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Ethnographic Tradition of Positive Hailing: Dalit Women, Caste-gaze Inversions and Celebrations of Body and Identity in *Viramma: Life of an Untouchable,* India

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Abstract

This article engages *Viramma: Life of an Untouchable* (1995), one of the earliest ethnographies to foreground a Dalit woman's voice, marking thirty years since its publication. Viramma's oral testimonies in this work continue to influence Dalit women by fostering positive body image, participatory knowledge production, and self-love. Ethnomusicologist Josiane Racine and anthropologist Jean-Luc Racine present Viramma's life through affirmative stories that invert the caste-gaze that has traditionally cast Dalit women as passive victims marked for sexual violation. This article argues that through her narrative, Viramma inaugurates an ethnographic tradition of "positive hailing" calling attention to Dalit women's embodied self-understanding and agency as vital to Dalit feminist ethnography. Her life stories enunciate Dalit women's values, beliefs, and political agency, as countering both casteist and caste-neutral feminist frameworks, and redefining knowledge production as solidarity, healing and shared life. Viramma's deliberate linguistic and narrative choices become acts of resistance that challenge casteist tropes attached to Dalit womanhood. In meticulously constructing her life narrative, Viramma establishes a tradition of self-chosen visibility that resists caste-imposed invisibility and stigma; she affirms Dalit female-focused ritual practices as necessary for life-sustenance.

Keywords

Caste and gender, Autoethnography, Dalit women, Dalit feminism, Dalit culture, Oral narrative, Testimonial narrative

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Introduction

On the thirtieth anniversary of its publication, I engage with *Viramma: Life of an Untouchable* (1995) as one of the earliest significant ethnographies primarily carrying a Dalit woman's voice.[1] This work continues to profoundly shape my Dalit identity-formation, especially as I recall struggling with self-acceptance as a young woman after being told I was Dalit.[2] The narrator Viramma elatedly forges a beloved Dalit female identity in an intricate ethnographic tradition centering Dalit body and voice as testaments of positive self-understanding and self-love. She deliberately chooses words and stories to rise above victimhood and firmly establishes female-centered practices of caste-gaze inversions. In this oral narrative based in the *ceri* (segregated hamlet) of Karani near Puducherry, Tamil Nadu, India, Viramma self-identifies her belonging community as that of the *Paraiyar* and her female identity as a *Paratchi*.[3] Viramma narrated her life stories in the Tamil language to ethnomusicologist Josiane Racine native to Puducherry over a period of ten years (1980s). Josiane[4] and cultural anthropologist Jean-Luc Racine transcribed, translated and published this narrative in 1995 in French, and 1997 in English. I argue that Viramma inaugurates a Dalit feminist ethnographic tradition of positive hailing through the chosen visibility of her life. In doing so, she enunciates a subjectivity rooted in self-love and affirmation that directly counters the imposed invisibility and stigmatization of the Dalit body as the "polluted other" within caste society. I examine how as an active subject, she spontaneously weaves method, purpose, and centrality of her narrative as she takes control of the details of her life that she decides to share with Josiane Racine. Further, I advance my interest to understand Viramma's forging of such a tradition on her own terms in foregrounding voice, body, and communal culture of Dalit women as sites of validation. This essay carries twofold discussions on impacts of a Dalit feminist ethnography carrying lived experiences intertwined with suffering and affirmation: 1. Ethnography of self-chosen visibility of body and community, and 2. Critical pedagogy for feminist cultural ethnographers. My objective for these observations

[1]Translator Will Hobson notes that the ethnomusicologist Josiane Racine and Viramma engaged in spontaneous conversations for over 10 years resulting in the ethnography. The original names of people and places are changed upon request.

[2]See Singh's chapter on "Embracing Dalit identity" in her ethnographic work rooted in Dalit communities in Tamil Nadu. She shares her dilemma in declaring her new found Dalit identity fearing impending consequences.

[3]Each Dalit community regionallly chose to embrace local communal identities such as *Paraiyar* originating from the *parai* –meaning "to announce"—the drum that Dalit men play in funeral processions. Paratchi is feminine equivalent to paraiyan, the Paraiyar have since subverted the parai to represent Dalit cultural identity. See work on this by Clarke. Also, see foonote 8.

[4]I use Josiane Racine's first name throughout this essay since her partner Jean-Luc Racine shares the same last name.

is that the readers might recognize the transformative power of organic narratives by Dalit women to weave new cultural feminist traditions into ethnographic work processes that replace institutionalized rules. This tradition involves discarding epistemic positions of caste power and shifting research objectives when subjects become embodiments of active subjectivity.

Viramma and Positive Hailing

I adapt positive hailing as a Dalit feminist ethnographic method that subverts brahminical caste-gaze notions that mark Dalit women's bodies as polluted and sexually available laborers. I draw on Black feminist scholar Jacqueline Bobo's adaptation of Louis Althusser's (1971) concept of "interpellation," which examines the role of reader/viewer positionality in interpreting representations of Black women's lives (Bobo, Hudley & Michel 2004). I juxtapose positive hailing with Althusser's notion of ideological "hailing," through which dominant structures summon subjects into subordinate positions. He describes interpellation as a reflexive submission to authority when individuals respond to such summons (pp. 174–175). In caste society, coercive labels imposed upon Dalit women function in a similar way: oppressive ideological hailing reproduces stereotypes that diminish their authenticity of voice and visibility. In contrast, positive hailing summons the listener into self-authored spaces of affirmative visibility where Dalit women appear uncontaminated, beautiful, and secure. Through this immersive method, Viramma confronts brahminical patriarchy and disrupts caste structures that mark Dalit female bodies as sites of exploitation.

