

Victims and the Victimizers: A Critical Study on Caste discrimination and Inter-Caste Rivalry in Bama's Vanmam

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Article Received: 12/06/2022, Article Accepted: 04/07/2022, Published online: 05/07/2022, DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2022.7.3.22

Abstract

Society is the victim of all rivalries and revolts. It creates and shapes history through human treatment and communal biases. The human psyche craves to rule and master and tries to capitalize on others in the world. This leads to subalternity and oppression resulting in caste hierarchy and riots among themselves. Dalit writing emphasizes the themes of social equality, caste discrimination, communal cruelties, injustice, subalternity and cultural assertion that entitles the grapple for equality. Bama, a Tamil Dalit writer centers the theme on gender and discrimination. Her third novel, *Vanmam* prioritizes Dalit intelligence, experience and individuality. This paper mainly focuses on the concept of others being the victims and the victimhood of society. Bama exploits the rage and resentment of the wicked upper-caste Naickar, which results in the outrageousness of the Dalit communities, together.

Keywords: dalits, violence, riots, injustice, segregation, subaltern, inter-caste, dalit intelligence, dalit experience, identity, community, discrimination, inequality.

Introduction: Dalit Literature in India

The term Dalit leads to the meaning of 'depressed' since the early 20th century. They are the group of people who are disputable with their state of being. Dalit is a category chosen by themselves considering as inferior and subordinated by their economic, religious and social status (*General Introduction of Dalit*).

Dalit writings are an attempt to bring forth the experience of discrimination, violence, poverty and segregation of the Dalits in India. It emerged as an integrated voice for all the oppressed and marginalized communities to endure their social inequality and injustice in the society. They use their pen as a weapon to vent out their anger and outrage against the social *varna*

or hierarchy which is responsible for their degradation.

Dalit is not a caste but a realization and is related to the experiences, joys and sorrows and struggles of those in the lowest strata of society. It matures with a sociological point of view and is related to the principles of negativity, rebellion and loyalty to science, thus finally ending as revolutionary (*Poisoned Bread*, 21).

One of the first Dalit writers, Madara Chennaiah, a 11th c cobbler- saint lived during the reign of Western Chalukyas. He is regarded the father of Vachana poetry. Another dalit writer was Dohara Kakkaiyah, a dalit by birth. The origin of dalit writing is traced back to the Buddhist literature, through dalit Bhakti poets like Gora, Raidas, Chokha Mela and Karmamela and the Tamil Siddhas.

Lord Gautama, the Buddha was the earliest preacher in abolishing untouchability that had its evolution under the caste system. Varna system is used to create a social hierarchy in society which dictates who to marry whom and what profession should one choose. Later, the *Varna* divided the people based on the caste-system wherein the Dalits stayed out of the system.

Dalits were traditionally not the part of the *varna* system as they were out of the four *varnas* described in various

Hindu scriptures. They were variously known as anti-*shudras*, *chandals*, *panchmas*, *antyajas*, *achhuts*, *asprushyas*, *neechjati*, depressed classes, harijans etc. at different times in Indian history (*Doing of Caste: An Analysis of Inter-caste Violence among Dalits in Bama's Vanmam*, 159).

Dalit literature was written by Dalits about their lives and forms an important distinct part of Indian literature. Maharashtra is the central point in abolishing Dalit untouchability. The state centers the emergence of the Dalit literature in 1960s with the Marati language and soon appears in Hindi, Kannada, Telugu, Bangalaand Tamil languages. Dr. B. R. Ambedhkar is the predominant figure during the period of Dalit reformation. "The earliest known reformation within Hinduism happened during the medieval period, when the Bhakti movements actively, engaged in the participation and inclusion of Dalits" (*Paripex - Indian Journal of Research*, 240). Ambedhkar, later turned to Buddhism and followed its principle, and changed many dalits to Buddhism.

Das states that, "The advent of Dalit literature, comprising poems, novels, memoirs, and the like, is rectifying this situation slowly by depicting the nuances of the Dalit culture" (*Dalit Literature: What it is, Why should you read it, and Where to start*). Dalit experiences and struggles are exploited through poems, short stories and

mostly through autobiographical novels which reveals the portrayal of reality and the dalit political scene. It closely relates with African American literature, especially in the depiction of racial segregation and injustice.

