

Cultural Aspect of Dalits in Bama

^a S. Ramanathan, ^b S. Maharajan

^a Assistant Professor of English Research Centre in English VHNSN College Virudhunagar, India

^b PhD Scholar Research Centre in English VHNSN College Virudhnagar India

Abstract

This paper examines the cultural aspects of dalits in Bama. Culture is complex and multilayered which may include assemblage of practices, beliefs and facts that factually determine the life of people, language, ideas, aesthetic tastes, skills and usages, those can be categorized as narrative, psychological, structural and genetic. To put it succinctly, culture is the conglomeration of the entire intra and inter social transactions which is construed as the value system of a particular society. Culture is racial in the sense every human race has its one practices and beliefs. Man is a social animal, he comes into contact with other people and during his transaction of life with others, he acquires many new things apart from his original which also makes the reservoir of his culture and consequently culture is dynamic. The practices, undertaken by a particular group of people may be rejected by the same group of people in course of time, because mankind has commenced their career at the bottom and has walked their way up from savagery to civilization.

KEYWORDS: Culture, Dalits, Civilization, Life.

The term, “culture” has a very long and comparatively complex history signifying various and different things at different times. It is derived from Latin word “culture” meaning “tending”; an agricultural term that has been extended to signify the development and sophistication in human attitude—the cultivation of values. Culture is complex and multilayered which may include assemblage of practices, beliefs and facts that factually determine the life of people, language, ideas, aesthetic tastes, skills and usages, those can be categorized as narrative, psychological, structural and genetic. To put it succinctly, culture is the conglomeration of the entire intra and inter social transactions which is construed as the value system of a particular society.

Culture is racial in the sense every human race has its one practices and beliefs. Man is a social animal, he comes into contact with other people and during his transaction of life with others, he acquires many new things apart from his original which also makes the reservoir of his culture and consequently culture is dynamic. The practices, undertaken by a particular group of people may be rejected by the same group of people in course of time, because mankind has commenced their career at the bottom and has walked their way up from savagery to civilization.

Culture is historical and specific and in that sense it is interpretative. In the present day context, culture is pluralistic. In this connection Geertz observes:

The concept of culture I espouse is essentially semiotic one. Believing with Max Weber that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take

culture to those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not experimental science is search of laws, but an interpretative one in search of meanings. (5)

Raymond Williams lists four contemporary uses of the term culture. To him, culture is seen as:

- a) a particular way of life of a group in a particular period,
- b) a general process of intellectual spiritual and aesthetic development
- c) works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity, and finally
- d) the signifying systems through which necessarily a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored. (11-20)

Based on his observation, culture is a system that creates meanings, knowledge and subjectivities.

Every human society has its own shape, its own purposes and its own meanings. Every society eventually expresses its institutions through various arts like literature, painting and etc., produced by it in search of the common meanings underlying in such pattern and for seeking approval of those institutions and customs prevalent in their society. India is a land that is commonly known for diversified and pluralistic cultures. Each society contributes some elements for the nation's plurality; even their different, and the varied mode of their living contribute to the culture of this land. Dalit society which is rich in aesthetic sense also contributes something to its part. Bama details on the contribution of Dalits to Indian culture and the cultural preservation and transformation by Dalits.

Bama describes village in all its natural settings and the village seems to be very beautiful in *Vanmam*, the village, Kandampatti that is placed at the foot of a mountain and the people who live in the village is vividly pictorially portrayed. There are many caste people, who are hierarchically arranged starting from the west spread towards the east. The settlements of Pallar and Parayar, two predominantly existing Dalit communities are secluded and ostracized. One can find a gap between these settlements and those of others. These outcaste settlements are usually found in the east almost in all the villages and to note that the Pallar settlements are usually named as "*Pacheri*" and the Parayar settlements as "*Cheri*". These people are treated as untouchables, may be because of the profession they indulge in. The Pallars and Parayars have to pass through the other caste settlements to go to the bazaar and Church. Bama writes, "As one moves from east to west in the village, the caste status of the residents steadily rises" (*Vanmam* 5). Pallars and Parayars are the only agricultural labourers in the village but the lands are situated in the western side adjacent to the upper caste settlements; "they all belong to the upper-caste people" (Bama: *Vanmam* 5) and it is found in the village that Parayars are the only Christians, yet the church "is in the western part of the village" (Bama: *Vanmam* 5).

