

WRITING AGAINST CASTE AND GENDER VIOLENCE:
A CRITICAL STUDY OF BAMA'S VANMAM –
VENDETTA

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Abstract

Women studies as an emerging discipline contain many pertinent issues relating to women in particular and society in general. It is an unfortunate fact that women in India reality face inequality and injustice in terms of education, job opportunities, pay and health. Women are being haunted by crime and violence due to various reasons. If it is the issues related to the Dalits and Tribes, the Dalit and Tribal women have been subjugated to experience the discrimination in every walk of their life. The proposition of the present paper is to portray the experiences of sufferings and oppression faced by the Dalit women not only by elite sections but also within their own community. Further, being an attempt to explore the position of Dalit women in the society, the present paper deals with the issues related to caste and gender violence with reference to Bama's *Vanmam-Vendetta* (2008).

Keywords:Institutionalization;Caste discrimination;Gender violence.

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Introduction

Feminism started to get into the stream as the people saw feminism as the war between the sexes than the political struggle to end the sexist oppression. The reasons behind the war between the sexes are due to the sexual discrimination, exploitation, and oppression. Feminism can end the war between the sexes as it can transform the relationships so that the alienation, compensation, and de-humanization that characterize human interaction can be replaced with a feeling of intimacy, mutuality, and camaraderie¹. Eradicating the sexist oppression will bring equality in the society as it is the basic of all other oppressions. Racism and class oppression is also stemming from the sexist oppression. Sexist oppression is of primary importance not because it is the only oppression but it is the practice of domination that most people experience they male play a role of discriminator or discriminated against, exploiter or exploited. Though the sexist oppression cannot eradicate or eliminate all other forms of oppression it can make the other oppression intact as all the oppressions are connected to the social structure.

According to Bell Hooks, “Feminism is the one radical political movement that focuses on transforming family relationships”². Bell hooks in her essay on *Feminist theory form Margin to Center* views that feminism as a movement ends the sexist oppression to bring a social change that will strengthen and sustain the family life in the entire household. She further states that as the fight against sexist oppression is of grave political significance- it is not of women only. The feminist movement is vital both in its power to liberate us form the terrible bonds of sexist oppression and its potential to radicalize and renew other liberation struggles³.

The term masculine and feminine are used only in legal papers and forms but in reality, they are like the two electrical poles. Simon de Beauvoir states about the view of society to see man as he is right in being aman and it is awoman who is in the wrong. Women are always seen in terms of thebody as women have ovaries and uterus and these things imprison her in her subjectivity. Women are often termed that she thinks with her glands. Men ignore the fact that they also have anatomy as they include testicles and they secrete hormones. Women are always seen as an object of sex as anatomy is women’s destiny. The identification of a woman is determined by her biology⁴. Betty Friedan says that women have to shed her immaturity that has been called

femininity in order to get the full human identity. This crisis of identity was there hundred years ago and in order to overcome the identity the women have to suffer to become fully human⁵.

Women are not only left out in the political sphere but also in the social, economic and historical spheres they are been excluded and hidden. When we trace the Indian history we find the poor Peasants, Dalits, tribes, and nomads struggle but we fail to know the struggles of women in each and every phase of life. A survey of Altekar's shows how the women act as a weighing scale to know the strength of a family and society as a whole. According to him:

One of the best ways to understand the spirit of a civilization and to appreciate its excellence and realize its limitations is to study the history of the position and status of the women in it... The marriage laws and customs enable us to realize whether men regarded women as market commodities or war prizes or whether they realized that the wife is to all her husband's valued partner whose co-operation was indispensable for happiness and success in family life⁶.

Looking into the status of women in the Vedic period they were given due respect and value. The social evils like Purdha, Sati, dowry and female infanticide came into society when the invaders like Muslim, Mughals, Britishers abducted the Hindu women and violated them. As Shakuntala Rao states:

The tenth and the eleventh centuries saw the advent and later, the firm establishment of Muhammadans in the country. When Hindu culture came into clash with a culture far different from its own, the leaders of the society began to frame rules and laws to safeguard their interest—specially the position of women. Rigorous restrictions were planned on them... We find at this stage child marriage firmly enforced. The death of a widow was preferred to her falling into evil hands. Hence, self-molestation of a widow was enjoyed by the law codes giving the unfortunate victim the hope of heavenly bliss. Such and several other customs were introduced which curbed the freedom of women to a very large extent. This was done perhaps to save her from the foreigners and to preserve the purity of the race⁷.

