Viramma: Life of an untouchable is a weave of memories and experiences of an illiterate rural Pariah woman, Viramma. Her caste and gender identity integrates into her individual life story. In her life narrative, she shows two types of resistance. One resistance is confrontation with the social structure which chains women and the other is against the caste system. The opening of Viramma: Life of an untouchable gives dismal insights into the expression of female sensibility when Viramma narrates about her paternal grandfather Samikkannu’s second marriage. Viramma’s grandmother Kannima accepted her husband’s second marriage as her fate without resistance: “My grandmother said nothing and she was never aggressive towards the newcomer. God alone can tell if she was afraid that Grandfather would cast a spell on her if she argued. She kept on leading her quiet life, raising her children and then her rival’s, who had a boy and a girl” (Viramma: Life of an untouchable 1). Her grandmother’s social and economic dependence on her husband stopped her from reacting:

A common Indian house wife has a tendency to bear the harassment she is subjected to by her husband and the family. One reason could be to prevent the children from undergoing the hardships if she separates from the spouse. Also the traditional and orthodox mindset makes them bear the sufferings without any protest. (A. Kumar)

Kannima kept silent and lived a humiliating marital life for the sake of her children. Observing her grandmother’s predicament, Viramma realized the marginal identity and existence of a woman: “The prevailing social order stands as a great and resplendent hall of mirrors. It owns and occupies the world as it is and the world as it is seen and heard” (Sheila Rowbotham qtd. in Friedman 75). Her grandmother’s existence became a reflecting surface of “cultural representation” (Friedman 75) into which Viramma stared to form her own identity while she became conscious of her gender status within the house.

In her life narrative, Viramma talks about two types of bodies—one is Pariah girl and the other is Pariah wife who lies at the periphery of Pariah community. Viramma’s life narrative resists the marginalization of Pariah girl’s body within the Pariah community. The birth of a girl child has always remained an undesirable happening: “…women are considered a burden to the society….The female child is not treated
properly and its birth itself is considered a sad affair” (Muthulakshmi 9). Virginia Woolf in *Moments of Being* (1985) speaks, “That is, I suppose, that my memory supplies what I had forgotten, so that it seems as if it were happening independently, though I am really making it happen” (67). Similarly, Viramma’s memories supply the content of her life narrative. Recalling her birth, Viramma narrates the atmosphere of sadness and despondency in her house seen through the posture of her father and the reaction of the neighbours: “They stopped in front of the house and seeing my father sitting near the door, his head in his hands, was all they needed to guess what sex the child was. The women recognized the high-pitched cry of a girl and shouted good-naturedly, Hey! Here’s another little bitch been born!” (VIR 3). Birth of a girl in the family, irrespective of caste hierarchy, has never been an occasion for celebration. This occasion is seen as the onset of misery.

Pariah girls never enjoyed the freedom to laugh, relax and play: “When we started roaming a bit too far,…our parents ordered us to come to the fields to stay in their sight and start learning the trade.” The prime duty of Pariahs was to serve Reddi community in their fields and houses. Pariah girls were told, “‘Listen little girls, life is not just songs. You can’t play like that for ever. You must learn to use your hands. One day you’ll go and make your life elsewhere and people must be able to say, ‘Here’s a good worker! Here’s a pair of hands that’ll bring in money and not just another mouth to feed!'’” (9). Pariah girls were exposed to field work at a very young age so that after marriage they could work in the fields along with their husbands to earn money. Thus, they were groomed to contribute to the family earnings along with household work: “In my day we did our education in the fields” (12). Pariah girls’ childhood unlike other children was spent in learning the skills for earning livelihood and the value of hard work. According to Joan Almon, “*creative play is a central activity in the lives of healthy children.* Play helps children weave together all the elements of life as they experience it” (Almon). But these children were deprived of the freedom to have fun with other children. The sad experiences of childhood remain ingrained in Viramma’s memories.

Viramma wanted to receive education. However, her parents did not realize the value of education, and so they did not send her to school. The urge to be educated
remained with Viramma the whole of her life: “In my day the school was here, but my parents didn’t take the trouble to send me. They didn’t understand anything. They didn’t think of our future: they lived from day to day. If they had educated us, we would have earned more money, but they were ignorant!” (VIR 182). She laments the denial of education to her by her parents who were short sighted.

Viramma’s childhood “was a little short” (4) as she was only eleven when it was decided to marry her off. The news came as a blow to her:

When we were small, we were told to watch out for kidnappers and now, here I was going to be good as kidnapped with my whole family’s blessing!...For the first time in my life, I stayed awake the whole night. I heard the first crows announcing that day would soon be breaking. The sky was still black, no moon, no stars, no clouds, no lightning. It was as if it was in tune with my pain. I’d stared at that black sky all night. (17)

She recollects the agony she went through when she heard of her marriage. None of the members of her family asked her consent. In her case, her marriage was her family’s decision forced upon her because in “the structure of Indian society…it is the parents who choose brides and grooms for their children” (R. Gupta 61). It is the parents who decide who and when the children are to marry. In Hindu society a boy is precious, an asset but in the matter of marriage even he succumbs to his parents’ wishes. Against this backdrop the situation of a girl with regard to her marriage is miserable. Parents want to get rid of daughters at the earliest and majority of the girls, deprived of decision making, are unable to resist compulsive marriage.

