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Caste Stigma in Bama's Vanmam

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Abstract

Bama's Dalit writing has been used to reimagine the ways of writing about Dalit women's lives and identities in a male-dominated and racist society that extends to the social-economic, political and sexual spheres of their lives. This paper focuses on the issue of caste identity in Bama's *Vanmam*. It discusses the contribution of Dalit women writers and their works in developing the genre, especially the works of Bama as an autobiographer who breaks all the shackles and takes up the courage to fight against injustice. It is also an attempt to present the theme of identity crisis based on caste discrimination which was established from the beginning of the novel recounting the past of Bama's life from her early years up to late adolescence as a Dalit. This paper also projects how the novel envisages the subaltern dream of equity and justice in society.

Keywords: Dalit, Literature, Bama's Vanmam.

1. Introduction

Literature brings out the feelings of society in the writings. Literature helps us grow, both personally and intellectually. It links us with the broader cultural, philosophical, and religious world we are part of. It enables us to recognise human dreams and struggles in different places and at different times. It helps us to develop mature sensibility and compassion. Our cumulative experience in reading literature shapes our goals and values by clarifying our own identities positively and accepting the admirable in human beings. It enables us to develop a perspective on events occurring logically and globally.

In Dalit literature, the writings give importance, especially to the marginalised and oppressed. Dalit literature is literature written by the people of Dalit with the consciousness of being a Dalit. The writings are based on the experiences and culture of the people of the Dalit community. It is a field of study where the Dalits express a life they are living. It is the literature of lived experience. Dalit literature puts a human into the centre and gets a strong protest against the caste problem, racial discrimination, and the troubles of the tribals. It believes in human liberty. The term 'Dalit' is extended to the oppressed, rejected, tortured, hated, exploited, deprived and dejected. Dalit literature is a literary system which aims at removing the Varna system and caste in Indian society.

Dalits have an identity crisis. They take an opportunity to deal with other religions to get a social identity of their own. Sometimes they protest religion for social reasons. Dalit literature is written by

Dalits, on Dalits, and for Dalits. It expresses the suppression, exploitation, humiliation and oppression. This literature is the literature of exploited people. Initially, the Dalits started writing about the caste problem that they faced. Some writers tried to avoid Dalitism as a personal attack on great individuals or progressive intellectuals.

In contemporary Dalit Literature, writers expanded their horizons through their constant struggle for equal rights. In such writings, autobiography holds up deep fascination for people of all ages, races and sexes. An autobiographer seeks liberation through the creative act of writing. Bama is significant among many writers who actively participate in propagating Dalit literature. Bama is a Tamil Dalit feminist writer, a teacher, a short story writer and a novelist. The works of Bama portray the issues of caste-based oppression and gender discrimination.

Bama's *Vanmam* is the third novel that envisages the subaltern dream of equity and justice in society. *Vanmam*, published in 2008, highlights the happenings between two Dalit castes in a village called Kandampatti in Tamil Nadu. Bama raises her voice to assert the need for unity, liberty and equality of the suppressed class for a better future. *Vanmam* exposes the internal fissures in the sub-communities of Parayars and Pallars and their harrowing experiences. It depicts how village streets are marked to segregate castes and sub-castes of Dalits, and the landlord exercise supremacy in general. The personal vendetta coupled with starvation, atrocities and unreasonable quarrels within communities in such a locale led Dalit youth to choose the path of education and solidarity. They realise that it helps to retain the cherished Dalit dream of independence.

Bama's *Vanmam* focuses on the rivalry among the oppressed communities. It also attempts to study how the upper caste people exploit this animosity between the two castes – Parayar and Pallar and perpetuate this rivalry by exercising a divide and rule policy. In the aftermath of violence and the loss of many lives, self-realisation happens among the marginalised people paving the way for peace. Bama's *Vanmam* is an attempt to bring to the forefront the experiences of the Dalits everywhere. The novel puts forth the inter-Caste rivalry among the landowners of the upper Caste Naickers stokes the fire of intra-Dalit hostilities to benefit themselves.

The Naickers are characterised to be the dominant upper class under which the Pallars and Parayars work, earning their daily wages. Throughout the novel, we can see that Pallars and Parayars work in the Naicker's field and earn their wages, and they are fully dependent on the Naickers for their financial needs. The Naickers always support the Pallars. The Parayar community youngsters like Jayaraju, Saminathan and Antony started an arts group called Kazhani Arts Troupe, and they organised many games and competitions which have a social message. The Naickers grew jealous of the developments on the Parayar street and accused the church of encouraging the Parayars.

The landlords were angry by the unity in organising the programme and the speeches made in the programme. They conspired to destroy the unity of the downtrodden. Misguided by the Naickers, some of the Pallars, who had not realised the evil intentions of the Naickers, demanded to return the money donated for the Ambedkar's statue. While a flag pole was erected near the statue of Ambedkar, the wire that was used to tie the flag touched the statue. Sesurathnam, a Parayar boy, secretly removed that wire which became a problem among the people in the village, especially among the two castes that led to several deaths.

When during the trial of the murder of a Parayar, there evolved a common notion of peace between the two communities. Jayaraju, an educated Parayar young man, declared in public, "We were just beginning to progress slowly and now these murders and court cases and police raids . . . all over people scattered about, studies ruined, not even able to attend Church . . . how long can we go on like this? (*Vanmam* 126). The two groups resumed discussion which led them to compromise. They unanimously declared, "After all, life is short. We work, we eat . . . we die. Why take on unnecessary problems?" (*Vanmam* 129).

2. Conclusion

The novel concludes with typically Bama's optimism, hoping for a result-oriented future. We must be on our guard if anyone tries to provoke us and create enmity between our castes. With this determination and united strength, they gained success in their conviction to live together forever and not yield to the instigation of the upper caste people. Bama has felt the affinity between the two groups is important and uses feminist strategies of representation and historicising the oppression in her narratives of Dalit experience. She points out in her writing that Dalits would have to help themselves and assert themselves as a strategy to overcome upper caste domination.

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