

Dalit Subjugation and the Politics of Unity in Bama's: Vanmam

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Abstract

Dalit literature in India has emerged as a powerful medium of resistance against caste-based oppression and social exclusion. Rooted in lived experiences, it foregrounds the voices of the marginalized and challenges dominant literary traditions. Bama's novel *Vanmam* occupies a significant position in Tamil Dalit writing as it addresses intra-Dalit conflicts and emphasizes the necessity of unity for social empowerment. This paper examines *Vanmam* as a narrative of Dalit subjugation, internal fragmentation, and collective struggle. It explores how caste, religion, gender, and education intersect in shaping Dalit identity and resistance. Through a critical reading of the text, the study highlights Bama's commitment to social justice and her vision of solidarity as the foundation for Dalit emancipation.

Keywords: dalit literature, bama, vanmam, caste, subjugation, unity, dalit feminism, education

Introduction

Dalit literature represents a radical departure from mainstream Indian literary traditions. It is literature written by Dalits, about Dalits, and for Dalits, grounded in experiences of oppression, humiliation, and resistance. Unlike conventional literature that often romanticizes social realities, Dalit writing presents life in its stark and painful truth.

Among contemporary Tamil Dalit writers, Bama occupies a prominent position. Her works such as *Karukku*, *Sangati*, and *Vanmam* articulate the struggles of marginalized communities with remarkable honesty and intensity. While *Karukku* focuses on spiritual and institutional discrimination and *Sangati* foregrounds Dalit women's experiences, *Vanmam* addresses intra-Dalit conflicts and their destructive consequences.

This paper examines how *Vanmam* portrays Dalit subjugation not only through external oppression but also through internal divisions, and how Bama advocates unity and education as tools of liberation.

Dalit Literature and Social Consciousness

Dalit literature emerged as a response to centuries of caste-based discrimination. Inspired by the of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and other social reformers, it emphasizes dignity, equality, and self-respect. It rejects traditional aesthetics and adopts a language rooted in everyday life.

Dalit consciousness is central to this literary tradition. It involves an awareness of historical injustice and a commitment to social transformation. This consciousness differentiates Dalit writing from humanitarian literature produced by non-Dalit authors, which often lacks political commitment.

Bama's writing reflects this consciousness. Her narratives are not merely personal accounts but collective testimonies of a community struggling for recognition and justice.

Vanmam: A Narrative of Intra-Dalit Conflict

Vanmam, meaning “vendetta,” is set in Kandampatti, a village in Tamil Nadu inhabited by Parayars (mostly Christian) and Pallars (mostly Hindu). Although both communities belong to the Dalit fold, they are divided by caste pride, religion, and economic competition.

The novel portrays how upper-caste landlords exploit these divisions to maintain their dominance. By instigating suspicion and hostility, they prevent Dalits from forming a united front. Violence becomes a recurring pattern, leading to loss of lives and social instability.

Bama does not romanticize either community. Instead, she presents their weaknesses, prejudices, and internalized caste mentality. Through this realistic portrayal, she exposes how caste hierarchy reproduces itself even among the oppressed.

Caste, Religion, and Power

One of the central concerns of Vanmam is the persistence of caste despite religious conversion. Christianity, which promises equality, fails to erase caste consciousness. Converted Parayars continue to be treated as untouchables within and outside religious institutions.

The Pallars, on the other hand, assert a superior identity by distancing themselves from Parayars. This reflects what Ambedkar described as “caste-mindedness,” where communities cling to hierarchical status even at the cost of collective welfare.

Bama shows that caste is not merely a social structure but a psychological condition deeply embedded in everyday practices. As long as this mindset persists, genuine social transformation remains difficult.

Dalit Women and Triple Marginalization

Although Vanmam primarily focuses on caste conflict, it also reveals the marginal position of Dalit women. They suffer oppression on three levels: as Dalits, as members of the working class, and as women in a patriarchal society.

Women are often excluded from political discussions and decision-making processes. Their voices remain peripheral even within movements aimed at Dalit empowerment. Domestic violence, economic exploitation, and social restrictions further compound their vulnerability.

Bama, as a Dalit feminist, recognizes this layered oppression. While Vanmam gives limited narrative space to women compared to Sangati, it still reflects the gendered dimensions of caste conflict and social marginalization.

Education as a Tool of Empowerment

Education plays a crucial role in Vanmam. Parayar youth, who gain access to education through missionary institutions, develop political awareness and self-confidence. They organize cultural programmes, promote Ambedkarite ideology, and challenge traditional hierarchies.

In contrast, lack of educational opportunities among Pallars leads to frustration and resentment. This disparity becomes another factor contributing to conflict.

For Bama, education is not merely academic achievement but political enlightenment. It enables Dalits to understand structures of domination and resist manipulation. She consistently presents education as the foundation for dignity and self-reliance.

Narrative Technique and Aesthetic Strategy

Vanmam adopts an omniscient narrative voice that observes events without overt emotional involvement. This detached style allows readers to analyze social realities objectively. Unlike the autobiographical tone of Karukku, this novel emphasizes collective experience over individual suffering.

Bama avoids elaborate plots and literary ornamentation. Her straightforward language reflects oral traditions and community storytelling. This aesthetic choice reinforces the authenticity of the narrative and aligns with Dalit literary principles.

The absence of sentimentalism strengthens the political impact of the text, making it a powerful document of social reality.

Unity as Political Necessity

The central message of Vanmam is the urgent need for unity among Dalits. Internal divisions weaken collective strength and facilitate exploitation by dominant groups. Through repeated cycles of violence, Bama demonstrates the futility of vendetta.

The novel advocates political awareness and organized struggle as alternatives to emotional retaliation. Electoral participation, community organizations, and cultural movements emerge as potential avenues for empowerment.

Bama's vision aligns with Ambedkar's emphasis on solidarity, education, and constitutional methods as means of social change.

Conclusion

Vanmam is a significant contribution to Dalit literature as it addresses an often-neglected aspect of Dalit life: internal conflict. By exposing the destructive consequences of caste pride and religious divisions, Bama calls for critical self-reflection within marginalized communities.

The novel portrays subjugation not only as external oppression but also as internalized hierarchy. Through her emphasis on unity, education, and political consciousness, Bama offers a constructive vision for Dalit empowerment.

As a Dalit feminist and activist writer, Bama transforms literature into a form of social intervention. Vanmam thus stands as both a warning against fragmentation and a manifesto for collective resistance.

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