A few days later, relatives from the groom’s side visited Viramma’s house to see their would-be daughter-in-law. During this viewing ceremony, quite prevalent in Hindu families, a girl is always presented as a decorative object by her family before the people from the groom’s side who like buyers after proper assessment of the qualities of a good daughter-in-law in the girl give their consent or refusal for marriage:

Mum called me and asked me to bring some water. I came out of my hiding place with my head lowered and put a three-quarters-full glass down next to the person who had been pointed out to me. Without lifting my eyes, I went and sat down near grandmother. Silence fell. I felt everyone looking at me, trying to guess, from their first glimpse, what kind of a daughter-in-law I might be: a good one, able to live in the bosom
of my new family without rebelling, or a difficult one, ready to run away at the first scolding?...I took a good-looking leaf, broke the stalk, spread very little lime on – a sign of meekness – and sprinkled a little areca nut and ground tobacco. I folded it all up carefully and offered it with both hands to my mother-in-law. A murmur of satisfaction rose from the visitors. Embarrassed and not knowing what to do, I quickly went back to my hiding place. Mum followed me into the house, clasped her hands in front of the trident fixed in the ground and threw me a big smile. (VIR 18)

The would-be daughter-in-law is forced to exhibit qualities like endurance, meekness and submissiveness: “It is the mother’s duty to train her daughters up to be an absolute docile daughter-in-law. The sumnum bonum of a girl’s life is to please her parents-in-law and her husband. If she does not ‘get on’ with her mother-in-law, she will be a disgrace to the family and cast a blot on the fair name of her mother” (M.N. Srinivas qtd. in Kunjakkan 16). Girls’ training to be “good women” starts in childhood. Irrespective of caste hierarchy, a girl is trained to imbibe qualities of “submission and docility as well as skill and grace in the various household tasks” (Kunjakkann 16). The Pariah community too compels Pariah girls to exhibit submissiveness and to imbibe the passive identity which serves the interests of the male dominated Pariah community.

In addition to virtues a girl needs dowry to gain acceptability in her in-laws family. Viramma’s father pawned his land to Reddi to arrange money for her dowry: “Dad borrowed a large sum by pawning the two plots of land which Grandfather owned. After he’d tried to pay the interest for a long time, not to mention the loan itself, he had to give them up. That’s how we lost our fields” (VIR 19). This incident reflects the miserable plight of the parents of girls who leave no stone unturned, and in the process even lose their land, to provide dowry for the happiness and well being of their daughters as bringing insufficient dowry means excessive domestic violence. However, this sacrifice of the parents usually goes waste: “Ten of thousands of women in India die each year, mostly soaked in kerosene by their husbands or in-laws and then set alight. Those who survive live with hideous scars. Commonly referred to as “victims of dowry deaths”, they have become statistics” (Mala Sen qtd. in Nubile 21). The condition of Pariah women is further depressing as unable to arrange dowry because of poverty the parents pawn their house or land or household articles to landlords for cash. In these wretched economic conditions, Dalit women become helpless and tormented objects:
“Unfortunately not everyone can afford the same and so grievances are born and they last until death and even beyond…” (VIR 23). Articulating her parents’ predicament, Viramma resists the practices and ceremonies during wedding which consume a lot of money but still fail to give Pariah girls the desirable place in the marital home.

Viramma still had not reached puberty at the time of her marriage. So after marriage she stayed back at her parents’ house. However, she underwent different experience and ceremonies at the onset of puberty:

So I was confined for eleven days and forbidden to receive anybody in my shelter, forbidden to leave it except for my daily bath, forbidden to go into the house, forbidden to touch the household crockery….It was a strange moment in my life: on one hand, I was rejected and confined because I was unclean; on the other I was constantly surrounded. I felt that the reason I was being cared for so well was to tear me away from childhood and throw me into the real life of an adult. A woman had to be made out of me in those eleven days. (32-34)

The solitary confinement of Viramma during menstruation was pathetic. She was forced to remain cut off from the outside world. Menstruation establishes a girl’s identity as woman which also signals the change in the attitude of people towards her which according to Theresa E. Jackson and Rachel Joffe Falmagne leads to the rejection and alienation of girls from their own bodies: “…rejecting this status, refusing, at the time, to consider what being a menstruating girl meant for their identity or fearing how others might react in relation to this feminizing bodily change” (388). With the onset of puberty and menstruation, Viramma became aware that she was on the threshold of womanhood: “What was a woman? I was perfectly happy being a little girl” (VIR 17). Her refusal of herself:

…as a woman at menarche was based in an implicit refusal to be reduced to her bodily capacity for bearing children or to its association with motherhood—the empathic and nurturing characteristics associated with mothers and motherhood…are used as a site for women’s subordination. (Jackson and Falmagne 387-88)

exhibits her resistance to the burden of womanhood placed on her shoulders when it was her age to experience the joys of being a girl. Menstruation “marks the child’s entry into womanhood, potential motherhood” (Narayan 68) when the girl is no longer perceived as a child.
The onset of menstruation sent Viramma to her in-laws place. However, the time she spent at her parents’ house made her introspect her marginalized identity as a female. At her in-laws house she discovered that women “are defined and restrained by male boundaries” (Nubile 2). They are just vaginas “to be ruled and dominated by male laws” (3). Initially, unaware of her obligation to satiate her husband’s sexual desire, Viramma resisted Manikkam’s moves to come closer to her. However, after a few days of severe beating she finally surrendered before him:

The man came in last. I shut my eyes straightaway. I was curled up like a shrimp, my head in my hands….I was as still as a corpse….I was suffocating under his weight. I was trembling. I was terribly wet as if I’d pissed….It felt like he was tearing me. He roared like a lion, giving great thrusts and for once, I suffered in silence (VIR 43-44).

