

## **VIRAMMA: OPPRESSION TO EXPRESSION**

Dr. Shameemunnisa Begum  
Post Doctoral Research Scholar,  
Kakatiya University, Warangal,  
Telangana, India.

### **Abstract**

*The research paper focuses on a diverse oral record of Viramma, a Dalit woman. Struggling between sovereignty and her bondage, Viramma is discriminated twice – as a Dalit and as a woman. Viramma offers a first person account of what feminity can be and consolidates a very traditional perception of a woman- tame and obedient along with an image of admirable strength for confronting challenges of daily life and her situation in a society. The presentation traces the struggle of the socially excluded (Dalits specifically) towards their attempt to express themselves. Viramma as a Dalit woman does not simply bewail and cry her Dalit identity, she seems to praise and celebrate it, and would even like to immaculate it. Dalit songs, rituals, festivals and other community-centric ceremonies are described with an intimacy of a participant that from the mere ‘rejection’ and ‘revolt’ against the Brahmanical order, the entire self- portrayal bristles with conviction of an autonomous being. Viramma’s life history is half about how the parayas endure due to the merciless agrarian social order of class and caste oppression, and the other half is full of songs, stories, rituals, festivals- the celebration of paraya culture. Through these two expansive divisions, Viramma tries to look at life of her community in a more balanced way.*

**Key words:** Dalit, women, caste, gender, discrimination, community.

### **Introduction:**

India provides a critical site for the discussion of life histories. It was frequently assumed that caste was one of the essential attributes of Indian society and that identities founded on caste and religion dominated to such a degree that individual agency and a sense of selfhood (and hence life histories and other individualistic modes of expression) were marginal to South Asian thought and behavior. To cite a perhaps extreme case, McKim Marriott (1976) argued that Indians were best understood as "dividuals" rather than individuals (Arnold 2).

The enormous impediment for Dalit women is their lack of education. In spite of nearly five decades of literacy projects and formal educational facilities available in autonomous India, the number of literates among Dalit women is appallingly low. A majority of them endeavor to lead a simple and ordinary life due to wild poverty in their families. Poverty compels them to abandon education and do hard work to find ways and intends to

survive. Illiterate women cannot write their autobiographies. But, as there are examples, these women, given a chance, can portray their delights and distresses, joys as well as sorrows to someone who can help document their narrative voices, *Viramma: Life of an Untouchable* (2000), a collaborative autobiographical narrative comes into this category.

Dalit women are the most under-privileged cluster left out at the bottom of the hierarchical caste society for centuries. Compared to Dalit men they endure all the more due to their dual disadvantages: being Dalit and being women. Being Dalit they endure due to caste discrimination. Being women they become the victims of the patriarchal social order in their families and outside. The social researchers studying the status of Dalit women believe that they are thrice alienated due to their caste, class and gender positions. While the upper caste men sexually exploit them in their workplaces, at home they are beaten up by their own men. Thus, violence against Dalit women is rampant (Kannabiran 249).

Life histories reveal insights not just into the experiences and attitudes of the individuals directly concerned, but also of the wider society, or social segment, of which they are a part. This is of particular value in seeking to understand and analyze groups that are socially marginalized and hence not normally heard, such as women and Dalits ("Untouchables"). As many of the titles in this type of scholarship attest, finding the "voice" of the otherwise apparently voiceless has a force propelling the investigation of life histories as a whole, and not least in South Asia; in this way, the life-history approach is a means of breaking the silences imposed by society and history. We would add, however, that it is of no less value in allowing us to stand back from the familiar lives of the "great and famous," of deities, saints and heroes, and to see them as representative of, or creative departures from, established life-historical form.

Life histories have often, and increasingly, been used to uncover lives that would otherwise have remained marginal and obscure, and several of the essays in this volume take up and develop that approach. As Josiane and Jean-Luc Racine remind us, there is now an extensive, primarily anthropological, literature about Untouchables, and their own, life of a Tamil Dalit woman, Viramma.

