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Resisting Modern Dalit Self and Assertion in Bama's *Vanmam*

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Abstract:

This paper deals with the symbolic violence that Dalits experience in the contemporary caste-ridden Tamil Nadu, when they assert their 'self', as modern dalit self. To understand the symbolic violence waged on dalits, Bama's *Vanam* (Vendetta) enables one to comprehend the social reality of violence, both explicit and implicit. Suppressing assertive dalit self is a historical reality and still continues to be a harsh reality in the contemporary Indian society in general. I argue in this paper that modern dalit self is an assertive self to subvert the power, hegemony and caste hierarchy; and it should be read as an attempt to redefine and reconstruct the identity of the self and the community.

Keywords: Dalit, self, modernity, violence, assertion, Dalit sub-caste

“Modernization challenges to break away from hierarchy to equality, from holism to individualism and it also paves way for secularism” (Rege 2009: 30).

Dalits have been asserting themselves throughout the century whenever the caste Hindus resist them to enter into the public sphere. Whenever Dalits assert themselves they face violence from caste Hindus. This is evident in the Dalit autobiographies and novels. Dalit autobiographies are the modern narrative forms to express their oppressed past experience. Dalit autobiographies are the modern narrative form to express their oppressed past experience (Rege 2009). While the Dalit testimonies/autobiographies, that came into existence in the 1990s, exposes the reality of Dalit lives in the form of humiliation and violence, Dalit movements in the colonial times and the individual struggles during the bhakti movement fought for equality and dignity, reveal the suppression of Dalits' self and also the resistance against such suppression (Mani 2007).

This paper talks about the assertion of the Dalit self in the public sphere in general and Tamil Dalits in particular. Here, in this paper, self means the individual self as well as the community self and assertion means community assertion. To understand all these I engage with the Bama's *Vanmam* which is based on the real events happened in her own village. It is a novel that deals with the violence and hatred that was prevalent among the dalits themselves. Bama has insisted on the imperatives of unity among dalits: unity against hegemony and oppression.

Bama starts the novel with the condition that enables Dalits towards upward mobility. The whole story is about the enmity between the Dalit castes, Pallars and Parayars.¹ The

narratives can be structured in three parts as that of educated dalits, organized dalits and agitated dalits through which they capture the power politics. An educated Saminathan organizes the other educated youths of his caste in the village. He along with Jayaraj and Anthony play a major role in organizing people in the name of Christmas and New Year. By organizing functions, they try to inflict the needs of being conscious and assertive in the minds of Dalit Parayars of the village. The educated younger generation teaches them to be reactionary to the violence and indifference shown by Pallars and Naickers.ⁱⁱ While Parayars assert their identity, the Naickers decide to suppress their assertion for which they use Pallars as shield. The Naickers instigate violence between Parayars and Pallars and enjoy the power by ensuring the disunity between them. At the end of the novel, the youths of both Pallars and Parayars realize the vested interests of Naickers and come together, emphasizing the importance of unity, to dislodge the power and hegemony of Naickers.

The Pallars' hatred is further kindled by Naickers and there erupts violence. Both the Dalit sub-caste loses many people's life. When both Pallars and Parayars could not stand up with the problem, they decide to live in harmony. At the end they are united to win the Panchayat election to put an end to the Naickers' crookedness. This unity among the Dalits is made possible by the educated youths of both castes. Dalit assertion goes hand in hand with education. While the brahmanical ideology kept Dalits out of the reach of education and thus ignorant of their social condition for centuries, the advent of colonial rule and the Christian missionaries, made it a reality for Dalits to get access to education and the other modern institutions despite the Brahmins and the upper castes hold over power during the colonial rule (Mani 2005).ⁱⁱⁱ

As a result of this historical process the assertive dalits as well as modern dalit self are in danger. Attacks and accusation on dalits' self is not just a simple act of violence that but also a strategic move against the assertion and mobilization of all dalits. This attack is to keep dalits under the control of the dominant caste. The envious upper castes resist their efforts towards any sort of upward social and economic mobility. The dominant caste strives to keep dalits under their headship in the modern/contemporary time and they unleash cruel physical violence and target the Dalit properties so as to dislodge them off any form of economic prosperity that the Dalits attained (Pandian 2013).

Be it the Kodyankulam incident in (mention the year) or the recent caste atrocity in Dharmapuri in 2012, the dominant caste Hindus Thevars and Vanniyars ransacked and destroyed the Pallars and Parayars properties. Both the instances of caste violence at two different districts of Tamil Nadu is not merely an act of enmity or Violence alone, but it shows the complicit nature of the police force and thereby extend it to the nature of the state's participatory role in either triggering the violence, or being a mute witness to the events. In Kodyankulam in the name of raids and constant vigilance, the police ransacked all Pallar households and looted their belongings. Similarly in Darmapuri, the police quietly watched violence that took place for almost six hours and then proceeded to act, pretending to be unaware of the incident. Hence the violence on Dalits cannot be reduced to be acts of clashes between Dalits and the dominant caste

but should be read as the State's willful complicit participation in unleashing either partial or full violence on the Dalits. Dalit as an individual self or as a community are ready for a change and embrace modernity, but whenever they emerge and assert themselves as a modern Dalit or as a community of breaking or deconstructing the social strata, then violence is used as a norm by the caste Hindus to keep them within the system. In rural places and semi-urban places, assertive modern Dalit self faces physical violence and at times even encounter destruction of their economic properties. In modern institutions, especially educational centers, it takes the shape of symbolic, emotional and other unidentifiable violence. Dalits' modern self poses a challenge to the system of social structure and tradition. Ravikumar states:

“When the oppressed dalits are enlightened by their exposure to aspects of modernity and assert their rights, those sections which have traditionally wielded power, reluctant to lose their authoritarian position, unleash violence against them” (Viswanathan 2005)

Wearing nice clothes or hiding the upper part of the body of women has its own history. “Clothing, jewelry, hairstyle, naming, and food all these constituted an elaborate sign-system that had as its basis the system of caste differentiation” (Udaya 1997). When the Nadars women wore upper clothes to cover their body the upper caste (especially Nairs) people's selves felt it as an insult to their social status and so they ‘revolted against the violation of social customs’ (Mariappan 2004) and restricted the new practice and later not to imitate their own way of covering the upper body.

As Udaya Kumar says the spectacle of body in public spaces was replete with caste markers in the 19th century (Kumar 1997). Similarly the spectacle of neat dress is also a marker of caste identity. The larger mass of people particularly upper caste people have a notion that Dalits are impure and will not and should not wear could dresses. But with the advent of globalization and state's policy Dalits could get easy accessibility to towns, technologies, education and they migrate for work and study in the urban area. This made them to get access with modernity. In this background one has to understand Patali Makkal Katchi (PMK) leader Ramadoss' statement. His statement on 2nd Dec 2012 “They wear jeans, T-shirts and fancy sunglasses to lure girls from other communities,” is a reflection of inability to overpower Dalits as they did in the past and so he reflects his caste self in a different language. This modern self of a Dalit is always perceived as a threat by the caste Hindus and they keep their efforts to unleash attacks on modern Dalit self in every possible way.

It is also evident in the novel when Justin along with his friends talks loudly while walking along the Naickers' street, the Naicker men asked them which street they belong to and the direct answer to this question by Justin is “the Parayar street... also known as R.C. Street” (Vanmam 2008: 18). Hearing this Naickers are helpless and feel that they lost the power over Dalits. Their inability to control them comes out in the form of a dialogue. They say:

“Paraya fellows... see how arrogantly they talk! Now I remember... see that fellow in the checked shirt. His father is that Mudiappan who has come many times with his father

and held out his hand for food. Now, just because he's got a bit of education, he is behaving as if he's some very important fellow" (*Vanmam* 2008: 18)

Though Parayars are conscious about the upper caste i.e., Naicker's plan of creating enmity between Pallars and Parayars in the past they are helpless and could not mobilize themselves to stop the enmity. But the next younger generation Parayars like Saminathan are very eager to fight back. Saminathan's modern Dalit self erupts out in anger. As a modern educated Dalit he observes the things around him and questions everything. When his uncle Mariarasu is killed by Karupasamy, a Pallar, he questions the violence and realizes that it is Naickers who are benefited out of it. Further he also enquires the past of why there are chains of violence and how it is started between Pallars and Parayars. He thinks and understands:

"We should get education, qualify as lawyers, and come back put an end to this sort of injustice. It's only with education that we can get a proper understanding of such matters. Saminathan went about restlessly with all this thoughts swirling in his mind" (*Vanmam* 2008: 12)

He also further thinks himself:

"After I finish college, I must go on to study law. My sister Kuttiyamma too must get a good education. All the young fellows in our street and the girls too, must get to good positions. Only then we can take a confident stand." (*Vanmam* 2008: 16)

He is conscious of the traditional cultural belief of fate, ghosts, demons that in any sense would pave way for degradation. This understanding about the tradition or past experience is a sign of modern Dalit self. Anthony also shouts at his caste elders who take an ignorant decision of solving problem by holding a *panchayat* meeting with both caste *nattaamais*. He knows they will not deserve any justice from the Pallar *nattamai* in the case of a twelve year old boy who is beaten by Maasanam for taking a mango from an orchard. He expects a change in the people's mind and they have to shed out all the traditional practice. He wants the people to emerge and to realize the casteism they practice and also to which they themselves are a victim.