A woman resents enforced sex: the colonization of her body and it gets noticeable in case of poor Dalit women like Viramma where sex becomes synonymous with domination and violence. Her first sexual experience remained a terrifying and “horrible memory” (44). The pain and humiliation caused by this assault remained etched in her psyche: “…sex in our patriarchal society is coercive and degrading to women, sexual penetration may by its very nature doom women to inferiority and submission…” (Andrea Dworkin qtd. in Khosla). This was exhibited by Viramma’s husband when he forced himself on her without her consent and without making her comfortable. It was not only the expression of an unrestrained sex drive but also a reiteration of patriarchal social structures and norms. Manikkam did not see her as an individual. He saw her as a wife, a subdued woman, on whom the patriarchal social structure bestowed him the right of coercion in intimate marital space.

In such adverse circumstances Viramma’s only source of strength was her mother: “…the maternal ethic, with its values of mutual support, trust, and protectiveness and its practice of mutual nurturing, expresses…authentic solidarity among women…” (Cotton 27). Maternal ethic offers protectiveness and support to the daughters. Viramma recalls her mother’s death: “It’s never the same after your mother dies….It’s well known that, for us women, a mother can’t be replaced, even if we leave our mother’s house to join a new family….I would have given my life if I had to, save my mother, but she was
in good shape when death took her” \textit{(VIR 131)}. She missed her mother’s love and support.

Viramma, following her mother, carried forward this strong feeling of care for her daughters when she supported her daughter Sundari’s decision to marry a boy of her choice: “...it’s Anban who’s fretting about her, because she’s started looking for a husband on her own...Really he would have liked his sister to do the same as me....In the end Sundari has found herself a good boy” \textit{(211)}. However, Anban observed Sundari’s decision an act to tarnish the honour of his family: “Really he would have like his sister to do the same as me....I was married very young to the Old man...” \textit{(VIR 210)}. When a woman resists the patriarchal tradition, her act is seen as bringing disgrace to her family. Anban behaved “in a conservative manner towards his sister” \textit{(Karan Singh 206)}. But Viramma sided with her daughter to resist the forced codes and patriarchal restriction, and to assert individual choice and decision making. She strongly felt that women should articulate their choice in marriage and sexual matters:

You can’t force anyone to stay or sleep with you. It’s the same for all women, for you the same as me. Govinda created us all the same and no one can touch a woman unless she agrees. Between a man and a woman, both have to be willing, otherwise the man’s hand will never be able to stroke anything! \textit{(VIR 210)}

Viramma had a traumatic experience of sexual violence during the consummation of her marriage. She did not want the same for her daughter. She in her life narrative asserts that man-woman/husband-wife relationship should be based on mutual understanding besides in conjugal love both should agree and a woman should have her say. By supporting her daughter, Viramma resisted the cultural and patriarchal norms which reduce Pariah women to sexual commodities in marriage without thought for their emotions.

A matrimonial alliance between a Pariah woman and an upper caste man was unacknowledged and received public disgrace in Pariah community. Viramma recounts if a woman from the \textit{ceri} had an affair with a man from \textit{ur}, she faced humiliation in public. The community council abused the women while no one questioned the upper caste man: “‘Bring her here immediately! Show her to the whole world! You, a Paratchi. What a nerve you’ve got to come and take a husband here in the \textit{ur}!’ We’d called every name
there is! What a disgrace it would be! “(VIR 208). By giving space to these disgusting caste and gender incidents in *Viramma: Life of an untouchable*, Viramma opposes the patriarchal set up whose enmeshed system of values leads to Pariah women’s oppression and condemns them.

The second type of resistance exhibited in her life narrative is against the caste system. And the second type of body she talks about is that of Pariah woman as a labourer and as untouchable. As Viramma grew up, she realized her low status as Pariah and understood that she had to behave and work according to the prescribed caste code. She recalls the incident when Reddi’s wife scolded Viramma for showing off her knowledge. Viramma and Reddi’s daughter were playing riddles and Reddi’s daughter was unable to give the answer of a riddle which Viramma asked: “I was scolded for having wanted to show off my little knowledge in front of our masters who were much better educated than us. Humiliated, I shouted the answer from the door of the stable…” (9). Knowledge and education have always remained the legacy of upper caste people: “Becoming one of them, equal to them was disliked and scorned at” (R. Kamble 189). Reddi’s wife took it as an insult that a low born Viramma knew something which her daughter did not know, and so she scolded her. However, Viramma’s shouting the answer was resistance against the prejudices that a low born has no right to knowledge.

Viramma criticizes the fake morality of upper caste men through her personal experience of an encounter with a civil servant who offered her money in return for sexual favour:

The civil servant was sitting at a table near the window. When he saw me walking past, he signaled to me to come in….I went into the room, covering my back with my sari and putting my palms together respectfully. And what did I see when I raised my eyes? His dick! A fat dick! He was holding it in one hand and he had money in the other. I screamed. I was trembling all over….The schoolmaster’s mother and her husband were watching the scene from their courtyard…. (VIR 51-52)

The civil servant offered money to Viramma as he categorized her identity as a Dalit woman who he thought would easily succumb to his advances in return for money: “We Paratchi have the reputation of being easy women who’ll jump into bed with anyone if they whistle….But we’re not whores. Those gentlemen of the *ur* talk a lot about the
uncleanliness of Untouchables, but our holes always turn them on. We’re the ones they get up to all their dirty tricks with…” (52).

