

**THE WORLD OF DALIT WOMEN IN VIRAMMA'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY VIRAMMA:  
THE LIFE OF AN UNTOUCHABLE**

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**Dr Suruchi Sharma**

Assistant Professor in RKSD College, Kaithal, Haryana

Untouchability was one of the biggest problems in India and this practice has only been mitigated not eradicated even after the enforcement of legal laws by the government. Laws can be made by the government but it is very difficult to change the mentality of the people. Though many dalit women writers from India have written their autobiographies in regional languages, yet only few autobiographies are available in English. Most of these autobiographies have been translated from other languages but there are few dalit women's autobiographies which have been told by the autobiographers to someone else, and those people have recorded the life of illiterate dalit women. *Viramma: The Life of an Untouchable* by Viramma also belongs to this category.

An autobiography is an authentic record of one's life and it has all realistic depiction because all the incidents of the author's life are revealed through him/her directly. That's the reason, autobiography remains more appealing to people. Shweta Singh writes in this context:

An autobiography with its claim of genuine remembrance and retelling can also have a counter-claim of genuine forgetting and omission as is evident from the treatment of women in male autobiographies....Dalit women not only questioned their victimization but also spoke for the upper and the middle class women who met the same fate at home. (46)

The life narrative of Viramma has been written in different chapters. The first chapter of this autobiography "A Childhood in Velpakkam" narrates the life of her grandparents. Viramma describes that her family belonged to an untouchable community called serfs. Her grandfather Samikkannu was a sorcerer and one day he brought another pregnant woman in his home. Nobody dared to protest against his decision. He went to Madras to work in coconut plantations. Her grandmother remained alone in the village and it was very difficult for her to stay alone:

The separation was heartbreaking for the grandmother though. She was always crying and lamenting and wishing that the boys would come back, or at least her son Nadeshnan. Night and day, she tried to think of ways to bring him home and she decided to talk about it to her sister who lived in Ranganam. (2)

Viramma's mother's name was Pattu. She had seven children as in that time these people did not know much about the family planning methods. At the time of Viramma's delivery, her father was sitting with his head in his hands and at the birth of a girl child, he said, "Hey, here's another little bitch been born!" (3). But it was an auspicious day and that's why she was named as Viramma.

Viramma tells her story how she became a woman. It was a strange and shocking experience for her when she saw blood under her thighs. She was unable to understand why it has happened with her because she had not received any cut or injury. When the elder women of the family came to know about it, they were not a bit surprised. Viramma was kept in a separate place and a special tonic was given to her so that her uterus may become strong and she may be able to give birth to strong and healthy children in future. She is told that she has become a woman and she can live with a husband now. The family members become busy in the ceremony and they had to borrow amount for it. After this incidence, Viramma was married soon:

I was still a little child, innocent, happy and flat chested when it was decided that I should get married. Big sister Ellamma, one of my much older cousins, had been given to a family from Karani. When she heard that my future parents-in-law were looking for a daughter-

in-law she let them know that an ideal little girl in Velpakkam the village where she was born. (15)

Her sister Ellemma brings marriage proposal for her from the village where she was married. Viarmma's mother feels happy that Viramma will be married in a good family and her sister will help her out in case of any need. Viramma tells about it, "I knew they were talking about me, but I only heard snatches of sentences, 'She will be happy. ... She will work well...Ellemma will be there to look out for her...Karani's not far, we'll be able to go and see her a lot' ..." (15-16). Viramma told her mother that she did not want to get married at this age. She sobbed days and night but nobody listened to her. Viramma tells everything about it, "I sobbed day and night. I begged my mother not to give me away in marriage. I would be good. I would stop all the games, I'd work hard, I'd bring home lots of money" (16).

In the chapter "Destinies of Children" Viramma speaks about the problems of women and dalit children. She tells that dalit women would breastfeed for at least three years so that they may not have another child soon. These women had to keep their child everywhere and they were forced to do every work. They wanted delay in the birth of the next baby just because they must leave their child alone while working and this child remained at high risk.

Viramma tells the horrible experience of her first night. She was merely an immature girl at that time and did not know properly what actually happens after marriage. That's why when her husband came close and touched her in the dark, she cried loudly and her mother-in-law immediately came to calm her down. When her husband touched her again and started making love with her, it remained an awful experience with her. She tells her husband in a resented voice, "I want to go back to Velpakkam, I want to go back to my mum, I'll tell her everything that's happened to me here" (41). Her husband knew everything and he just tells her to calm down. She faced almost the same problem the next night also but her husband told her that he would keep her happy but initially she will face some problems but she will enjoy later. She was feeling like a caged bird in her husband's house. Dr Sigma G.R. writes about Viramma, "She was thinking like her kidnapping news with the consent of her family members" (Sigma 76). Baby Kamble also writes in her autobiography:

In those days, it was the custom to keep women at home, behind the threshold. The honour enjoyed by a family was in proportion to the restrictions imposed on the women of the house. When no one could see even a nail of the woman thus confined within the four walls of the house, then this 'honour' became the talk of the town—a byword among the relatives and friends in the surrounding villages. (Kamble 5)