Dalit feminist studies scholar Uthara Geetha (2025) positions experience as a crucial epistemic resource for subaltern communities but cautions that lived experience alone cannot sustain knowledge production without conceptual reflection (p. 320). Dalit feminist writers and ethnographers such as Urmila Pawar, Kumud Pawde, Shailaja Paik and Bama Susairaj demonstrate that Dalit women's personal and collective experiences function as vital theoretical interventions in caste-gender analysis. Building on South-Asian gender studies scholar Sharmila Rege's recognition of Dalit feminist praxis and language as central to challenging casteist configurations (2006), I argue that positive hailing emerges from lived experiences through processes of relationality and resocialization to bring hidden meanings to visibility. Rather than dwelling on suffering, Viramma's narrative reveals a Dalit-centered universe in which her body and identity are honored. Her positive hailing reflects a collective *arivaayviyal* (Tamil: epistemology) that challenges brahminical hierarchies of knowledge organized through binaries of sacred and degraded bodies. Viramma's reclamation of the terms *Paraiyar* and *Paratchi*, her celebration of dark skin, sexuality, and communal rituals, does not stop with inverting stigma; it restores symbolic and lived meanings to Dalit

womanhood. Through storytelling she situates the Dalit female body as sacred within her own value system, illuminating joy, erotic pleasure, ritual meaning, laughter, and communal solidarity as constitutive of agency.

Positive hailing reconfigures ethnography where instead of the researcher operating with interpretive authority, they become an apprentice engaged in disciplined listening. Dalit feminist methodology thus requires relinquishing the impulse to dominate analysis allowing Dalit women's experiential and cultural frameworks to reshape the meanings of "ethno" and "graphy." Such narratives transform listeners by redirecting them from dominant caste figurations toward more compassionate understandings. As Geetha observes, Dalit feminist standpoint is an "epistemic and political intervention that redefines the very conditions of knowledge production and its legitimacy" (p. 318). Positive hailing therefore functions as both narrative strategy and methodological compass, challenging caste studies that spotlight only violence and obscure the expansive affirmative worlds within Dalit communities. Through this practice, Viramma's carefully arranged narrative of affirmation despite pain becomes a site of alternate knowledge production that rephrases the terms of imposed recognition.

In theoretically framing positive hailing, I do not suggest that such attention on affirmation should displace the necessity to question and dismantle caste violence. The Racines in their afterword to the ethnography record that this work does not deny the atrocities against Dalits, but on the contrary believe that in the recognition and articulation of dignity by Dalit women, the despised life emerges respectful (p.312). Vasanth Kannabiran and Kalpana Kannabiran powerfully describe—with evidence on violence against Dalits—how caste and gender relations are sustained through terror, force, humiliation, and the silencing of protest. Reporting incidents such as the public stripping and parading of Muthama from the Golla community, they illustrate how power operates not only through brutality but through the prevention of grievance itself (2025). They argue that the most absolute form of power is one that forbids even seeing the shame when Golla men had to close their eyes, and the fear of articulation of wrong when Golla women had to hide. Positive hailing must therefore be read not as denial of violence, but as a radical feminist method to interrupt silent suffering through an assertion of voices that project self-recognition onto a caste society devised to prevent it.

Dalit Feminist Pedagogies of Refusal and Caste-Gaze Inversion

Thoughts from "Unbecoming Claims: Pedagogies of Refusal in Qualitative Research" authored by social scientists Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang (2014) provide an important framework for understanding "refusal" as a form of resistance to the anthropological and qualitative traditions that have historically dehumanized oppressed bodies. They

caution against an economy of pain within academic capitalism, where qualitative research often commodifies women's bodily suffering. Viramma's conscious decision to center celebration rather than pain exemplifies an "organic refusal," embodying Tuck and Yang's pedagogy of refusal; she asserts positivity without erasing the reality of exclusion. They help us understand the urgency of this message to learn from narratives of "dispossessed peoples" that they do not desire to dwell on pain (p. 812). Instead, they guide anthropological inquiry toward recognizing subversive meanings and proactive strategies of living fully and not merely surviving. Tuck and Yang conclude that "Refusal makes space for recognition, and for reciprocity. Refusal turns the gaze back upon power, specifically the colonial modalities of knowing persons as bodies to be differentially counted, violated, saved, and put to work" (p. 817). In refusing commodification of pain, the oppressed reclaim agency through narrative capital, and the act of saying "no" becomes a form of epistemic power. As the primary force of representation and documentation, Viramma controls the narrative, and dissemination of her experiential knowledge.

Tuck and Yang comment that when anthropologists publish the pain caused to their own peoples, either geographically, nationally or communally, the obligatory representation or exposition could come close to reproducing colonial authoritative institutionalized knowledge that controls meanings (ibid). However, in her mode of storytelling, Viramma spares Racine from the wrongs of profiting from the native's pain; she verbally and narratively refuses the traumatization of her body, saying "no" to its reduction as spectacle of suffering, and instead is her own messiah in resurrecting a positive embodied self through her testimony. Her pedagogy of positive hailing is more than liberating body from caste-gaze but freeing qualitative engagement of an eager anthropologist and readers from presumptuous analytical interpretations. In her ethnography, Singh (2018) situates Dalit women's narratives of pain and brutal sexual violence as truth-telling acts of rebellion that reveal a deep desire to call attention to the need to invert the objectification imposed by caste power (pp. 122-138). Journalist and anti-caste activist Smita Narula, reporting for the Human Rights Watch documents violence against Dalit communities—specifically in the Bihar tragedy in 1998— to bring global attention to the ferocity of caste power (Narula 1999).[5] From within such spaces where caste powers are in daily operation to routinely massacre and violate Dalit women's bodies, Viramma instates their life and body as agents of positive value nurtured in the female-centric rituals of Dalit culture. Rege notes, "The testimonios used in a consciously defined modern sense of what it means to be a Dalit woman, challenge the hegemony of brahminical linguistic practices" (2006, p. 93). Likewise,

[5]Narula's work is the first published documentation of violence against Dalits following the massacre in Laxmanpur Bathe, Bihar, of over 60 Dalits including children for demanding higher daily wages in 1998.