A majority of Dalit women live in rural areas in the midst of poverty and backwardness. As has been specified before several decades of Government sponsored rural development programmes have not possessed the capacity to help them to get regular employment. Therefore, they have to intensely depend on the traditional sources of employment for their livelihoods. Larger part of Dalit women are daily wage labourers, agricultural workers, maidservants and unskilled workers in industrial and mechanical units. They even work in dangerous unsafe work-sites such as mines and quarries. Even though the labour they put in their work is no less than their male counterparts they are every time paid lower wages. At the point when their men flee from shouldering family responsibilities it is they who are responsible to run their families with meagre income. It has been observed that

Dalit women travel long distances investing loads of their time and energy to collect water and fuel for their everyday utilization.

Anupama Rao believes that caste relations are embedded in Dalit women's profoundly unequal access to resources of basic survival such as water and sanitation facilities, as well as educational institutions, public places, and sites of religious worship. On the other hand, the material deprivation of Dalits and their political weakness perpetuate the symbolic structures of untouchability, which legitimates upper caste sexual access to Dalit women (Rao 14). As has been specified before, Dalit women writers are small in number. A few of them have composed their autobiographies in Indian dialects because English is still a dominant language of the upper caste and class. There are also a few "narrated autobiographies" of illiterate Dalit women who cannot write their life accounts themselves yet can narrate their life-stories to other people who can document them. Studying of such genre will unquestionably give new insight and enrich our understanding about autobiographies.

Life histories show great diversity of form and intent; they also illustrate the power of certain cultural conventions and constraints in the presentation of one's own or others' life histories. one of the principal reasons for turning to the life histories of women, as with Dalits, is that their lives are not generally accessible by other means, and their individual voices, and the underlying subversive messages they may contain, are too readily silenced in the more familiar, accessible and overtly self-important sources that serve the perspectives of the state or those of the dominant caste and gender. For these reasons, life histories are a way of rescuing or recovering the woman's (or Dalit's) voice, "buried," as Vatuk puts it, "as it often is in the unrecorded past or in the unwritten lives of contemporary non-literate and often oppressed and marginalized peoples" (Arnold 15).

## II

Josiane Racine, originally a Tamil and now living in France came to Tamil Nadu in the nineteen eighties with a research project on ethnomusicology. It was amid that time that she happened to meet Viramma, a Tamil Dalit woman. Viramma is a multi-faced personality; She is a folk singer, a trained mid-wife, a knower of spells, an agricultural labourer tied in a *jajmani* relationship with the most powerful Reddiar family of the village furthermore a supervisor of other contract labourers in her landlord's fields. What may have pulled in Josiane was Viramma's ability to sing wide range of songs: songs related to birth, puberty, adolescence, marriage and even demise. In her initial meetings Viramma, it appears, was not comfortable with Josiane to uncover about her life and talents. It took great ten years from 1980 to 1990 for Viramma to break her silence. Viramma's life-history was originally published in French in France in 1995. Later, Will Hobson translated into English which got published in 1997.

Josain writes about *Viramma*; “Our published account of Viramma's life was an unexpected outgrowth of a research project in ethnomusicology focused on oral culture in Tamil Nadu. The emphasis was on music and songs as expression of culture and society. In a strongly hierarchical society, it was important not to be perceived as too personally associated with one of the castes or one of the families of the village” (Arnold 258).

Viramma narrates her life-story in Tamil but her Tamil is not quite the same as the standard Tamil generally used by the upper castes. She speaks in that Tamil which the Paraya, the community she belongs to use in their day-to-day routine conversations. Being a folk singer she has a flexibility of using certain words in her own way. But this is socially not within acceptable limits. At least not by the upper castes, Will Hobson in his translator's note observes that when Viramma articulates, contracts and alters words in unique ways, the upper caste of the *ur* consider her act as falling short of 'correct' Tamil usage. Even then Viramma manipulates the chances given to her. She exercises her freedom, on occasion with no restriction. She habitually uses swear words, slangs and sexually unambiguous language. She tries to justify the use of her language by saying that significance and meaning of a word depends on the context in which it has been used. There is yet another dimension why she uses such language. Subjected to all forms of oppression and subjugation such as, caste, class and gender, Viramma like other Dalit women in the country is compelled to remain silent all these years. So when she gets an opportunity to speak, she articulates to her heart's content. Speaking in a specific manner, perhaps, gives her pleasure; it is also her self-assertion. Especially, her fastidious attention to detail, her use of accentuation conveyed by many exclamation marks and the strongly imagistic nature of language are some of the pointers to prove that she is really self- confident.

