

Depiction of Dalit Consciousness in Bama's Vanmam

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Abstract

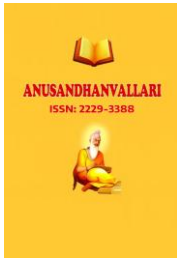
Bama is a celebrated Dalit woman writer who has contributed a lot to Dalit literature. Her third novel *Vanmam*(2002) which has been translated into English by Malini Seshadri exposes the clandestine act of the Upper-Caste Naickers to instigate enmity between two Dalit sub-castes, converted Christian Parayars and Hindu Pallars. The writer, instead of grieving over and complaining about the sufferings of the marginalized, raises her voice and emphasizes the need for staying united in order to alter their position in the hierarchical society. At one level, the novel describes the motives of the Caste Hindus, incidents of violence, the atrocities against Dalit and the brutalities of police against women and at another level it highlights the willingness of the Christian Parayars to initiate dialogues with the Hindu Pallars and reconciliation takes place. Only Naickers have been elected to the post of President in Kandampatti village for many years. After the union of the two Dalit sub-castes, the joint candidate becomes the President. On the day of unveiling the statue of Ambedkar they vow to stay together ever. Solidarity of the marginalized is emphasized by Bama through *Vanmam*.

Keywords: hierarchical society, caste Hindus, Dalits, sub-castes, reconciliation

Dalit writings emerged as a form of literature in India in 1960s. Soon it came to be recognized as new literary genre and has wide readership across the country. It provides a platform to the oppressed section of the society to voice how they have been victims of unbearable cruelty in the hands of the so-called high society; it records the sufferings and pains of the discriminated, exploited and marginalized sections of the society. It is the literature of protest. The Sanskrit word "Dalit" means "suppressed", "crushed", or "broken to pieces". In the nineteenth century Jyotiba Phule, social reformer used this word to represent the group of people who wereexploited by Caste Hindus. The word does not refer to particular caste; instead it includes people from many castes but who are socially and economically backward. The thematic concerns of Dalit literature is often compared with African-American literature that deals with racial discrimination.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was the first national leader who raised his voice against the hierarchal and caste-based social structure; he strongly objected discrimination of the Dalits and fought for Dalit liberation and rights. After him many writers have started depicting the enmity, viciousness, brutality and violence unleashed against the Dalits by caste Hindus down the ages. These writers not only aim at creating awareness among the people but also inspire them to have resistant mind-set in order to establish themselves on par with other communities in the society. The Dalit writers from Maharashtra and Kannada in 1960s were ideologically very forceful and they expressed Dalit concerns and issues strongly in their works. They become prominent and their writings were translated into English.

Dalit aesthetics and Dalit consciousness slowly spread to other regions of the country. New writers from Punjab, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Bengal have started contributing to Dalit literature. All genres of writing have been used in order to trigger resistance against social exploitation and to establish social justice. In 1990, Dalit literature blossomed in Tamil and new voices emerged to radicalise social and political consciousness of the Dalits. Bama is a representative writer to delineate caste issues such as caste-instigated animosity, caste clashes,



and caste discrimination choosing real life incidents from Tamil Nadu. *Vanmam* is her third novel that explicates how the uppercaste Naickers tried to exploit the two subcastes from Dalits.

In the novel, Bama explores the life of the low class society. She illustrates in the novel how they have been crushed by the so called upper class society. This paper makes an attempt to analyse the historical background of the low class society and to study class enmity portrayed in *Vanmam* (Vendetta). Bama's *Vanmam* concentrates on caste discrimination and marginalisation. The novel portrays the Pallar community as Hindus and the Paraya community as converted Christians. As the novelist highlights, Naickers, the upper caste Hindu and agricultural land owners from Kandampatti village blow the fire between the low class people of either communities and seek happiness. Bama remarks, "The Parayas toiled hard day and night to turn even barren land into fertile fields" (6). In Kandampatti village, both the parayas and the pallars are agricultural labourers; they are destined to work hard from morning till evening in the fields of the landlords for paltry sum. They lead a pitiable life with the husk thrown by the upper caste Naickers. In spite of their hard labour, they have to remain half-fed and sometimes they drink little porridge. The following description from the text underscores the pathetic status of the poor labourers thus:

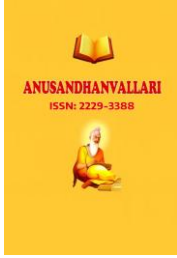
"Sometimes they would come home hungry after their bath and look eagerly into the kanji pot. But it would be empty because their younger brothers and sisters would have finished off the food" (45). Worse than this is, at times they have to do brain work with empty stomach.

These poor people have to be at the mercy of the Naickers for their existence. They are pinned down to the village; they cannot take up any other job because no one will offer them any job and they have not learnt any other profession. Hence, they live in misery. They lament, "What a life...even dog's life would be better...can't live, can't die either" (113).

Such is the status of the low caste people of the village.

In such hard times, the Christian missionary who came here to India preached fraternity, solidarity, and equality. The people of low castes had natural inclination towards the missionaries since they accepted the low caste people as their equals. Thus, Christianity provided shelter and other basic needs to the people of paraya community in Tamil Nadu in 1801. It is significant to know that the term "paraya" originated from Tamil means "Traders". In 1881 "census of British India" it was announced that there were eighty three sub divisions in Parayas. The arrival of the British colonizers and their East India Company gave a fatal blow to the trading community. The parayas (traders) lost their jobs once the colonizers took up trading. Subsequently, the paraya community had to face adversity and even their very existence was in lurch.

Bama's novel show that of the two communities, the people of paraya community ge educated and they are able to do jobs like teachers, policemen, tailors, masons, drivers, conductors and so on. Since, the younger generation of this community has started earning, the older generation has stopped receiving any kind of offerings from the odaiyar people. They have become economically independent and their life styles also get changed. Being influenced by the parayas the pallars also do not receive offering from their landlords. This act enrages the upper caste people and they decide to create enmity between the parayas and pallars. The Naickers do not like the boys of both communities playing volleyball together. Jayaraju who has joined the college is neatly dressed and asks the Naickers the way to R. C. Street. It irritates them. Similarly Seenivasan Naicker tries to stop the boys who have been going to take bath in the lake which is closer to his well, Joseph and the other boys have said in chorus "This is our well. We will bathe only here"(30). Moreover, both the communities have celebrated Christmas, New Year, and Pongal together. Bama mentions such incidents to show how the people of paraya and pallar communities have lived in harmony. This unity disturbs the Naickers and thus they scheme out to break the relationship that exists between the two communities. They are scared about the growing closeness of the



communities because five years before they jointly won the election to the posts of milk society and co-operative society.

The Naickers are cautious. Somehow they have to snatch the panchayat president post by hook or by crook. If only they destroy the unity between the parayas and pallars they can win the panchayat president post in the election. Otherwise either a paraya or a pallar will be the president and the Naickers have to bow before the low caste people. The Naickers tell the pallars that they should be together because they are Hindus. All attempts of the Naickers to disturb the unity of parayas and pallars failed. In the panchayat election Kaalaiyan has been elected as president. Once again both communities vow to stay together forever. The novel ends with a positive chord: “As Ambedkar, the champion of the downtrodden, we must capture the levers of the government power”(134).

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). Bama believes that education alone can bring change in the society, redeem the lower sections of the society from exploitations; education alone can play a vital role in mainstreaming the marginalised.

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