

RELIGIOUS SOLIDARITY IN VANMAM

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to show the religious solidarity in Bama's Vanmam. Her other novels expose the religious disharmony and conflict between the Dalits and the upper castes. In this novel, Bama finds the futility of internal conflicts among themselves and lays foundation of unity and integrity. The dalits understand that they are victimised on the ground of their disunity. They are disintegrated and segregated in the name of caste and religion. They realize that they cannot get rid of the brand of their caste even after their conversion. Religious fighting and intolerance lead them to nowhere. At last they get to know that religious solidarity is the panacea for their community growth and peaceful living. The text will be analysed in the context of Tamil society and Tamil Dalit Literature.

Keywords: *Dalit literature, religious solidarity, marginalization*



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The Dalit in Tamil Nadu are called as “Taazhhtappator or Odukkapattavar” previously, but Dalit is in more use. Due to Dravidian politics it comes to Tamil Nadu. Dalit literature has come to Tamil Nadu like other states or other languages such as Marathi, Kannad and so on. Due to Dravidian politics it comes to existence in Tamil Nadu till then it did not find its place in the domain of literature. The self-respect movement is an anti Brahminst movement founded in 1925 by E.V. Ramasamy Naicker in Tamil Nadu which sought for justice of depressed castes. Rettamalai Srinivasan is a Dalit activist and freedom fighter in Tamil Nadu and works for welfare of Dalits. He is an icon and very close to Mahatma Gandhi and one of the pioneers of Dalit movement in India. He was born in a poor Parayar family in Madras and brother-in-law of famous dalit activist Iyothee Thass. Srinivasan was the founder of Parayar Mahajan Sabha in 1891 and later it was converted to Adi –Dravida Mahajana Sabha. According to Thass, Dalits are originally Buddhists. There is no caste system in Buddhism, so he was fascinated by this religion and prompted to other dalits to accept Buddhism. The VKC liberation party (Viduthalai Ciruthaigai Katchi) is transferred from largest Dalit movement to recognised political organisation. Srinivasan, who is one of the pioneers of

Tamil Dalit movements, had represented Paraiyar group in the Round Table Conference in London.

In Indian literary milieu, the last decades of 20th century have witnessed the emergence of talented Dalit writers which explores the miseries and misfortune of their Dalit communities with utmost commitment for social change. Among the contemporary Dalit writers, Bama is a nun who has become a social activist and turned into a powerful voice for helpless lower caste Dalit people. Writing from margin, Bama's literary writing is a path breaking intervention in Tamil Dalit fiction. Bama who is a Dalit woman, Christian nun and a school teacher has written about her own experiences locating them within the context that circumscribe her personal and professional life. Her identity as a Dalit and her marginalized position in the society are shown in her writings. She is marginalized on basis of her caste, class, gender and religion and explores the multiple structures of oppression that operate in the lives of Dalits in caste based society. Dalit literary writing is a mode of activism that seeks the freedom of Dalits from the clutches of dominant ideology. She likes to foreground Dalit's resistance to oppression rather than merely record their victimization on account of their caste. A dalit is kept away from formal education due to the socio-economical and ideological paradigm. Things have been changed over the ages for dalits in Indian social milieu. In modern India, social prejudice and economic deprivation largely account for the gross negligence of the educational opportunities for Dalits.

Bama belongs to the class of first generation learners in her community and has found a place in academic circle by virtue of being a school teacher and more significantly as a writer. She lays great emphasis on education as means of social empowerment. As an activist and writer she forges close ideological affinity with feminist thought. Women and Dalit both are oppressed on account of their birth. She repeatedly points out in her writings that Dalits will help themselves and assert their difference from the dominant castes as a strategy of self-affirmation. She also consciously writes about the Dalits in the Dalit's own vocabulary refusing to follow traditional notion of form, style, aesthetic paradigm or acceptable forms of diction and grammar. Bama aggressively affirms her Dalit identity and refuses to be accommodated into mainstream literary circles. Her works adopt a more militant that often invade literary discourse. In '*Karukku*', Bama focuses the vulnerable condition of Dalit people and how they are victims of circumstances due to their poor economic background. They remain landless agricultural labourers who are politically powerless. She focuses another problem that is untouchability in Christianity. She painfully notes that their rich

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culture is robbed and they are left with no culture. She appears to be concerned about the survival of Dalit community. She focuses on the work that is routinely done by dalit women both at home and outside. She explores the marginalization of Dalits in the hands of church and authorities of church. In *Sangati*, Bama focuses the triple marginalization of Dalit women by the society on the basis of gender, class and caste. Her fictional landscape is filled with violence on dalit women, wife beating, sexual harassment, loneliness, women abandoned by their husbands and denial of their freedom at home and ultimately the succumbing of the entire dalit community to the economic exploitation of upper caste people.