We should also note that the individual lives embodied in these Indian life histories are inflected not only through family but also through a broader network of relations and identities, involving caste, religion and gender. Gender identity is a salient element in many women's life histories.

When we turn to the oral stories and spoken lives, we see even more unambiguously how the individual life is expressed in terms of kin, caste, and religious identities. Family relations are thus fundamental to the life story told by Viramma in Tamil Nadu. Viramma also speaks of herself as a member of her Untouchable caste (or sub-caste) and its neighborhood, the *ceri*.

All through the narrative Viramma never hesitates to use the term Paraiyar to refer to her community. Literally the expression 'Paraiyar' means people of the parai. Parai is basically a drum used during various rituals, ceremonies and festivals. These drums are traditionally made and used by the men of the Vettiyan, a sub-caste of Dalit community. It is believed that from this Tamil word 'Paraiyar', the Portuguese, the French and the British have

derived the term 'Pariah' which suggests the state of deprivation, exclusion and enslavement. Today the word 'Paraiyar' is no more out in public use on the grounds that its implied derogatory meaning insult the Paraya community. For this reason government of Tamil Nadu brought a legislation to ban the utilization of the word long back. But Viramma uses this term purposely. She never uses even the accessible terms such as Harijan, Scheduled Caste or Dalit. Rather, she uses a number of terms related to Paraiyar such as, paratchi, a Paraya woman; paraimelam, a Paraya orchestra; paraceri, the ceri of the Paraya always situated far away from the main village etc. By using these terms, Viramma, perhaps, tries to reinvent the Paraya tradition and to some extent, to re-establish some of the lost cultural characteristics of her community. It is in this sense that her life history also turns into the history of the Paraya community.

India is still a vibrant oral culture. Far from the monopolies of the twice-born and from Vedic recitations, oral narratives have the relevance that European culture, privileging the written medium, has forgotten. Sudhir Kakar has underlined their decisive significance as follows:

The spell of the story has always exercised a special potency in the oral-based Indian tradition, and Indians have characteristically sought expressions of central and collective meanings through narrative design. While the twentieth-century West has wrenched philosophy, history, and other human concerns out of integrated narrative structures to form the discourse of isolated social sciences, the preferred medium of instruction and transmission of psychological, metaphysical, and social thought in India continue to be the story. Narrative has thus been prominently used as a way of thinking, as a way of reasoning about complex situations, as an enquiry into the nature of reality (Kakar 1989: 1).

Collected life histories, such as Viramma's, have become a genre by themselves, largely through the efforts of anthro-pologists. Some of these narrators could write, others merely read. Some were illiterate. David Brumble's(1993) analysis of hundreds of "auto-biographies" of American Indians is probably the most systematic attempt to theorize the genre, and to bring forward its possible limitations. The important point here is not really the pertinence of the concept of autobiography. True, these biographies are not always "auto," where the narrators were illiterate, and the writing of their narrative are not even their own "graphy." The concept of life history is broader and more convenient, for it leaves open the question of the third party. Since the 1960s, comments Brumble, some American authors involved in life histories have called for a "total unveiling" of the procedures of writing such narratives. More important to us was the subterfuge Brumble denounces under the term "absentee writer," which erases the third party from the narrative, as if the narrator was alone in telling the story of his/her life (Arnold 256).

