

**GENDERING DALIT: A CRITIQUE OF TAMIL DALIT WOMEN'S  
FICTION**

**Thesis submitted to**

**Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit Kalady**

*in partial fulfilment of the requirements*

*for the Award of the Degree of*

*Doctor of Philosophy*

*in*

*English Language and Literature*

**By**

**HIMA K. R.**

**Reg. No. 16KA06EN07**



**Department of English, Faculty of Foreign Languages**

**SREE SANKARACHARYA UNIVERSITY OF SANSKRIT KALADY**

**SEPTEMBER 2020**

## **Conclusion: Validation of Dalit Women's Struggles**

The thesis, **Gendering Dalit: A Critique of Tamil Dalit Women's Fiction** is an attempt to examine P. Sivakami's *The Grip of Change*, Bama's *Sangati* and Meena Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess*, foregrounding the intersectionality of caste, class, and gender. The thesis locates women within the discursive space of dalit feminism, focusing on the aspects of multiple oppressions and resistance. The analysis of the selected fiction attempts to capture "difference" as the focus of feminist analysis. The study is structured predominantly by the theories of dalit feminism and resistance. It examines the experiences of the intersectionality of caste, class and gender inequalities and oppressions which dalit women experience in their everyday life and explores the ways in which dalit women resist them.

The dalit women writers under study Sivakami, Bama and Kandasamy articulate their resistance to centuries long dehumanisation of dalit women. Their writings explore the experienced realities of dalit women living on the margins of Indian society. They articulate dalit women's lives which were hitherto misrepresented or unknown to the mainstream society. The novels are significant as part of their activism which makes the problems of dalit women an international human rights issue. They serve to rectify dalit female stereotypes and provide a genealogy of women's fictional narratives. Their writings have enriched Tamil dalit literature and blazed new trails in feminism.

Their writings bravely exhibit the superficial discourses of the mainstream feminist movements and dalit movements being blind to the questions of caste and gender. They record the real life problems of dalit women such as poverty, patriarchy, untouchability, superstition, sexual exploitation and so on with special thrust on the reasons of their marginality and so on. Both caste specific and gender specific issues find mentioning in their writings. It is due to their writings that the issues related to their actual life situations gain academic intellectual interventions. They break the presumptions of the readers that culturally, socially and economically dalit woman is not a homogenous category with the upper caste, middle class women. They critique the caste system and patriarchy and they describe the violence these women have to undergo in all spheres.

The term subaltern as theorised by Antonio Gramsci, has greater relevance in contemporary critical discourse. It is now used to refer to all the marginalised and oppressed groups like the disorganised workers, gypsies, and women. The study describes in detail the formation of caste system and its sustenance through endogamy. In India, dalits are the non-elite people, who are on the periphery, subordinated and oppressed by the caste Hindus. Their literature, known as Phule-Ambedkarite literature, as a genre, emerged in 1950s as a critical and creative force to resist the hegemonic structures of socio-cultural power created by the caste Hindu order. It critically evaluates the *Manusmriti* and other Hindu scriptures for establishing the superiority of Brahmins and the inferiority of Sudras and women. The study has successfully

examined how caste system determines the division of labour and the sexual division of labour to reinforce the subordination of Sudras and women. The study evaluates the contributions of Phule, Savitribai Phule, Ambedkar and others in meticulous details and Rege's Dalit Feminist Standpoint theory owes its origin to Satyashodhak tradition and Ambedkarism. Dalit feminism is more emancipatory in nature and it exhorts other feminist groups to metamorphose into dalit feminists transforming their feminist framework. Dalit feminist framework is, in practice, a social justice movement which the caste only or gender only movements cannot accomplish.

The theoretical premise of dalit feminism has emerged as an act of resistance against the inadequacy of mainstream women's movements and dalit movements in addressing the issues of dalit women. Unlike feminism, which confined its scope to patriarchy and the economic rights of upper caste/class women, dalit feminism encompasses multiple women identities. It reaches out to all categories of women including the Savarna women. Dalit feminism demands a total transformation in the social order. Mainstream feminism has been homogenising women despite their differences. Dalit theorists and feminists like Gopal Guru and Sharmila Rege have argued for dalit women's need for autonomous organisations. Savarna women's lack of solidarity and their discriminatory attitude towards dalit women are clearly exposed in Sivakami's *The Grip of Change*. While untouchability is the sole issue discussed as the gravest problem in the novels of dalit male writers, dalit

