealous at Parayars which leads to enmity. Moreover the upper caste Naickers cunningly exploit the situation and fan the fury of the Pallars against Parayars in order to keep both the communities under their control. Though the Parayars are suppressed by the upper-caste Naickers, education gives a sort of 'self-assertion' to Parayars. So they consider the age-old practice of giving homage, Odaiyaru to Naicker as a shame on them:

As more and more of the Parayar boys left the village to get an education and then came back, they began to detest this practice whole heartedly. They thought it humiliating to take so many things for the landlords and then have to stand at a distance and reach for a mere morsel of pongal for them. The educated ones stood firm and decided that their elders must not make offerings like this anymore. At first, the older ones resisted and refused to stop

the practice, but even they gradually came to agree with the educated ones, and the offerings stopped altogether. (7)

R. Azhagarasan makes an in-depth analysis of the novel and remarks in the introduction:

...The focus on the animosity between the two Dalit communities need not be seen as merely commenting on their internal differences, but also as highlighting how caste remains sacrosanct and inviolable... The grip of caste is so powerful that even conversion to a religion that promises equality of all classes cannot annihilate it. Hence, the narrator in Vanmam sees the Christian – converted Parayars as part of the Hindu social order. (xv)

The enmity between the Parayars and Pallars, strengthened by organizing joint sports events and celebrating each other's festivals, begins to feel the strain of jealousies and running feuds, culminating in the murder of a Parayar by a Pallar. Hatred and animosity pile up with a series of retaliations and counter retaliations which end in a bloody caste clash. The men are forced to live in hiding, children are not able to go to school, women are widowed, and children are orphaned.

For seven or eight months they couldn't come back (to the village) The street, which had been bustling with life from early dawn to evening, was now lifeless. Only half-starved, skinny goats and cows roamed the streets. It was only the animals which would sometimes call out, 'Amma' in a faint voice. Even they didn't have the energy to call any louder. (123)

More than half the people couldn't return. There is a constant fear that any time anyone could be murdered. Even if someone dies, it is only the women who are left to dig a grave and bury the body. The loss on both sides opens their eyes to the cunning role of dominant castes and the state machinery, especially the police, in perpetuating their animosity.

This all started when Naickers decided to avenge Parayars. Exploiting the divisions within the

community, they wage a proxy war and indirectly attack the Parayars through Pallars, which leads to mutual killing. Once the fight started between Karuppusamy, a Pallar and Marraasu, a Parayar over the use of water for irrigation from a common well of Naickers ended in the murder of Marraasu by Karuppusamy. Karuppusamy's uncle Pichamurthy's attempts to control both Marraasu and Karuppusamy are in vain. After the murder Karuppusamy seek Pichamurthy's help to bury Maaraasu but Pichamurthy advise Karuppusamy to surrender himself before police, which angers Karuppusamy who shout at Pichamurthy: "You're prepared to support a Parayan so much. Yet here I am asking you for help and you're refusing." (10) and then Marraasu is buried. When the murder is found out by the Parayar community, they lodge a complaint against Karuppusamy. But Karuppusamy's master Palanivelu Naicker hush up the matter by bribing the police:

When Maaraasu's younger brother Jayaraj heard about this, he hurried to the field along with four or five other men. They looked around, and were about to turn back when they saw a couple of dogs, gapping and scratching at something in the ditch.

They went nearer and saw that the dogs were tearing at the corpse of Marraasu. They chased the dogs away, and immediately went and registered a case with the police. They also gave it in writing that there had been frequent quarrels between Marraasu and Karuppusamy, and that the latter was the chief suspect. But this was of no use, because Palanivelu paid off the police, managed to convince Pichamurthy to be quiet about the whole thing, and saw to it that no case was filed. After all, when one has wealth, one can do anything, cover it up, and get away with it! To this day, the Parayars of the village talk about this murder with deep resentment and anger. Whatever it is, they say, the Pallars are against us, aren't they? (11)

Caste remains as an indomitable force in India. The most important trait of this caste division in the Indian society is the presence of internal

divisions even among the Dalits. This internal hierarchy is one of the principal reasons for the inability to eradicate untouchability. Roy and Singh attests to this: "Untouchability is the greatest blot on humanity. ... What is most astonishing is its existence among various castes of the Scheduled Castes themselves. The nature of this problem would have been much different had the Scheduled Castes themselves succeeded in uprooting the evil among themselves first. Failure on their part to do so has adversely affected the whole movement against untouchability." (129)

Bama lays emphasis on the past history of the Dalit community of Kandampatti. She writes: "The Pallans, the Parayans, the Chakkaliyars... everyone used to drink toddy there." (13) Such was the cooperation prevailing among the Dalit people. However, one day, Mannangatti, a sturdy Parayan, is given free toddy by a Nadar shopkeeper. Seeing this many Pallar chide the shop owner for giving free toddy to Mannangatti alone. Afraid at the turn of events the shopkeeper ask Mannangatti to pay for the toddy. This makes him angry and Mannangatti kills one of the Pallar. This is the cause of the prevailing enmity between the Parayans and Pallans:

Then what? One day those rascals brought a big knife, dragged Mannangatti into an argument and tried to stab him. But Mannangatti was such a fine fighter, you see. He brandished his stick, knocked the abdomen... and it was over. The man had his guts ripped out, and Mannangatti pulled out his intestines and draped them around his neck like a garland. Seeing him walk the street like this, the onlookers grew pale... they were stunned. That is how the enmity started, and it is that Vendetta that is going on even today. (14)

The inherent desire of human psyche to rule over others is ascribed to the prevalence of internal hierarchy among the Dalits. According to Sinha, "Though economic functions and rewards are dispersed according to caste criteria, they are made to look secondary to the ideational trappings of the system in which people are made to feel inferior or superior without any reference to the level of their

material possessions or earnings. This makes the problem of eliminating castes extremely difficult and complex." (Sinha 215-216) He further adds: "Here it is the psychology of superiority or inferiority which makes the real distinction." (Sinha 216) In fact, Ambedkar expected the perpetuation of this kind of internal hierarchy among the Dalits. Ambedkar, who dedicated his entire life to annihilating caste, made an extensive study on the causative factors which originated, nurtured and perpetuated caste system. He is the first to comprehend the internal divisions and disparities among the Dalits. According to him, they are "a disunited body [...] infested with the caste system in which they believe as much as does the high caste Hindu. This caste system among the Untouchables has given rise to mutual rivalry and to jealousy and it has made common action impossible." (qtd. in Jaffrelot 57)

The enmity between the Pallars and Parayars gets still worse when the youngsters from both the divisions want to put their flagpoles near the newly erected Ambedkar Statue. The Pallars decide to collect money back from the Parayars donated to erect the statue. However it is decided by the Pallar boys to put their flagpole near the statue. "The Pallar youngsters get together and put up their own flagpole on a platform right next to the Ambedkar statue. They wanted their flagpole to be fuller than the Ambedkar pole, and so they put in a very full post and anchored it on all four sides with thick wires to prevent it from toppling over." (79) One evening, one of the Parayar boys namely Sesurathnam cut the wire of the flagpole erected by the Pallar. The anger of the Pallar boys over this incident grow because of the continuous instigation of the Naickers. As Azhagarasan rightly observes: "The focus on animosity between the two Dalit communities need not be seen as merely commenting on their internal differences, but also as highlighting how caste remains sacrosanct and inviolable ..." (xv)

### Conclusion

Caste is the most powerful and decisive factor in establishing one's identity. Since birth to death, the indelible imprint of caste is more torturous if one belongs to lower strata of society. The intensity of pain is evident in these lines of

Kumud Pawade, quoted by Chakravarty: "The result is that although I try to forget my caste, it is impossible to forget. And then I remember an expression that I heard somewhere: "what comes by birth can't be cast off by dying- that is caste." (6)

This evil succeeds in corroding the psyche of the victims and makes the upper caste to dominate the marginalized both physically and mentally. Their subaltern position moulds them and makes them conscious of it. Devasree Chakravarti and G.A. Ghanshyam in *Subaltern can (not) Speak: A Study on Salman Rushdie's Shame* says that subaltern consciousness is "one that borders on the realms of neurotic and psychotic behaviour, a result of years of repression, pain, loss and denial..." (86)

*Vanmam* portrays oppression faced by the men and women in terms of caste. U. S. Saranya and B. Siva Nagaiah in their article, "Dalit Fiction is the Realistic Fiction: A Critical Review" write:

Dalits are being exploited physically, mentally and socially. They are treated very low and the upper caste people suck the blood of the lower caste people till death. Though India claims freedom and states that it is the nation of equality and liberty but still the Dalits face the oppression. In order to overcome this terrific social stigma, poverty has to be eradicated and the future generation of the lower caste people must gain education to change the atrocities and humiliation by the upper caste. (346)

Bama brings before us the horrendous scenes of a riot-hit village and the mortification endured by the oppressed in the hands of the rich and powerful. Malini Seshadri rightly says:

Though *Vanmam* talks about the events happening among the people of a small village. In a state in India, "it is a microcosm of a bigger world, a sort of inset to the big picture. Intra-Dalit rivalry leading to animosity, the deft manipulation of emotions and prejudices by upper caste landlords ... this is a cautionary tale." (x)

Bama's works reflect her Dalit consciousness and the individual and collective experiences that her people

face in their daily affairs in this caste-dominated society. The angst of casteism in all her novels shows the pathetic plight of the Dalits in the crusade for survival. Bama with her rebellious nature questions the institutions such as family, church, school and government and strongly believes that only the collective struggle of her people against this social discrimination will help them to emancipate into individuals.

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