According to Moniot (1974), oral traditions, as tools of knowledge, have therefore to be validated through a threefold critique. The textual critique calls for "observing the conditions and the circumstances of the collection, and how the testimony has been received." The sociological critique is that an oral tradition survives because of its functionality, which has to be identified, for it could be ideological, political, practical, aesthetic, apologetic, entertaining, etc. The third (cultural) critique addresses the references recognized in the considered group, be they formal, conceptual or value-marked (Arnold 257).

### III

Viramma starts her story by saying that she comes from a serf family. Both her paternal grandfather, Samikkannu and her father, Nadesan were working as serfs for one Swara Reddi, a landlord under the *jajmani* system. Later, after her marriage to Manikkam, Viramma found that her husband's family was likewise serving one Reddiar's family as serfs under the same *jajmani* framework. In fact, Viramma lets us know that not a single Paraya family was free from this medieval routine practice of serfhood. It may be noted here that the political economy of the *jajmani* system is very obscure. Under the system one or a few families completely and selflessly dedicate their labour, time and energy to the landowner's family. And in return, the landowner gives them pay either in kind or cash or in both. In most cases the serfs do not get their due wages. But when there are no regular jobs available in our society for the poor and landless, turning into a serf seems to be a better deal because it brings a certain financial monetary security.

Moreover, the serfs always manage to get loans from their proprietors during an emergency. But the interest of the loans is generally too high; to such an extent that a serf is never able to pay back the loan to his/her master even in his/her life-time. And, that is the reason behind why a family of serf keeps on to become serf from generation to generation. The landowner, on the other hand, always plays the role of a patron. If he is considerate, he may give a small piece of land to the family of serfs who may enhance their economic conditions by doing some cultivation. By owning a plot of area the family can also command some social respect in the village. But in any case, if the landlord is not satisfied with the work of the serfs he might physically punish them. Sometimes he may stop their wages and deny them their basic necessary livelihoods. Viramma's family being attached to this medieval system need to experience all such rituals from time to time and has no respite.

Viramma's life-history speaks about how the Parayas endure due to the callous agrarian social order of class and caste suppression in first half, and the other half is brimming with songs, stories, rituals, ceremonies, festivals - the celebration of the Paraya culture. Through these two wide divisions Viramma, perhaps, tries to take a look at her community life in a more balanced way. In her scheme of portrayal the Parayas never rebel against their landlords, despite of the fact that the degree of exploitation at times is beyond

tolerable limit. In fact considering their existential conditions, it could have been an impractical proposition to present the Parayas as social protesters. Actually they cannot revolt against their oppressors because above all else, they are poor. Being illiterate as well as landless they hardly have any career option.

Labour turns into their one and only one occupation through which they can earn their food. Thus they struggle hard to make both ends meet and try to live in an adjustable manner. But during their toil even if there is no collective defiance against their landlords there are evidences in Viramma's narrative that they use certain traps to manoeuvre the landlords for their little gains. For example, they tell lies, steal grains, sing melodies and relax at work and do a few other small things all the time to their advantage. This is what is known as "weapons of the weak" to use James C. Scott's famous phrase (Scott xvi). These traps, as Viramma justifies in her narrative, come naturally to the Parayas. They are aware that they have very hard lives to lead. But they also know how to cope with their life-conditions. And hence they attempt to celebrate life, in spite of the agony that floats around them. Perhaps, it is their culture that gives them potency as well as hopes to struggle and outlive. That might be the reason behind why Viramma allocates a part of her narrative dealing with Paraya culture.

However, at no point does Viramma advocate that everything is good in the Paraya culture. Rather her scathing assault on some of the cultural characteristics and trends of her community proposes that she is extremely critical of both her culture and community. For instance, in several places she condemns the dominant male prejudiced attitude of her community expressing that Paraya women need better deal from their own men. She also critiques some of the orthodox social and cultural practices of her community and recommends changes. It is quite interesting that Viramma tries to perform twofold parts: like a crusader she wishes to preserve the Paraya culture which is being dissolved by modernization and urbanization; and like a reformer she desires to make certain changes in its old order so that the new generation can feel proud of their culture and admiration for their community. It is in this sense that Viramma's life-history is also the account of her community.

