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Violence Against Marginalized Women: Literary Representations in Tamil

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Abstract

This paper discusses representations of marginalized women on grounds of caste and religion in literary works in Tamil. An analysis of writings of Bama, Sivakami, Salma foreground the forms of oppression on women's labour, both physical and sexual. The violent containment of women's bodies, repression of their sexuality by family, and state institutions is highlighted. The institutionalizing of violence on Dalit women and the collusion of patriarchy and religious institutions alerts us to the dehumanizing of marginalized women. The paper argues for recognizing a heterogeneity among women to be reckoned with, in feminist discourse on grounds of class, caste, religious identity and to make feminist standpoint an inter-sectional one.

Keywords- Institutionalised Violence, Female Sexuality, Marginalized Women, Muslim Women and Caste, Inter-Sectional Feminism

In a patriarchal social structure, violence against women is pervasive. We are aware of its existence in subtle and not so subtle forms. Violence against women, in fact, stands institutionalized and receives social legitimacy. Family, State and religion form integral agencies of perpetrating violence against women in myriad forms. Such a widespread system of violence gets much more oppressive when it is directed against women marginalized from mainstream society on account of caste or religion. Gender violence compounded with caste discrimination results in a socially sanctioned and therefore a far more dehumanizing form of violence.

Such a form of violence, it is to be noted, is sharply targeted against women's body and seeks to contain their sexuality. Patriarchal containment of women's body in collusion with a casteist social paradigm results in dual oppression in the life of Dalit women. The exploitation of Dalit women's body as a source of cheap labour and as an easy appropriation of sexual pleasure by men from hegemonic castes or by state officials results in their enforced participation in productive and reproductive labour. In both categories of labour, Dalit women remain powerless over their body and

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consequently over the labour rendered as well. The question of denial of agency and autonomy to women stands embedded in a system that is fundamentally oppressive as it is rooted in a hierachal social order. Dalit women toil hard at home and outside and also get subjugated at home and outside. They are subjected to violent treatment by upper caste landlords, the panchayat, the police as well as by Dalit men within their homes. The collusion of patriarchy and caste structure in the oppression of Dalit women is largely located in the violation of the woman's body.

Dalit women are held captive and subjugated to rape at their workplace—farms, factories, landlord's home or at police stations. At times, they are raped as a mode of punishing their men folk for their refusal to comply with the demand for forced or unpaid labour. In the context of Dalit women, rape is an act of sexual violence embedded in caste hegemony and social power. Any attempt at a possible undermining of caste hegemony by the Dalit community is met with abduction, mutilation or rape of Dalit women. The subjugation of a Dalit woman's body is made possible by a sustained collusion between patriarchal and casteist structure that wields enormous power in our private and public domain.

Another form of violence against Dalit women, often unreported, is primarily located on her body and seeks to control her sexuality. This pertains to enforcing poor, Dalit women to live as concubines or second wife of upper caste men who view them as easy prey to satiate their lust and assert their social power over them. The savarna landlord or the factory owner who rigorously upholds untouchability in his social intercourse is also the one who commodifies Dalit woman's body and thereby renders her position as a concubine, socially unacceptable both within her community and within the family of the casteist master. Deprived of social sanctions or economic security young Dalit women are sexually victimized. Here the collusion of family as an institution with the hegemonic caste structure is evident.

A Dalit woman's body is thus the site of oppression on dual counts—her caste and gender identity. Her body is the site of control embedded in multi-layered collusion. Dalit women writers in Tamil, like Sivakami and Bama foreground the twice oppressed lives of Dalit women in their fiction. Sivakami's novels *Pazhiyana Kazahidalum* (1989), *Anandayee* (1992), Bama's autobiographical fiction *Karukku* (1992), *Sangati* (1994), the novel *Vanmam* (2002) and the two writers' short story collections highlight how Dalit women are subjugated by multiple agencies of power on account of their gender and caste.