In villages, one can witness that people live in clusters and they are secluded within their caste. There are different types of settlements based on caste, each settlement is named after the caste of the people who reside there: Nadar settlements; Koravar settlement; Chakkiliyar settlement; Pallar settlement, the Parayar settlement and so on. People from one settlement may not mingle with those of other settlements.

Dalits' life is enshrouded with similes and narration of stories which often mythicise their sufferings; they often narrate some beautiful stories that are metaphorical and through this metaphorical stories; they want to hand down their sufferings and ill treatment. Bama uses the story of Nallathangal happened in Archanavaram, a village situated adjacent to Puthupatti where the novel *Karukku* is set. Bama uses this story as an intertext. Nallathangal is the sister of Nallannan, the King of Madhurapuri. Nallathangal is married to Somanathan, the King of neighbouring country Ratnapuri. Alankari, the wicked queen of Madhurapuri becomes envious of the happy married life of Nallathangal. Years pass and one day, drought strikes Ratnapuri. Nallathangal with her seven children seeks refuge in her brother Nallannan's palace. Nallannan promises all help, while Alankari tortures Nallathangal. But Nallathangal hides the misdeeds of Alankari from her brother as she does not want their family life to be disturbed. Nallathangal is forced to leave her brother's palace. She decides to kill her children and commit suicide. She throws her children one by one into a well and kills herself. Nallathangal suffers like anything and she finds consolation only in her death and all the troubles and hardships seem to cease with that.

In *Sangati*, there is a narration of another story of Esakki which is narrated by Vellaiamma Kizhavi, Bama's grandmother. Considering the birth order, Esakki is the eighth girl in an upper caste family. He has fallen in love with a Vannan boy which has been opposed by her seven brothers, since vannan is considered as an outcaste in the Indian social structure. But the little girl has eloped with the Vannan boy and they have settled in another place. Esakki's brothers have searched for her all over. At last, they have found her and beheaded her without caring that she is pregnant. They also have opened her stomach and have taken the infant and twisted its head. From that day onwards Esakki has turned into a demon god. It is believed that Esakki is more powerful and "If Esakki gets her hands on you, she won't let you go easily" (Bama: *Sangati* 50). The grandma adds "'For Esakki, they must always offer cradles dolls and such things. She demands them'" (Bama: *Sangati* 50). In both the stories, Bama metaphorically symbolizes that Dalits are suffering at the treacherous hands of the upper caste people in the caste-ridden society to earn their livelihood and to make their identity unique, and there is no end for their suffering. Death is the only deliverance for Dalits from misery and their suffering just like Nallathangal and the vannan boy mentioned in the Esakki story. Bama dexterously uses the story to depict the suffering and relinquishment of suffering.

Dalit's life is also intermingled with songs. They use song on all occasions like on weeding, on transplanting, on harvesting the crops or on doing anything else in order to drive away the monotony of work. They use songs also to tease each other. They use songs from cradle to grave as lullabies (*rorattu songs*) to elegies (*oppari*). From cradle to grave they have songs. These songs are sung to relieve themselves from the sorrows and troubles of life. Bama's fiction also shares the women's jovial life with a lot of extreme fun and frolic. Women gather together, chat, gossip and discuss problems with each other. Their life is extremely mingled with joy, mirth and humour. They are skillful in singing; they compose songs instantaneously that deal with the problems of real life. One popular song about a man who often fights with his wife over trivial matters goes thus:

As we cleaned out teeth.

In spring by the river.

It is because I spluttered over you.

You haven't talked to me for eight days? (Bama: *Sangati 77*)

Another song about a man who is involved with a mistress after marriage runs this way:

Eighteen sweet paniyaarm.

You handed to her across the wall.

But whatever you might give away.

You still are my husband. (Bama: *Sangati 77*)

Bama also explains the dirge in *Vanmam*. Kaanikka Mary, wife of Sesurathnam wails aloud for the death of her husband. This kind of wailing is literally known as “*oppari*” in Tamil. While doing this *oppari* the victim's relatives enumerate the qualities of the dead person and wails aloud.

I'm just going to shop', you said . . . I'll come back soon, you said . . . raja . . . was this the end that was written in your stars . . . you have abandoned me to this plight . . . ey raja, who is there left for me you have gone before you could even see the face of your child that is be born, raja. Ey . . . raja . . . raja . . . emma . . .' (Bama: *Vanmam 84*).

The persons, performing the dirge usually address the deceased as “*raja*” “*ayya*”, “*saami*” and the other laudatory words. This rich culture full of folklore, folksong and sharing was part of the culture and the part of positive identity of Dalits.

