

Dynamics of Dalit Politics in Bama Faustina's Vanman: Vendetta

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(Abstract)

The paper aims to highlight the core political Dalit issues and their intricacies in Bama's fictional world. It is an endeavour to explore the problems of Dalits castes and the treatment of the upper castes towards them especially in political spheres. The paper analytically depicts clashes between the two socially deprived castes Pallar and Paraiyar, who are constantly at odds due to the upper caste Naickers' divide and rule tactics. The paper highlights intra-Dalit hostility and political consciousness following loss and death. Bama's present work explores the different dynamics of Dalit politics and root causes of their sufferings, tortures and brutalities against them. The study of the novels highlights the different dynamics of Dalit politics such as role of education, upper castes manipulations and the landlord caste's divide and rule policy. Bama's approach towards Dalit political awareness has been critically discussed in the paper and her emphasis on unified Dalit identity to get political and social existence. The paper also highlights the role of political dominance for social equality and justice.

Keyword: Dalit Consciousness, Naickers, Untouchable, Paraiyar, Pallars and Dalit politics, Atrocities.

Dalit writings emerged as the revolutionary and dissenting voices in literature of regional as well as mainstream languages in India highlighting and exploring the historical, social and political background of Indian marginalized masses in Indian caste ridden society. Bama Faustina is not only a Tamil Dalit writer but most acclaimed woman Dalit novelist too who has received critical recognition for her literary writings. Her three most notable novels are *Karukku* (1992), *Sangati* (1994), and *Vanman* (2002), as well as a collection of short stories that explore not only Dalit suffering but also the basis of caste hierarchy in Tamil society. Bama Faustina, a well-known Dalit writer, was born in 1958 to a landless family that worked as labourers in the village of Puthupati in Tamil Nadu, India. She faces numerous socio-cultural hurdles in her life. Being subjugated and marginalized, she became a Christian nun at the age of twenty-six, but she returned to seminary and began writing about her own experience and childhood memory. The paper emphasizes the cultural and sociopolitical stances in the novel, *Vanman: Vendetta* (2003) which was first published in Tamil and translated into English literature in 2008. Her works have been translated in many Indian and foreign languages. She is concerned with all elements of Dalit life, including religion, conversions, language, festivals, ceremonies, dietary habits, amusement, games, and social problems in everyday life. The present work focuses on Dalit-related socio-political issues in its framework. The term *Dalit* refers to a specific set of individuals or communities in India who have been marginalized, exploited, hated, and humiliated as a result of the caste system and social order that is widely practiced in India. The word *Dalit* derives from the Sanskrit root word *dal*, and *dalan* in Hindi means 'broken down' or 'broken into pieces'. The famous social reformist and thinker Jotiba Rao Phule (1826-1890) is thought to have coined the word to characterize the plight and sufferings of outcastes and untouchables in India. The discriminatory behavior towards outcastes has been raised by the social reformist later, Baba Sahib B.R. Ambedkar popularized the word by using it frequently in his Marathi speeches and writings. The phrase took on new meaning in the 1970s, a period of literary and cultural boom that saw the creation of Dalit literature, and it now alludes to delayed acceptance of the Dalit's militant demands based on a history of humiliation and suffering.

Bama insists that Dalits must work together to overcome their issues. She believes that Dalits should resist upper-class politics of division and domination. In Vanman's 'Author's note,' the novelist asserts: "Marginalized people, those who have been pushed to the very edges of society, must put aside their internal enmities if they are to reclaim their self-respect and their rightful place in society" (vii). The novelist depicts the many dynamics of Dalit politics, as well as the upper class-Dalit power equation, in which Paraiyars and Pallars band together

to win the panchayat elections. They make history by gaining power for the first time from the dominating caste. Bama had taken up her social accountability and ensured that Dalits' welfare was linked to the liberty of their caste system as a whole.

The tale is set in Kandampatti village, Tamil Nadu. It is about the hostility between two castes in the oppressed class: Parayars, who are Roman Catholics, and Pallars, who practice Hinduism. Even the conversion of Parayars could not eliminate the Dalit stigma from the Parayar. The Naickers are portrayed as a prominent class with landholdings in the novel. They hold an important position in the hamlet and fuel tensions between the various castes of the subjugated class. They believe that if the Dalits unite, they will be able to confront and grab power. Abraham, the old Parayar man, claims that these Naickers are not innocent individuals who cause divisions among dalits in order to maintain their control. According to the speaker, the panchayat president, milk society president, and cooperative society chairman are all Naickers. Our fellows naively vote for them, elect them, and then go and stand before them with folded hands and slaves" (14). The article confirms that the Naickers are the dominant caste in the village and expresses concern for the unity of the oppressed castes. They understand that if they band together, their dominance may be challenged. Abraham continues:

The Naickers grew really worried. If the two castes banded together and fielded a common candidate, they could potentially take over the panchayat president position! They reasoned that these people had been coming and standing before us with folded hands, ready to serve us for years, and that we should not be forced to kneel before them (15).