I observe that Viramma organically introduces new traditions into institutionalized anthropological studies, mandating ethnographic engagement with lived experiences. This requirement demands ardent labor of learning through listening on the part of the researcher, and to study Dalit women's lives as feminist cultural pedagogy.

The refusals that Viramma voices are not merely personal acts of choice; they are epistemological interventions that muddle cultural codes through which Dalit women's bodies have been rendered as mandatorily legible only within specified caste conventions. In recognizing that signs in any form gain meaning only through systems of patterned representation, Viramma elicits reversal of meanings through active interpretations of personal experiences and in doing so disrupts the patterned relationship between signs, and signified objects within which Dalit women are tied to as embodiments of trauma. In claiming narrative authority over her own body, she reworks representation itself as a cultural practice, transforming testimony into an active site where meanings are set on her own terms. In this regard, positive hailing extends beyond Tuck and Yang's "refusal" in not only rejecting capitalist research that does not hesitate to commodify pain but reformulates the analytic frame itself in the positive hailing of body presence.

Regional Contours of Caste, Linguistic Belonging and Resistance

In the northern part of Tamil Nadu that Viramma speaks from, more than 56 per cent of the population depend on agricultural labor for livelihood (Government of Puducherry, n.d.). The Reddiar, Naicker, Gounder (sub-caste groups of the Vanniyar, traditionally the business caste), Nadar and Vellalar (sub-caste groups of the Shudra, traditionally the laborer caste) are some of the sub-caste groups that Viramma encounters daily (Census India, n.d.). Though Brahmins occupy the highest status in the caste hierarchy, these other caste communities claim immediate supremacy over Dalits in their daily lives as their employers and demanding servitude. Common to caste operations, here as well, land is the major source of wealth, investment, and mark of social and economic status where Dalits work as laborers for daily wages. Paraiyar form the major Dalit group in Puducherry, and the Vettiyan sub-group of the Paraiyar live here as well. *Sakkillee* (those who work with animal hide), *Thotee* (cleaning sewers and toilets), *Sanar* (toddy tapping) and *Tomban* (barbering) are some of the other Dalit groups (census.co.in). As Viramma states, most Dalit communities work for the Reddiar who are the most prominent native caste group continuing their traditional family heritage as landowners (p. 241).

Though the word Paraiyar is used as a derogatory term by caste communities, Viramma activates her resistance taking pride in that identity and re-signifying the terms Paraiyar and Paratchi repeatedly in her narrative. The caste people call out to a woman as a Paratchi when they mean to degrade them as a "prostitute" or "bitch;"[6] Viramma overturns that stereotyping in proudly referring to herself as Paratchi. In her communal autobiography *Sangati* (2009), Bama applies the same term when referencing her Dalit identity-based social placing while living among caste communities as a teacher. In listing the rigid expectations caste women are bound by in comparison with Dalit women's freedom to quarrel, or leave an abusive marriage, she states, "I could see that in some ways I was lucky to be a parachi" (p. 113). Bama reminds Dalit women that "We tend to forget it all [good things] and believe that to be upper caste is best" (ibid). She describes the physical beauty of Dalit women, their unique way of wearing a sari: "The way we wear our saris with the pleats as the back and the way we pull our hair back and knot it to one side – all these have their own beauty" (ibid). Such usage of Paratchi and Paraiyar is a common subversive linguistic strategy among Dalit families to dilute and mock the intended injury of verbal abuse (Satya 2024).

Further, in her linguistic reclamation, Viramma rejects the term "Harijan," (children of God) coined by Gandhi:[7] "'The Harijans!' My son corrected me, coming out of the house. 'You can keep quiet, boy, that name will never cross my lips!'" (p. 165). This refusal to accept a new name for her community is Viramma's strong political statement against the celebrated Mahatma. She adds, "In the past, in the time of the ancestors, someone called us Pariahs and that word has stuck for generation after generation. Eh, boy! What do you want to hide from Sinnamma [Josiane]?" (pp. 165-166). As Tuck and Yang insist, saying "no" to articulations declared on behalf of the dispossessed (p. 812), and in this case, without involving them in the decision-making is an act of resistance to a colonial pattern of image control. Viramma's choice of the word "hide" indicates that in her understanding, Gandhi imposed this invented name of Harijan onto the *Paraiyar* as a charitable alternative image through a caste

[6]My current learning project in villages surrounding Madurai, Tamil Nadu, is among Dalit women who were formerly employed as "manual scavengers" to clean public toilets. In my conversation with Satya, who works as their community organizer, I learned that "Paratchi" is widely used to scold or degrade caste women indicating "prostitute" or "bitch." This linguistic control is yet another performance of caste entitlement to Dalit female body in creating and normalizing such linguistic patterns of name-calling.