"All right ...go on living in the past. You don't know and you won't listen. You mean to say everything will be fine just because you talk to their naattamai? Shouted Anthony furiously." (*Vanman* 2008: 69)

When Jayaraj returns the village from college, he tries to present himself to the upper caste and his own Parayar caste men that he is modern, cultured and educated. Though he is eager to show his Dalit self as modern he goes to the extent of neglecting his own caste friends. Later he is changed when his modern self is recognized and respected by friends. This new Dalit self of Jayaraj is a result of his past experience and his realization of the upper caste's mindset of Dalits as unclean and uncultured (Pandian: 2002). He is one who always roams with ironed shirt

and pants. But people like Anthony do not dare to reject his culture. When he is called by some of his friends to take bath along with them, he thought:

“Silly idiots! They’re supposed to have gone out of the village to get educated but still they’ve no decency’, he thought to himself” (Vanmam 2008: 32)

The educated Dalits in the novel strongly believe in assertion and social status that can be achieved only through education. People like Anthony, Jeyaraj and Saminathan find out the social injustice, inequality and casteism prevalent in the village try to fight against them. They further spread their knowledge of understanding casteism. They consume modernity at the same time asserting their cultural identity. They prepare the people not to be submissive and unaware of, to violence, and injustice by conducting talks and installing Ambedkar’s statue. They conduct *pattimantram* (debate) on caste system on topics like Does society or families encourage caste? The educated modern Dalit selves transform into the collective Dalit selves that aim at equality and self-respect. These collective Dalit selves have changed many things among Parayars of Kandampatti village and brought in unity among Pallars and Parayars. The Parayar elders have stopped the old practice of offering roosters, rice, pumpkin on every Pongal festival.

“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.” (Vanmam 2008: 7)

These assertions of Parayars have questioned the upper caste position. Political assertion, cultural assertion or any other assertions of Dalits contest the hegemony of dominant castes. The cultural, ideological and economic changes of Parayars have threatened the Naickers’ stances of power. Whenever the upper castes’ power position is under threat they find a means to regain it by suppressing the Dalits’ assertion, mostly through violence. In Tamil Nadu, generally when the dominant castes’ power is challenged by Dalits there would be a conflict and violence only between the assertive Dalit and dominant caste- in south Tamil Nadu it is between Pallars and Thevars and in North Tamil Nadu Parayars and Vanniyars (Pandian: 2002). But in the novel the Naickers could not indulge in suppression Parayars, hence they mediate violence through Pallars to keep the Parayars under control. The Parayars indulge in counter violence to Pallars not as resistance but as assertion of their place. The Naickers also use police force against the Parayars to suppress their uprising.

“Dalits assert their identity and demand a respectable position in social life, while on the other; they face violent reaction of the higher caste against these assertions” (Arun 2007)

The consumption of modernity in India among various castes and individuals differs according to their culture and politics. In the Indian context tradition cannot be rejected fully in the name of modernity. For Dalits, traditional cultural practice is needed for their alternative cultural politics which pose a challenge to the constructed dominant ideology yet at the same

time they discard the traditional practice of caste system. Rege observes that “Dalit modernity, on the other hand, was fashioned by a stitching together of the emancipatory materialistic traditions that challenged Brahmanism and new western ideas” (Rege 2009: 32).^{iv} Both the Dalit castes are very much aware of their own politics for their uprising.

The Dalit literature and the usages of the term ‘Dalit’ came into existence in Tamil Nadu in 1990s. The novel *Vanmam* sets 1990s as a background and talks about the importance of Dalit unity but the Pallars who wants to be known as Devendra Kula Velalars or Mallars (as in Sangam Lit or period) and rejects the term ‘Dalit’ that is evident in the novel.^v The modern Parayars bring up the colonial modern Dalit icons like Rettaimalai Sreenivasan to spread consciousness. The Pallars are bringing up the modern icon Imanuvel Sekaran to spread the consciousness as Devendra Kula Velalars or Mallars. John Pandian, Pasupathi Pandian, Dr. K. Krishnasamy, and Thirumavalavan further play a vital role in deciding Pallars and Parayars politics of 1980s and 1990s. In this background it has to be understood that the modern Dalit self and Dalit assertion are the historical continuity.

Notes:

ⁱ Pallars, Parayars and Arundathiyars are the three major castes among the all dalit castes. Among these three castes, Pallars are geographically located more in southern Tamil Nadu and in Coimbatore; Parayars are located numerically more in the North Tamil Nadu; and Arundathiyars are located in the West part of Tamil Nadu. Pallars are considered as higher among all the dalit castes.

ⁱⁱ Naickers are one of the dominant landholding castes who had migrated from the erstwhile Andra Pradesh during the invasion of the non-Tamil kings, Vijayanagara and the Nayaka kings, in the 14th century.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mani has elaborately discussed how Brahmins and the upper castes have made use of the colonial masters to enjoy the power.

^{iv} Rege has discussed here the idea of Dalit modernity which was originally discussed by Gopal Guru. For more see: Gopal Guru. “Dalits in Pursuit of Modernity” in Romila Thapa (ed.) *India: Another Millennium*. New Delhi: Viking, 2002.

^v The Pallar youths talk of the pride of the caste, claiming that they are not dalits; Parayars are inferior to Pallars; and they are the descendant of kings. Pallars assert that they are not untouchables but rather the descendant of Chera, Chola and Padya kings who ruled the pre and post-sangam period. See for more *Vanmam*, PP. 77-78.

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