The novel clearly depicts the power-hungry Naickers, who attempt to impose the age-old traditions of a caste-ridden society. They expect Parayars to follow traditional caste practices. They want the Parayars to walk calmly down the Naickers' street. On the other side, Parayars work hard to improve their economic situation through government jobs and other means. 'Odaiyaruoffering' is a practice in which they must pay an offering to landlords every Pongal day, however the educated youth of Parayars oppose the rite, believing it to be degrading. As a result, they strictly advise their elders not to repeat this humiliating habit. The elders accept this instruction tentatively at first, then wholeheartedly. The Naickers believe such customs should continue, even though Dalits are no longer interested in them. The book masterfully depicts the struggle between the oppressor and the oppressed as Parayar boys pass through Naickers' Street after winning the Volleyball Cup. They celebrate in a happy and exuberant attitude, and the Naickers complain about their behavior, "Paraya fellows...see how arrogantly they talk!" (18). They desire conventional respect from them just in the name of caste and convention. The Parayar boy says, "What's there so special about you people? If you are here, we shouldn't laugh, is it? We shouldn't talk? This is a free country. We will talk anywhere we like. We will laugh. We will play. And we will win. See, we have won this volleyball cup" (18). It shows the aggressiveness of Dalits' younger generation. The parayars and Pallars collaborate to install an Ambedkar statue in a bazaar. The aprayar guys designed it and worked hard to establish it. They ask Pallars boys to join them by donating one thousand rupees. The Naickers are unable to handle this level of development in the village. They decided to break the Dalit unity and push the Pallars to oppose the Parayars. Pallars have grown dissatisfied with the Parayars' statue installation and believe that it would be preferable if they installed Immanuel Sekaran's statue instead. The Naickers are eager for such a chance to create a schism between both communities of Dalits, inciting the Pallars:

When the Chakkliya fellows are keeping their mouth shut, why are you fellow joining with those Parayans and talking rubbish about getting rid of caste and things. Like that? Fellow who are scratching around for their next meal...and they are grandly putting up Ambedkar's statue! Just they have got a bit od an education they're doing all this drama! (61).

In fact, educated individuals from the Parayar community, such as Saminathan, Jayaraju, and others, work to raise awareness among the village's Dalits. They are attempting to transform the attitude and mindset of Parayars, prompting Ambedkar's words, "Educate! Organize! Agitate!" (61). On the contrary, the rise of Dalits irritates the jealous dominant caste Naickers and Pallars, who have not made much progress in their living conditions.

The Naickers are unable to accept the improvement in lifestyle of these so-called lower castes. The novelist uses Lokanath Naicker as the spokesman of his community and provokes Perumal, the Pallar man:

Enda? Why shouldn't you people protest? Are they such great fellows or what? After all, they're of a lower caste than you. If you challenge them, they will become docile. Just because they have seen some money recently, they've become so arrogant. They have forgotten their true status...They're acting big. If we let them go on like this, it's not good for you and not good for us (62).

Unfortunately, the Pallars were seduced by class consciousness and were unable to appreciate the politics of the

upper castes. They began to employ violence against the Parayars for little concerns, such as Chinnapapa, a Parayar child who had been thrashed by them for picking a mango from the orchard. The book stresses the Pallars' arrogance, believing they are superior to the Parayars. However, both the Pallars and the Parayars are Dalits, according to upper caste Naickers. Bama highlights up the bragging and self-glorification of the Pallars through the discourse of Pallar man Sundarraju. "The Parayars are inferior to us, and always will be. We are not untouchables; we are royal descents. We are not Dalits. We are now Devendra Kula Vellalars and Mallars. Not Pallars. So, we must not have any type of contact or communication with low Dalit Parayars" (78). However, the caste-ridden society treats them as Dalits; they are classified as a Scheduled Caste community and desire to be removed from that classification. They are victims of the upper caste men's divide and conquer approach since they are unaware of their politics. They create a "vanman" who has a grudge against the Parayars. Saminathan, Jayaraju, and other Parayar youngsters credit their education with bringing about numerous changes in their local society. They make Parayar aware of their fundamental rights. During Easter, they host a variety of events, including a fancy-dress competition, pattimandram, dance, singing, and oration. The novelist celebrates the excluded community's intrinsic creative ability. On the contrary, Pallars become envious of the Parayars and attempt to disrupt their programming by throwing stones. Not only that, but they intend to conduct events such as Villupattu about Immanuel Sekaran and have a large-scale village celebration. The Pallars become envious and eventually hateful as a result of the Naickers' provocation.

