

# The Pathetic state of Intra-Caste Conflicts in *Vanmam: Vendetta*

(K. Suriya, Assistant Professor, Department of English, KCS Kasi Nadar College of Arts and Science, Chennai.

*Vanmam: Vendetta* is the third work written by Bama. It first appeared in Tamil in 2003 and is not an usual novel of atrocities against Dalits. It focuses on brutality of the policemen against Dalit women and records the internal animosity between *Pallars* and *Parayars*. This work has been translated into English by Malini Seshadri.

*Vanmam: Vendetta* brings out the prolonged feud between families in which people are murdered in return for previous murders. It also portrays the most problematic aspects of Dalit identity and projects the enmity that exists between the two Dalit castes – *Parayars* and *Pallars*, in Kandampatti village.

*Vanmam: Vendetta* visualizes the internal segregation of caste within the Dalit community, with emphasis on the role of caste in their lives. Caste plays a major role in the lives of both the lower and the upper caste people.

The wealthy *Naickers* had used their power and social status to separate *Pallars* and *Parayars* to ensure that the Dalit served under them as slaves without questioning. Lack of education, innocence and deeds of the greedy *Naickers* prevented them from logical thinking. They just believed the words of the upper caste people which as a consequence helped in nurturing a strong enmity amidst the two lower castes disturbed the peace of the whole village.

The introduction and the description of characters finely throws light on the culture, customs, tradition and their day-to-day life in the village set up. Young men like Jayaraju, Saminathan and the others desired to improve the standard of the Dalit people and make them well-informed about the outside world. Though there were educated young people in the village, the elders of the Dalit community believed the upper caste *Naickers*, especially *Pallars*. Due to this blind devotion, they were exploited and hence were bound to suffer. After enough experience, they understood the intentional moves of the dominant castes and their idea of divide and rule. The only aim of the upper caste people was to fuel the enmity between the two Dalit groups and keep the animosity alive. They felt that this was the only trump card to force the downtrodden to serve under them. The core theme of this work is caste and is described in the introduction of the novel.

In the novel, *Kandampatti* was inhabited by people belonging to various castes. The eastern part was occupied by lower caste people such as *Parayars*, *Pallars*, *Chakkaliyars*, *Chaliyars*, *Moopanars* and *Pannadis*.

The high caste people such as Thevars, Chettiyars, Aasaris, Pillais, Nadars and *Naickers* resided in the western part. The upper castes had isolated the untouchables from them. *Parayars* went out of the village for education but the *Pallars* didn't do so.

*Naickers* had leased their lands to *Parayars*. Some greedy *Naickers* who disliked their development had changed their fields into orchards and grooves and engaged them to work as guards in their orchards. The orchards were much closer to the mountains and this made the guards afraid of the wild animals, as they feared that they would invade into field at night and kill the men who guarded the field. The high caste *Naickers* enjoyed all the benefits whereas the lower caste *Pallars* and *Parayars* had to toil for them. Now, the *Parayars* lives had changed a lot. They took up professions like tailoring, law, masonry, plumbing, driving, conductors, teaching, police service and also engaged in the trading field. Even then in certain village people from *parayar* caste face problems. *Parayar* people were murdered and case will not be taken by the police.

*Parayar* people were murdered for no reasons sometimes. The enmity between *Pallars* and *Parayars* was strengthened by various issues and problems. Saminathan, the main character in the novel and other characters suffer a lot because of the caste discrimination. A simple quarrel between *Pallars* and *Parayars* led to too many confusion. They are completely unaware that their discrimination is being used by the *Naickers*. The immature state of the people is clearly explained throughout the story.

The novel clearly reveals the pathetic state of the people who don't possess knowledge about how to lead a respectable life. When life offers too many threats for them through upper caste people, they fight among them. The problem reached the peak during the panchayat election. In the panchayat elections, they came to an agreement that *Parayars* should become the president of the milk society and the *Pallars* should become the president of the co-operative society. People had accepted it and polled without splitting the votes. The *Naickers* were very much angry with them and often played some tricks to widen the rift between *Pallars* and *Parayars*.

