



**Epitome : International Journal
of Multidisciplinary Research**

ISSN : 2395-6968

**Selfhood Narrated: the Self Reflections and Cultural Refractions in the
Autobiography *Viramma: Life of a Dalit***



Shamna R.

MA MPhil JRF

Asst. Professor, PG Dept. of English

PSMO College, Tirurangadi

Malappuram 676 306

ABSTRACT

The promise of an exploration or revelation of a 'self' has made autobiography of immense interest to its critics. As viewed by the noted critic James Olney, the current interest in the literary genre of autobiography arises from a shift in attention from life to the self. A major preoccupation of contemporary literature has been the problem of man's establishment of an identity in the face of the complex conditions of the present times. Human quest for identity being the core of contemporary experiences, the autobiographical works portray the individual self, searching for and attaining higher levels of emotional and intellectual awareness of both the inner self and the outside world. Human beings today, whether they are cultural critics, social scientists, therapists or

ordinary folk, evince a keen interest in the study of self. Traditionally, the genre of autobiography was confined to the male writers till the mid twentieth century. The patriarchal society could not visualize a scenario when women could also open up their life experiences. But after the 1970s, with the advent of feminism and feministic movements, many women writers turned towards autobiography as an optimum mode of literature for the expression of their problems and realizations of the self. When it comes to autobiographical narratives of dalit women, the question of oppression and power become more pertinent, and through writing their selves they try to realize their true identities and selfhood. *Viramma: Life of a Dalit* is such a remarkable book that reveals the world of an extraordinary woman living at the very margins (pariah community) of Indian society, who describes her dalit experiences with pleasure and accepts it as the part of human life.

KEYWORDS

Dalit autobiography, oppressions, identity crisis, cultural heritage, Viramma.

RESEARCH PAPER

The promise of an exploration or revelation of a 'self' has made autobiography of immense interest to its critics. The term autobiography generally means a full account of a person's life, wherein the subject writes about himself or herself. According to Philip Lejeune, an "autobiography is a retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality" (193). An autobiography is born when the author becomes the narrator as well as the main character, recording personal life and experiences. By chronicling their own stories or experiences, the autobiographers usually attempt to examine, interpret and find the meaning and purpose of their lives. It becomes then a text of self-scrutiny, self-interpretation, and self-revelation. It is not the quantity of events but the quality of the narrative, the truth and the depth of the writer's experiences that matters most.

The current interest in the literary genre of autobiography, in the view of the noted critic James Olney, arises from a shift in attention from life to the self (19). A major preoccupation of contemporary literature has been the problem of man's establishment of an identity in the face of the complex conditions of the present times. Human quest for identity being the core of contemporary experiences, the autobiographical works portray the individual self, searching for and attaining higher levels of emotional and intellectual awareness of both the inner self and the outside world. Human beings today, whether they are cultural critics, social scientists, therapists or ordinary folk, evince a keen interest in the study of self. And so, to reach the selfhood one has to move away from the objective world in which one lives and shifts one's attention from biography to autobiography, and later from autobiography to solipsism.

Man's personal quest for self-identity, self-esteem and self-affirmation, for certainty, for self-sustaining dignity and for a sense of psychological stability in an inconstant world, comprises the basic pattern of autobiographical writings. The notion of "Self" is rather elusive and enigmatic. It comprises different aspects of the same person, his feelings about himself, his feelings of worth or unworthiness. Critics of autobiography have long realized that at least two 'selves' are involved in the writing of a life: the self then and the self now, doing the writing. Autobiography attempts to write the self, or give the self a narrative that is deeply found with the formation of a particular identity. The past functions as an interpretive framework by which one sorts out information, participates in a sense of continuity and specifies selfhood. Selfhood — individual and collective — is central to the self-reliance which would gradually lead to self-assertion.