Dalit writers carry a certain historical truth about the lives and the struggles faced by the Dalits in the Indian society. Like race, in India, Dalits face the problem of discrimination and inequality that triggers them to revolt against the system of hierarchy. Moreover, Dalits express their experience and forced separation from the society in their writing, predominantly through their autobiographical account. They bring their personal account of lives to the public and make the reader to relate the human emotions and circumstances they have undergone.

Autobiographies serve as a moral support for the Dalit movements. Most of the Dalit writers live in cities and revisits their village through autobiographies where they spent their childhood with lots of sufferings and cruel experiences of untouchability. "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" (*Vanmam*, vii).

Bama's Vanmam: Caste discrimination and Inter-Caste rivalry

Vanmam is the third novel written by a Dalit woman writer, Bama. The novel portrays the riot between the two dalit communities in a village, Kandampatti in the rural land of Tamil Nadu. "It deals with

the animosity between two castes within Dalits-Pallars (who identify themselves as Hindus) and Parayars (mostly Christian converts) in the novel-and how the landowners of the dominant Naicker caste stroke fires to preserve their own status" (Vanmam, ix).

Bama offers a self-analysis on the victimhood in *Vanmam* because when there is an inter-caste strife, the two communities seems to be submerged. The murder of a Parayar is the start to the clashes between the communities. The rest are the counter retaliations of the murder. Rajesh and Devasigamani states that, "The conflict between two Dalit communities which was helped along by organizing joint sports competition and celebrating each other's festivals cause to extend of covetousness and handling funds, culminating in the murder of a Parayar by a Pallar" (*Inter-Caste Discrimination in Bama's Vanmam*, 120).

Vanmam set forth the inter-caste rivalry and resentment among the two Dalit communities named Pallars and Parayars. The novel shows the anger and violence of them, where hundreds and thousands die because of inter-caste revolt. It puts forth the struggle of the subaltern, causing cruelty and brutality among the Dalit people. Dr. Ghurye states that, "Caste is a Brahminic child of Indian-Aryan culture cradled in the land of the Ganges and then transferred to other parts of India (*Caste and Race in India*, 143).

Bama focuses how the Naickers blow fires among the two Dalit communities to gain happiness and to retain

their dignity. “The novel describes how the landowners of the dominant caste stroke the fires of intra-Dalit hostilities to benefit themselves, ignoring the human costs paid for time and again in solace, loss and death (*An Explosion of Muffled Voices in Bama's Vanmam*).

The two Dalit communities Pallars and Parayars are treated on par by the Naickers. “Dalits, who were part of Indian indigenous culture, have also adopted this system in their society and started having faith in the idea of high and low born among themselves” (*Doing of Caste: An Analysis of Inter-caste Violence among Dalits in Bama's Vanmam*, 159). In order to hit them, the Naickers support the Pallars and give confidence that they are Hindus and the other community, Parayars are inferior to Pallars. Parayars are the converted Christian community whereas Pallars are the Hindus. “The Parayars feel Christianity power that they have to the length that Pallars are on the one hand more assertive, and on the other present more accessible than the Pallars to talk of their people's mercy and adjustment” (*Inter-Caste Discrimination in Bama's Vanmam*, 121). Please check the original quotation .

Bama depicts how Dalits become victims and highlights their disaster in society. “She has depicted how Dalits of different castes become sworn enemies of one another and fall prey to the stratagems of caste Hindus” (*Doing of Caste: An Analysis of Inter-caste Violence among Dalits in Bama's Vanmam*, 159). The clash between two communities results in the Dalits becoming the suspects for all the rivalry. The two become one by the end of

the novel, as the Pallars and Parayars join together, realizing the motto of the upper caste community. “The loss of both sides makes them realize the role of dominant castes and the state machinery, especially the police, in perpetuating their animosity” (*Vanmam*, xiv). Considering the other as inferior, they fail to understand their stand on their position in society. They are acknowledged as subaltern by the dominant caste that impels them to feel themselves as downtrodden. The caste reality in the novel exhibits the story into two ways.

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 (*Vanmam*, xv).

The first conflict in the novel happens between two men: Mariaraasu and Karupusamy from different Dalit communities. During the trial, Karupusamy murders Mariaraasu, for the irrigation of the fields of Naickers. This incident leads to the constant clash and riot between the Pallars and Parayars. “Bama recounts the time

when both Parayars and Pallars maintained peaceful and harmonious relationship and in contrast she also portrays how the caste causes indifference and lack of concern among them” (*Feminism in India*)(mention source).

