

The Paradigms of Dominance and Resistance in Bama's *Vanmam* (Vendetta)

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Abstract: In India the caste ideology operates at deeper level and in more complex ways than what we have realized so far. The dynamics of caste and dalit issues are closely linked with our ideas of identity and self. Bama's *Vanmam* itself is the most forceful resistance, resistance to the caste-ideology that operates so vigorously in India.

Keywords: Dalit, resistance, caste dominance, marginalization.

*When readers of communities other than my own
Read these palm-leaf manuscripts of mine,
They will feel giddy, experience extreme palpitation in the heart,
And intense, painful soreness in the eyes.
And what is more they will unlearn everything.*
(N.D. Rajkumar qtd in Azhagarasan xxvi)

This is the wish of all dalit writers that the people in India show empathy with the pain of a dalit. But to experience the pain of a dalit what is needed is to 'unlearn' the typical and usual response that we give to the lived experiences of a dalit. But unlearning anything is the most difficult thing, especially when a society has to unlearn something. In India the caste ideology operates at deeper level and in more complex ways than what we have realized so far. The dynamics of caste and dalit issues are closely linked with our ideas of identity and self. The caste-identity is something that defines our notions of self, subject, religion, culture and also everyday lived experience. The caste identity is something that we have historically inherited, learned and practiced for ages, and lived concretely for centuries. Caste is the basis of our consciousness, of our knowledge systems, and of course of our discourse practices which constitute our knowledge systems. Caste is our primordial being, our existential being cannot escape it. By paradigms of dominance I mean the dominance of caste system and caste-structures that dominate our lives. The narratives of dalit writings are also dominated by caste issues. "Caste as a cultural category thus becomes central to an understanding of Indian culture. This way of re-situating Ambedkar in the present theoretical context may help us trace the anti caste framework found in the dalit intellectual tradition and in also what emerges today as Dalit literature" (Azhagarasan xxii). But resistance of caste is not something that is outside this dominance. The resistance is inherently part of the dominant ideology. Caste ideology was always resisted, since its

beginning. The Buddhist religion denied the Hindu traditions of caste. The resistance continues, dalit writings are part of the resistance to this caste ideology. The matured dalit writings like Bama's *Vanmam* (Vendetta) are not just the tale of sufferings of dalits but a narrative of resistance of caste ideology in which the question of dalit is one of the issues.

The setting of *Vanmam* is in Kandampatti village situated near Madurai in Tamil Nadu. Besides other castes, the village has two main dalit castes, the Parayars, the dalits converted to Christianity, and the Pallars. The Naickers are the upper caste who are now losing ground to the dalits and trying their all tricks and power to hold to the powers enjoyed by them in the past. This novel basically portrays the rivalry of the two dalit castes, the Parayars and the Pallars. The rivalry is not caused by some significant issues or conflicts, the rivalry is generated, nourished and maintained by the basic human nature of dominance, and fanned by the Naickers. The Naickers fear the loss of their power and control over these dalits as the Parayars are getting educated and becoming prosperous. Even the political power at Panchayat level is now a big issue in Indian politics because that is the source of concrete power structure experienced by the masses of this country. The common man in a village is less affected by national politics and more by the local politics. The unity of dalits can topple the applecart of power so far enjoyed by the upper castes. Hence every effort is made by the upper castes to maintain the hold on the local politics. In *Vanmam* the Naickers, the upper castes, enjoyed the local political power and they can maintain this dominance only if they keep the two dalit castes divided. But the Pallars and Parayars initially got united and defeated Naickers in local elections. This alarmed the Naickers. The dangers of unity of the dalit could mean losing the dominant status. The old man Abraham tells Saminathan:

The Naickers became utterly scared. If the two castes were to work together and put up a common candidate, they could snatch away even the Panchayat President's post! They thought, all these years these people have been coming and standing before us with folded hands, ready to serve us; we mustn't get to a situation where we have to bow before them. And so the Naickers made plans to destroy the unity between the Pallars and the Parayars (Bama 15).

The point that I want make is that there are two kinds of dominance that we find in this narrative. The dominance that the Naickers enjoyed, the dominance of the upper caste, and the dominance, which is perhaps more important in the case of this novel, is the dominance of the caste system as a whole. The Naickers are interested in keeping the dominance of both the kinds because it is the second type of dominance that can sustain the first type of dominance. At broader level Bama is resisting the whole caste system. It is the ideology of caste that is cause of all deaths and destruction in Kandampatti. But the resistance that we see in *Vanmam* is that the dalits resisting the upper caste codes. Even when the two dalit castes come together to fight the elections to defeat the

Naickers, this does not solve the issue of caste politics. In fact it sometimes increases the level of venom between the upper and lower castes. The Naickers pitch the Pallars and the Parayars against each other and the gruesome murder that takes place in the first chapter itself tells the story of the destruction that caste politics can bring.

“... Karuppusamy placed a stout stick across Markaasu's throat and pressed it down hard with his foot. That did it! Marraasu's tongue was forced out of his mouth, and his eyes bulged out of their sockets.”
(Bama10).

