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The Explosion of Enfold voices: Marginals in Bama's Vanmam

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Abstract:

The paper attempts to examine Vanmam the Vendetta Dalits' marginalization based on caste, class, hegemony in the Indian society. Till recently Dalit experiences had been significantly absent from the mainstream Indian literature. The book focuses on the degradation and inhuman treatment of the Dalit community by the Hindu community. And also, Bama concentrates on the differences and community clashes among Dalits. She formulates a whole dichotomous structure among Dalits' religion and movement. Vanmam certainly had laid the ground open for such formulation, which is detrimental to Dalit struggles. This paper throws light on the study of the internal animosity and victimhood among Pallar and Parayar Dalits in Tamilnadu. The novel has served the purpose of awakening the consciousness of the under privileged and oppresses forgetting their identities. She forcefully asserts that unity and solidarity are the need of the hour among the downtrodden and it should light the lamp of liberty in their lives.

Keywords: Animosity, Detrimental, Dichotomy, Marginalization, Victimhood.

“I speak not for my myself but for those without voice... Those who have fought for their rights... Their right to live in peace, their right to be treated with dignity, their right to equality of opportunity, their right to be educated.” - Malala Yousafzai

The trilogy of Bama implies Karukku, Sangati, and Vanmam. In the first, a single voice came through as the narrative of anecdotes concerning her as well as the community. In the second many voices were audible, discernable talking about the ills and problems troubling the community. In the third, an inter-community Saga unfolds involving fights, vendetta, animosity, and victimhood. Like Satyajit Roy's famous trilogy of films based on simple, rural background, Bama's trilogy sees another India infested with myriad souls and problems which are waiting for centuries to be solved in the interest in the growth of mankind.

From Karukku (1992) to Vanmam (2008) the canvas seems to have become larger. From another angle, if Karukku stressed education, Sangati celebrated organized agitation. Vanmam enjoins the need for unity and harmony among Dalit communities. When the canvas grows there arise a problem of obscure images and a lack of goal. The characters were quite disturbed because of this universal phenomenon of truth. No character carry the story strongly on the shoulders from the beginning to end.

Bama's Vanmam insinuate Vendetta was published in 2008 in Tamil. It was translated by Malini Seshadri. Instead of resonating the sufferings of the marginalized Dalits, Bama has brought out the pains by raising her voice and tone ardently uphold the need for solidarity among the Dalits.

The major events described in Vanmam are confined to the problems of the particular village of Kandampatti.

Vanmam describes the pernicious interaction with the dalit castes- Pallars and Parayars the Pallars belong to Hinduism, whereas the Parayars converted into Christianity. Bama's writings highly reflect the ideology of Feminism. According to her, Dalits and Women are suppressed due to their wretched conditions and unfortunate birth. She has chronicled the oppression of these by the more elite fortunate upper-class people.

The treatise of the novel is one of decent and displeasure reflecting a politics of difference from the main stream feminism which has put aside the Dalit women into marginal sections.

It is quite natural; Dalit feminist discourse has questioned the hegemony of Indian feminism galvanized and supported by mainstream writers. Her writings have a more aggressive pattern that breaks away from the bondage of upper-middle-class ramification and involvement.

Bama, who has substantiated a severe caste and communal fringe in the Tamil society, happens to come to the community Parayars considered to be the lowest of the low in the caste, a sub-caste system as a plight to raise the voice as a Dalit writer.

The antagonism between the two groups of Dalits is the main theme of *Vanmam*. Such a scenario prevails almost in every region of India. It is important to note that the undercurrent in these situations is that women are oppressed in every aspect of life by men of their community as well as of upper caste.

The caste issue is foregrounded in *Vanmam*. The narration is done by an omniscient narrator challenging the stereotype that Dalit writing must deal with Dalit victimhood. The focus on the animosity between the two Dalit communities highlights how caste remains sacrosanct and inviolable, and the dangerous consequences of what Ambedkar would call, caste-mindedness (Azagarsan, Introduction xv).

Caste forms a graded system of sovereignty, high and low, which are jealous of their status and which know that if a general dissolution came, some of them stand to lose more of their prestige and power than others 'do.' You cannot, therefore, have a general mobilization of the Hindus, to use a military expression, for an attack on the caste system (Ambedkar:1979, p.72).

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. Because, as Ambedkar said:

... the change in the social status of the convert can be the result of a twofold change. There must be a change in the attitudes of the Hindus, Secondly, there must be a change in the mentality of the convert. Status is a dual matter, a matter of interests between two persons, and unless both moves from their old positions there can be no change (Ambedkar:1991, p.470).