Related to the idea of self are the concepts of identity, self-image, and self-esteem. A dimension of self-experience is brought out in the concepts of self-image. One's self-image consists of the

qualities, attributes and characteristics the person attributes to himself or herself. People develop images of themselves and of one another in relation to those qualities and attributes that are important to their social roles and their sense of identification with one another. Images of self are positive or negative, to be cultivated or avoided, desired or undesired. Culture determines the qualities considered important and that which people feel they ought to possess or seek. The social world gains considerable portion of its influence over the person simply because it controls both the definition of what a person should be and the means of becoming it.

The concept of identity may have different ramifications at the personal, socio-cultural and national levels. A person may perceive himself/herself as man or woman based both on his/her biological frame as well as culturally ingrained ideas of masculinity or femininity. This identity can further be developed at the socio-cultural level in terms of familial relationships and roles as father-mother, husband-wife, parent-child, brother-sister and so on. At another level, one tends to identify oneself in terms of race, nationality, and perhaps even religion. Thus, identity tends to differ at different stages of one's life, and any of these levels could take precedence over the other, depending on the experience and exigencies of one's life. The genre autobiography, in fact, helps the writers to forge an identity through re-enacting the various stages of life and moving towards a united consciousness. Or in other words, we could say that the speaking persona of an autobiography exhibits an identity which the experiences selected by the writer are supposed to have shaped.

Traditionally, the genre of autobiography was confined to the male writers till the mid twentieth century. The patriarchal society could not visualize a scenario when women could also open up their life experiences. But after the 1970s, feminism and feminist thought have enhanced women's consciousness and heightened their sense of awareness. The feminist movement, which seeks to create a feeling of sisterhood and a new sense of dignity among women in order to overcome the self-hatred and animosity that many women feel for others of their own sex, turned towards autobiography as an optimum mode of literature for the expression of the self. A woman's autobiography, no matter where and when it is written, is hardly ever the narrative of an individual. It is in this context that the most popular slogan of the second wave feminism of the 1960s, 'the personal is the political', becomes relevant. Whatever types of setbacks a woman has to face in her personal life involve the question of power and hence the issue of politics. The question of power becomes more pertinent when it comes to autobiographical narratives of dalit women. Dalit women's autobiographies are defined by caste and religion as much as by gender as they attempt to mould a space for themselves at the national level. The very act of dalit writing stands in direct opposition to elitist writing in many aspects—motivation and purpose, ideology and aesthetics, and in the nature of experimental reality. It is shaped by its attempt to negotiate with the institutions of power,

thereby countering and finally erasing them. Through the act of writing, the dalits arrive at their true identities and selfhood.

Viramma: Life of a Dalit by three authors, Viramma, Josaine Racine and Jean-Luc Racine, is such a remarkable book that reveals the world of an extraordinary woman living at the very margins (pariah community) of Indian society. Told over ten years to Josiane and Jean-Luc Racine, the book is an intensely personal and moving self-portrait, informed by a sense of profound social change in contemporary India. Even though not written by Viramma, the text consists of the spoken words of a dalit woman living at the margins of Indian society. When the writers transferred an oral culture to a written form, they did full justice to it. For Josaine and Jean-Luc Racine, Viramma was not a mere material for writing an academic study. They have not treaded the familiar path of data collection that the census officers and the development officers do. Josaine and Jean-Luc reveal:

We have not conducted the interviews of Viramma. We have not played a question answer game. We have just tried for years to be beautiful witness, to the extent possible, bringing to light with utmost respect, a kind of testimony, which is usually despised and disregarded and kept within the confines of a village society. In this long process, we have also seen Viramma discover and her past; reappropriating for herself what was for a part buried inside individual, familial and collective memories. (310)

M. N. Srinivas states that: "It is much more difficult for an Indian to observe his own society than it is for a non-Indian . . . At a deeper level, one is so fundamentally and even hopelessly enslaved in one's own society, that detachment is well-nigh impossible" (4-5).