[7]While in jail, in 1933, Gandhi started *Harijan*, a weekly newspaper to address untouchability as a social evil. The publication's name, meaning "children of God," was Gandhi's term that he chose to use for those traditionally considered untouchables in Indian society; however, the Dalit movement rejected the term as charitable because Gandhi did not condemn caste as a systemic issue. Leaders in the Dalit movement, especially Dr. Ambedkar chose to popularize the Marathi term Dalit – meaning broken people.

person's eye. Thus, the Gandhian gesture functions as a benevolent mask concealing caste power; Viramma's rejection exposes and subverts it. When Viramma says that the name will not cross her lips, one speculates an implication that Gandhi did not want to utter the words Chuhra, Valmik and Vankar (words for Dalit in Gujarati) and chooses a comfort-term as an entitlement of caste and political power. Her refusal not only rejects Gandhi's paternalism but reclaims the authority to name the self—a critical act of epistemic claim to her linguistic belonging. Thus, Viramma sets directions of resistance to casteist piercings and steers her listeners to recognize and condemn linguistic control of derogation and victimhood.

Visibility and Engagement

I continue to tie my discussions onto Bobo's understanding of "interpellation" where she proposes that the viewer or reader of a text can be "hailed" by the actual subject of a narrative into that very subjecthood, and "…the subject begins to construct meaning from the work and is constructed by the work" (p.186). Likewise, Viramma impresses upon Racine and her reader/listener a methodology of subjective storytelling through organic ethnographic processes that create a tradition of positive hailing built on trust and experiential self-understanding. In that process, the reader/listener recognizes that Viramma's thoughts and words are purposeful as she understands herself in relationship with her family and community. Further, the reader gathers that she intentionally organizes her life and memories into various components that are thematically and sequentially organized to establish a positive identity.

Viramma first hailed me through this ethnography as a thirty-four-year-old Dalit woman in the United States, grappling with the recent discovery of my Dalit roots and the temptation to conceal them. As I returned to her words over the years, her voice continued to challenge and guide me while I confronted internalized stereotypes of Dalit womanhood—dark skin equated with ugliness, immorality, and lack of intellect. Viramma's narrative urged me to reclaim and celebrate my Dalit body, voice, language, and communal culture as sites of agency. Calling forth such identity formations, her stories hail readers into processes of positive selfhood beyond caste definitions. As a transnational feminist cultural anthropologist, I learn from Viramma's narrative of the ethical discipline required of me: to practice attentive listening, and to recognize the real meanings embedded in organic sites of self-assertion.

Positional Switching, Trust and Methodology

Josianne steps into Viramma's world ready to serve the formalized discipline of anthropology, strictly following its institutionalized methodological rubric. However, what surprises her is that the respondent in the ethnographic field work is not Viramma

but Josiane— as the one permitted into a Dalit woman's circle of trust. This inversion causes a methodological breach where the ethnographer turns into the one "observed" on her capacity to listen and learn; trust becomes the medium of inquiry. Viramma iterates firmly that she is in command, daring to break sociocultural rules by allowing the presence of a caste individual into her physically and emotionally cordoned space, along with the world Josiane represents unbeknownst of the visceral entry of institutionally dictated rules. Trust and unconditional hospitality are the air, wind, and water in Viramma's ecosystem unbound by western disciplinary conditionalities, formula and methods.

In this study on Dalit culture and identity initialized by Josiane Racine, an organic and spontaneous culture of trust emerges in her relationship with Viramma. In that organic creation, Viramma assumes the position of the methodological innovator who reverses the anthropologist's expectation that subjects must learn to "trust" the researcher. Here, the reader experiences ethnography as a sensual and relational narrative that is alive and pulsating with touch, breath, desire, joy, and horror. In my close reading of this work, the reflective interrogation that Viramma provokes is: Do you trust yourself to possess the capacity to handle the flesh and blood experiences of a Dalit woman? Viramma interweaves the ambiguous strands of Dalit life into her life story requiring emotional strength on the part of listeners. They should swiftly switch between finding joy in a celebration of life experiences, body, communal strength, and values while simultaneously allowing themselves to heave along with Viramma's sighs, tears, fears and laments. Such emotional labor of understanding calls for skill development over a long period of time. Viramma's positionality to hire laborers for her landlord could be noted as possibly influencing such expectations.

For Josiane, the organic trust process becomes a form of on-the-job training grounded in the cultural generosity of freely shared, organically produced knowledge. This work requires uninterrupted commitment to a deeper, foundational connection with Viramma's lived experiences, allowing them to emerge in the ways Viramma herself chooses to voice them. She brings awareness to a cultural relativist "letting go" of caste informed socializations permeated by observational caste-gaze; this represents the hard work needed in unlearning caste-coded viewing versus comfortable neutrality. The immersive engagement that Viramma leads a willing ethnographer into primarily involves the art of active listening to moral agency and subjectivity. This learning should activate the cognitive processing necessary to engage in the experiential co-mingling of visceral, and physical sounds and resounds of pain, fear, hope and joy. Such a calling requires physical and emotional energy to unwaveringly follow her place-based and needs-based movements within and outside her living spaces where spatial and psychological shifts are constant. In this ethnography, positionality is

dynamic rather than fixed—ethnographer and subject continuously switch sites of authority and vulnerability. The ethnographer gains knowledge of a constant state of reconciliatory relationships and the seamless existence of self-resolved contrasting emotions within Dalit women.

Viramma converts Josiane into her apprentice who learns her trade well while partnering in this new tradition of hailing positivity and discipleship through experiential understanding. Viramma models a lived practical methodology of trust and relationship to overcome caste and gender fears not from within Viramma's cognition, but from Josiane's and her fears of being allowed into Viramma's world. Josiane will come close to anomalies and ambiguities embedded in this ethnographic activity involving slow-paced movement of time and patience. The following discussions illustrate what she learns as an ethnographer about Dalit life. Viramma's refusal, as Tuck and Yang theorize it, does not simply negate dominant knowledge production but places hurdles for such exchange. Through such reclaiming of epistemic agency and reversing the gaze back upon power, the apprenticeship with Josiane is possible where ethnography is reshaped through trust, reciprocity, and a pedagogy grounded in positive hailing rather than the commodification of pain.