women focuses on caste and gender subjugation with special thrust on the discrimination they experience in the hands of the upper caste women. As V. Geetha argues, caste is not just a division of labourers, but a system which has divided women as well. While the mainstream feminism in India has regarded only patriarchy as a structure of exploitation, dalit feminism has found both caste and patriarchy as the twin interlocking structures of exploitation. Dalit movements, with its stress on casteist discrimination and untouchability, have given relatively less importance to gender subjugation among dalits themselves. The thesis addresses the issues which are crucial in the understanding of the multiple oppressions to which dalit women are subjected in terms of the intersectionality of caste, class and gender. The thesis breaks the popular understanding of dalit women as “sexually” and “economically” liberated and independent that they are socially, economically and sexually more exploited and oppressed than Savarna women. Dalit women’s creative output is always coupled with activism. For these writers, literature is a process as well as a tool to make this earth a better place for humanity. Dalit feminism has also produced broad minded non-dalit intellectuals like Uma Chakravarti, Sharmila Rege, Charu Gupta and others. The intersectionality of caste and gender theory makes it possible to understand the complexity of the marginalisation and oppression of dalit women and therefore it helps the social agencies to work for the upliftment of them.

Dalit women are entrapped by the intersection of caste oppression and patriarchal subjugation. The novelists under study record dalit women’s

multiple oppressions and their experiences of humiliation. Their novels are the narratives of violence experienced by dalit women in India. Stripping, naked parading and sexual assault of lower caste women give the upper castes an opportunity to assert their caste hegemony. Caste is crucial in shaping dalit women's gender status and identity. Caste violence is an important aspect of dalit feminism, and in the case of dalit women, rape must be considered as a form of caste violence. Rape and other forms of violence against dalit women do not occur in isolation; it is the direct result of the hegemonic intersection of caste and gender. Dalit women are regarded as untouchables even by the women who belong to the caste just above them in the caste hierarchy, who are in turn regarded as untouchable by the caste Hindus. It is a fact that dalit women endure terrible forms of discrimination and violence despite the progress in education and employment. They are forced to internalise their inferiority and subjugation. Even the concept of purity-pollution affects the lives of dalit women, more than dalit men, though they are engaged in similar occupations which are considered defiling. The correlating operations of caste, class and gender multiply the oppression and subjugation of dalit women. They are always treated as unequal and inferior by upper caste men and women and also by dalit men. They live for giving pleasure and comfort to upper castes and their men. They lead sub-human lives deprived of basic necessities perpetually facing violence and exploitation throughout. Caste discrimination, gender oppression and class exploitation are interlinked in the private as well as public spheres of dalit women.

Placed at the lowest rung of India's caste, class and gender hierarchies, dalit women experience gender subjugation, caste discrimination, class exploitation and sexual violence. The novels portray dalit women's caste, class and gender struggles in the most realistic manner. As far as lower caste women are concerned, their struggle is completely different from that of upper caste women. The novels focus on the victimised women through the major events in the lives of dalit women who are subjected to multiple oppressions. The most pathetic fact about the oppressive state of dalit women is that they are being marginalised by both upper caste men and women and also by dalit men. Violence against dalit women is mainly done to reinforce the Brahmanical patriarchal norms. They are easily available for all forms of violence and oppression. Dalit women are forced to endure sexual molestation and harassment in the hands of both upper caste and lower caste men. They are sexually exploited by upper caste men in their homes, fields and factories. Violence against dalit women is the direct result of the caste; the men of dominant castes exercise power over dalits, and dalit women are seen as sexually available as they move about in public space engaged in productive labour. Even the violation of dalit women's bodies is one of the tools employed by the upper caste men to emasculate and control dalit men. Through the expropriation of these women they can have an assertion of power over the entire dalit community.

Dalit community on the whole becomes the Other for the upper caste men and women and dalit women become the Other for dalit men. They break

the myth that dalit patriarchy is democratic. They are subjected to the worst form of physical torture even inside their families in the hands of their fathers, brothers and husbands. As Bama's *Sangati* shows, the husband did not even hesitate to cut the long hair of his wife who he doubts has entered into affairs with other men which in reality is only his suspicion. It also analyses how dalit patriarchy and dalit women's oppression are closely related. They present the shocking realities in the life of dalit women as they submit themselves to patriarchy. These novels indicate the power relation between husband and wife in dalit community. In dalit families men are free to spend whatever they earn as they have no responsibilities. Women do labour both inside and outside their houses and they only get wages lower than men for the same amount of work. In fact, casteism is discussed with reference to patriarchy. Dalit men reproduce Brahmanical patriarchy, which is viewed as an attempt to Sanskritise themselves to improve their rank in the caste hierarchy. In the process, they try to control women's bodies, movements and sexuality. Dalit men's alcohol addiction, wife battering, polygamy and so on are elaborately examined in these novels. They explore critically how internal patriarchy is detrimental to the identity creation of dalit women and pictures the way by which they are subjected to physical abuse and economic exploitation. These novels present the disturbing picture of the sexual exploitation of dalit women in Indian villages. Perpetual sexual subjugation to uppercaste as well as dalit men seems to be their fate. As far as dalit women are concerned, violence against them is not gender specific, but it correlates with other structures like caste and class.