Viramma narrates in this autobiography that the life of Paraya women was full of all the challenges because they had to do all the domestic chores and they had to go for the work also. Their economic condition and social status were low that's why they would become the easy prey of the upper caste people. Their own respective husbands would not give them any respect while the upper caste people would get attracted to them so easily. She narrates:

Those gentlemen of the ur talk a lot about the uncleanness of Untouchables, but our holes always turn them on. We're the ones they get up to all their dirty tricks with; it makes you think our juices taste better than their wives! (52)

Dalit women did not have sufficient money. That's why they had to go to the cheaper hospitals for the treatment. Doctors and other staff also tried to exploit them. Viramma narrates that poverty is like a curse for these women. She narrates how doctors would touch them in hospitals, "The doctors pretend to listen to our hearts so they can feel our breasts....That's happened to more than one of us. We're harassed nonstop down there" (52). These women had to bear everything silently.

Sometimes other caste women would come in the demand of their milk especially when their children would get ill. Viramma tells that her milk was nutritious because they eat various types of milk and other food also while the upper caste women would eat only green vegetables.

Viramma narrates about the crime committed by Dalits. In the chapter “The Caste of Thieves,” she narrates about the caste of thieves. She writes that Kempari men and women are thieves, “It’s their families’ trade” (151). The women of this caste also go for stealing from one town to another. Their target remained the metro-cities and they never harmed the village people. The men would rob the banks and the women would steal from temples, festivals and fairs. It was a strange thing that these women would wear very good dresses and would speak several local languages so that other people might not have doubt on them. Viramma further writes, “Besides, they really are rich. The real rich couldn’t match them!” (151).

These women would perform this task in the groups and they would use some spray and cut the jewels with the gold-cutting stone. They were so expert that nobody could notice them, “They know all the techniques, eh, it’s their trade!” (152). Sometimes the children would help them and they would take the jewels to a man who would stand at little way off. These women were not afraid of anything and sometimes the police would come and arrest them. Viramma writes about it:

Sometimes we were sad for them and we’d cry: poor women, take away by the police like that, the shame of it! We’d say to them, ‘You’re as beautiful as sugar candy, why do you steal? Why do you have such a trade?’ But it didn’t embarrass them at all. (152)

Viramma writes about the caste discrimination also in this autobiography. She writes that Raddiars belonged to the upper caste and the other castes such as Mudaliars, Naikars, Gounders, etc. were below them. The Reddiars would never go to work, instead they would put many others for the work. Even the women also stayed at home as Viramma writes, “Their women don’t work and they never go out” (156). Baburao Bagul writes about the misfortune of the dalits in his poem “You Have Made the Mistake”:

...That’s why I say—

You have made the mistake of being born in this country

Must now rectify it: either leave this country,

Or make war.... (*Poisoned Bread* 81)

Viramma writes that they would fear the most from the Reddiars and they would never speak in front of them but when they would work for the Naickers, they would make fun of them. Viramma writes how they would cut jokes with the Naikar people. She writes about one occasion:

‘Yennayya! You never stop giving your wife children! She’s pregnant every year like a bitch and you’ll lose your strength, you won’t have anything left, even if you eat melted butter and curds. Come over here a bit, ayya, come and see if you strength is a match for us beef eaters when it comes to real work like this!’ (157)

In this autobiography, Viramma tells about the dalit consciousness through radio broadcasting and through the announcement on loudspeaker. Some people motivated them to stay united and fight for their rights. She writes how the announcement would go like:

Come people of the colony! Come and educate yourselves! Come to evening lessons, adults and children, for people who can’t read and for people who can’t write! You’ll see that when you’re educated, you won’t be treated like you are now! You won’t be a lower caste anymore!” (181)

Some young educated people would inspire dalit people to join their movement. These people would persuade the elders not to send their children to work at low wages. They would convince dalit women not to work on the low wages. They wanted hike in their wages so that dalit people may live their life with respect and dignity, “Demand an increase in your wages! Five rupees for the women, ten rupees for the men!” (181).

The party workers would leave no stone unturned to bring a change in dalit people’s life. They would tell people that it has been a long time since they are being harassed, suppressed and exploited, but now they must be aware about their rights. This *kaliyugam* should go to an end and

an ideal world should be created where all the people have equal rights and there is no discrimination on the basis of caste, class and religion.

Thus, it is clear from this autobiography that the life of dalit women remains full of problems because they are given multiple responsibilities and they don't have enough money to run their respective families. That's why they had to do many manual works like men so that they may be able to bring bread for their family members. Showkat Ahmad Naik writes:

Dalit autobiography, a recent offshoot, introduces a new world of experience in Indian literature. It widens the range of expressions and makes use of the Dalits who have been excluded from the mainstream Indian society and discriminated, exploited, humiliated and marginalised on the basis of low caste status. (Naik 278)

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