Vanmam abandons familiar, conversational, and confessional voices and sticks to a linear, descriptive, and relatively more chronological narration. In the process, such a narrative

is less exciting and less dramatic being sort of insipid stuff. Even her earlier humor of sharp variety in vitriol and resilience of rare vigor are conspicuous by absence.

The narrator shows self-efficacy as the participant. As a writer, she shows definite inclination and empathy for the parayar community. The diversified character of the Dalits become apparent in the plots and counterplots of Vanmam. As the story continues Dalit resentment and hate become noticeable. The individuality and self-respect of the two groups of Dalits become scape goat on the altar of scaffold.

As the overall canvas is spreaded out, the vehemence of oppression gets diluted in the core of Vanmam. Some issues discussed in the earlier works remain reticent in Vanmam. Even the engaging and interesting is glaringly absent.

With a weak storyline, the incidents of fights between the two Dalit communities in Kandampatti cannot withstand in comparison with the authentic description found in Karukku and Sangathi.

The village in the plot is a picturesque area surrounded by the Eastern Ghats having people living for centuries. With the church in the western part, the Parayars of Christian background and Pallars of Hindu background live as neighbors. Away from the settlements of the lower caste are the streets inhabited by Naickers, Nadars, and Chettiyars, and Thevans.

The people of the lower caste have to pass the area of the upper caste to reach the agricultural fields. Despite the hard labor they put in the fields, all that they take for food is porridge sufficient to fill half of the stomach. The prejudistic view of the author is clear in the description of subjugated yet reasonable Parayar and the cruel, insensitive Pallars.

This statement of the author is supposed to be limited to the village and not to the whole state. So, it is a qualified statement though a slightly euphemistic way of escaping the blame of prejudging a community. It is of course seen that the co-existence of two Dalit communities is a common feature of many villages because persons are ascribing some caste names as per the vocation.

So, in the corners of many villages these communities related to specific vocation relegated to the peripheral areas of the village to maintain "the purity" of the overall rural structure.

The kernel of the story is that the Dalits have to redeem their self-respect, they need to set aside the quasi-permanent interval animosity and inimical behavior. The bottom line of the story of feminism is diverted to combating oppressors related to the caste system with a constructive method of empowerment. She has cast doubts on the facts that “every human being should be treated with humane approach”. Her goal is an egalitarian society in which every person is equal.” She has doubted the future by asking “will it ever be a reality?” (Author’s Note Vanmam viii).

Education has played a very important role in the village. Many Parayar boys left the village for education and when they came back “they began to detest this practice wholeheartedly” implying that they did not approve of the lower status accorded to them. They also understood that the upper caste people are using Dalits as pawns to instigate anger and fume among Dalits so that they can benefit from the policy of divide and rule.

Parayar Marrasu and Pallar Kuruppusamy have frequent wrangles that are settled by another person of Pallar castes. Yet with an escalation of fight Kurupuswamy hit Marrasu with a shaft of spade such that he fell to the ground in agony. His nephew wept “because we have no money, no education they killed and buried Chithappa in a ditch” (Vanmam p.11).

Bama has laid the foundation for animosity by settling a simplistic feature of the co-existence of Dalit communities not at peace with each other. It must also be noted that the gender factor which is so strong in Karukku and Sangati is not the main theme of Vanmam. The women are almost a forgotten lot in the story of clashes and strife. They do not have roles demarcated for them. That’s why they prefer to indulge in showery filthy abuses with sexual undertones. In some sort of defense, she has stated: -

“The Dalit women are not even considered as ‘subject’ and caste was never considered to be a subject for the discussion”(Vanmam p. 62).

Bama’s Vanmam has been described as the discourse of discontent, “a politics of difference” from mainstream feminism and it has been criticized for marginalizing Dalit women. Dalit feminism discourse questions Indian feminism hegemony speaking about all women.

According to Dalit feminists, Dalit women are facing three ways of oppression viz., caste oppression at the hands of upper-class-based oppression at the hands of the upper and middle castes and as women, who experience patriarchal oppression at the hands of all men

and men of their own caste. It is worth noting that right from the last decade of the last century, cohesive efforts have been made by feminist thinkers for constructing the record of Dalit feminism.