The intersection of caste and gender in the context of Dalit women's oppression is an important marker to reckon with in feminist discourse. Feminism in the Indian context has to reformulate its received discourse, largely derived from its western counterpart and its notion of gender oppression that is invariably located within the middleclass Indian home. Dalit women writers

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point out that there has to be a paradigmatic shift in feminist standpoint in India. Feminism in India has largely addressed the woman question within the confines of middle class, upper caste woman's domain. The nationalist project, earlier, had addressed reformist concerns pertaining to the upper caste Hindu family. It had not engaged with the question of caste at all. Issues like child marriage, widow remarriage, or women's education, conduct discourse, were addressed by the nationalists while issues like caste structure, untouchability and women's oppression on account of their caste were brushed under the carpet. Ambedkar's call for annihilation of caste and radical re-structuring of Hindu society was subsumed by the half - hearted reformist discourse that valorized service, purity of heart and Gandhian paternalism towards the lower castes. The nationalist movement under Gandhi's leadership strove for Swaraj, but rendered the agitation for Swabhiman (self- respect) rather secondary.

Feminist standpoint during the nationalist struggle and in the decade following independence has consistently paid little attention to the complex web of co-option, collusion and consolidation of patriarchy and caste hegemony in Indian society. Since the late eighties and early nineties, Dalit women's literary discourse has successfully drawn our attention to the caste and class bias in feminist discourse pointing out the theoretical limitation of feminist movement in India. Dalit writers critique feminism's complicity with the nationalist project earlier and its continued projection of upper caste, middle class, Hindu woman as a synonym for Indian women. Articulating the need for a remediation of caste and gender in any inquiry into the oppression of women, they seek to forge questions of identity, gender and social justice.

Feminist standpoint merits a re-vision and re-mediation concerning notions of *streesamaj* and *streevarg* and school itself to accommodate *streejati* as integral to Indian feminist discourse. Dalit women writers argue that there cannot be any facile bonding between Dalit women and women at large in our society. The inequalities within our society have to be reckoned with in women's movements. Notions of sexual difference and female bonding require a radical reorientation to address specific concerns of our society and its distinct trappings in class, caste, religion and other sociological markers have to be recognized and accommodated. Sharmila Rege argues for evolving a Dalit feminist standpoint to negotiate Dalit women's concerns and its impact/fallout on feminist movement in our country.

Dalit women's self- articulation is one of the most positive and far-reaching steps that has paved the way for Dalit empowerment. Most of them, whether Marathi or Gujarati or Punjabi or Tamil or Hindi began recording their lived experience as a Dalit. A Dalit woman's autobiography is invariably an account of her community's social history as well. In Tamil Dalit women's fiction, we note that the autobiographical essence of the novel overlaps with accounts of numerous Dalit women's life narratives as well. The use of Dalit woman's vocabulary in Bama's fiction is a

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significant intervention in Dalit discourse as it seeks to grant literary merit to the spoken language of Dalit women and thereby interrogates any homogenization of women or valorization of univocality in literature. Unlike a traditional autobiography a Dalit woman's autobiography emerges as not a linear but a cyclic narrative, not of one individual's rags to riches story but rather a collage of interesting tales of hope, aspiration, angst, suffering, humiliation, subversion, success and failings of the entire Dalit community.

The Tamil Dalit writer Bama's writings show how the all-male panchayat duplicates the discriminatory, unjust, repressive attitude of the upper castes towards Dalits in its treatment of Dalit women. It violates their dignity, erases them spatially, silences them and excludes them from decision making even on issues directly concerned with their subjectivity. In a telling visual motif, at the panchayat meeting, the women of the *Parai Cheri* are shown to huddle together at a distance, hovering over the margins, far removed from the centre where the men hold court. A Dalit woman suffers violence both at the hands of her father and her husband. Her bruised body bears witness to the oppressively hegemonic control of Dalit women by the men of their community. They have to bear the dual oppression of caste and gender hegemony in our society. If the upper castes throw the leftovers as food for Dalits, at home the men beat up the women if they eat before the men do. A folk song among Dalits describes how a pregnant Dalit woman eats up the crab stew that she had cooked with a lot of effort, after having waited long for her husband. Angered by his wife's eating a meal before his turn, the man kicks her in the stomach, throws her out, beats up his children, injures the baby in the womb, smashing his wife's bones and her bangles.