The Dalit Cultural festival was organized in Pondicherry and Neyveli in 1992 and mobilized the Dalit organizations and activists and provided a common platform for them. According to the model of the Black Cultural Festival of US, the Dalit Cultural Festival was modelled. In this programme there was a discussion about the function of caste, panchami land, role of state machinery and role of separate electorate were discussed here by the different Dalit groups. The books on dalits were released there. There was a display of art which showed the artistry related to caste oppression. The government's publication of writings of Ambedkar played a key role in shaping Dalit politics. The grassroot level Tamil journal 'Little Magazine Culture' has played a key role in this field. Dalit Studies become new discipline in academic sphere. Besides such developments in intellectual cultural spheres, there is political mobilization for Dalits under the guidance of Tirumaavalavan and Dr. Krishnasamy. And between these processes, Vidudhalai Ciruthaikkal has emerged as political party and it can challenge the Dravidian parties by re-establishing the continuity of the anti-caste intellectual tradition of Iyothee Thass, Rettaimalai Srinivasan, M.C. Rajah and other dalit intellectuals. During this period Bama has emerged as Dalit women writer at the international level.

In Indian context the literature is categorized in two groups. One is the main stream literature and the other one is marginal. The main stream literature is based on 'Varnas' and 'Varnashramas'. The story of aristocratic society and its glorification is depicted in this sort of literature. On the other hand the story of the lower caste has not found a place and has never been accepted as the subject of art. The picture of suffering of huge number of people of our nation was kept aside by the so called artists of life for centuries. It is believed that they serve the purpose of social ethnics, morals, divinity and so on and so forth. Art never discriminates on the basis of caste, gender and so on. Bama uses simple, demotic and colloquial language in *VANMAM*. Here in Bama's writings there is not the description of a

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community but also a search for identity and at same time, a search for a change of that identity. So Bama's writing allows non-Dalit readers to break from a traditional world view concerning Dalits and see them as fellow human beings with their own identity. The language of *VANMAM* is totally different from *SANGATI* and *KARUKKU*. It is free of expletives and strong forms of address. Here the language shows a strong sense of community. The entire village addresses elderly women as 'patti' and old men as 'thatha'. She shows her women characters to be straight forward, independent and courageous. In *VANMAM*, there is not much use of abusive language comparing to other novels of Bama. *VANMAM* does not carry her emotions to a very large extent. It is a stark portrayal of Intra-Dalit rivalry. It also shows the religious solidarity in the end of the novel. It is a serious work because it deals with intercaste violence. Even though there is a fair amount of light-hearted talk among people, it is to do with male members of the community talking and making fun with each other.

While *SANGATI* shows more conversation of women, *VANMAM* shows more conversation of men. *VANMAM* is more political in nature. It serves as critique of caste system. Besides political importance, the women marginalization shows language of pain and suffering. She uses 'aadu-puli-attam' game as metaphor. The meaning of this game is tiger-goat game. She uses metaphor like 'aadu' (goat) for symbolizing soft, innocent people or Dalit people and 'puli' (tiger) refers to high caste or Naickers of the village. Here the Naickers are 'puli' and Dalits are 'aadu' But in inter-caste fight, the Pallars are 'puli' and Parayars are 'aadu'. The language of activism also can be seen in the voice of Anthony in the novel. The language of violence is put forward without any graphic and gory details. It is narrated in a very clinical straight forward manner. Bama also uses language of instigation. This kind of language is used by Naickers to instigate Pallars against Parayars. The Naickers also use this kind of language to suppress Parayars and Pallars. The language of pain and suffering is also seen in the voice of women and children of Parayar community because the women are marginalized by police. In the last we can see Bama uses a special language or word which indicates religious solidarity. This article is going to show the aspect of religious solidarity within the dalits. The religious solidarity means religious unity. The Pallars are Hindus and Parayar are converted Christians and always oppose to each other on the basis of their religious difference. Both of them are Dalits but hate each other by thinking that both are superior to each other. According to Parayar, they are superior to Pallars. And according to Pallars, they are superior to Parayars. So there is animosity between these two religions. This article aims to show religious solidarity between these two different religious groups in Tamil

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Nadu for the better development and better future of their Dalit community. It is also discussed that due to this religious difference, the religious solidarity is possible through conflict. The result of this vendetta is religious solidarity. *Vanmam* resolves the problems for two different religious communities i.e. Hindus and Christians. But in *Karukku*, Bama has attacked on Christianity for suppressing Dalits and multiplying their difficulties in different forms of life. This text explores the solutions for two religious communities. It is not ideological dispute rather unity which is the key to their peaceful cohabitation. There are few works which have been done on different dimensions of *Vanmam* but the aspect of this article is totally different from others. No works have been done on this particular aspect of this text. So this paper is going to show this unique aspect of *Vanmam* that is religious solidarity.