The recommendations for making use of oral traditions are formulated for historians trying to reconstruct the past. They rely upon interlocutors who are the depositories of these traditions; and these narrators are seen as heirs preserving, but also enriching, a cultural legacy. Most of these methodological points appear valid as well for another type of orality, involving not so much an old legacy as a recent past. In these circumstances, we have to listen to witnesses more than to heirs. This is particularly true when testimonies—dramatic fragments of life histories which have suddenly changed their course for the worse—are a recollection of something which is the antithesis of oral tradition, of a cultural legacy: something hardly expressible, so unutterable that sometimes it was not believed.

When a member of a group with primarily an oral tradition tells his or her life story, he or she is the bearer of a cultural legacy: Viramma, as a storyteller and singer, is thus heir to Tamil Dalit culture. But she is also a witness of her times. Her testimony is not just the egotistical exercise of autobiographer and her "I" is not expression of a "bourgeois individualism." Talking about herself, she talks as well of her family, of her community, of life in the Dalit ward (the *ceri*), of the system of relations and unequal power governing the village. As a subaltern telling her life history, she sheds light on those who are outside her community. Moreover, because unlimited time was given to Viramma, she was able to recollect her life not only in its historical continuity, but also in its totality—covering joys and sorrows, material dimensions and beliefs, legacies of the past and dynamics of change. Life histories such as Viramma's are representative of at least a part of the so-called "silent majority."

#### IV

Viramma comes from a serf family, when she was born there was dissatisfaction in the family because it was believed that she would bring calamity to her natal family after she was married off. Her parents were not so happy as they suspected that being a girl, she was a burden to the family. They required more male children, who they thought, could help them in their work and add to the regular family earnings. Besides, they already had three daughters and to include one more would mean further burden. So when Viramma was born the family declared, "Here's another little bitch been born" (Viramma 3) - a clear statement of family's condemnation of her birth. But distress or misfortune does not last long in Dalit families as Viramma puts it, "we can't live if we brood on them the whole time. So, the disappointment of my birth was quickly forgotten and I was welcomed into the household very well" (4).

Viramma tenderly recollects her childhood and portrays it using pleasurable words. She writes, "My childhood passed as if I was living in the kingdom of the gods on earth" (4). Though poverty, illness and wide range of problems were there in the family Viramma enjoyed her childhood by playing, listening grandfather Munissami's stories and spending her time with Kitteri, Rukkumani and Nilamma's companionship. At the time when Viramma attained school-going age she was simply denied education because the school was situated in the *ur*, the upper caste locality where the Parayas were not permitted to enter. Instead Viramma started learning how to deal with household errands. This was also the time when she came to be familiar with the caste hierarchy that existed in her village, her own identity as one of the lower caste persons and two diverse cultures that existed in the *ur* and the *ceri*. She contrasts her childhood with Janaki and Minathi's, two upper caste girls who never got a option to go out of their homes and get pleasure from life outside. She feels sad for their restricted life-styles and comments, "Always shut away in their big house, the poor things! Friendship, discovering nature, Grandfather Munissami's stories - they were forbidden all of

that. That's the lot of high-born children!" (13). By bringing this comparison, Viramma wants to make a point: life in the *ceri* may be hard and troublesome due to poverty and a few other problems; but it is still beautiful in a lot of ways.

But the childhood of Dalit children does not last long. As soon as they grow little older they are told by their parents to end playing and begin learning the family trade. They are asked to use their hands and bring in as much money as possible so that the family can be run well. The responsibilities of girl-children are additional and more than the boys. They are expected to help run the family so that they will have capacity to feed several mouths in their in-laws' home after their marriage. These girls are given in marriages earlier than they attend puberty. Consequently, they shoulder what is called 'family responsibility' during a time when they should be playing around. Viramma says, she would have loved to play a child's role a bit longer had it not been for her stomach. She tells Sinnamma, the author, "That's how we learned to work, Sinnamma. We would rather have carried on playing and getting up late. We would have loved to stay children all our lives, and we tell ourselves that if it wasn't for these bloody stomachs which we always have to fill, we'd live innocently and happily" (12).