Everybody in ceri and ur got to know about the incident. However, no action was taken against the civil servant as the victim was a Pariah woman. But when the same civil servant repeated similar deed with Tacimma, a woman from ur, Grand Reddi took stern action and the man was transferred immediately:

Statistics on rapes committed against Dalit women are unreliable and are based on Brahmin patriarchal culture: that Dalit women are expected to be sexually available, that an upper caste man would not risk pollution through contact with a Dalit woman and the concept that purity is marked on the bodies of upper-caste women, while Dalit women have no honour….In a context where upper caste men may easily regain ritual purity, contact with doubly ‘polluted’ Dalit women via sexual violence asserts the ‘pure’ status of upper caste men in relation to Dalit women’s polluted status. (Abraham and Misrahi-Barak)

Dalit women’s sexual assault is not considered as rape because of their low status due to their caste. Low status for the upper castes means no honour, and therefore Dalit women are not considered worthy of respect or reputation. Thus, sexual harassment or rape of Dalit women by the upper caste men is not taken as a crime. Viramma, in her life narrative, refutes this perception of Pariah woman as available to the upper caste men in exchange for money.

Viramma mocks at the upper castes’ hype about untouchability as these people pressurize Pariah women to breastfeed their children: “We Pariahs breastfeed for a long time and our milk is in great demand, Sinnamma…when it’s given to your children, they get better quickly, because it’s very rich milk” (VIR 75). Pariah woman’s breastfeed is supposed to have good nutrient value. Therefore, Pariah women breastfeed on demand the children of the upper caste in spite of facade of rituals of pollution. Viramma discloses she used to breastfeed Reddiar’s son when he was small but later on when he grew up, he developed the consciousness of her being a Pariah. He even hesitated to offer her a glass of water: “I fed him like my own child….And now he’s, man, he doesn’t respect me and if I’m at his house, in the courtyard, he says to me, ‘Aye! Stop there, you! It smells of Pariah here!’” (75-76). This incident has similarity with Alice Walker’s story
“Am I Blue?” in which Alice Walker talks about racism and how it seeps into the consciousness of white children when they grow up. In their childhood they are easily able to communicate and identify themselves with their Negro nannies, but as they grow up they acquire notion of racial differentiation: “Well, about slavery: about white children, who were raised by black people, who knew their first all-accepting love from black women, and then, when they were twelve or so, were told they must “forget” the deep levels of communication between themselves and “mammy” that they knew” (1343). Reddiar’s son too like the white children became conscious and developed the notion of caste differentiation. Viramma contemplates, “He’d drunk at my breasts, and now here he is, thinking twice about giving me a little water!” (VIR 76). Viramma’s life narrative confronts the reception of Pariah women as untouchable when they are not needed but useful objects when there is need. Hence, there is not only the exploitation of their labour in the fields but their bodies, feelings, emotions and care are also exploited.

Illiteracy, ignorance, injustices and discrimination thwart Pariah women from visiting dispensary during pregnancy and delivery. Due to ignorance, Pariah women are bewildered and often laughed at by nurses. Viramma narrates various episodes of sexual harassment and abuse of Pariah women at the hands of doctors, sweepers and other male workers in the hospital:

It’s 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 non-stop down there. But we don’t dare shout or make a scandal: we’d be called liars, our names would be crossed off the hospital registers and we wouldn’t be given any more treatment. (52)

Women’s sexual harassment is a common occurrence in the hospitals. One such case is of Aruna Shanbaug, a Brahmin nurse who was molested by a sweeper during duty hours in the hospital: “Aruna has been in coma for over twenty-five years, her rapist, a sweeper in the hospital, walked a free man after a mere seven years in prison for robbery…” (Virani). Aruna Shanbaug in a vegetative state died on 18 May 2015. If such has been the plight of an upper caste literate working woman, the situation of Pariah women who are illiterate and unaware is wretched: “…we’re lost over there” (VIR 67). Even if they
speak, they are never been heard: “...we’re humiliated. Or else the nurses send us away or tell lies about us to the head doctor. He doesn’t see what goes on” (68). Therefore, they never dare to speak up against the harassment and the discriminatory behaviour of nurses.

Viramma also narrates the incidents of babies’ swapping in the hospitals which prevent these women to avail medical facilities. The people from high castes who have money exchange their girls with the Pariah boys with the help of nurses. Viramma remembers how Irsamma’s boy was exchanged with a girl of high caste woman who already had three daughters. Irsamma cried a lot for her baby but as she was illiterate and did not know how to fight her cause, she had to take the baby girl home. Viramma narrates another incident to highlight the hypocrisy of upper caste people who employ the tool of purity and pollution to oppress Dalits but never hesitate swapping their newly born girls with Pariah boys. While swapping the babies the upper caste people overlook the Pariah boys’ caste which exposes their pretense.

Due to ill-treatment in the hospitals, Pariah women: “… prefer to give birth at home” (67). Under such adverse circumstances Pariah women often turn to superstitions and rituals which at least give them the belief that they are healing:

Rana Katteri, with the bleeding wounds, who drinks blood; Irsi Katteri, the foetus eater; other ones as well. Irsi Katteri is terrible. She’s the one who causes miscarriages. As soon as she catches the smell of a foetus in a woman’s womb, she’s there, spying, waiting for the first chance to suck up the foetus. We can tell immediately that it’s that bitch at work if there are black clots like charcoal when the baby miscarries: she sucks up the good blood and only leaves the bad. As soon as someone miscarry like that, we prepare a sauce straightway with aubergines, salted fish and all sorts of vegetables. We mix the sauce with large quantities of rice and throw it out, handful by handful, at each crossroads in every corner of the ceri, to satisfy her so she’ll leave without touching our children. Breast milk attracts her. Once she emptied my breasts, and she’s done that to lots of other women in the ceri; we hadn’t even a drop of milk to give as medicine! Children died day after day; how do you expect them to be strong without their mother’s milk? We can’t do anything to protect ourselves. We have to see a samiar or a mantra sayer. (91)

In Tamil, chicken pox or small pox is called mariatta. Viramma narrates that mariatta is caused by “Mariamman, the Mother, who comes in this form to make people give jar of gruel…when everybody has given her what she wants, she leaves this world” (105). She
calls cholera as Mother Kali: “Cholera is Mother Kali” (112). She justifies the onset of
diseases as they are the nature’s way to control population:

But it’s all written, Sinnamma! Look how crowded our ceri is! I’ve had
twelve children: how would I have fed them and brought them all up? And
it’s the same in every family! How many people would there be in this
ceri if everyone had stayed alive? That’s why Mother goes into the ceri
each year. She gives cholera to some and mariatta to others. She takes five
or ten people in each ceri, and about ten more in each ur. She does that in
every ceri and every ur in the world and that means there’s that many
fewer people to feed! (114)

Women suffer oppression in private as well as public sphere. This makes them
more prone to superstitions:

…it is observed that female are more superstitious than their male
counterpart….They are the victims of all the exploitation and harassment
arising through these superstitions and still they don’t take any objections
against that. They believe that, these are not superstitions but the beliefs or
customs which give meaning to their life….The root cause of women
being more superstitious lies in the circumstances and society in which she
lives. She is ignorant about the ways to escape these situations. She faces
failures, frustrations, grieves in her life. Patriarchy in our society doesn’t
allow her to find the out of this maze of blind faiths. (Takale 2-3)

The status and space allotted to women bend them towards superstitions. Through
superstitions and rituals women try to give meaning to their lives and see them as the
ways to escape their predicament. The situation of Pariah women becomes more difficult
as: “…it is much more a question of daily experience, of struggle…” (Grey). These
women worship a whole lot of village deities in order to be saved from disease, bareness,
and other externally induced misfortunes. They believed if not the doctor then God or
spirits or sorcery would heal them and take care of their children. Viramma gave birth to
twelve children but only three survived. Her children died because of lack of medical
treatment and malnutrition. However, in her life narrative she calls diseases like cholera
and chicken pox as goddesses who kill people to maintain balance in the world: “Women
are far more superstitious than men” (Sarjit Talwar qtd. in “Women more”), especially
illiterate Dalit women who are unable to free themselves from these shackles of
temporary relief.
Dalits, in the name of religion, have faced denial of education. Their degraded position has been sanctified by the religious texts: “Now if a Sudra listens intentionally to (a recitation of) the Veda, his ears shall be filled with (molten) tin or lac” (Gautam Dharma Sutra 12.4 qtd. in R. Kamble 138) and exploited by the upper castes who imposed restrictions on Pariahs to read or hear the scriptures: “For centuries, the Untouchables of India were denied the benefit of education. They were even subjected to harsh punishments if they dared to read or write the Hindu scriptures. Even hearing of religious scriptures was out of bounds for them” (Mahapatra 213). One day while working at the Reddiar’s house, Viramma heard the Brahmin mumbling his prayers as he raised the sacrificial fire. Viramma peeped out of the window. However, the Grand Reddiar’s mother saw her and chased her away: “Eh, Velpakkatta! Get out of here! Get out of here! Don’t look at that!” Viramma admits her crime: “And it’s true that we mustn’t see any of it” (VIR 158), which reflects her fear in these discriminating rituals.

Viramma admits Pariahs in ceri heard the priest whenever he in ur recited the scriptures like Bharatam:

Apparently it’s very good for you to listen, it absolves your sins. But that only happens in the ur. No one will ever agree to read for us, we’re too unclean for that, and there’ll always be some son of a whore who starts cursing during the reading. But again, who knows? In this kaliyugam, money’s what matters. Perhaps if you paid a good price, a better price than the people from the ur, you’d find a priest who’d agree. But that hasn’t happened up till now. (VIR 81)

No priests ever agreed to read scriptures for the Pariahs. However, they found a way out. They contributed money to buy the book Bharatam: “We all clubbed together to buy a big book of the Bharatam…” (81). In this effort Pariah women did not remain mute spectators. They also contributed their hard earned wages for the desire for knowledge to resist these man-made restraints:

Our men who know how to read take this book, go and sit down near the kulam and, while the temple narrator reads and explains the Bharatam, our lads, who are intelligent and smart, write down all the details on the book: here’s the palace of wax, here the descent into the fire and so on….In the ceri, on days when there’s no work, four or five of them sit on the tinnai and start reading. (81)
Hearing them, women joined to “listen as well” (81). Pariah women’s efforts to acquire knowledge have led to their resurrection. When nobody from the upper caste, who had the privilege of education, wanted to help them, they devised their own ways to help themselves/each other. They challenged “existing education politics…to claim resources…as well as to disseminate educational (and civic) discourse deeper into Dalit society, thus bringing about the emergence of Dalit resistance” (Paik). The Pariah women supported and equally contributed and participated with their male counterparts for dissemination of knowledge to take place in ceri. They transformed their rejected status into the position of resistance and became agents of resurrection not only for their individual self but for the whole ceri community.

In India, “Shudras were peasant serfs or day laborers” (Wolpert 119). Viramma’s family too worked as serf for the Grand Reddiars: “Serfdom is the status of many peasants under feudalism….It was a condition of bondage….Serfs…were required to work for the land of the manor who owned the land, and in return were entitled to protection, justice and the right to exploit certain fields within the manor to maintain their subsistence” (“Serfdom”). Viramma narrates Serfs had to work hard at the Reddiars as they did not own land:

God only left us these eyes and these hands to earn our living. By working hard at the Reddiar’s we’ve been able to lead our lives in the proper way….Of all the castes in the ur, the Reddiar caste is the highest….The Reddiar are the people who don’t work, they put others to work: fifty, sixty, ninety, two hundred people. Their women don’t work and they never go out. (VIR 156)

She acknowledges Pariah women’s contribution in the maintenance of the family. Viramma worked at Reddiar’s fields along with her husband. Her daughter Miniyamma helped her until she got married. Sundari did the same and now it was her daughter-in-law Amsa who was working at the Reddiar’s dwelling.