The very definition of feminism in the Indian context is a complicated debate especially when we apply the feminism so as to understand the life of the Dalits, Minorities, and Tribal women. Hence the emergence of Dalit feminism does unmask the mask of Indian feminism claiming that the Indian feminism is exclusivist and religious oriented. The Dalit feminism dares to interrogate the dominance of the Caste-Hindus of both men and women and challenging the imposed culture of silence over the Dalits for centuries together by voicing their feelings, the Dalit women pave the way for reclaiming their esteemed culture and represent themselves through their narratives. The Dalit narratives, especially by the Dalit women, truly aim at representing the innate and unexplored experiences of the Dalit women in the male-dominated Indian society.

Women are not given freedom and they lack their individuality and so, they are forced to rely upon the men for each and every thing in life and accordingly they are being oppressed and treated very low. The worst exploitation of Dalit women involves a lifetime of suffering, torture, and rape. The only way these Dalit women can escape the viscous cycle of poverty, abuse and oppression are through education. Through education, more Dalit women can come to know their basic human rights and they can then raise an even stronger voice against abuse and exploitation from the upper castes.

The novel *Vanmam-Vendetta* [vengeance, revenge] (2008) written by Bama portrays the animosity between two castes within Dalits. Pallars and Parayyas are the two Dalit Casts discussed in the text. Pallars identified themselves as Hindus and Parayyas are mostly Christian converts. A small rift between them caused by the upper-class people make the women suffer and later how the women manage to lead their life without the help of men and how they speak out bravely to the police about the murder and injustice happened to them shows the strength of the women in the novel. It is very pertinent to know that Women are subjugated in every sphere of life both by men of upper caste and by her own men. The concept of the novel is how the land owners of the dominated “Naicker” caste stroke the fire between Pillars and Parayyas to preserve Naickers own status.

In the village of Kandampatti, where the novel is set, the people have been living for years with the burden of fears of their fellowmen, and of what the future may bring. Due to these

unnecessary rivalries with dalits, the young men are forced to live in hiding. Children cannot go to school, women are widowed and children are orphaned. The loss on both sides makes them realize the role of dominant castes and state machinery especially the police in perpetrating their animosity. The story ends when yet another killing of an innocent parayar by the agitated Pillars leads to a serious rethink in both caste groups. They realize that the dominant castes have been following a divide and rule strategy to keep the fires of Vanmam-Vendetta burning between the two castes.

The growth of the lower caste people brings hatred and vengeance into the heart of upper caste people. They don't want the parayars and Pallars to grow. And they discuss, "Gone are those days when people would do jobs for you even without your having to tell them" (19)⁸. The parayars were well educated and they were in different professions the village parayars were very active and had the wisdom of education. And they followed Christianity hence the Naickers wanted to bring a rift between the Pallars and Parayars as Pallars belong to Hindu they put forth the issue of religion and the Naickers instigated the Pallars and made them be mere puppets in the hands of them stating that they all belonged to Hindu religion and the Parayars belonged to the Christianity. Likewise, the Naickers incited and goaded the Pallans:

You know the old saying, "if the village is split into two, only the mischief-maker will celebrate". It is true instead of being sensible and cooperating, the pallans and the parayars are confronting one another with weapons drawn. Naturally, the other caste people are only too delighted to stand by and watch. (63)⁹

After the inauguration of the Ambedkar statue in the village, the continuous events brought forth many problems within the Parayar and Pallar community and it went to the extent of murdering Sesurathnam it was a gang murder in a bazaar by the Pallars. On hearing all these news, apoliceman came to both the streets, and the men folk of both streets fled. As for the Pallar street women, they had already left their homes and gone away to stay with their people nearby villages. But the Parayar street women were still in their houses. There were rumors that the Pallar had killed ten Parayars and the Parayars had finished off five Pallars. There was panic everywhere. No one knew for certain who had been killed, and by whom.