Women in the movements of Ambedkar as described by Urmila Pawar and associates like Meenakshi are recent supplements. It is rather an irony of fate that Bama has not opted for discussion on women. Dalit feminism and the complicated relationship between gender, caste have been nearly sidelined. In such a situation, the dominant factor of masculine behavior comes to stay in the narrative.

The condition of Dalits is low they don't have two meals per day. After completion of their lowly job, they brought only Kanji and pickle to stay alive. Marassu a parayan and Kuruppusamy, a pallan earn their living by working in the fields of Naickers. There are frequent quarrels between Marrasu and Karuppusamy. Pichamurthy, a Pallan helped them to understand that is futile to fight for this,

“Why all this fighting amongst us? Whether the fields are dry or watered, what is the gain to you? It's someone else who is going to reap the benefit, but it's you two who are fighting!” (Vanmam p. 9). In its worst stage Kuruppusamy lifted the spade he was holding, and with the shaft of the spade he struck a hard blow on the head of Marrasu. Marraasu fell to the ground with a cry of utmost agony.

Saminathan felt distressed whenever he thought of how his uncle Marrassu had been murdered. The memory also aroused an insane fury in him, because we have no money, no education, they killed and buried Chithappa in a ditch.....As if it was all in a day's work as if he were a mere dog or something” (Vanmam p.11).

In another episode, Pallars killed Sethuraman and Savariappan. The horrible scene of Sethuraman being chased and hacked to death still lingered in the minds of Parayars. Mekalamma, one of the Paraya women made a very true and interesting point about all these fights among these two Dalit groups that “they're the ones who are plotting to make sure our two castes never unite, this has been going on for ten or twenty years now” (Vanmam p.12).

In yet another fight, Pallar eliminated Parayar Sethu Raman by chasing and harassing him making it a last pain for the whole community. This made his son Rasaratnam to take revenge on his father's death “When I grow up, I still stab them and carve them up....I will

finish off every one of the fellows who murdered my father.” (Vanmam p.97). Such murders even destroyed the minds of the young children to take vengeance.

This observation summed up the situation. Behind the fatal fall of low caste men was the conspiracy of the upper caste. The earliest instance of such baseless fights was the violent killing of Pallar by Paraya man. Despite such a sad incident, the community made peace with each other for some time. The incidence of Marrassu death was the creation of the landlord who instigated the attacker with an assurance of “taking care of everything”.

The improved lifestyle of educated Parayar boys made the rich Naickers disturbed, they accused “the church for encouraging the Parayar’s.” Despite spells of peace, the death of Marassu was the starting point of Vendetta. Before this death, Parayars and Pallars used to celebrate Christmas, New year, and Pongal. The igniting point was a sample Kabaddi match. In the beginning, it was like a war of words but very soon the physical fight started despite elders trying to diffuse the crisis. Pretty soon, the news of the death reached Parayar streets and the women came to take the children.

Even in organizing function, there was a competition about Villupattu organized by the Pallars about Immanuel Sekaran. The Parayars did a similar art program regarding Srinivasan. Sekaran and Srinivasan were the community leaders. However, soon after these functions, each of the groups was at the throat of the other. Even the women were not to be left behind. All these got compounded with the case of theft of mangoes in which a 12-year-old boy Chinnapan was the suspect.

Very soon Pallar street meeting was held. Kalimuthu and Sundar Raju spoken. This gave momentum for the collection of money for the Ambedkar statue. This obvious unity amongst the Dalits caused tremors in the camp of the richer caste. Some of them instigated the Pallars statue. The violence took place when a Parayar youth cut a wire tied to a flag hole with boosting from the landlords; the Pallars were on the verge of attacking the Parayars.

During the rioting type of situation, even innocent people were harmed and the belongings were torched. As the Pallars being Hindus they had the upper hand in contacting the police, the Parayas had the worst of times. In the pretext of absconding men, police took the opportunity to enter the homes of Parayas and talk vulgarly to the women and even misbehaved with them.

The Paraya women were beaten up. All the women had swelling and black bruises all over their bodies as the blood clotted and congealed under the blows. Women were dead scared of the police as many of them were taken inside and hammered and abused. A pregnant woman of Paraya community was kicked by the police in the lower belly. As she lay on the floor of that police lock-up, she felt a sharp pain in her belly and had an abortion right there.

The whole village became a scene of terror so much so that the Paraya canceled the Christmas function. Once again, there was a fresh violence on the basis of communal issues during Easter.

The nature of Vendetta made people focus on the course of action to be taken. Lives were lost, properties were destroyed yet justice was not there. The police sided with the opponents – Pallars and Naickers. For the Naickers “the news that the Parayar street had become wasteland was as sweet as the sweet of nectar” (Vanmam p.95).