Viramma's marriage was arranged with Manikkam when she was a child, three years sooner than she attained puberty. Manikkam, on the other hand, was quite older to her and thus there was a big age-gap between the two. It is a custom among the Parayas to send the bride to In-laws' house only after she reaches puberty. So subsequent to wedding Manikkam Viramma put in three years in her parents' house enjoying their company. As a child bride, she did not know what marriage was all about. The only thing she understood was that she would be given away to an outsider and she would go away from her parents' house for good. The thought of departure from her parents and going with an unfamiliar person made her tense. She depicts her awful emotional state thus: "I spent a terrible night. I imagined awful things. At that age you don't understand what marriage is. I was going to be parted from the people I loved: as far as I could see, it was like a kidnapping" (17).

When she attained puberty and sent back to her husband's home, she was not at all ready to leave her parents and begin a new life. She hated her husband, who she came to know, would be her new master. She labeled him as her 'executioner'. Her hatred for her spouse further compounded when she was compelled to have sexual intercourse with him in the first night. She screamed in fear and confronted him saying that being a stranger he had no rights to touch her. Later, as she gradually grew to be a woman, she came to understand the relationship of husband and wife and enjoyed her wedded life. She is quite explicit about unfolding her sexual life without any inhibitions. By the time she narrates the account of her life she was already sixty years of age. But the horrifying memory that she had in the first night seems to be fresh still in her mind. While describing it she brings an assessment between how people from the *ur* and the *ceri* are diverse in their sexual approaches:

Even today, at my age, I still tremble when I think of my first time: it's stayed as a horrible memory. The Reddi are more civilized, and they don't do it like these

savages, these Pariahs. I know how it's done with the Reddi ... The elders lead the married couple into the bedroom and shut the door. Then the young ones have a whole day to talk, win each other over and make love gently. It's too crude with us, too brutal. It's true we don't have the time or the space to do it like that. But my experience was too awful! (44).

It is not that Viramma valorizes the traditions of the Reddis. She recommends that life in the Paraya families will be better if the Paraya men are little sensible, humane and caring in their sexual approaches. Viramma's suggestion seems to be significant because from her own particular experience she lets us know how there is no limitation in their sexual lives. She uncovers that no Paraya family ever takes on any family planning method to control their population. Neither do they use any contraception to prevent any undesirable birth. Viramma herself is a mother of twelve kids out of which only a son and two little girls have survived. The reality of the matter is that being poor they require as many extra hands as possible so that the family earnings can be greater than before. But, as Viramma admits, that should not be the only consideration. Due to lack of medical care, many children die earlier than they reach working age. Moreover, because of repeated pregnancies the Paraya women not only go down of their robust health, they also turn out to be easy prey to various diseases and often fall ill. And still, they keep on working hard. It is, perhaps, not strange when Viramma tells us that compared to their men the Paraya women shoulder twofold responsibilities: working in the agricultural fields as well as looking after their homes. For example, as soon as the Paraya men complete their work they rush to wine shop, get intoxicated and demand good food from their wives, however insufficient their income might be. Usually there are abuses, brawls and fights over petty and minor issues. Thus it is the Paraya women who all the time give up and sacrifice their lives to smoothly run the families.

Thus sufferers and victims at their own homes the Paraya women also turn out to be easy targets of sexual exploitation outside their homes: at work places, hospitals, bus stops, markets, and so forth. Because of the work they do, they have to travel from one place to another frequently. As being mobile, they are viewed as women of easy virtue. The upper caste men all the time make sexual overtures thinking that Dalit women can be simply bought by throwing some cash. Viramma scathingly attacks the hypocrisy of the upper caste gentlemen who in day time practice untouchability yet around night sleep with the untouchable women with no disgrace or blame. Viramma, thus, says:

We Paratchi have the reputation of being easy women who'll jump into bed with anyone if they whistle... 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'! It is the same in the hospital. All of them make passes at us, from the doctor to the sweeper. "Aye! What do you say? Are you coming? The doctors pretend to listen to our hearts so they can feel our breasts. Others just go ahead and get their

packet out and tell us to touch it. That's happened to more than one of us. We're harassed nonstop down there. But we don't dare shout or make a scandal: we'd be called liars, our names would be crossed off (from) the hospital registers and we wouldn't be given any more treatment (52).