The autobiography of Viramma chronicles the personal life experiences of Viramma and the socio-political, religious, and cultural background of Karani. From the last 70s to the early 90s, Josaine carried on long conversations with Viramma in Karani. Mutual trust was built up and slowly, Viramma began to tell in great detail the story of her life. In this long process, Viramma discovers what her true self is and her past and re-appropriates for herself what were buried inside individual, familial, and collective memories. Speaking to Josaine helps her to reassess, with great interest, what had been her life: her joys, her pains and to express what was her culture and her view of life. The text consists of 25 chapters, which contain the enticing episodes of Viramma's life. These include the frank accounts of her happy and carefree childhood, her marriage at the age of ten, her sexual experiences and desires, child bearing, as well as detailed descriptions of her backbreaking work. Her narration is also filled with detailed description of religious ceremonies, rituals and day-to-day secular customs. Her account teems with demons and deities. The first seven chapters describe the key moments and events in Viramma's life, varying from her childhood to the old age. The rest of the chapters present a vivid portrayal of the harvest rituals, funeral ceremonies and religious festivals in Karani.

Beginning with a personal account, this autobiographic narrative moves into community representation, analyzes the religious rituals, and then critiques the socio-cultural changes in Karani. The most prolific singer of Karani, Viramma is an illiterate agricultural labourer who is attached to the biggest local landlord's family, respectfully known by his caste name as the Great Reddiar. She was also a midwife, and a born storyteller. Her childhood was carefree and creative with songs and games. But all that ends up with her marriage to Manikkam. She was married off even before attaining puberty and continued to stay with her parents, as was the custom in the not too far off village of Velpakkam, across the river in Tamil Nadu. A few years later, after puberty, she comes to live with her husband in Karani. Consequently, her identity starts to be tied to the village of Karani. Or in other words, Viramma's childhood in Velpakkam and adulthood in Karani, gradually provides provision for constructing her 'selfhood'.

Any attempt to discuss identity in India inevitably leads to the concept of caste, a feature that is rooted in the cultural tradition of India. Viramma's village is pluralistic; every caste has its own sphere within which it is free and sovereign. The village of Karani is divided into Ceri and Ur. Ceri is the Tamil word for quarters where untouchables (dalits) live and is established away from the main village centre, the Ur, where the other castes from the barbers to the Brahmin priests live. Viramma's narration is mainly focused on the pariah community, the largest caste of dalits in Tamil Nadu. Through their contact first with the Portuguese in the 16th century and then the French and English in the 18th century, their caste name has become a general term in its Europeanized form of pariah. Muniyan, head of the Ceri gives one of its mythical (26) derivations: "the people of drum" (289). 'Paria' is the specific leather drum played by the paraiyar. Michael Moffat in his book *An Untouchable Community of South India: Structure and Consensus*, suggests that "*Paraiya maraiyade* refers to a piece of beef, rather than drum, which the four sons of Siva and Adi were meant to share" (qtd in Chettiar 33). Adi Dravida is the modern name of pariah given by government of Tamil Nadu. It is considered as the main caste in the Ceri; *pannaiyar* and *vettian* being its two sub castes, and Viramma belongs to the latter. Even though the political order has invoked a new defiance amongst the lower castes against the higher castes, Viramma could not accept it. She complains that the lower castes refuse to let them be called by their caste names. She is not ashamed to call herself a pariah; she is not ashamed of her rituals, her beliefs, her convictions and her prejudices. But she also has had to hide her caste once, while she was on the public transport on her way to Tirupati temple, and the other time when she helped another untouchable woman to obtain the funeral milk from an upper-caste family who cremated their dead, unlike them who buried theirs.

Viramma's self and identity are blended together with the cultural heritage of Karani. Culture and society are two closely related concepts. Obviously, there can be no culture without a society, just as there can be no society without individuals. Conversely, there are no known human societies that do not exhibit culture. Some other species of animals however lead a social existence. One can have a society without a