Josiane developed a friendship with Viramma over a period of fifteen years (1975-90) beginning with listening to Viramma's singing as a prominent singer, lamenter, and midwife. Viramma offering a close relationship with Josiane is seen in referencing her as *Sinnamma* (Tamil: kinship term for mother's younger sister) out of respect and affection. There is, however, a deferential relationship in this case because Viramma is old enough to be Racine's mother and the term *Sinnamma* is normally used for an elderly woman. Such adopted kinship claims flow naturally in Tamil cultures only among those sharing a close communal bond. Hence, interestingly, Viramma ignores the socially called for lines of untouchability practice and cajolingly chastises her own awareness of social identities and touches Josiane to claim their bond:

> Take an example: You were the one who came to me, I didn't go looking for you. What right would I have had to do that? I'm happy to know you, I love you like my own daughter. When it's just us, I talk to you with an open heart, I touch you when I talk to you. But could I behave like that with you outdoors? No! I owe you respect; you are a higher caste! Everything else is the same. They want to make us one, when Gods said, 'Each of you stay in your caste. Live apart. There'll be no arguments. There'll be harmony and the world will turn in the right direction! (p. 191)

Viramma demarcates the differences in behavior she must maintain in the two worlds of caste and outcaste because of Josiane's superior social position in the "outdoors" caste world. While Viramma enjoys her relationship with Racine within

her ceri community, she fears the consequences of overstepping caste boundaries in the "outdoors." She believes that by remaining within her community and its territorial limits as an untouchable, she can raise a finger to caution caste rules. Discussing the nature of character of touch in relation to caste, Geetha confirms, "Due to [the] relational nature of social categories, the one who refuses to touch (oppressor castes) ironically turns into the untouched—deprived of touch" (p. 322). This significant thought could be applied to describe the love and trust that Viramma places in Racine and a cautious expression of freedom to disobey the social and religious taboo of untouchability and becomes the first actor of touch—not only of Racine but of the inner source of truth that wells in her narrations. She admits fearing the outside world, where she must suppress such affection toward Racine; nevertheless, Viramma pours out her story trusting Racine within a relationship shaped by love and respect on one hand, and hesitations structured by differences in class, caste, culture, and education on the other. As caste and gender studies scholar, Rupali Bansode notes, though untouchability was officially abolished in post-colonial India, societal attitudes and behavior have not changed (2021). Viramma understands that she embodies the polluted object within caste-governed human contact. In her life story Pawar (2009) illustrates that caste and gender coexist in Dalit women's experiences of untouchability as caste exclusion and gendered vulnerability. In Viramma's understanding, untouchability extends beyond stigma; it is a caste rule restricting spontaneous bodily expressions of affection, sexuality, and spatial comfort.

Ritualistic Resistance: Birth, Puberty, and Sexuality

Viramma centers her resistance on positive constructions of self and community that concretize identity through experiences of trusted touch, celebration of body, and ownership of communal identity as Paraiyar and female naming as Paratchi. As Patricia Hill Collins highlights what Audre Lorde (1990) states, "…it is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others – for their use and to our detriment" (p. 26). Viramma's practical lessons epitomize that desirous determination to remove imposed meanings in her body. The everyday consciousness of Black women that Collins writes about expands from an individual sense of identity to a collective group consciousness of positivity (p. 111). Bama's works prove that daily life, rituals and cultural values emanate from *kuzhu unnarvu* (Tamil: Collective identity) as foundational to deconstruct casteist imaging and rhetoric (Singh, p. 231). Lodged in the everyday experiences of Dalit women are assertions of selfhood that resist caste-based negation and erasure of the Dalit female body, contributing to the liberation of Dalit female consciousness.

The community in Velpakkam gain their affirmation from female embodiments of goddess Mariamman as they live into participatory communal celebrations of love and life (Singh 2018, pp. 101-106). Women in the ceri help in the birth of a girl, marry her off, guide her into puberty and provide lessons on freeing the body from caste cages into expansive pleasures. Viramma describes her birth as a communal event when Dalit women gather around her mother to aid, witness and jubilantly welcome her arrival in the month of *Markaji* in the Tamil calendar when caste communities observe devotion and avoid celebrations.[8] The Tamil harvest festival of *Pongal*[9] occurs towards the end of this auspicious month, and Dalits gather to honor crops, agricultural work, decorate and parade statues of their gods to endow blessings. Relying on details provided by her mother and grandmother, Viramma speaks of entering the world at such a time celebrated along with the gods, with Dalit women blessing a *Paratchi* baby welcoming Pongal. The repetition of her birth story affirms that it was not just another burdensome birth of a Dalit girl who could be subject to female infanticide. Contrastingly, caste communities around her celebrate the birth of a boy on a larger scale than the birth of a girl due to patrilineality, and economic promise in work and dowry. Though some Dalit communities have adapted to such gender preference, Viramma's family rejoices in her birth as her grandmother draws on the significance of the day she was born as the festival of the god Perumal[10] to support her female surge of loving energy that inverts the curse traditionally associated with a girl child and confirms the arrival of happiness and prosperity (Satya 2024). Mariamman's paradoxical merging of the human and divine appears in Viramma's birth story where her subversive power descends on baby Viramma as the beginning of a beloved identity across the stages of her life.