Viramma clearly says that the Parayas cannot fight against the upper castes even though there are atrocities and abominations committed upon them. The caste is the real culprit behind the offences, she confides. She is familiar with the fact that her community cannot deal with their livelihoods without support and backing from the upper caste Reddis. Otherwise, the living of the Parayas is absolutely insecure. She believes in her fate stating that her community is destined to undergo suffering for their offenses that they committed in the previously. She also feels that because they eat waste and mostly unclean and dirty food they are called untouchable people by the high castes. Viramma thus accepts the given hierarchy of castes and declines to see any probable change in the social religious order saying that if at all there is any transformation it will create disharmony and disturbances among different castes and communities. She does not akin to the thought of her husband, Manikkam and son, Anban who are political activists of CPI and DMK, respectively and discuss about Dalit unanimity for bringing a social change through revolution. Her basic fear and apprehension is that a alteration in society may lead to further disaster and debacle to their existed insecured lives and that is the reason why she is not prepared to welcome any change in Indian society and culture (Kumar 252).

## V

Like Viramma, most of the Paraya people consider their fate and hence subsequently they accept their lives as whatever comes their way. They cannot think about another social order which will give them sense of pride and freedom. Generations of their reliance on the higher castes have made them submissive, feeble, passive and resigned. Education which could enable and empower them is completely missing and absent. Thus Viramma and her community cannot imagine of battling against their oppressors despite they know them very well.

Such submissiveness of Viramma and her community is not an isolated case. Rather, theirs is a classic example of how the exploited gradually deal with their conditions when they understand that they cannot change their destiny on their own. It has been examined that people, those who experience different forms of oppression and subjugation across the world behave in the same manner. They disguise their sufferings and rather than cursing their fate they find out how to act impeccably even with their tormenters. They contrast the level of their sufferings with the other oppressed castes who perhaps suffer more than them and at last bear them mutely. After certain point of time they come to understand that it is ultimately humankind that all matters in regular relationship and not their sufferings

which are widespread among a majority of population over the world. Josiane and Jean-Luc Racine view this trend in Viramma and her community. They put in writing:

In Marxist terms, Viramma can appear a stereotype of alienation. In her alienation itself, in her certainties as well as her anxieties, she presents the universal figure of those women and men who cannot or dare not conceive of a new world, of those who have borne for so long the logic of oppression that they believe in the order that debases them more than in those who wish to overthrow it. But at the same time she offers a richness, a courage and a strength which, despite the hardship of her condition, fill her daily life with an intense humanity. What alienates her makes her life itself, of course. But to liberate all the Virammass of India, all the Virammass of the world, it is necessary fundamentally to understand and to respect them (311).

Viramma and her community may not sort out themselves to fight against their oppressors for the welfare of humanity but never at any point of time do they lose their optimism to better living in future. Viramma herself makes endeavors to progress the material conditions of her family by striving hard. Her sincerity and truthfulness at last remunerated when she turns into the supervisor of the complete work-force that labors for the Reddis in the agricultural fields. This new position gives her an additional income and also certain respect in her community.