culture, even though one cannot have a culture without a society. Sir Edward Tylor compares culture to the complex whole, which includes knowledge and belief, art and morals, law and custom and other habits acquired by man as a member of a society (1). Stated more simply, culture is everything, which is socially learned and shared by the members of the society. Culture in Karani is also the common denominator that makes the actions of individuals intelligible to other members of their society and gives meaning to their lives. Because they share a common culture, they can predict how others are most likely to behave in a given circumstance and react accordingly. The pattern of streets, house and community is the same everywhere in Karani. It is the cultural hierarchy that divides the villages into Ur and Ceri. The culture in Karani can be understood in the light of their work, power, social functions, and rituals. Viramma's narration marks her wilful acceptance of her heritage and culture. A deep concern for transfer of culture from one generation to the other continues to be reflected in Viramma's autobiography too. She is both disappointed because of the loss of her past culture, and she is happy because of the improvements brought to the Ceri by the new cultural changes. As the individual identity of Viramma is combined with that of the collective identity of Karani, we understand that the cultural factors, including society, religion, customs, beliefs and tradition as moulding and helping Viramma in defining her selfhood too. Her thoughts reflect the social, political, and communal atmosphere in which she has existed and survived. Consequently, what Viramma offers us is a vivid portrait of a woman caught between the traditional compulsions of her status and her quest for managing and expanding her margin of autonomy. Each episode of her life and aspects of her identity has been confined within the space delineated heavy compulsions and a frail autonomy.

The text portrays Viramma as still believing in her caste *Dharma* which could easily be defined as the acceptance of her social position, and respect for the master who feeds his workers. At the same time, their culture is a maintenance system, which ensures the contained well-being, interrelationships and cooperation in the social group. Far behind Viramma's submissiveness to the dominant social system, lies a facet of her personality, a wonderful strength, which to put simply is the very force of life itself. Her vibrant interest in other human beings, be they itinerant singers, eunuchs or snake catcher tribes, makes her a good social being, and human being. Her taste for songs, stories and street theatre, the abundance of detailed observation she is able to provide on rituals and ceremonies or on the exact type of food being prepared for social occasions, show a lively curiosity about all facets of life—the social, economic, political and religious. The book, in short, elaborately sketches the religious rituals, ceremonies and festivals that are prevalent in Karani. Apart from the rituals and ceremonies, various folk songs which are the carriers of culture and are also abundant in the village of Viramma, in general, reflect the ancient tradition and cultural ethos of the lives of individuals in Karani.

Josiane and Jean-Luc Racine comment that they have not attempted in the book to write a comprehensive socio-political analysis of Tamil dalits. They wanted to talk about the dalits, so they talked to one of them. “When narrated in great detail, a single life can provides a wealth of information and insight.” (310) What Viramma tells us might be a bit different from what dalit writers have to say. She brings in a very traditional perception of a woman; submissive and obedient, but only upto a point, combined with an image of a woman of admirable strength for facing the challenges of daily life and assessing her own rights in the family circle. She illuminates her truth, the story of her life, which is the memory of her past, her discovery of self, her way to bear children, her care for all of them, cherished even when dead, then partly forgotten, her pride and anguish for surviving ones, her relationship to Periyandavan, her lineage god, to Mariamman, the smallpox goddess, to the spirits, the *kattery*, the exorcists, the *mantrakar*. Viramma, in short, acts as an efficient informant who can tell the cultural history of Karani in great detail. Many, particularly, the dalit militants, may think that Viramma’s visions are not progressive. Viramma’s life story as she offers it in her own words is not a dalit text. Usually dalit literature is said to have specificities, particularly a deep sense of anger and revolt against the prevailing customs of untouchability, the social order, and the established ideology, which backs them. It is not a dalit text in this sense, but viramma’s story is nevertheless, the text of a dalit, if we give to this word its basic meaning of one who is ‘oppressed and crushed’, without political or ideological implications. It is not, in a primary sense, a text attacking oppression, but it is a narrative, which tells how an oppressed woman lives and thinks. In “Another Song of the Road”, Susmita Dasgupta speaks of it in this way: “Viramma is the classical slave of Hegelian idealism-not revolt, not defiance, but obedience so silent and so certain that it would make the master utterly dependent upon the slave” (2017). Unlike other dalit writings, the work does not disclose any harsh experience in a derogatory way. Instead, Viramma describes her dalit experiences with pleasure and accepts it as the part of human life. Though the book is an excellent eye-opener and valuable source of the various sides of dalit writing, it is eulogised more for its self portrayal and cultural ramifications.

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