The cheer-filled descriptions of marriage arrangements and celebrations reflect a shared life within the Paraiyar community. Viramma's matchmaker is a female

[8]*Markaji* is the ninth month in the Tamil calendar which runs from mid-December to mid-January. It is observed as a sacred month filled with regular devotional practices. Traditionally weddings and other major social celebrations do not occur in this time, and people gather only for collective devotion.

[9]The literal meaning of the word Pongal is to boil. As a festival Pongal is celebrated across all castes, but among Dalit communities in Tamil Nadu, it is celebrated as a harvest festival as communities gathered providing significance to agricultural labor and collective survival. They acknowledge the connections between their labor, food and community. They cook the traditional dish of pongal consisting of rice, milk and jaggery and cry out "Pongalo Pongal," when the pot boils over symbolizing abundance and hope for prosperity.

Their gods such as Mariamman, Yellamma are honored to protect the community's health and fertility. Their cattle are decorated and honored as well for their role in agricultural labor. Pongal signifies solidarity, gratitude, and affirmation of life within Dalit communities.

[10]Perumal is a male Hindu god worshipped primarily in Tamil Nadu. His devotees believe that he possesses the power to heal the sick. Women who have difficulty in conceiving a child pray to this god and promise offerings upon the birth of a child.

cousin, and women remain central to the ceremony. Viramma's grandmother and other women in the ceri teach her about the experiences she may face in her new home and the expectations on a "good" daughter-in-law. On the wedding day, women dress and decorate Viramma as the whole village gathers to admire her: a vision of their newest goddess. This moment resonates deeply given that Dalits were historically denied entry into temples to view caste gods; thus the decorated Dalit female body seated and celebrated becomes a joyful ritual of *darisanam* [Tamil: divine vision]. The community prepares collectively for the celebration, pooling resources to erect *pandal* [Tamil: makeshift tents] and decorations throughout the ceri. Viramma recalls the marriage procession led by women: "The musicians of the ceri were in front… The whole ceri came with us to the temple of Mariamman" (p. 23). Just as Mariamman is honored during her festival, Viramma is dressed as a bride leaving Velpakkam for her husband's home in Karani.

Virama returns to Velpakkam after her marriage, entering a period during which she awaits puberty before reuniting with her husband. When she attains puberty the women of the community surround her, welcoming her into womanhood: "Aunt Kanikkai lifted up my underskirt and trumpeted, 'Viramma's got her period! We're going to have *puttu* [rice cake].' … A celebration was on its way and once again they were going to be invited..." (p. 29). The entire ceri takes part in the rites of Viramma becoming a woman. Though overwhelming, the celebration reassures her of the leadership of her grandmother and the support of the community, especially women. Viramma understands that she is being initiated into rites of womanhood celebrating fertility and presence of body within the Paraiyar community confirming reified self-worth. While she initially fears that becoming a woman would mean permanently leaving her family to join her husband, those emotions dissolve as she is lifted by the communal celebration.

Each aspect of the puberty rituals leads Viramma into an awareness of her body as the bearer of beauty, positive meanings and fertility. The women exalt her as a deity just as they elevate Mariamman during her festival: bathed in turmeric water, decorated with flowers, and adorned with makeup. As Viramma recalls: "I was sat down on the ground… I was rubbed with turmeric paste and then rinsed with plenty of water" (p. 31). This celebration reveals complexities that her body harbors: externally polluted in caste eyes yet internally divine within Dalit ritual frameworks. Dalit women demonized by caste society are both deified and humanized in such rituals as menstrual blood carriers like any other woman. After the bleeding stops the women bathe her again: "Then Mum and the seven women gave me the ritual bath… I was put into new clothes which my parents had bought, and my hair was dried with incense smoke" (p. 35). Through these rituals, Viramma gains identification with Mariamman,

and vice versa, accepting practices that convert the "unclean" body in the caste gaze into a divine one.

Viramma's grandmother strengthens her positivity through her presence at significant moments in her life: when Viramma was born she called upon the stars to confirm the auspicious nature of the day. During puberty rites she pours affection into words and metaphors affirming Viramma's beauty and love for her body: "Come here my little kid, my sugar candy, my queen of heaven… my piece of gold, my pearl, my ruby…." (pp. 30–31). The grandmother leads the ceremony that recognizes the divine within Viramma and passes on assertive female identity across generations. She becomes the carrier of testimonials of positive body image since much of what Viramma recalls derives from her grandmother's stories. Through purposeful interactions with everyday symbols, images, gestures, and narratives from her living and work spaces, she trains Viramma to invert caste-imposed inscriptions on her body and thoughts.

Bama describes similar puberty rituals in her communal autoethnography *Sangati* (2009) involving sacred space, turmeric baths, nourishing food, flowers and gifts similar to honoring deities. In an interview Pawar notes that sexual abuse and physical assault against Dalit women have been normalized and observes: "No one has bothered about the Dalit woman's identity and honor" (2020). Unless this caste fixation on Dalit women's bodies as sexual prey is negated, it will remain fixed. Pawar believes that it is in spaces where Dalit women bond with one another that the caste imaginary collapses. Singh builds on Rege's thought that Dalit feminist praxis transforms their bodies into epistemic sites of resistance. Body-centered rituals embedded in Dalit feminist ethnographies invert the casteist gaze that marks Dalit women's bodies as sites of violence, and instead reassert them as sites of honor.