When the fields are ready, it is the “women who go and plant out the rice” (243). Pariah women work hard in their houses and in the fields and also in the houses of upper caste people. Viramma after finishing household work left for Reddiar’s house. As Viramma was serf at Reddiars, she had to do extra work in comparison to other women
workers. She used to sweep the front of the Reddiar’s house, clean the stable and wash the jars. She had to pound the rice and winnow lentils. Then the Reddiars gave her something to eat before she returned home.

Viramma laments the labour of Pariah women remained unacknowledged. Pariah women received fewer wages as compared to men. She exposes the duplicity of the social workers who provoked the Pariahs against landlords “Demand an increase in your wages! Five rupees for the women, ten rupees for the men!” (181) but did not raise the issue in their agenda with the landlords fearing their anger. Moreover, they create a divide by suggesting different wages for men and women:

Since all forms of oppression are linked in our society because they are supported by similar institutions and social structures, one system cannot be eradicated while the others remain intact. Challenging sexist oppression is a crucial step in the struggle to eliminate all forms of oppression, (hooks, Feminist Theory 37)

Viramma is critical of the double standards adopted by the social workers who claim to work for the upliftment of Dalits but create hierarchies between Dalit men and women, thus pushing these women towards further oppression and suffering, and thereby thwarting their move towards freedom.

Pariah women toil along with their men in the fields but it is only man’s work, which is recognized: “In agricultural sector the women labour suffer from….disparities and discrimination in wages…women are generally paid 40 to 60 percent of male’s wages and are given more labour intensive and nerve breaking tasks like weeding, transplanting and harvesting” (M. Gupta 163). Viramma’s husband took seven or eight measures of paddy in his basket: “That paddy is just for my husband” while shelling black lentils at the Reddiars gave Viramma “two little measures, as well as the one I get as wages” which she saved “for occasions like Kartikkai or Amavasai, days when I love making dosai and idli for the whole family” (VIR 251). This illustrates that “a dalit woman is rooted in the larger social environ and her children, who are a part of organic being, give a meaning to her life” (Karan Singh 194), thus highlighting Dalit women’s greater contribution towards the maintenance of the family.
Besides discrimination in wages, Pariah women were denied food given to labourers in the fields. It was only the men who got the gruel to eat from the Reddiars after ploughing the fields. When Reddiar came for inspection in the field, he gave money to Viramma to distribute among the workers. Viramma had to keep an eye on the workers to avoid theft of grains. However, if anything happened, she got scolding from Reddiar:

‘What are you there for, eh, you Paratchi? You think your pot will boil if they take everything? If it’s on my land….And even if I beat you, you know you can help yourself on my land!’ (VIR 247)

This rebuke from Reddiar demonstrates how caste system enables a landowner not only to exploit poor Pariah woman’s labour but also bestow on him the right to beat her. Viramma in her life narrative *Viramma: Life of an untouchable* through her experiences reflects the plight of her community. In this context, the threat from Reddiar “even if I beat you” (247) reveals the oppressive plight of Pariah women who face battering both at the hands of their men /husband and upper caste landlords.

Viramma despite “That’s the hardest work” in peanut fields got the same share of harvest like other workers: “...no more or less, exactly the same as everybody else.” That left her unsatisfied. She resisted and revolted by getting into “the field, I fill a little jar with big, fat peanuts....I hide the jar under a peanut plant. At the end of the day, I quietly pick up what I’ve hidden....” (247). The peasants “employ various forms of passive resistance….Pilfering and stealing (a form of resistance still widespread)” (Kemeny 52) in response to the exploitation of their labour. Viramma in her act of stealing displays passive resistance to the landowner’s exploitation. The share which he gave to Viramma was not justified. Stealing the jar of peanuts from Reddiars was Viramma’s mode of resistance to the injustice and exploitation meted out to her.

Viramma fears the “capacity of the powerful for…repression, and their displeasure at seeing her community make progress, however small” (Josiane Racine and Jean-Luc Racine 311), that is why Viramma never openly resisted the landowner: “Soap does not remove uncleanliness…. Just because we’re little bit ‘decent’ now doesn’t mean that we’re going to be allowed into people’s houses: and if we touch any utensils in a courtyard or at the well, women still rinse them with loads of water before they pick them up!” (VIR 167). Viramma uses the word ‘decent’ as “a synonym for the social practices
and standards of hygiene and dress – set by high castes – which she describes as ‘civilised’” (289). Viramma opines that wearing good clothes and getting educated will not erase the blot of being born as low caste and acceptance from the upper caste people who hold prejudice against them:

‘The government itself is on their side and fights for them! They give too many facilities to those Pariah dogs!’ That’s what they say when they see the ceri streets tarmacked and lit up. And it’s true that there didn’t used to be any order in the ceri. It didn’t matter where houses were built. The streets were full of bumps. Even indoors, everything has changed today: there’s aluminum tumblers, bowls and plates when they all used to be earthenware. (189)

The upper caste people can never accept Pariahs, their servants on equal terms. J. M. Ovasdi quotes a Dalit woman who does not want to contest Panchayat elections because: “If I contest the elections, the upper caste people will attack my children and husband. They will ransack and destroy my house. That is what has been happening over many generations. So we do not contest”’ (355). Those who are above the Dalits in caste hierarchy are reluctant to accept Dalits as the acceptance of Dalits in the mainstream society will be a threat and challenge to their domination.