Once there was a fight between *Parayars* and *Pallars* on important festivals, the elders in that community had advised to conduct the events separately in order to avoid unnecessary chaos.

The immaturity of the people didn't allow them even to recognize good happenings around them. When a good person like Jayaraju tried to help them, he was teased. Jayaraju was the one who behaved in a unique manner in the Parayar Street. He dressed well and always looked neat and clean. He never failed to attend the prayer meetings every morning in the Church. He conducted prayer meetings separately and did many good things for the

welfare of the people of the *Parayars* community. Jayaraju's day-to-day activities made other young fellows encourage him to become a priest. He clearly replied that his service and prayers were only to God and not to make money out of that. Jayaraju had gathered some details for getting foreign donations to improve the lifestyle of the people. The young fellows planned to play some tricks in this matter. They spread the rumour that the donation had arrived and was in the bank. Believing that, Jayaraju made all arrangements for the project and also appointed Aarogyadas as his assistant. When he went to the bank to collect the donation he came to know that it was false information and this upset him. Thus it is proved that people lack basic knowledge to improve their life from ordinary deeds.

In all these activities *Naickers* enjoyed through the foolishness of the *Pallars* and *Parayars*. *Naickers* showed partiality in favouring things to *Pallars* and *Parayars*. The young boys of the village used to bathe in *Naickers* well whenever they were free. *Naickers* never liked the activities of those boys, because the *Parayars* never obeyed the words of the *Naickers* and didn't work under them like the *Pallars*. So the *Naickers* did all sorts of favours to *Pallars* and avoided *Parayars* deliberately.

Antony another worthy character in the novel had done deeds for the welfare of their village when he was studying second year in college. During college vacations he came to Kandampatti village, and planned to put up a statue for Ambedkar. He had permission from the *naatamai* and started collecting funds. Antony had collected funds from everyone in that village including *Pallars* and *Chakkaliyars*. After collecting enough amount, five members went to Madras to purchase Ambedkar's statue. They built a pedestal for the statue and planned to unveil the statue on April 14<sup>th</sup>. They postponed it to May as it was incomplete.

On the inaugural day they invited *naatamais* and other people in the village. They unveiled the statue. This made everyone overwhelmed with joy. The *naatamais* were felt proud of the youngsters and congratulated them for their intelligence and bravery. Antony delivered a very brilliant speech which made everyone think in a revolutionary manner. He had come out with his thoughts, ideas and slogans about Ambedkar. But the *pallars* were not able to bear that. Instead of adopting the good things in everyone the unnecessary conflicts made them spoil their own life.

The *Pallars* were jealous about the installed Ambedkar statue and so they quarreled among themselves and planned to install the *Pallar* leader Immanuel's statue. The significance of this statue is clearly described by the author. All these conflicts are happenings before the personality who fought to caste away caste and creed.

The *Pallars* were very angry on the *Parayars*. They had listed the problems between them and the *Parayars*. A Pallar man called Sundaraju explained to their people that they did not belong to the Dalit community and were addressed as Devendra Kula Vellars or Mallars, not *Pallars*. They decided to get back the donation that they had given for installing the Ambedkar statue. They planned to put up a tall flag pole near Ambedkar's pole. They tied up a wire on all four sides, one of which touched Ambedkar's statue. On seeing this, the *Parayars* got angry and warned them to remove it or tie it a little away from the statue.