The village *Panchayat* is one of the significant parts of the village culture; even today one can witness such type of *panchayat* system to redress the problems. The headman of the village hears the problem of the concerned people and in consultation with other members of the *panchayat*, the redresses the issues. The *Panchayat* usually assembles in a public place either under a tree or in a community hall, usually adjacent to the village temple. The headman arranges such meetings. In Puthupatti and Kandampatti villages also, the headman summons the people to gather in the community hall at that night. The victims usually greet the elders by falling down at full length and then they stand on one side of the gathering with their arms folded.

Through the work Dalits indulge in, Bama describes how those works contribute to the development of their culture, and also signifies that they always do productive work. Most Dalits are the landless agricultural workers who usually strive hard for their gruel and all the livelihoods. She also portrays how Dalits are exploited. They work hard in the field from the daybreak to sunset, whereas they are given only a meagre amount as wages. They “can survive only through hard and incessant labour” (Bama: *Karukku48*). They do the works like tilling, sowing, weeding, and reaping the crops. Though the land is owned by the upper caste people, Dalits work as bonded labourers. Bama says, “. . . each paraya family is attached to a Naicker family, as pannaiyaal” (Bama: *Karukku48*). *Pallu* literature, in Tamil elaborates on these labours. On critiquing *Pallu* literature, Gnasekaran observes, “These songs are mostly sung by the people who lived in *Marutham* landscape and particularly in the paddy cultivating fields; those people

were called as Mallars (Pallars). Later these have been compiled under the name of “*UzhathiPattu*” or “*Pallisai*” (7) *(Song by Ploughmen). Tamil people used to divide the landscape into five parts, as *Kurinchi*(Mountain), *Mullai*(Forest), *Marutham*(Fertile agricultural lands), *Neithal*(Sea) and *Paalai*(desert) and the people lived in *Marutham* landscape has come to be known as Pallars, as they have occupied the lowlands which suit the purpose of irrigating the crops and they have indulged themselves in agriculture.

Tilling the land, though it is considered as foolish outcaste task by the Brahmanical construct of Indian society has its own scientific fact. Tiller has to know the quality and fertility of the land first in terms of its capability to be able to plough. The plough is one of the inventions of ancient men, which has considerably changed the lives of human beings like the invention of fire and wheel. Plough is one of the main things which have motivated the philosophy of food production and consumption. In the process of production the outcastes are involved and as soon as the production phase becomes over, all the strata of the society consume the produced crops and consequently exploitation of the working class begins with this phase through neglecting to offer correct wages. Kanchalliah rightly observes:

Tilling the land with the wooden plough, with the help of power of theyoked cattle, is one of the most scientific and materialist processes that our ancestors have handed down to us. . . . The tiller’s knowledge about the land and its nature and character is a basic necessity to conduct the operation of tilling efficiently. A tiller understands the soil by examining its very surface itself. . . . The tiller has to assess the moisture levels of the soil at the beginning of the tilling process itself. . . . The farmers (several shudra, chandala and Adivasi communities) perform the task of tilling have developed highly sophisticated knowledge. . . . A Brahman pundit does not know how to measure the levels of rain—the tiller knows it in its all dimensions. (*Post-Hindu India*146)

The farmers even predict the rainfalls by looking at the sky, even when the entire folk of our scientists fails to rightly judge the possibility of raining and the movement of monsoon using the sophisticated, scientifically developed instruments and satellites. The process of tilling becomes the primeval force of human existence. This process is not celebrated in the Hindu scriptures like the *Bhagavad Gita* and the Vedas, because these texts are Brahmanically based and the Brahmins consider that tilling the land for cultivation is the task of outcastes.

Dalits are also indulged themselves in the construction labour, “digging wells, carrying loads of earth, gravel and stone” (Bama: *Karukku* 48). When these jobs are not available, since cultivation in India is monsoon based, Dalits used to gather firewood, and sell it to the upper caste people. In villages which serve as a background to Bama’s fiction, the Pallar and Parayar work hard in the fields whereas, the other Dalit castes “the Koravar or gypsies, washing Vannan and leather-working Chakkiliyar would sweep the streets, dredge and clean the drains and make a living that way” (Bama: *Karukku* 49).