The illustration of passive resistance can be traced in Pariah women’s songs too. In spite of exploitation, Pariah women never fully surrendered to the degrading hierarchical social system. They developed their own strategies to show resistance. Viramma memorizes the lyrics of a song:

Our legs stuck in the mud make us suffer
Ellamba ellan!
Have pity on us, executioner!
Ellamba ellan! (VIR 11),

which reveals “individual as well as collective” resistance (Karan Singh 203). According to Michelle Toglia, “The Words Are Just As Important As The Music” (Toglia). In context of Dalit women, C. Lutz and L. Abu-Lughod in their work *Language and Politics of Emotion* state, “…some or great extent emotions play their roles in singing songs, and these emotions are essentially social….” Therefore, it is “imperative to examine the social premise of the Dalit women before close attention is paid to the songs of the Dalit
women” (N. Rao 73). Dalit women’s songs need to be scrutinized within the context of social foundation. The lyrics of the songs by Pariah women show their resentment against the executioner, that is landlord. Another song makes fun of Brahmins and their shams of purity by referring to his desire to have sex and for eating crabs:

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. (VIR 157)

Pariah women unable to resist openly the Brahmins for fear of repercussion through songs pour out their feelings, and try to give voice to their suffering at the hands of priests, who sexually exploit them but go unpunished under the garb of religion. Songs become the medium through which they give vent to their anger against their exploiters.

The pangs of poverty and hunger form an important component of Viramma’s life narrative:

I remember before when times were difficult and there wasn’t work in the fields, we didn’t eat every day. All my grandmother would go and buy was a little oil for the lamp and she’d say to us, ‘Little ones, we haven’t got anything to cook today. We’ll light the lamp instead of the fire, so you won’t be afraid of the dark. Quickly go to sleep, you won’t feel any pangs of hunger!’ We’d lie down on our stomachs, all huddled together and shut our eyes. Hunching our shoulders and clamping our teeth tight shut so as not to hear any noise, we’d fall asleep in a flash. Our parents would ease their tiredness and hunger by sharing a twist of betel. (186)

The basic requirement for survival is food. And for food Pariahs, Viramma admits, were solely dependent on the landlords. So despite knowing their exploitative situation at the hands of the landlords they could not dare to revolt against the injustice meted out to them. Viramma is critical of the leaders and social workers who provoked Pariahs to stand against caste atrocities, and get educated and to ask for more wages from the people who employ them as labourers but fail to address the issue that if Pariahs stand against the landlords, how they are going to survive:
With ploughs and sickles, our parents only showed us how to plough the land, how to manure it and irrigate it. They taught us to make our living from that. And now suddenly all of you start telling us we have to give up the hoe for the pen! So how are we going to live? Unlike yours, our parents did not make us study….You people who can write still need our work, you still need as manual labourers, and we’re still dominated by you!’ (181-82)

She identifies caste with social and economic backwardness. Instead of hollow promises, she wants some concrete action:

We haven’t got a field or any land, nothing but the house we live in: so how do you expect us to live? If you really want to fight for us to cultivate, …give us some money to buy some land, or share out land for us to cultivate. Give us a cow, a goat, a pair of oxen and we’ll be able to make our living, eat our fill and have plenty of children. They could study, have a job.’ (182)

Viramma is blunt in making social activists realize the hollowness of their rousing sermons.

Regular hard labour in the fields and home along with frequent pregnancies make Pariah women prematurely old: “Dalit women perform hard domestic labour which is unpaid and as agricultural labourers or casual labourers they continue to toil under the burning sun, with no protection or benefits that labour laws provide, since majority of these women are in the unorganized sector” (“Unheard voices” 2). In addition to this, “Frequent pregnancies and abortions have further made them very weak” (Jaiswal). Viramma in Viramma: Life of an untouchable gives peep into the harsh life of Pariah women. While narrating her life story, she says to Josiane Racine:

What would it be like if we were as civilized as you, always clean and beautiful? But don’t worry we can’t stay beautiful as long as you. Young, yes, we’re as strong as tamarind seeds, but after children start coming, it’s all over. We lose blood with each child and, on top of that, there’s all the work we get through: planting out, weeding, harvesting, looking after the cattle, collecting cow dung, carrying eight jars of water….A Pariah woman loses her strength and beauty very early….We come home in the evening exhausted, covered in sweat. We don’t take the time to wash, we go to bed as we are. (VIR 52)

Viramma highlights that Pariah women engrossed in their struggle with hunger and poverty find no ‘me time’ to clean and adorn themselves daily. Viramma articulates
against the apathy of social system which cause disparity between the high caste women and the low caste women.

Like Baby Kamble, Viramma in her life narrative also talks about the dress code, a potent sign, to differentiate Pariah women from the upper caste women. Pariah women were strictly prohibited to cover the upper part of the body: “A parachi shouldn’t wear one once she’s had a child, it’s not polite” (187). In the past, covering the breasts was considered as a sign of caste and only upper caste women were allowed to cover their breasts: “Breast tax in the erstwhile Travancore kingdom of Kerala was levied on women who belonged to the lower caste….” Dalit women were forced to uncover their breasts. In order to keep tradition intact, strict laws were imposed. However, Dalit women were not mute acceptors: “In 1840 AD (ibid.), Nangeli, a 35 year old Ezhava woman of Chertala town, covered her body without paying any tax. When the village officer demanded the tax from her, she cut off her breasts, and died on spot….It was abolished the very next day” (T. Thomas127). Nangeli rebelled and articulated her resistance through her body by cutting off her breasts. Viramma’s life narrative reveals that this custom still prevails in the rural areas: “In the country I don’t wear a blouse.” Moreover, men from their own community compel them to follow the rule: “…there’s no shortage of pierced ears in the ceri and old troublemakers who criticise us bitterly, ‘Will you take a look at them! They’ve had a bushel of children and there they are, putting on a blouse to strut about at the Reddiar’s imitating their wives!’” (VIR 187). It is the men in their own community who turn against them when these women try to bring about small changes in their day to day life. These assertions are Dalit women’s endeavour to have control on their bodies which is refuted by their community men, who take their awareness, their dignity as a challenge to male Dalit patriarchy.