In an article, "*A Discourse on Caste Clashes among Dalits in Bama's Vanmam (Vendetta)*", D. Sudhakara Rao discusses the discourse on caste clashes between these groups. He describes the role of Naickers in their increasing animosity between two castes within dalit sub-castes one is Parayar and another is Pallar. He also describes the role of upper caste and state machinery in the fighting of Dalit sub castes. In this paper he mainly focuses on the caste clashes or fighting of dalit sub castes and how they are used by the upper caste people in prompting the animosity among themselves. According to him, "This novel is differentiated from her earlier novels as it focuses the involvement of the church and Christianity which empowered the Parayars community towards the rational thinking. Bama retains her critique of casteism in the church and also portrayed the Dalits as more assertive in this novel than the earlier one" (78).

He also describes in this article that unlike other dalit writings, the author raises her voice and vehemently asserts the need for the unity of dalits for their betterment in socio-economic and political spheres in this caste based society where dalits are treated as untouchables. He gives his focus to the women suppression or marginalization in this village named Kandampatti. So Rao writes in his above article:

"Bama's *Vanmam* (Vendetta), which first appeared in Tamil in 2002, is not the usual novel of atrocities against Dalits, though atrocities are depicted, particularly the brutality of the police against women when they cannot vent their rage on the absconding men. But rather than focus on violence, it strikes at the heart of one of the most problematic aspects of Dalit identity: the enmity that frequently exists among different Dalit castes themselves. The protagonists here are two Dalit castes, Parayars and Pallars, in kandampatti village of Tamilnadu. The Parayars are Roman Catholics

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and the Pallars are Hindu, identifying themselves as DKVs or Devendra Kula Vanniyars. The Parayars' Christianity influences them to the extent that they are on the one hand more assertive, and on the other hand appear more ready than the Pallars to talk of humanity, forgiveness and compromise. The Pallars are portrayed as the victims of Hindu discrimination and caste feeling which make them susceptible to being used by Naickers, the dominant caste (2).

Then he discusses other dalit castes all over India. The Malas in Andhra Pradesh, Maharas in Maharashtra and Chamars across all over India. These castes give importance to education and active participation in liberation movement and dalit politics. Here he gives importance to dalit education. Dalit converted Christians are Parayars who are more educated than Pallars. The role of church is remarkable for the education of converted Christians. So, Rao writes in his article: "Bama in *Vanmam* highlights the fact that Dalit youngsters are determined to have education as they believe that only through education they can liberate themselves from the bondage of ignorance and poverty and improve their social status. There had been an age old practice in Kandampatti that the Dalits had to offer homage to the Naickers"(7).

This article affirms that Bama gives importance to violence. In this caste violence so many innocent people are killed from both the sides. In this fighting women are marginalized by the state authority and police. So Rao writes: "Bama has quite optimistic vision of a very bright future for the Dalits. She finds a zest for life, courage of the Dalits and she is astonished at the resilience of the Dalit women, in particular. There is a burning desire to develop and a thirst for knowledge prevailing among the Dalit youths. When the men were hiding to avoid arrest, the Parayar women stayed indoors."(6)

In an another article "*Dalit Literature Becomes a Voice of Protest in the New Context: Special Focus on Bama*" by Dr. C. S. Robinson, where he describes Dalit literature as the voice of protest. He gives special focus to Bama. Here, according to this article Bama writes about the rift between two dalit communities one is Parayar and another is Pallar and how they are victims of the upper caste people's politics. The way in which Pallars are manipulated by the upper caste people is due to lack of education. Here in this article both dalit sub-castes win the election to prove their right in this society.

"In *Vanmam*, Bama moves back to her concern for the community at large. Her problem in *Vanmam* is to negotiate the dynamics of exploitation which is at the heart of upper caste-Dalit equation. The centuries old paradigms in which Dalit remains socially

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dispossessed needs to be reworked into a more acceptable frame of social co-existence. The challenge of mending the old age paradigm, Bama feels, must begin within the community. The member of the community must see the reason in suiting their petty differences and unite for a common cause. Bama plays the role of a visionary social philosopher and reformer by drawing everyone's attention to the role of education in the journey of Dalit community towards an identity and social recognition. She demonstrates her many intrepid acts of rebellion and the impact of education in one's life"(4).