Bama demonstrates not only the politics of upper-class Naickers, but also the bias of police officers, who bash the Paraiyar ladies. In actuality, she depicts the brutality of police officers upon Paraiyar women. Uma Chakaravarthi makes a valid point when she states, "We need to recognize the cultural oppression as it operates in the lives of Dalits and women, especially on women of the lower caste, is far more dehumanizing than economic exploitation, which we understand as the dominant feature by itself" (Chakravarti 7). She asserts:

Sesurathnam's wife was in the last stages of pregnancy. After seven or eight years of being childless, Chellakili was also expecting a baby. Even worse Chinnamma was also holding a newborn infant, less than two months old, in her arms. Most alarming of all, Selva Mary had left her six-month-old baby asleep in the cradle at home, thinking she could soon get back after seeing the corpses in the bazaar...Her husband too had fled avoid the police... no one nearby either...Selva Mary was weeping as if her heart would break. (85)

The novelist emphasizes the deplorable circumstances of the Paraiyar women. Also, the police brutalized and tortured them. The policemen brutalize them severely; Chellakili is beaten and thrashed with kicks on her lower tummy, resulting in miscarriage. Bama demonstrates Dalit women's unbreakable willpower: when the dead bodies are returned to the village and no male member is there to bury them, the women carry the corpses to the graveyard and dig a single grave to bury all three bodies. The novelist criticises police inactivity after Marraassu is killed by Pallar man Karrupasamy over the subject of irrigating their respective lands. The police are unwilling to file an F.I.R. against the murderer, but are willing to do so in a payment case involving Palanivelu Naicker. The novelist depicts that Dalit women have to face oppression at many stances by both upper caste men as well as the deep-seated male arrogance within their own castes. The Dalit man, while he suffers from caste oppression is not willing to let go of the hierarchy and dominance that this system has given him for being a male.

Atrocities, brutalities, killings, thrashings, property damage, and house fires caat many use Dalits to understand vanman's terrible plan. They have realized that the Naickers, the upper caste, intend to divide and govern them. They accept that peaceful coexistence is unavoidable. Both the Dalit castes, the Parayars and the Pallars, seek to settle their problems and reunite. They want a better and more wealthy future. The Parayars released the accused in the Seshurathnam murder case. The Pallars also recognize their mistakes and value their initiative. The book depicts how both castes unite to contest the panchayat president election. To begin, the Naickers believe that Dalit unity is only transient and will pass in a few days. On the other hand, the Parayars and Pallars have chosen to challenge the top caste, the Naickers. The election for president of the panchayat represents a shift in power. The village has never had a Dalit president before. The novelist hopes that this kind of oneness will last forever, saying, "As for the future. But in their minds, they know clearly what they have to do" (135).

The paper examines the dynamic of power politics and Dalit consciousness in the novel **Vanman; Vendetta**. The novelist's major concerns have been investigated and addressed, such as the Dalit's social and economic conditions. The politics of the caste system, as well as the pervasiveness of graded inequalities within it the cruel plan of the upper caste people, who always incite Dalits to fight one other, even though they dominate them.

Bama's work is not only breaking a mainstream aesthetic, but also proposing a new one which is integral to his politics.... This is certainly not comfortable reading for anyone. Bama is writing to change hearts and minds. And as a reader of his works, we are asked for nothing less than an imaginative entry into that world of experience and its political struggle. (Holmstrom XX)

The novelist insinuates the role of education in the upliftment of down trodden so called lower caste. The youth of Paraiyar community, indebted to education accessible through schools run by Christian missionary. Due to education only they are advanced socially and financially. They are not advance only socially and financially but have better political consciousness. Therefore, they are badly shunned by upper caste for Ambedkar's ideology. *Vanman* alerts Dalit, the marginalized castes to accept the harsh reality that all the are underdogs in the eyes of upper castes in hierarchal social order and they need to accept a unified identity as *Dalit* a singular political identity instead of divisions of castes and religion. They need to understand provocation and manipulations against them. The novel graphically depicts that unity among deprived castes is a prerequisite to maintain a sociopolitical scenario to overthrow of upper caste hegemony and dominance in society which is the root cause of many of their suffering and tortures. A democratic resolving of intra-caste differences becomes the established mantra at the end of novel and this democratic resolving of the infights uneasy the Naickers badly. The castes always at inimical terms begin to understand the mutual interest in unity and united stand. The begin to understand the value of political power as in the words of Kaaliyan, "As Ambedkar pointed out, we need to capture political power first. Let the Panchayat election be the first step towards the goal" (158).

The paper reflects that Bama's novel *Vanman* is not only path breaking work in field of literature but also proposes a world in her Tamil writings and an Indian form of worldwide literature of the deprived and oppressed which is integral to her political enlightenment of the deprived masses. Its political dynamics seems actives one that fights for human rights, social equality and justice. However, the novel seems a saga of sufferings, tortures, brutalities and manipulations of the upper caste against the divided Dalit castes in the beginning, but the novel ends with a typically optimistic note, Bama's political optimism hoping for the favorable future for deprived ones, "...through there are fears lurking in our minds, there exists clarity of thought and a strong will as well. The novel emphasizes pre-requisites the unity, organization and education for the outcaste deprived classes.



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