Sesurathanam, who belonged to the Parayar community, was a unique man. Though he was uneducated, he was bold to face any kind of problem. He was the one who cut the wire around Ambedkar's statue. This made the *Pallars* angry. The *Pallars* planned for an execution to finish off Sesurathanam. One day Sesurathanam was standing in the tea shop. Kalimuthu, tried to hack him to death. Though he escaped from him, he chased him and hacked him till Sesurathanam was dead. The *Parayars* were infuriated and planned to do something against the *Pallars*. A group of *Parayars* moved towards the Pallar Street and killed two *Pallars*. The *Pallars* had taken revenge and killed ten more *Parayars*, and the *Parayars* aimed to kill five more *Pallars*. Men who were involved in the killing had escaped. The police arrived only to note that the *Pallars* had cleverly sent their women to the nearby village.

The policemen arrested many Parayar women and treated them in a very indecent manner. They released some sixteen women next day. The men were in hiding. The women buried the corpses of the dead in a single grave. Next day, the police searched for the men in hiding in the entire village. To show their anger, the policemen started beating the children and women using their lathis and used abusive words.

Rosemary secretly took some women to the priest to seek his help to release the rest of the women who were in the police lockup. Though the women confined themselves to their house, the policemen dragged them out and started to beat and harass them. So during night time the women stayed together and felt somewhat comfortable doing so. Rosemary had taken steps to release all the women but, the policemen released six women alone shifting the rest the other ten to Madurai jail.

The women of Pallar Street cooked their kanji and, slept in their chavady itself. Some ten to twenty Pallar men were hiding in Kumaresan Naicker's cattle shed. Naicker took the policemen to his farm and asked a few men to surrender sending the rest of them home. Understanding the situation, some of the *Pallars* had surrendered and, the policemen arrested the Parayar men, who were hiding in the nearby villages.

The *Parayars* planned to drop Christmas celebrations that year because the Church was in the next street and feared that it might create a confrontation between *Parayars* and *Pallars*. The *Parayars* were not able to enjoy the liberty even for religious rituals and recreations. This pathetic state is being explained through the story.

When Periya Rayappan, his wife and Chandhana Mary who belong to parayar community, were working in the cotton field some *Pallars* came there to attack them. The women made Periya Rayappan hide in a bush. The *Pallars* killed the two women. Rayappan hid himself in the bush till dawn. Even the policemen didn't support them and harassed the women and children. Even legal rights are denied for them just because they belong to low caste.

Thus the story *Vanmam: Vendetta* talks about the two Dalit communities i.e. *Pallars* and *Parayars*. It narrates the story of intra-caste conflicts and violence between them. It appeared in Tamil in 2003 and it is not a usual novel of atrocities against the Dalit people as it depicts the police brutality against Dalit women and vengeance of *Naickers* against the *Parayars*. *Pallars* and *Parayars* were bonded labourers to *Naickers*. The *Pallars* supported *Naickers* and worked under them but the *Parayars* intention was to live a free life without depending on the *Naickers*.

The economic prosperity of *Parayars* made the upper caste *Naickers* furious. The *Naickers* withdrew their support to *Parayars* and instigated the *Pallars* to act against the *Parayars* by favouring them with all sorts of comfort.

The interview at the end of the novel helps Bama to untie all the knots and construct a discovered Dalit identity.

Like the proverb "Pen is mightier than the sword" Bama felt that the pen is a powerful tool to establish identity instead of using a sword to fight against the dominant caste to attain a better status. Unfortunately, the trials and tribulations that lay dormant in her mind flowed out in papers and later metamorphosed into literary pieces that became representations of the whole Dalit community and seldom her personal voice. Bama's works have initiated a kind of new culture, tradition, awareness and identity to nurture new ideas and bring dignity to the life of the Dalits. Bama's works are also instrumental to sensitise the upper caste about their faults and become aware of the unhealed wounds that have left scars in the hearts of the Dalits.

There are some pioneering ideals that make the Dalits feel proud of their practices: widow remarriage, opportunity for both women and men in Dalit community to attend a funeral, practice of groom paying bride

price to the bride, independence of Dalit women to work and earn their own wages and not depend on their men, etc., These aspects throw light on the unique identity that Dalits have and foreground the truth that they are better off than the people of the other castes.

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