In one of Bama's short stories *Ottha* (Singular), a Dalit girl (Illamalli) loses one of her breasts when a wild boar attacks her in the forest where she had gone to relieve herself. She attains a healthy womanhood but due to her singular condition, she is teased and nicknamed singular, a woman with a single organ (in this case, a single breast). She longs to get married and nurse a baby but no one is willing to marry her. One day, she is molested by the upper caste landlord who teases and abuses her condition. She tells him, "Look, my people can call me by any nickname. You have no right to do so." She tries to wriggle out of his clasp but he holds her tight and calls her *Ottha* repeatedly. She takes out her sickle to cut off his hand but the sickle falls on one of his eyes and the landlord loses an eye. A grand dame of the village assures her, "Only if they are tackled this way, would they learn their lessons." The landlord too becomes an *Ottha*, a man with a single organ. In another story, *Ponnutaayi*, the woman Ponnutaayi returns to her natal home when she can no longer put up with her husband's violent, abusive behaviour. When he continues to harass her and hit her here as well, she runs to the police station with her bleeding wounds and files a case against her husband. He gets arrested and she tells the SHO that he could do what he wants with her man, she is off him, forever.

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She sells her *taali* (mangalsutra) and sets up a shop with the money. She also dumps her children on the husband reminding him that they are his responsibility as well and he cannot use them to tie her down. Both Ponnaayi and Illamalli assert their right to live according to their belief and choice. They also address their problems directly, often using the same male discourse of violence and intimidation to subdue their adversary. They subvert codified conduct outlined for women and transgress spaces demarcated on the basis of gender. Both are conscious of their Dalit identity and prefer singleness to an unequal relationship based on oppressive hierarchy either of caste (*Ottha*) or gender (*Ponnaayi*).

Literary representation of Dalit women show how they subvert hegemonic caste / gender discourse in order to defend themselves against an unjust system, often employing parody, invective, banter, subversion through ridicule which Bama terms *Nayyandior Pagadi* in Tamil. Through verbal *Pagadi*(subversive discourse) Dalit women affirm their self-esteem and counter oppressive control of their physical, social and domestic space. As Raj Gautaman writes in his foreword to Bama's collection of short stories, *Kisumbukkaaran*, "Dalit invective and banter (Pagadi) ultimately empower Dalits to rise against caste oppression with courage." Bama uses humor as a subversive strategy to debunk casteist prejudices and presumptions concerning Dalit community.

Bama also depicts how conversions to Christianity does not free Dalits from caste oppression. They are kept out of the choir or not allowed to share the prayer space or take out procession during the church festivals through the streets inhabited by upper castes. Dalit Christians are not allowed even to bury their dead in the cemetery. Bama's writing embodies an activist agenda. As a Dalit, writing has empowered Bama. Her entry into academy, her presence at literary meets, conferences in Indian metros and abroad, her continued contribution in the sphere of education as a school teacher are various facets of her social empowerment. In turn she employs her writing to implore Dalits to adopt education as a sure strategy for self-empowerment and acceptability in society. Her writing while using spoken Dalit women's vocabulary is addressed to non-Dalits who need to be educated and sensitised about Dalits' struggle for a dignified existence. At the same time, it also shows possibilities of success to her Dalit readers.