According to Catrina Welch: “…each of us has that core desire to be lovely, just like we all have the desire to eat…” (55). Viramma in her life narrative exhibits this desire among Pariah women. She remembers that in the past, they could not use soap, comb their hair, wear fine clothes and cover the upper parts of their bodies as these were the codes which were attached to Pariah women’s bodies: established their identity as Pariah women. Good clothes, combs, powder, make up, etc., all were privileges of the
upper caste women: “On our way to work we’d go past and we’d look at that foaming water with amazement.” But now things are changing: “Now my Anban buys soap with different scents every month and I use it as well. You can find everything in Tirulagam or even in the markets: combs of all colours, powder, pencils for the eyes and the lips, pottu which don’t rub off and we’re gradually learning to use them” (VIR 187). The change with regard to dress and make up is appreciative in context of Pariah women as it establishes their acceptability in society. Viramma welcomes the changes coming among the young Pariah women: “…if you could see our girls…in the ceri today! What clothes! What saris! What blouses! What hairdos! What haircuts!” as she looks at it as a step forward toward resurrection. She asserts, “When everybody changes, why shouldn’t we?” (188).

Comparing her childhood with her daughter Sundari she dwells on the positive changes coming in the lives of Pariah girls: “My childhood…if I compare it to my daughter Sundari’s I am sure it was a little short; we didn’t go to school when I was a kid” (4). Viramma herself an illiterate woman realizes the importance of education, especially for women. She aspires to a better future for the girls of her community. Viramma appreciates the efforts of the government for opening evening schools to educate Pariahs: “That’s how my daughter, Sundari got to learn all by herself” (184). The young girls can avail the opportunity of receiving education to improve their life. She appreciates that Pariah girls like her daughter Sundari are assertive in decision making: “…I was married very young to the Old man….But today girls are married later, years after their first period! In the end Sundari has found herself a good boy. He stayed at school up to class X, he owns a quarter of a kani and he’s very serious” (210-11). Viramma stands as an optimistic, inspiring individual in supporting the young Pariah girls when other women in ceri are apprehensive about the changes: “‘But where can that whore be off to so neat and so dressed up? Just look at her: a nylon sari, a pottu, flowers in her hair’…” (188).Viramma values the progressiveness in the young generation which she hopes will bring about the resurrection of Pariah women.

When it comes to celebrating herself, Viramma echoes Lee Maracle, a Canadian First Nations Coast Salish poet and author, who in I am Woman asserts, “‘I want the
standard for our judgment of our brilliance, our beauty and our passions, to be ourselves’” (qtd. in Srinivasan 121). Maracle’s voice resonates with Viramma’s when Viramma appreciates the dark-skinned body of Pariah woman: “…our girls beat you when it comes to clothes….The men from the ur, their mouths water when they see our girls…” (VIR 187). Like Maracle, Viramma affirms to appreciate one’s own body and be true to her own ‘self.’ Maria Preethi Srinivasan remarks, “Maracle’s celebration of Native womanhood comes from her assertion ‘I am woman’” (121). Viramma’s celebration of herself comes from her declaration that she is Pariah woman. In spite of being at the margins because of her low status in the caste pyramid, Viramma always felt proud of her Pariah identity and never called herself a Harijan: “‘The Harijans!’ my son corrected me, coming out of the house. ‘You can keep quiet, boy, that name will never cross my lips!’” (VIR 165). Viramma: Life of an untouchable establishes Viramma’s identity as a dignified Pariah woman. She is conscious that as a Pariah, she is at the margin but, at the same time, she is aware that it is because of the margin, the centre exists: “The owners need us, Sinamma. How could the ur survive without us?” (253). Hence, Viramma never displaces the centre from its space but brings the margin in focus and compels her readers to recognize the margin as a distinctive space and to appreciate the differences.

Viramma being illiterate developed her own ways of resistance. She strongly felt emancipation can come only “when the dignity of crushed and the despised is recognised, first of all recognised by themselves” (Josiane Racine and Jean-Luc Racine 312). She opined: “you just had to raise your voice” (VIR 71) to move from resistance to resurrection. Through articulation of her experiences as Pariah women in her life narrative, Viramma exhibits resistance to the social structure responsible for the marginalization of Pariah women. Viramma in Viramma: Life of an untouchable not only acts as an agent for the resurrection of the dignity of the crushed Pariah women collectively but also helps in the resurrection of her own persona as a distinctive person.

Bama as well as Viramma are from Tamil society. Bama is Tamil Dalit Christian and Viramma is Tamil Dalit Hindu. Both are from Pariah or Paraya caste and both voice the resistance against the suppression of Dalit women, and thus inspire Dalit women to resurrect themselves from the suppression of caste, class and gender. Both the writers in
their life narratives assert pride in their identity as Dalit women. Both negotiate from their marginal space and make the margin as a space of resistance. The focalization in the narratives is internal as the focus is on the narrator’s feelings, experiences and perception as well as external because the focus is also on the social and cultural factors which affect Dalit women’s lives.

Karukku and Viramma: Life of an untouchable act as sites of struggle where the voice of the marginalized individuals contests the institutionalized hegemony. Both the life narratives weave stories of journey from hopelessness to hope, invisibility to visibility, from silence to articulation, from nonentity to identity, from exclusion to inclusion and from resistance to resurrection of Dalit women’s collective/individual self.