



VIRAMMA'S LIFE OF AN UNTOUCHABLE: A MULTIDIMENSIONAL NARRATIVE

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ABSTRACT

Viramma's Life of an Untouchable is a multifaceted work which needs to be explored from various angles. It's not only a treatise on Dalit literature, but it should also be read as a feminist text, a gender study, a cultural narrative, a linguistic treasure and so on. It's the story of an untouchable, an honest description of the lives of a people who are now classified as Dalits. Viramma never calls herself a Dalit woman although her son keeps correcting her all the time but this is what which makes the text different from others. She prefers to call herself a Paratchi a word that she thinks defines her and her community with more subtlety. Besides, Viramma is a trained mid-wife and a powerful folk singer who can sing all kinds of songs sung on different occasions like death, marriage and puberty and perhaps this very quality of her must have attracted Josiane towards her.

Keywords : *untouchable, paratchi, cultural narrative*

INTRODUCTION

Who is Viramma? Is she a Dalit as emancipationists would call her or a Harijan as the Gandhian would call her or an untouchable or an outsider or a *Pariah* as her own village people would call her? Does she narrate her story to bring some change in the society? Does she have any revolutionary purpose or the text carry some agenda for the underdogs of the society or Viramma is just telling the story of any *Pariah* woman of her village without having even the slightest idea of where her text can or should be actually placed. Number of questions may arise in a reader's mind but the answer comes in the very next line spoken by Josiane Racine- the woman who stayed in conversation with Viramma for ten years and recorded all her experiences brilliantly in the most possible original colours:

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1P a g e



The testimony we give after listening to Viramma is not a Dalit text – in the sense that Dalit literature can be said to have specific aims- but it is the text of a Dalit. It is not, in a primary sense, a text attacking oppression, but it is a text which tells how an oppressed woman lives and thinks... Viramma does not formulate a damning critique of that system: she simply tells, in her own words, how it functions in the village space, in the heads of the 'high-born' and 'the low-born'. (Viramma: Life of an Untouchable 310-11)

Besides, Viramma is a trained mid-wife and a powerful folk singer who can sing all kinds of songs sung on different occasions like death, marriage and puberty and perhaps this very quality of her must have attracted Josiane towards her. Viramma is a born story –teller, and the way she reveals her as well as the lives of her people, is unmatched and unique. Without being overly sentimental, she narrates the most pathetic lots of her people.

It's the story of an untouchable, an honest description of the lives of a people who are now classified as Dalits. Viramma never calls herself a Dalit woman although her son keeps correcting her all the time but this is what which makes the text different from others. She prefers to call herself a Paratchi a word that she thinks defines her and her community with more subtlety. While giving her account, she never has any idea of emphasizing her lower status with concern to any social and political agenda. But Viramma's sincere narration forces us to think critically over the lives of the deprived section of our society. It is the triumph of the text that neither Viramma nor Josiane aims to make it a Dalit testimony rather it becomes the one itself and this adds to the specialty of the narrative.

Viramma's *Life of an Untouchable* is a multifaceted and multidimensional work which requires a multidisciplinary approach to understand it completely. It is not merely a Dalit text, rather it goes beyond and should be read as a feminist text, a gender study, a cultural narrative, a linguistic treasure and so on. Viramma is so unique as a story teller, as a narrator of her rich cultural heritage that Josiane, the author of the book picked her story for her research on ethnomusicology. Her personality is so well imbibed with her cultural traits and she is so flamboyant in her descriptions about the *pariah* community that it takes the book to some other level and makes it an excellent work of art and literature.

She is the mouth-piece of all the women of her community and therefore she speaks in a language which carries all the flavours and crunchiness of their day today's conversation, full of slangs and phrases. Since Josiane basically came for her research on ethnomusicology and Viramma was a veteran in folk singing, a large part of the text is full of songs, stories, rituals and festivals which represent the true spirit of her community and people.