To maintain body honor, Viramma boasts of sexuality and bodily desirability, breaking into ecstatic poetic descriptions in cultural songs. In a liberating tone she juxtaposes pain and joy within her voice. While she sings of exploitation of Dalit women, she emphasizes the joy of consensual sexuality to discard the deliberate a-sexualization of Dalit bodies by caste patriarchy:

> He goes up the hill of Annamalai and notices…
> He climbs up Clitoris mount and sees…
> Squeezing your breasts with both hands, my beloved,
> He enters your hairy, curly fanny,
> He's hurt you by entering the hole above,
> But how good it is, my beloved, how good!
> You are mature, it's marvelous, my beloved,
> It's marvelous! (33)

Her enunciation of a deep sense of pleasure and a positive body image as desirable signify liberation from the fear-filled subconsciousness as sexual prey.

Importantly, there is a freeing frankness in humorous references to sexuality throughout her lyrical narratives as she reminds listeners that desire and pleasure are bodily rights. In such simultaneity where dominant communities suppress Dalit bodies' sexual pleasure through control of body and mind, she opposes by voicing pleasure. Humor becomes a tool of rebellion as she mocks Brahminical claims to purity while pointing to their hypocrisy in exploiting Dalit women:

It's the *pappan, adi-pappan*
Who irrigates by digging a hole,
Who fishes in there for a dish of crabs,
Who fishes in there for a dish of crabs,
While drinking the juices of a young girl
That very night, there was no moon,
And his sleep was troubled,
That man with a *pottu* in the shape of the moon,
Wants to welcome Virayi so much!!
Nanna, nanna, nanana,
Nanna, Nannana, Nananana… .(p. 157)

In this song Viramma employs humor as a tool of rebellion in mocking a Brahmin priest's belief that he is the purest of all beings. She exposes his wielding of authoritative convenience that ignores caste rules of touch on food and body and points to his voracious sexual hunger as "crabbing." She ridicules the prominence of *pottu* dotted on his forehead—made up of the holy powder—indicating his Brahmin status while he is engaged in lustful activities of sexually exploiting Dalit women in the secrecy of the night.

Viramma's confidence in her physical beauty is an affirmation of an unerasable female consciousness of body splendor: "In those days I was beautiful, young and healthy. My hips and thighs were as smooth as the trunk of a banana tree. I was small and black as a crow, but my curves were attractive. For a Pariah, I wasn't so bad and, even in the *ur*, everyone said so: I used to hear it as I walked past" (p. 51). What begins in the ritualistic celebration of her body from birth into puberty resiliently continues to ceremonialize self-love and dignity. As Viramma's student, Josiane's task is to carefully document such exhortations of oppositional identity as direct protests to caste-gaze on Dalit women. In her self-declarations, Viramma rejects caste signifiers on Dalit female body as underserving and incapable of sexuality as passive receptors of sexual violence. Such liberated language elucidates Dalit feminist phenomenology in reclaiming sensation, sexuality, and bodily presence. Thus, Viramma transforms the

Dalit female body from a caste-defined object into an active self-embracing subject whose experiences illustrate epistemic authority.

Relational Healing: Childhood, Social Exclusion and Mariamman

Childhood in her village Velpakkam remains etched in Viramma as filled with joyous and playful community building while absorbing and practicing Dalit values of unconditional caring and sharing. Her parents would set off to work quite early, and she was left under the care of her cousin. These years of her life free from awareness of the crude realities of poverty and life was "made up of games and stories," while her parents and older siblings worked hard in the field (p. 8). The ceri of Velpakkam had wide open spaces where, as a child, she could freely roam with other children, developing her sense of freedom and her sense of oneness with nature: My childhood passed as if I was living in the kingdom of the gods on earth" (p. 4). The children in the village moved around in groups and their pastime involved imaginatively creating scenarios, toys and games with whatever caught their eye in the wanderings. They were their own deities with no awareness of the concept of control; unbound by time they effortlessly bonded in spontaneous reciprocity:

> My little brothers went around naked. I just put on an underskirt like my sister. Stick in hand, dragging our carts made of coconuts, we went from house to house looking for friends who'd join us, each of them with their treasures: tea sets, marbles, ropes, pebbles, little white shells. And off we went! We'd stop here and there, climb trees, steal fruit, pick grain and plants, collect stones, singing and squawking away the whole time. (ibid)

Such details testify to the formative stages of praxis of spontaneity, creativity and collective identity early in her life. Thriving in such spaces of collective acceptance as a child was integral to her identity formation as a person who mattered in the economy of their play-world resourced by nature and cultural generosity. Mutual investments of trust and affection independently multiplied and naturally deposited personal and communal identity gains with no variables.

Spaces of exclusions where Dalit bodies were forbidden entry were part of Viramma's childhood memories as well but strengthened their bond to stick together. She vividly recalls a religious event when all the kids sat perched on a tree to watch the *golu* festival of dolls celebrated in caste homes: "Finally, we settled down discreetly in a margosa tree, which was facing the *pandal*. Huddled together like monkeys in our tree, we could watch everything" (p. 14). The subversive memory in Viramma does not give up the possibility of placing themselves at a higher vantage point looking down at forbidden spaces and rituals as giggling spectators of the caste world. During such

stinging experiences of rejection, their collective comments on the dolls and laughter provided the required inner strength. Their togetherness, and a sense of belonging with one another mark the beginnings of individual and collective agency to own positive acceptance on their terms. It was from such festivals that the children shared the food still sticking on to the banana leaf discarded by caste people after feasting. Viramma does not state this as a shameful memory, but as a value-based blissful memory of sharing as a normal childhood activity of bonding. Such juxtaposition of pain and positivity is an example of the emotional code switching that Viramma calls Josiane to observe and learn from.