In all her works, *Karukku*, an autobiographical narrative, *Sangati*, a feminist narrative on Dalit women's lives, *Vanmam*, a novel, Bama reiterates and calls upon Dalits to organise and help themselves, "Who would come forward to aid us? We would have to help ourselves" is her repeated reminder. In *Karukku* she comments, "Each one of us has to wake up from slumber. Instead of accepting our lot as our fate, we should reject this bondage, this unjust system. We must be brave and stand up for ourselves. Break up caste barriers and biases and prove to the world that no man is inferior to another. Those who have prospered by suppressing us would not give up their hold so

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easily. But we need to show them their place, show them all are equal and change this society.” *Karukku* is a clarion call to Dalits to liberate themselves from bondage based on caste, religion and Bama reposes great faith in education as a possibility for deliverance from exploitative social structures.

In *Sangati*, Bama urges women to organise themselves and fight for their rights. “Why should we suppress our talents? We work as much as the men do. In fact, much more, I should say. Ask these men to take over our chores for one day. They would run away in no time...We have to assert our rights. We have to stand up for our esteem. If we wait for others to come and give us a helping hand, then you better stand prepared to rot for a lifetime.” She also points out that Dalit women have to assert themselves politically to reap gains for themselves and their community.

In *Vanmam*, forging of unity among Dalits is stressed upon most forcefully. Education for Bama is not limited to formal education. She lays equal emphasis on spiritual education but wants this to be free from interference from ecclesiasts and officialdom. Dalits have to gain enlightenment in a political sense, rather than merely accumulate university degrees.

Bama works within the Ambedkarite vision for Dalit empowerment. If *Karukku* upholds education, *Sangati* foregrounds organised agitation, while *Vanmam* enjoins upon unity among Dalit communities. Sivakami, another Tamil Dalit writer formulates the notion of Dalit feminism as a corrective in her representation of caste oppression in her fiction. Education, work, ideological consciousness (Marxist-feminist) and community participation are some of the alternative strategies that the writer points put for her women characters victimized by patriarchy and caste. She advocates a simultaneous, vigorous confrontation of both caste and gender injustice.

Salma is a Tamil Muslim poet and a well-known novelist. Her novel translated into English as *The Hour Past Midnight* foregrounds the lives of middle-class Muslim women and depicts how their sexuality is severely contained. Women from the age of nine to eighty are shown to be in the grip of patriarchal and clerical control which invades every aspect of their life but chiefly in relation to their body. Salma’s novel reads like a collage of short stories on women of different age groups from the Muslim community. *The Hour Past Midnight* foregrounds the oppressed lives of women trapped by the twin power structures of patriarchy and religion. The novel shows repeatedly how men use religion to confine women, limit their aspirations and seek to control/contain their sexuality. It also lays bare how religious orthodoxy thrives on patriarchal power and its associated privileges. It is in the domain of sexuality that Muslim women face enormous restriction. Confined and trapped within the four walls of home, withdrawn from school at the onset of puberty, betrothed and married off at an alarmingly young age, often, to much older, philandering men who are employed outside India (and therefore perceive their wives merely as potential nurturer of their family tree), the young girls

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and (married) women in the novel feel enormously pressured to cater to the sexual demands of their men folk. They are, at times, like the young bride Wahida subjected to sexual harassment by male relatives. Almost, without exception, the men in the novel are shown to be indulging in extra marital affairs and thereby reducing more than one woman's life to abject dependency and sexual containment.

What is highly provoking and reprehensible is the employment of religious/ priestly authority to control women's movement and their simple, innocuous pleasures. In Suleiman, we glimpse a rabid patriarch who uses faith to whip up an orchestrated frenzy against women's sexual assertiveness when Fatima, a poor abandoned wife elopes with her (Hindu) lover, leaving behind her son and an aged mother, Suleiman takes it upon himself to rouse the clergy to impose severe and unfair penalty on the old woman.