The destruction caused by caste hatred continues throughout the novel. As the dominant ideology of the upper / lower caste continues, the bitterness of caste system is further increased when the two dalit caste start fighting over small issues. There are three important metaphors of resistance in the novel. The three metaphors are – taking bath at the wells that belong to the upper caste, the celebrations of Christmas and the installation of Ambedkar statue. The dominance of upper caste is challenged by the Parayar boys when they start taking bath with the noise that has the tones of challenge to the upper caste dominance. When the Naickers try to stop the Parayar boys from bathing in his field, this is what the Joseph replies: “So this is where we will bathe. All the wells in your farms and fields were dug by our people only. So we will go and bathe in any of them. Yes!” (62). The Parayar boys have gone to colleges and are now aware of their being equal to other caste people. In fact they declare many times to Naickers that there is no difference between Naickers and the Paryars. These boys plan to celebrate Christmas with the traditional fervor but due to the local village politics and the undercurrent of defiance of caste hegemony that has been prevailing in this village Kandampatti for centuries, the celebration of Christmas pitches the two castes, the Pallars and the Paryars, against each other. The Naickers were fuming because now the Paryars have started daring even to take bath at those wells of water that belonged to Naickers. So it is important for them to curb the increasing sense of superiority in the Paryars. They use the naivety of the Pallars to pitch these two castes against each other to destroy them. The Christmas celebrations provide them an opportunity to poison the minds of Pallars against Parayars.

The installation of Ambedkar statue is another paradigm of resistance exhibited by the two communities of dalits to protest against the caste structures prevailing in the society. It is significant to understand that the two rival castes, the Pallars and the Parayars, come together and collect donations for the installation of the statue. It is another matter that in over enthusiasm to prove who is a greater follower of Ambedkar, these two dalit castes later fight and indulge in mayhem and murders. But reading closely we also realize that Bama, while indulging in the portrayals of caste rivalries, brings out the real life in a village which is occupied by such divergent groups and castes as the upper castes, the dalits and dalit converted Christians. The very structure of the novel is based on the discourse of the dominant and resistant voices. The

dominant voices come from not only the upper castes but also from within the dalits. The conflicts generating out of the age old traditions and thinking, the new generation of modern education, and the power struggle, all these are woven in the a text which resonates with the voices of dominance and resistance. The resistance that the dalits are now voicing about their subjugation is well expressed by Antony in the brief speech.

“Educate! Organize! Agitate!” That was the great Ambedkar's magic slogan. We must all get an education. We should be aware of social realities. We must realize how society has marginalized us. And having realized that, we must unite and fight the injustice. We must not be afraid to fight. We are not goats... we are lions! Only goats get slaughtered, isn't that so? We will stand firm. We shall strive together to see that justice prevails. This statue of our great leader, facing east with his arm raised... what is it telling us? Arise and face the new dawn. Don't remain docile. You have been born to rule, to live like human beings"... that is what it says. Let us follow in the footsteps of the revolutionary leader Ambedkar. We will make a new world. We will create an equitable society free of caste. Today this very hour, let us pledge ourselves to this task. Jai Bhim.” (Bama 61). But the upper caste Naickers want to keep the existing social order of their dominance by instigating the Pallars against the Parayars. They know this will work to stop the dalits from coming together to put a united fight against the existing caste system. The Pallars were already feeling uncomfortable in coming together with the Parayars in putting the Ambedkar statue. “On top of all this, the Naickers also instigated the Pallars. 'When the Chakkiliya fellows are keeping their mouth shut, why are you fellows joining with those Parayars and talking rubbish about getting rid of caste and things like that?' (Bama 61).

The desire to dominate, to feel superior, to rule over others, to create hegemonic structures is the faultline in the creation of social order. This desire to create hegemonic structures cannot be the legitimate social order. If the hegemony is created, the resistance to the hegemonic order is necessarily woven in the hegemonic order. In *Vanmam*, the Parayars feel superior to the Pallars. Whereas the Pallars also feel superior to the Parayars. But why is this so? One explanation is that it is human nature to feed their ego and to create dignity, even though it might be imaginative. The Pallars, the dalits, cannot say that they are superior to the Naickers. At the most, they desire that the Naickers treat them at least as human beings. But that may not happen. So whom to compare with and feel superior? The Parayars (who are also the dalits) are the best comparison for the Pallars. “The Pallar street meeting was held. When everyone had settled down, Kalimuthu and Sundarraju got up and spoke... Sundarraju said, “The Parayars are inferior to us and always will be. We are not untouchables, we are of royal descent. We are not Dalits. We are now Devendra Kula Vellars or Mallars. Not Pallars, so we must not have any type of contact or communication with those low Dalit Parayars.

They don't have our valor. We must get together with our own caste people from all the surrounding villages, and make sure these Parayars don't dare raise their heads." (Bama 77-78). Ambedkar said, "If the Hindu society plays part in maintaining the Established Order, so do the Hindu officials of the state. The two have made the Established Order impregnable (Ambedkar 1991, 107).

The role of police in this novel is in fact prove of an exploiter. The police adds the miseries of the dalits who indulge in killings and violence. The police becomes an agency to indirectly perpetuate the violence on the dalits. What we notice is that the paradigms of dominance and resistance are woven in very complex ways in this novel. The whole narrative is the narrative of attempts to dominate and the attempts to resist the domination. The individuals, the social order, the government system all play their part in creating the paradigms of dominance and resistance. The events of Christmas celebrations, the installation of Ambedkar statue, the local elections and every everyday existence is nothing but the attempts of resistance or dominance which have their origins in the caste system. The resistance sometimes takes the form of violence and deaths causing destruction and miseries all around. Bama's *Vanmam* itself is the most forceful resistance, resistance to the caste-ideology that operates so vigorously in India.

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