Viramma is a strong custodian of her culture. She has a certain sense of respect and connection with her language though the language she speaks is tagged as a half-language on the grounds of its lack of self control. But according to Viramma its meaning depends on its contexts. It gives her pleasure to speak her own language without any modifications and help her in self assertion as Will Hobson mentions in the Translator's Note:

Her fastidious attention to detail, her use of emphasis – conveyed by the many exclamation marks – and the strongly imagistic nature of her language all reflect the same attitude, and I hope that this translation allows Viramma's identity to emerge, not just through her thoughts, emotions and the ways she has reacted to the events of her life, but also through the way she expressed herself to Josiane Racine throughout the 1980s.(vi)

Viramma is proud of her culture and never hesitates in using the term *Pariah* though the word was already banned by Tamilnadu government a long time back but Viramma never uses the other available terms for her community rather she keeps varying from *Paratchi* to *Pariah* to *paraimelam* to *Pariah* orchestra etc. Her culture remains intact in her personality. Her story is more or less the history of her community beginning from the cruel agrarian system which her great grandfather, her grandfather, her own father and she herself had been a victim of till the changing scenario of her community when many political parties and leaders started reaching the most backward areas. Meanwhile she speaks of her personal life too- her childhood, her married life with her husband, their children and the life afterwards, and throughout these episodes of her life we get a peep into their rituals, their beliefs, their customs and traditions, their celebrations as well as their superstitions and mental backwardness due to the lack of education.

On a broad surface it can be said that the autobiography has two themes – one which presents Viramma as the leading lady of her community, a self- assertive woman, a wonderful folk singer, a multi-dimensional heroine of the text who can easily recite the ethnicity of her culture through her songs and narration, and the second one focuses on what her songs and stories reveal about her culture and community. The content she speaks is equally important because that is what which brings this book into the circumference of Dalit literature.

Since Josiane basically came for her research on ethnomusicology and Viramma was a veteran in folk singing, a large part of the text is full of songs, stories, rituals and festivals. A true spirit of *Pariah* community can be captured through her songs, the spirit which not only let them to celebrate the hardships of their lives but also helps them to survive the unjust social order, a society which is divided into two parts named as *ur* and *ceri*. *Ur* is the main part of the village or the village itself where all the major temples dedicated to Isvaran (Siva), Perumal (Vishnu) and Pillaiyar (Ganesh) are situated and where Dalits are forbidden to enter.



From Brahmins to landowning castes to the service castes like the barbers live in the *ur*. *Ceri* is that part of the village where Dalits live and is kept separated from the *ur*.

It can be observed here that Viramma has taken a very unbiased approach in her narration. If something is good about the *ur* and its people, it has been mentioned or if some practice in the *ceri* is wrong, Viramma never shrinks from criticizing it. As Viramma finds the men in her community very crude in their sexual approach, she mentions it honestly while appreciating the practice of the *ur* people in this matter. But at the same time she is of the view that life in the *ur* is very restricted, dull and monotonous in comparison to the lives of *ceri* people who are more liberal and stay cheerful in every situation.

Viramma's narrative is abundant in such songs and these songs have an exuberance of Pariah culture. There is a detailing in these songs, like telling some story or teaching through it. This story may start from the birth of a child to the different ceremonies of life like puberty, courtship, marriage then having children, death and funeral etc.

Viramma feels that in this *kaliyugam*, trends are changing and it may be for their betterment but at the same time she has a realization that change is a gradual process and that the older ones cannot be uprooted immediately. She discusses the things she notices every day in her village. The party workers roam in the whole *ceri*, raising awareness among the people. They say that there is no division of caste in the society anymore and that they should not stay separated. They emphasize on getting educated and advise the adults as well as the younger ones to come to the evening classes to learn new things as it is only learning that can bring a change in the society.

The point which is worthy to be discussed here is that Viramma puts her views and thinking quite convincingly. Her argument towards any topic is so critically thought out and well executed that she, in spite of being an illiterate woman, comes out as a profound scholar. She lives in the very thick of life, speaks with full conviction and draws her findings from the very ground realities, nothing fantastical. Viramma is not just one name or one woman; it is synonymous with all the Pariahs or Dalits in any part of the country.

REFERENCES

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