Women have absolutely no choice or say over their sexuality either before or after their marriage. The tragedy of Amina's sister, the young bride Maimoon who returns home unable to accept her unhandsome older husband but dies in a botched up abortion, or that of Amina's divorced daughter Firdaus, who enters into a relationship with her married neighbour Shiva and is forced by her mother to take poison and end her life rather than sully the family honour, are indicative of pervasive containment of women's sexuality in this unnamed, nondescript but prosperous Muslim dominated town in Tamil Nadu. Maimoon's death takes place in 1948 but things do not change significantly in this society even in Firdaus' times, a good forty odd years later.

The novel is a moving document of oppressed lives of Muslim women. The male characters loom large over their lives and remain menacing even if shadowy and less fleshed out in the novel. The women hail from prosperous homes, their men either look after their family business, own shops or are employed in Malaysia or Dubai. The context of oppression (patriarchal or clergy ordained) remains primarily in the domain of female sexuality. Containment of female sexuality is the central thread linking the various women's lives, yoking a series of violent acts against women's body to foreground the oppressive violent violation of Muslim women's dignity within the four walls of her home as much as in the outside world. It is worth noting that the women in the novel (with the notable exception of Fatima and her mother) hail from (upper) middle-class and their attitude (despite their own severely constrained lives) towards the working class, lower caste women remains largely embedded in their class position. They view the compromised lives of Dalit women and labouring women with the nonchalance of middle class complacency. They are unable to extend the possibility of gendered bonding to facilitate bonding of women across classes/ castes.

When Kadar-Karim's farm labourer, Paraman's son brings home a Malayali bride of his choice, the dispute between the angry father and the couple is settled by the brothers with an

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overriding sense of settling an absurd quarrel over matters unrelated to the social context of daily wage earners. Kadar's wife Rahima shelters the young bride as she feels 'proud' of her husband's promise of protection towards the girl. Rahima treats the girl with the self-conscious benevolence of a land owner, showcasing her charity (and the fact that she can afford the same), towards the poorer, lower caste woman.

Karim's concubine Mariyayi, a labouring, Dalit farmhand who tends to her 'master's' orchard, hands over her earning as well as savings to him and is coerced into getting her tubectomy done by him to put an end to numerous 'unwanted' pregnancies. She is treated as a reliable, efficient maid by Zohra, Karim's wife. Zohra doesn't feel threatened by Mariyayi's sexual liaison with her husband. Her class position frees her of sexual jealousy and allows her to employ Mariyayi as a beast of burden. Mariyayi is an efficient worker – physically and sexually, to Zohra and Karim. The sexually oppressed Muslim women do not desist from exploiting the labour of Dalit women. The moment Mariyayi reports to work, "instantly, Zohra felt as if a load had been lifted from her mind. After this, Mariyayi would take over the responsibility for everything, and do it all. Zohra need only supervise." When other women tease Zohra over Mariyayi's status as her husband's concubine, Zohra simply smiles. Her smile "intended to say, 'well, would you find such a good worker, however hard you looked all over the world?'"(81-82) There was no indication, in that smile, of any disapproval whatsoever, regarding Mariyayi and her own husband.

The middle- class Muslim woman's unself-reflexive endorsement of her rights over the labour(physical and sexual) of the Dalit woman brings to our attention the futility of homogenizing women across the social spectrum. Marginality, in the context of women in India needs to be problematised. There are multiple, often, contesting positions of marginality within the patriarchal structure. In such a scenario, feminist theorization on sexual difference or gender relations requires to be re-ordered to make a viable mode of critique. Polarisation on grounds of caste, class or religion amongst women merits a rigorous re-alignment of feminist interests and re-marshalling of diverse marginalities to facilitate a productive dialogue on the agency of women's self-articulation and their empowerment. The nuancing of women's oppression in India on grounds of class, caste, religion besides gender alerts us to a need for revising feminist position and, re-formulate a pluralist, multivocal, inclusive, non-elitist, inter-sectional feminism. A single canopy is still needed but of multiple hues and shades.

Endnotes

1. Translations from the Tamil texts have been done by me for the purposes of this paper.

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2. A part of the critique of Salma's novel has been published as a book review in the journal 'The Book Review', January 2010.

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