The climax was the case of the murder of a Paraya being tried in the law courts. The discussion started for making peace committees Jay Raju, an educated Paraya questioned “how long can we go on like this”? (Vanmam p.93). The upper caste persons ridiculed the efforts of peace they are supposed to be uniting again shameless fellow.

The upper caste people were getting upset with the Dalit community. Bama always had a vision of Dalit unity. She is amazed by the contribution of the women who carried on the routine work and endured the police atrocities. “Through misfortunes and problems continued to pile up the women faced them all resourcefully” (Vanmam p.123). In a unique event, Dalit women dared to receive the three corpses.

In Vanmam the young women bear the torture from police when they approached them. They drive carts to carry their dead and dig up a mass grave and bury the men. When police focus on women, during the raid on the village largely comprise sexual threat and physical violence on young girls. While Dalit women are not allowed to quit the village for work, they live and nurture their children by selling their dairy milk.

They also leave together at one house by turns and subvert police torture through their gendered bonding. When the situation returns to normal, boys are allowed to continue their studies, where girls have to stay at home giving up their studies. The impact of caste strife on

women is more acute. In dire situations pregnant women, old women, lactating mothers, and school-going girls have been suffered a lot, severely beaten up, jailed by the police.

According to Gail Omvedt, renowned Dalit studies scholar has said the following in her review of Vanmam: “In almost every region of India there are two main (Dalit) castes, often at odds”.

Vanmam opens the lid of the vessel of revenge and hatred among the Dalit communities. Lack of education has aggravated the differences and kept the downtrodden away from the path of unity and strength. Of the groups in Tamilnadu, Pallar, Parayar, and Arundhthiyar, the talk is that the book is regarding the love-hate relationship between Pallars and Parayars.

The serene bonding during events of cultural nature quite often is changed to the wide chasm between the two co existing communities. One can say that Christianity is a divisive factor. Hindu Pallars feel that Parayar has hijacked the educational field. Similarly, the Parayars feel that Hindu Pallars always have the benefit of official support of police and lower courts of law which are in the hands of the traditionally rich Hindu community.

Bama’s unconcealed glee is clear in the depiction of educated Parayar youth who have chosen to follow Ambedkar's thoughts. Social and Political activities of such students of higher education have been noted by the author with satisfaction. On the other hand, Pallar youth have nothing to be lauded. They waste their vacation time or serve the Naickers. The Parayar youth hold the woman in honor and maintain a degree of orthodoxy. They donot want to invite the women for discussing on cultural program. Jaya rasu says, “We shall continue with our cultural program. As a meeting is scheduled to be held at chavadi, women are asked to return to their homes quietly.” (p.66)

The educated girls raise theis voice against this. But of no use. Selvarani observes, these boys call themselves great reformists. But if there is ‘village meeting’, they ask us, women to go home. What kind of justice is this? (p.66) Older women explain to the girls “Oh, come on, men shall be men, women shall remain women” (Vanmam p.66).

Some Parayar boys who had run away when Sesurathnam was attacked, conspired to carry out destruction against the Pallars. Just as things seemed to be somewhat settling back to normal, suddenly these boys planned to take revenge on Sethuraman’s murder. This led to fresh unrest in the erstwhile peaceful scenario.

Myriad incidents took place in the lives of Pallars and Parayars. Soon they realized that “what started as a small spark now it's flame which is threatening to burn us all.” (Vanmam p .127). The overall situation was in favor of an amicable settlement. Even the elders sent the message What's past is past but the children who are yet to born must be able to live in this village” (Vanmam p.128).

Finally, nemesis caught up with the Naickers. The candidate supported by the Pallars and Parayars was elected as the President. Naickers had to accept the great victory of the Dalits. The filmy ending to the tale of violence is an indication of the writer's mind. She wants the raise of the Dalits through unity. She wants justice to prevail. She wants to usher in a new age where Dalits of all types combine and oppose the high-handedness of the upper caste.

Being a staunch Ambedkarite herself, the final picture is the dream of her guru. “As Ambedkar the champion of the downtrodden said, we must capture the lives of government power”. The mantra of “Educate! Organize! Agitate!” reverberates in her mind as well as the novel she has penned.