In another article U. S. Saranya and B. Siva Nagaiah say that Dalit literature is ideal with real aspect or situation of life. It portrays the real life suffering faced by the lower caste men and women in the name of religion, caste, gender and class. It deals with the oppression of high caste people on lower caste people. In this article they also discuss that *Vanmam* shows oppression faced by the men in terms of caste and suffering faced by the women in terms of gender. So they write in their article, "*Dalit Fiction is the Realistic Fiction: A Critical Review*":

"Dalits are being exploited physically, mentally and socially. They are treated very low and the upper caste people suck the blood of the lower caste people till death. Though India claims freedom and states that it is the nation of equality and liberty but still the Dalits face the oppression. In order to overcome this terrific social stigma, poverty has to be eradicated and the future generation of the lower caste people must gain education to change the atrocities and humiliation by the upper caste"(346).

According to Dr. J. G. Duresh *Vanmam* gives importance to dalit unity. Dalit unity is the most important factor of dalit development. The dalits are suppressed by the upper caste people. So he writes in his article, *Towards a New Dawn: Reflections on Bama's Vanmam*: "Bama's *Vanmam* strikes a new chord in Dalit literature. Instead of highlighting Dalit victimhood and the miseries of the underdogs, *Vanmam* calls for the solidarity of the oppressed. Citing the happenings in a village called Kandampattiin, Tamil Nadu, Bama has established that the solidarity of the subaltern alone can make their dream of equality a reality" (1).

Here the writer describes the new aspect of Dalit writings through *VANMAM*. The Dalit writings mostly give focus to the suffering, suppression, and marginalization of Dalit people of our society. But Bama's *Vanmam* gives focus to dalit unity for their better future. According to Bama, dalit unity is most important factor for their development in every sphere of society. Dr. J. G. Duresh writes in his above article:

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“Despite India’s marvellous achievements in science and technology, rapid changes in the spheres of education and the blooming of Parliamentary democracy, the monster casteism hampers social development, eats up the vitals of the nation and crushes down a considerable number of Indian population. Ironically, the constitutional safeguards and the laws of the land fail miserably to ensure equality to the Indian masses. Like the Blacks in America, natives of Canada and the aborigines in Australia, the Dalits in India are pushed to the margin and looked down as nonentity. Moreover, due to the hegemony of elites in literature and history, the precarious existence of Dalits was not registered properly in the literary canon and the subaltern could not find due space in literature in the colonial era” (1).

This article gives importance to Dalit unity. Here the writer of this article gives importance to those who have been subjugated and suppressed for ages, find due space in the domain of literature to articulate their harrowing experiences. Thus the minority and marginalized author all over the globe makes optimum use of the medium of writing to bring about a positive change in their life and for the development of dalit people. Despite of showing sufferings of dalits, Bama shows the importance of unity among Dalits. Another article is written by P. Rathna where she discusses the caste consciousness among the Dalits. According to her, division among human beings are natural on the basis of caste, class, creed and gender. In India high caste people want to dominate the lower caste people. So she writes in her article, "*Perpetuation of Caste Consciousness through Internal Division: Bama's Vanmam: Vendetta as a Testimony*":

“Divisions among human beings are so innate and inherent that they could not get rid of that divisive factor even at this stage of revolution. Human psyche craves to master, rule, oppress and assert its authority over others and this is the major reason for oppression in all levels, in the name of caste, creed, race, gender, etc. This innate desire to overpower is discernible through the intra caste conflicts among the marginalized communities also. This paper endeavours to focus on the internecine rivalry among the oppressed communities as revealed in Bama’s *Vanmam*. 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 ‘divide and rule’ policy. In the aftermath of violence and loss of many lives, self-realization happens among the marginalized paving way for peace” (341).

She also describes the caste system in this article. Due to the concepts of superiority and inferiority, caste system exists in India. The high caste people want to suppress the lower caste people on the basis of their caste hierarchy. Caste discrimination is a prominent

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problem in India. Dalit issue is the result of caste segregation. Due to this caste segregation it is difficult to remove untouchability. The innate caste consciousness is evident in the submissive nature of Pallars who willfully accept their inferior position in social ladder. Another article is written by V. Sangeetha and B. Vidhya on *Vanmam*, where they discuss the muffled voice. They put the muffled voice to the forefront of the society. They portray the violence faced by the Pallars and Parayar in this article. They focus to the dalit sub-caste rivalry of this novel in their article.

Every human being should be treated as human being and respected as a human being which is the chief objective of Dalit writings. Education is the most important factor for their developments. Through education they can empower themselves and can assert their existence to face the problems of caste ridden society. Through education a dalit can achieve international success. Every thing will be possible if they stop infighting in the name of caste, gender and religion. That's why Bama has reinforced the religious solidarity as the key to the Dalits' progress and prosperity.

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