The police haven't brought any women from Pallar street this made the women to wail and shout at the police men. Many women have left their six-month-old child in the cradle and all the men have flown to a different place to escape from the clutches of the police men. The women in the cell wept and made loud wail. "Who is going to come... What can they say...how can they get us released? No one's left in our streets. Do we have to rot here forever? asked Rosamma in tears." (85)¹⁰. These women were innocent and they were not aware of the situation. Chellakili was begged the police guard, 'Ayya, you've brought all of us here by playing a cruel trick on us and locked us up like this. We have just returned from our daily jobs, and everything has been left undone at home. What crime have we done that you have locked us up like this? We don't even know the detail of what happened in the village, ayya.' (85)¹¹. The inspector came the next day and released the old women and mother of the infants but Chellakili and other sixteen women were locked up in the cell again. As they were being escorted back, one of the policemen kicked Chellakili in the lower belly with his boots and said "so you complained to the circle inspector about us, eh? We'll rip up your mouth if you utter another word!" (86)¹². Another policeman hit her hard on her lower back with his lathi. Chellakili curled up and collapsed on the floor of the cell. "As she lay there on the floor of that police lock-up, she felt a sharp pain in her belly... And ...she had an abortion right there. She had lost her baby. What agony Chellakili suffered..." (86)¹³. After seven years she was carrying her baby but the policeman has kicked her and the baby. The women around Chellakili consoled her.

There were no men left in the Parayar Street only a few women were there and they were determined to take the corpse of their men and clear it. Rosemary drove the cart and brought the corpse. The women gathered together, took the bodies in the cart to the graveyard, dug a big grave all by themselves, and buried all three bodies in that single grave (87)¹⁴. The policemen were astonished to see the women doing the burial themselves. "these she- donkeys has so much guts, eh, they remarked" (87)¹⁵. The next day policemen went into the Parayar street and started beating the women with lathis chasing them as they ran and raining blows on them and cursing them in the foulest language. They entered every street and every house thrashing all the women by asking about their hidden husbands. Thirty or forty of the policemen went around entering every single house, dragging the women out into the street, and beating them up. With no regard

even for the infants and aged and when the beating finally stopped the women, horribly swollen with bruises all over, sat and cried. “Even our husbands have never beaten us like this. Are these fellows’ beasts from the jungle... are they drunk and mad... how can they hit us like this... see how the blood has clotted and turned black...” wailed Irudaya Mary loudly (89)¹⁶. The men of both Pallar and Parayar clang were dispersed to various places, some of them were in nearby villages, some were in the forest and some went in search of new jobs to distant places to safeguard themselves. While the women were left all alone in the streets and they managed by milking the cow and distributing to other women and they were leading their life with the little food they had and they never went out for any work. Even to go to market they have to cross the Pallar street. The upper caste people were basking in this issue of the lower caste. Slowly the life returned to normal.

Both the Pallars and Parayars started coming into the village and started leading a normal life. But still, there was little vengeance among the people. The village higher official (nattamai) of both the caste planned to meet and sort out the issue. The struggles faced by the women are irrecoverable. Men, in order to prove their dominance and power get into various activities which make the women suffer altogether as a whole in the society and especially Dalit women, face the double discrimination. Men always considered them to be the superior and they considered the women to be of low birth and to be inferior. The women of the upper caste and lower caste are treated as sexual dolls and concubines by men. They simply use them and throw away. Though the women who belong to lower caste are called untouchable but their body is touchable and they can be used as the men wish. The protagonist of the Dalit novel is the community itself. As a Dalit women writer, Bama highlighted the cultural silence imposed on the Dalit women and tries to break the si rightly empowering the Dalit women in the society. The novel *Vanmam-Vendetta* can be considered as an instrumental for the other Dalit women to rewrite their own history and identity so far.

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