Another example of the coexistence of varying emotional and bodily responses as harbored within one individual's experiential realities is the forbidden temple entry for Dalits.[11] They are not allowed to enter common places of worship that caste people have access to, and Viramma—like other Dalits—lives every moment of her life within this paradox of belonging to a religion that rejects them as polluted and polluting.[12] She warns her son Anban who insists on entering a temple, "No my son! Don't do that! This God will take away your sight! People like us haven't the right to go into these places" (p. 168). In her generous spirit, Viramma does not blame the caste people guarding the temple gates armed with retaliatory violence upon Dalits entering their temple premises. She blames the resident caste god inside the temple as the commandeer of such violence. Entrenched in that practice of hailing her listeners into her epistemology is the generous invitation not to interpret such statements as internalization of an outcaste position, but an inherent authority to externalize sources of oppression as belonging to the gods and denying that sadistic pleasure to the oppressor as the source of violent power. Such understanding of Viramma's statements calls for more than a peripheral observation-based ethnographic tradition. Disregarding negative impacts that such rejection of Dalit bodies in "holy" spaces might have, Viramma takes pride in her goddess Mariamman where reciprocity of presence is honored. Mariamman seeks refuge among Dalit communities after deposition from a pantheon of Gods, due to patriarchally ordered punishment (Singh, pp. 103-104). According to Viramma, Mariamman's husband rejects her, kicks her out of the pantheon of caste gods and curses her with pus filled spots on her body: "He cursed her and said, "Pueh! [devil] You're not worthy of my household! Get out of here! Sow the spots all around you and

[11]Traditionally Dalits are forbidden to enter orthodox Hindu Temples. The Temple Entry Proclamation issued in Travancore in 1936 legally permitted formerly "untouchable" castes to enter Hindu temples, marking a major moment in anti-caste reform movements in South India (Menon, 1994).

[12]See Singh's (2018) chapter: Spotted goddesses subvert "Difference": Traditional narratives and punishment ordinances. She explains how caste dominant narratives such as the *Manusmriti* depict Dalit women as not only polluted, but the carriers of pollution who will transmit pollution onto spaces and people.

live on what people will give you to be cured! People like us saw this woman arriving all naked and covered in spots and wondered who she was" (p. 105). In a rejected state, she enters the generous world of Dalits filled with unconditional care and willingly offers to be one with them; eating, breathing, protecting and healing along with them. She continues to tell the story of the spontaneity of Paraiyar communal response of unconditional caring:

> Some launderers at the wash house quickly soaked a white cloth in turmeric water and gave it to her to cover herself and treat her spots. Then she saw some cobblers. They prostrated themselves at her feet and gave her a pair of sandals so she could go around the world without hurting her feet. A bit further on, people from our caste were harvesting rice. They quickly picked a few ears, made flour out of them, offered that to the Mother in an unpolluted coconut shell and gave her *kuj* to drink. And the Mother carried on her way, granting favor to everyone who offered her underskirts, saris, *kuj* and balls of flour. (pp. 105-106)

Without direct mention of contrasts, she proceeds to juxtapose values, rituals and their community's direct deep relationship with Mariamman as one of their own.

Therefore, Viramma further affirms her sense of strength and positivity in elaborately describing Mariamman festival rites in spaces with no guards against caste entry. In this festival Dalit female bodies are an impressive presence in communal singing, dancing, cooking and eating together. The rituals that Viramma takes pride in during the Mariamman festival include the offering of *kuj* (Tamil: rice porridge) reflected in feeding the entire community that day. They bathe Mariamman with turmeric water (as in puberty ritual) that symbolizes healing wounds and purifying in reciprocity. Viramma believes that Mariamman has the divine power to help them in better yield in crops (p. 246). As Singh observes, irrespective of blessings she might bestow, "[Mariamman] embodies their physical struggles, along with their inner spiritual strength as a community of people who suffer but are resilient; who are forced to accept their state as unclean, but resist; and who formulate strategies of survival against all odds" (p. 104). With faith in her goddess, Viramma is not concerned about the caste gods despising her body, and she in turn disregards the forbiddance to enter ostentatious sacred spaces built by wealthy caste patrons. Instead, she is content and fearless as she establishes her body and community as god-filled by Mariamman in sacred spaces of rites and worship as opposed to a godless state of rejection that caste society forces her to accept. Yet another evidence surfaces here of garnering spiritual and bodily strength to gain control of the co-existence of mental and physical spaces of derisive rejection and celebratory acceptance.

Conclusion

The ethnographic traditions of positive hailing set in motion by Viramma are a validation of body and voice where the readers share with the ethnographer the privilege to follow the movement of Dalit women breaking objective generalizations. Tuck and Yang's thoughts on decolonizing pain and derogation is a significant lesson from native and other oppressed communities who have established this pedagogy in their testimonial narratives seen in Viramma's stories. She reduces the gap between pain and trust; pain of vulnerable communities is often left unrecognized as alien to an epistemology of trust building.

Viramma disputes labels of passive acceptance of caste-based control on their bodies and voices. She intentionally directs active subjective position of releasing the movement of truth of ethnography as not one directional but reciprocally travelling from outer expanse into inner spaces of subjectivity and agency. In those multipurposed directional movements, Viramma's testament hails us into her world of self-chosen visibility of positivity taking charge of her story as a counter narrative to the caste-gaze which dehumanizes Dalits. Freeing Viramma's words outside the perimeters of Eurocentric traditional anthropological nomenclatures acknowledges her spoken words to soak into a consciousness that is deeply personal, uniquely rebellious, and ideologically value based. As proposed, positive hailing is a Dalit feminist intervention that refuses to passively accept both excepted silence and traumatizing meanings of pain. Through Viramma's self-authored visibility, we witness organic ways by which women-led rituals, erotic self-regard, and communal bonding operate as methodological disruptions to caste society and engender resistant Dalit feminist pedagogy.

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