Pallars consider themselves as of a Hindu high caste than the Parayar community and clashes with them. Unaware on the tricks of the dominant caste, they become the suspects for all the atrocities and violence, taking into accounts the words of Naickers. “Caste system has heavily infected Dalits in India. As a result of the infection of imitation, they too have created caste-hierarchies among themselves” (*Doing of Caste: An Analysis of Inter-Caste Violence among Dalits in Bama's Vanmam*,160).

Due to the murder of Karupusamy, the clash between the two communities' increases and many lives are lost in the riot. Men are killed, women are treated badly and children are ill-treated. There are strict divisions between the Dalits and this leads the mind of the people to direct acts of violence towards their counterpart. People become blind and they are unaware that they are used by the dominant discourse to spoil themselves in the society:

Strict caste divisions among Dalits provide opportunities of manipulation to their oppressors who try to trap the people of relatively less educated castes among Dalits with the help of popular beliefs, myths and stories (*Doing of Caste: An*

Analysis of Inter-caste Violence among Dalits in Bama's Vanmam,160).

The dominant caste in the novel, Naickers find the Parayar community as educated. In order to pull them down, they use the Pallarcommunity. They see the progressiveness in the young people of the Parayar community and try to divide the Dalits through the course of clash and violence, which results in brutal death and loss. In *Doing of Caste: An Analysis of Inter-caste Violence among Dalits in Bama's Vanmam*, Kumar states that“ Naicker kept on stimulating caste based rivalries among Dalits who continuously fell prey to the subtle ways of Naickers irrespective of the best efforts made by some educated youths and adults” (160).

The influence of Naicker on Pallars makes them proud and superior than the Parayars. The Pallars follow the instructions of the Naickers as they assume that they get constant support from the dominant caste and are allowed to do whatever they wish. But, it is ironical that the Pallars stand ashamed as they betray their own community and kill a person. Kumar mentions that, “Under the influence of Naickers, caste pride/superiority had swelled the chest of Pallar nattamai so much that he, even when fate presented him opportunity, did not make sincere efforts to stop this clash” (161).

Pallars and the Parayars unite towards the end of the novel, positioning them in a caste based society and prove successful in their progress of being educative in the society. They realize the

harsh realities of the dominant discourse and are ready to follow Ambedkar's ideologies.

Situated firmly in caste-obsessed rural India, Vanmam thus serves as a critique of our caste culture, invoking Ambedkar's framework of cultural geography. This critique can be seen through Bama's representation of (1) the culture of the street; (2) the culture of the chavady; and (3) the culture of the field (Vanmam, xxiii).

Conclusion

Bama, a Tamil Dalit woman writer takes a departure from her novels, as she adopts a distinctive touch to reveal the empathy for the Parayars victimhood in the conflict between Pallars and Parayars. She offers a self-analysis on the subject of victimhood in her third novel, *Vanmam: Vendetta* because whenever happens a Dalit clash, it usually leads to the condemnation of Dalits. The novel is about the exchange of revenge between the two communities and the later incidents are the counter retaliations after the murder of a Parayar by a Pallar. The novel mainly deals with the theme of oppression, brutality, caste hierarchy and the exchange of vengeance. Bama explores how caste is used by the dominant class people as a strategy to diminish the growth and development of Dalit communities. She also exhibits how caste creates a pivotal role in the lives of Dalits in creating violence, weakening human relationships, creating marginalized

people and at the same time benefitting the dominant class with wealth and prosperity. Bama's characters in the novel are much aware about their value and position in the society as they do not subject them to the clutches of inferiority. She also explains the importance of education and how it changes the position of people in society and serves the purpose of liberating the Dalit community. Through knowledge and education Dalits maintains their rightful position in the society.

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How to cite this article?

Krishna Liji. M. G¹, Dr R. Venkataraman² Dr T. Senthamarai³ " Victims and the
Victimizers: A Critical Study on Caste discrimination and Inter-Caste Rivalry in Bama's
Vanmam", Research Journal Of English(RJOE) 7 (3), PP: 167-173,2022, DOI:
<http://doi.org/10.36993/RJOE.2022.7.3.22>