Violence against dalit women is an intrinsic part of the caste system to reinforce caste norms. They are vulnerable even to sexual violence particularly when they seem to violate the caste norms like endogamy or untouchability and also when they attempt to assert their rights. As delineated in *Sangati*, religious conversion does not make any qualitative change in the lives of dalits. Even in the church, the converted Christians continue to be engaged in culturally derogated occupations like sweeping and cleaning. Their quest for equality through conversion becomes elusive and hence their decision to convert remains a mistake.

Despite their unmitigated suffering dalit women shows remarkable agency and resistance to the power relations of caste, class and gender in Indian society. The novels selected for study make us look at the long history of the intersectionality of caste and gender oppressions of dalit women and the way they show resistance towards these oppressive structures. Through dalit women's experiences in a caste based society, there is an active attempt for empowerment and resistance to oppression and marginalisation. Dalit women like Gowri in *The Grip of Change* and the narrator, Bama in *Sangati* have undergone upward social mobility which can be viewed as a change from the experiences of the previous generations of dalit women, especially in the area of social relationship, religious belief, marriage and divorce, political involvement and activism. Through resistance they liberate themselves from caste oppression and gender subjugation. Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess* casts light on the resistance of the dalit agricultural labourers against the upper

caste landlords. The overlapping categories of caste, class and gender make them the victims of many acts of targeted violence and atrocities. These acts of oppression and resistance are critically interpreted within the frame work of the intersectionality of caste, class and gender. They have to bear with a lot of physical and psychological torturing experiences in their daily lives to achieve the barest means required for their existence like food and water. The lives of these women constantly under the burden of patriarchy, their multiple levels of oppressions, deprivations of resources and so on are well explored in the novels.

Bama uses the spoken language of Tamil dalits to challenge the hegemony of the mainstream written Tamil which is essentially the language monopolised by the upper caste people in Tamil Nadu. Dalit women create alternative folk songs, which become the text of women's liberation as they deconstruct and subvert the popular myths circulated by patriarchy to subjugate women. There is the resurgence of mother goddess cults and fertility worship. The goddess cult reiterates the female power principle. These temples of mother goddesses have been erected and run by dalits. This strongly poses anti-caste, anti-patriarchal challenges to Hinduism. The character Gowri in *The Grip of Change* and the narrator in *Sangati* protest against the patriarchal forces through the denial of marriage, by giving more importance to education and employment, and ultimately financial autonomy through them. They are aware of the fact that education helps in liberating them from the spaces of vulnerability. In *Sangati*, dalit women like Pechiamma decide to put an end to

their abusive marital relationships and by doing this they no longer remain subject to patriarchal domination. Bama advocates the struggling dalit women's right to divorce and by opposing patriarchal social order, they stand up for highly politicised gendered resistance. These women expose dalit women's efforts to bring about drastic changes to empower and resolve the issues of women caught in the structures of caste and gender. They reject Tali as it is the primary emblem for women's subordination to men. Their decision to go for tubectomy resists the patriarchal glorification of motherhood constructed as woman's highest mission. They exhibit agency to convert the female body and reproductive abilities from oppression to resistance. They ardently reject the patriarchal ideology of man's ownership of woman's body. Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess* has revealed the real side of the gruesome event in Indian history by giving voice to the long silenced dalit community and exposing the massacre as a caste atrocity rather than a class struggle or the struggle between the peasants. Memory is used as a powerful device, through which they resist the Brahmanical construction of history and culture that have completely excluded dalits' experiences and perspectives. Both Bama's and Sivakami's fiction is garnished with the narration of food tropes of Tamasik nature like the dry fish curry and the special cow intestine curry and their eating of beef becomes an act of resistance towards Brahmanism and its social order that regard cow as mother. The narration of killing of animals, cleaning and cooking their meat overtly contest the dominant cultural codes of Brahmanism.