It can be summarized that through Vanmam, she has dealt with Dalit issues such as daily threats of rape, sexual assaults, and physical harassment in workplaces. There is a distinct variation in the representation of women in the series Karukku, Sangati, and Vanmam. In the first, it is a singular voice, in the second version multiple voices and in the third, it is Dalit Christian woman versus Dalit Hindu women.

As A. Mukherjee has noted there has been a constant attempt to move the fringe of Dalits to the heart of the society.

There is, of course, the stress on education and the results in the reformist approach. When the educated students force elders to stop paying respect to Naickers, they did not know the importance of this step. This affected the Pallars who also declared a sort of autonomy. It has been Bama's ultimate concern to glorify, edify, deify the concept of subaltern unity.

It must be noted that two decades cover the trilogy. When she wrote Karukku she spontaneously recorded her outpourings. When she penned Sangathi, she wanted a broader canvas with main narrators, Amma and Patti, describing the tragedies of the entire community. Bama wrote Sangathi with a plan. Finally, she has written Vanmam with a master plan, not a masterstroke.

It is a record of her plan to revive the glory of the past, redeem the lost sense of humanity, and prove that Dalits are the superior, tougher, and patient breed. This can be treated as her manifesto-to be compared with Gandhiji's Hind Swaraj or Hitler's Mein Kampf. The literary value is for less than the political merit.

Though the trilogy Pather Panchali of Satyajit Ray came up soon after independence and Bama's trilogy came after Ambedkar centenary, this is mysterious bondage between the two. The first was regarding rural life in Bengal. The second is regarding rural life in Tamilnadu. The progress is in terms of Ambedkar's thoughts superimposed on the sense of independence.

According to Malini Seshadri, the translator of the novel, the novel vendetta is a narrative of events involving two Dalit castes in one small village in one state in India. She also commented that honesty stands in the novel and it lacks artifice. She concludes, translating Vanmam has been a journey of discovery for me and a valuable learning experience (Translator's note p. x).

Vanmam through fights, fumes, animosities, combats, and compromises presents the realistic portrayal of life and struggle of Dalits and it is a bidding farewell to the age-old venomous practices of the upper caste people. It is a lesson to all Dalits who fight among themselves in the oblivion that united they stand divided they fall.

It is the struggle for existence, which made Pallars and Parayars fight among themselves. But as the dawn of realization struck the chord of compromise, they understood that their struggle to raise the standards of their lifestyle can only be a meaningful endeavor.

Vanmam answers the questions raised by Bama in the author's note of the novel,

Let the coming generations at least live without quarrels, end fights, riots, and vendettas. Let them get along with one another, as for the future...Along with the hope, there lurks the old fear. But, in their minds, they know clearly what they have to do..... where they want to go (Vanmam p.130).

Bama's ultimate objective and vision in Vanmam is to enlighten the subaltern the need for unity and strength to get liberation.

In Vanmam, the author speaks through the character Anthony while unveiling the statue of Ambedkar, which is fit to quote:

We must all get an education. We should be aware of social realities. We must realize how society has marginalized us, discriminated against us. And having realized that, we must unite and fight injustice. We must not be afraid to fight. We will make a New World. We will create an equitable society free of caste. (Vanmam p .61)

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 (p.vii).

Conclusion

Bama in *Vanmam* asks to focus on the fact that the Dalit youngsters can raise their standard of living only through education, which can dismantle the shackles of caste-based clashes and conflicts. Through Education the downtrodden can free themselves from slavery and improve their social position.

In a nutshell, Bama in *Vanmam* gave a message that Dalits can overcome their challenges and improve their standards of life through harmony, clarity about their life mission and required efforts to attaining empowerment. Ultimate goal of Bama is to pave the expedient path to her folks. In many interviews, she shared her opinion that people need to focus on both conventional education and spiritual education for turning themselves strong and powerful in all facets of life. In her *Vanmam*, she insinuates both victims and proactive Dalits. Moreover, she voiced out her strong insights to attain betterment of marginals' lives through the characters in *Vanmam*: Mekkelamma, Swaminathan, Jayaraj, Antony, Selva Rani, Nattamai, who express their strong desire to change the lives of Dalits, to hone skills and to give attempts to bring out their inherent potentiality, and to educate themselves for enlightenment.

Dalits have to gain enlightenment in a political sense, rather than merely accumulate university degrees. Bama's works are concluding with the Ambedkarite vision for Dalit empowerment. Bama dreams for a society where every person is equal. Dr. Ambedkar's life mission is the right remedy for these conflicts and can surpass caste and inter-caste differences and to step forward in constructing a social reality of egalitarianism.

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