The art of leather-making which is the base for many professions like farming and industrial works like making footwear and wallets, is still considered as unclean and anti-divine by the Hindu socio-cultural philosophy and the chakkiliyar, one of the outcastes in India is indulged themselves by peeling of the skin of dead animals. The processing of leather is now considered as central to human existence. Peeling the skin without making any hole from the

dead body of the cattle involves certain skills like cultivation of hand and knife usage skills in a very advanced manner. This art is being handed down to generation to generation orally; the antiquity may be traced in “the Sanskrit inscriptions . . . The vilavatti plates, . . . mention the tax payable by the *carmakara* or the leather workers” (Subramaniam 19). This leather becomes useful in making agrarian usable commodities like leather ropes, bags, shoes and musical instruments.

Bama in *Karukku* refers to a substantial rock, “*VannaanPaara*” by name, on the top of which there is a pond, “. . . the Vannaan boys would wash clothes there, steaming and whitening them” (Bama : *Karukku* 2), and consequently, the rock is named so. *Vannaan* (washer man), one of the Dalit communities in Tamilnadu washes the clothes of the whole village. In Indian society the traditional Hindu upper caste women are assigned only the subsidiary role in the social life whereas in this particular community the women are indulged in creative humanitarian work and in cultural process. Professional clothes-washing involves washing all kinds of clothes. They have a unique culture, aesthetic sense, and sense of service which could be termed as “*Chakalatwam*” (Ilaiyah: *Post-Hindu India* 69). *Chakalatwam* is a social process of collecting dirty clothes from house to house, carrying them to the pond where they wash all the clothes, washing and drying them up. They will not use soap to wash but soil or mud as soap, this seems to be the earliest discovery. They use a specific soil which is black in colour which contains the chemical character of a detergent, and also it prevents the spread of germs. The second major breakthrough in the process of *chakalatwam* is the process of heating the clothes after dipped in the water with soil soap. This enables killing of germs. The idea of the modern washing machines’ inclusion of usage of hot water for washing is preconceived in the washer men’s ancient practice of heating. The process of heating clothes is known as “*vellavi*” in Tamil. The process does not only revive the beauty but also it preserves the health of the whole village.

When these sorts of works are not available, Dalits used to go to the jungle to collect fire woods as one of the means of earning livelihood. On their way to the jungle, they have to give bribe to the ‘Guarder’, who lives in the forest bungalow. Bama explains how difficult it is to go into the jungle by climbing up the steep mountain slopes, collect dried firewood and tie them together into bundles. While doing this, “the twigs and thorns would scratch and tear your face, your hair, your arms and legs. Sometimes your skin would be all torn and bleeding” (Bama: *Karukku* 51). They bring the fire wood after all the struggle: threat to health, climbing up the steep mountain slopes, passing and crawling through the trees. Some people usually sell the bundle to the Naickers or other upper caste people and they usually give “Seven or eight rupees” (Bama: *Karukku* 52). Children, while attaining the age twelve are usually taken to the fields along with their parents to make some money and the girl children need look after the chores at home like caring siblings and cooking. “If there were boys in the house, they would graze sheep and cattle” (Bama: *Karukku* 52).

Aesthetic richness of Dalit culture is expressed in Dalit art forms which are indigenous dance and music forms. Combination of many art forms is found in the lifestyle of Dalits. Dalits’ culture is basically expressed through these art forms. Dalit aesthetics is the culture of celebration. It expresses creativity, aesthetic richness and artifacts. They are expressed through *Parai*, appealing colour in costumes, imitating film stars, dancing even in funerals, and all these things are flavoured with realism that invariably colours the entire Indian aesthetic outlook. Suffering and resistance to power politics are the cultural aspects of Dalits.

References:

Bama.*Karukku*. Trans. Lakshmi Holmstrom. New York: Oxford UP,2012. Print.

---. *Sangati. Events*. Trans. Lakshmi Holmstrom. New York: Oxford UP, 2011. Print.

---. *Vanmam: Vendetta*. Trans. MaliniSeshadri, Introduction by R. Azhagarasan. New York: Oxford UP, 2011. Print.

Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Basic Books, 1973. *Monoskop*. [monoskop.org/images/5/54/Geertz Clifford The Interpretation of Cultures Selected_Essays.pdf](http://monoskop.org/images/5/54/Geertz_Clifford_The_Interpretation_of_Cultures_Selected_Essays.pdf). Accessed 18Aug 2016.

Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford UP, 1997. Wordpress. mykelandrada.files.wordpress.com/2011/06/raymond-williams-marxism-and-literature.pdf. Accessed 14 Feb. 2015.