Viramma also perceives how the power-structure of the village is gradually changing. The Paraya children are nowadays permitted to study in the village school situated in the *ur*. Indeed, even among the Parayas some have become school teachers who bring confidence and incredible motivations to the entire community. With government interference the Parayas have also started demanding higher wages. Viramma recollects how during Draupadi festival celebrations there was a major fight between the upper castes and her community about the issue of higher wages. She also presents instance of the Tombans, a pig-raising community, who are just slightly higher than her community in the caste hierarchy, have become rich in recent years and shifted to the *ur* to settle down. Viramma, anyway, does not like these transformations. She trusts that *kaliyuga* has finally arrived and that is the reason why such normless subversions in the social order are occurring. It is truly fascinating that Viramma rejects the present change in society justifying that the past was beautiful. At whatever point Viramma is in stress she falls back upon her community. In fact, except for a tiny bit of progress here and there her community has not changed throughout the years, and it comforts her. She tries to overlook her existential problems and troubles by embracing the culture and ethnicity of her community. In this way her relationship with her community gives her hope- hope to breathe and survive. Josiane and Jean-Luc Racine elucidate in the subsequent passage why Viramma adopts such a stratagem in her narrative:

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 is not taken in by the inequalities of the system! She knows she wears herself out and burns in the sun in the service of the landowners because she has to fill her stomach. She has not, however, rebelled or adopted a militant attitude. Viramma lives out her oppression like the majority: the harshness of existence does not preclude release through family, hope, the intact faculties of laughter, song and the imagination. And at the same time meaning is found in a place, a community, a framework of life and thought, and an order of things, even if that framework and order also claim to justify oppression or limit emancipation. Hers is essentially an example of the internalization of oppression, which must be understood as an ideological system representative of the old order of the world. In telling her life, in expressing her philosophy, 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 lowborn'. And her portrait of 'the low-born' makes us understand both how the system has held for so long and why it is cracking apart today (311).

Today, we are not being familiar with what is the situation of people like Viramma and her community. Not a lot can be expected because as such no significant social change has taken place in any of the Indian states including Tamil Nadu for the last few years. Caste structure still functions extremely well to the benefit of the upper castes and the lower castes yet do not know how to deal with its authority. Viramma's life-history, nevertheless, is an exceptional text because it uncovers the facts how a sufferer of caste system willfully uses her lower caste personality to her benefit and in a way succeeds in it. As it is apparent from her storyline, Viramma primarily hopes to lead a distinguished and noble life with liberty, freedom and self-esteem with or without caste-identity. Keeping in mind the end goal to accomplish such target, she follows certain models in her life, such as, sincerity, diligent work, and so on. But soon she understands that caste is the definitive reality in Indian life. This is, may be, the reason why she, rather than challenging the caste system, tries to negotiate with different social powers which sooner or later help her to maintain her source of revenue. But, this does not signify that Viramma supports caste exploitations or social prejudices which are committed on her family and community all together. In reality, as a storyteller, she tactically and unequivocally hits all forms of caste and class oppression and subjugation. She mourns her low position in society, scorns the traditions of the upper castes, ridicules their social conduct, makes fun of their hypocrisy - these are just a few examples which hold up the argument that Viramma as a final point comes into sight as a critic of caste system in her description. In particular, by portraying her individual and subjective experiences in her own style, she finds herself able to build a creative and innovative self of her she could call her own which is beyond doubt a big accomplishment for a poor,

uneducated and illiterate Dalit woman like Viramma. That confers Viramma's life story certain relevance.

**Work Cited:**

Arnold, David and Stuart Blackburn. *Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography and LifeHistory*. Indiana University Press: Permanent Black, 2004. Print.

James C. Scott. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990. Print.

Kannabiran, Vasanth and Kalpana Kannabiran. "Caste and Gender: Understanding Dynamics of Power and Violence." Ed. Anupama Rao. *Gender and Caste*. Delhi: Kali for Women, 2003. Print.

Kumar, Raj. *Dalit Personal Narratives: Reading Caste, Nation, and Identity*. New Delhi: Orient Black Swan, 2010. Print.

Rao, Anupama. Ed. "Caste, Gender and Indian Feminism." *Gender and Caste*. Delhi: Kali for Women, 2003. Print.

Viramma, Josiane Racine, and Jean-Luc Racine. *Viramma: Life of a Dalit*. New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2000. Print.