The patriarchal social order and caste have made dalit women endure violence in multifaceted form. The situation of dalit women who are the victims of both upper caste and lower caste patriarchies is well illustrated in these novels. They problematise the vulnerability of dalit women whose existence itself is marked by mute submission. In the novels, dalit women's vulnerability manifests the kind of patriarchal view to which women are subjected. It also reveals the extent to which dalit women's dignity and rights are denied in day to day life. The male power of the dominant castes is legitimised through violence and force and the male power gets reproduced within the patriarchal caste system of dalit families. Through the character of Thangam, Sivakami directs the readers' attention to the violent exploitation of a dalit woman's body. There is particularly a shift in the articulation of gendered experience from a single self to the community's self. Their writings can be considered as an effort undertaken by the representatives of dalit women who were denied even human status. These writers portray clear-cut and realistic picture of dalit women in rural areas. They lead dual fights: one is the fight for caste eradication and the other is the fight for women's liberation. Through their writings they assert that a separate platform of dalit feminism is required to deal with the problems of dalit women to achieve equality. Kandasamy's novel exposes how dalits are economically exploited and resistance at community level helps dalits to achieve their rights in a caste ridden society. Many tensions emerge from their articulation of resistance which the caste Hindus regard as a threat to their hegemony.

Dalit women's deeds of resistance are obviously met with more oppositional practices on the part of the casteist patriarchal powers, but there are many instances which tell us about their successful resistance to challenge them in order to bring about desirable changes. These novels do not fail to record the language of defiance articulated by dalit women against all the interlocking oppressive structures in Indian society. They critique the discriminatory attitude of the upper caste women which is more intimidating than the Savarna men's overt attacks. They resent the traumatic experiences of casteism and sexual torturing they have experienced throughout their lives. They are aware of their position in society and are endowed with revolutionary spirit for change. When they raise their voice, they are taking a step outside the ideological boundaries of caste and gender.

Following the anti-Brahmanical patriarchal movement in Tamil Nadu, these writers stand for improving the status of women by the abolition of pre-puberty marriages and promotion of women's education, birth control and divorce from abusive marriages. The thesis explores in detail the extreme nature of dalit oppression and resistance by dalit women who bear most of the antagonism of the hierarchical structures of caste, class and gender. The novels under study, influenced by the Phule-Ambedkarite movement for the emancipation of dalits, articulate dalit women's issues and support their demand for justice. These activist writers foreground dalit feminism as a discourse of emancipatory politics. Their fiction which powerfully expresses dalit women's experiences of the intersectionality of caste, class and gender

oppressions provides a necessary corrective to the myopia of the caste Hindu society.

Dalit women's fiction is not simply the representation of the multiple oppressions of dalit women caused by caste violence and gender subjugation. These novels mark dalit women's rise in Indian casteist patriarchal society where they have started narrating their experiences of oppression, discrimination and marginalisation as well as the misrepresentation of such experiences in the mainstream writings. Dalit women's fictional narratives have deconstructed dalit female stereotypes as exploited and subjugated women devoid of agency and resistance. Through their activism and writings, dalit women attempt to interrogate, politicise and transform their disempowering life conditions. Though dalit women's practices of resistance are covert and oblique in popular discourses, media and debates, they have the agency and will to offer resistance, personal and collective in everyday practices. These silent forms of resistance which James Scott calls the weapons of the weak have the potential to undermine hegemonic power structures without being recognised as resistance.

When the mainstream writers have presented dalit women as victims of circumstances, Sivakami, Bama and Kandasamy have presented them as real fighters, independent, and capable of agency and resistance. These novels visibly interrogate the mainstream narratives of dalit women's oppression and marginalisation and present them as capable of flaunting their strength to transform their lives through resistance. Dalit women are now fully aware of

the fact that the oppressive structures of caste and gender have hampered their social mobility. They have the real fighting spirit in them to move beyond the socio-cultural and economic barriers. They extend their solidarity to all the marginalised sections of society including the women of higher castes. They strive to project themselves as achievers rather than victimised sexual beings. Thus, these novels try to rewrite the history of dalit women not from the perspective of the victimised, but from the perspective of the resisters. They could break the stereotypes and the myths constructed for dalit women in the most effective manner, making them fully aware of the potentialities and the fire they possess within them. They aim at putting an end to all sorts of violence, especially caste sexual violence. Most importantly, they could restore the lost voice in these women and they call for revolution by empowering and educating dalit women. In fact, they challenge the dominant caste expectation that they will maintain their culture of silence and submission. Standing at the lowest position in the casteist patriarchal hierarchies where dalit woman is the downtrodden of the downtrodden, writing becomes an act of liberation and resistance for them. The novels challenge the legitimacy of the caste system in order to demolish the Savarna cultural hegemony and subvert the hegemonic cultural practices through representation and resistance. Through the novels, they could create counter hegemonic cultural practices, recreate the realities of gendered dalit existence and redefine their subjectivities.