

P. Sivakami: The Caste and Gendered Body

Kiran Keshavamurthy

Contrary to scholarly opinions that until recently have thought of Tamil Dalit literature as a post-Marathi phenomenon, modern Dalit consciousness in Tamil can be traced back to the late 19th century to the writings of Pandit Iyothee Thass (1845-1914). His imaginative and rather subversive etymological inversions of Shaivite and Vaishnavite literature reveal the Buddhist leanings of early Tamil literature and an interpretation of Dravidians as casteless Tamils. His readings merely point to a prevalence of inequality among persons of the same religion and the protest against such discrimination. This is significantly different from the totalizing operations of the hierarchical varna system that institute and perpetuate a structural form of graded inequality and injustice. The Dalit scholar Ravikumar based on his interpretation of inscriptional evidence on caste, traces the practice of untouchability and the spatial segregation of caste settlements to the 12th century where enhanced court patronage to Vedic Brahminism led to its spread and the violent expulsion of Jainism and Buddhism. According to the historian Burton Stein, the Brahmin-Non-Brahmin alliance has remained intact till 1800 and played a crucial role in the institutionalization of untouchability and the caste system in Tamil Nadu.

The formation of the South India Welfare Association in 1906 and the launch of the Non Brahmin manifesto were crucial events in the formation of the Non-Brahmin, a virtual category that did not end up representing all Non-Brahmins. The Justice

The author is Assistant Professor, Cultural Studies, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Kolkata. E-mail : kkmurthy2005@gmail.com

Party launched in 1917 formed the first Non Brahmin led ministry in the 1920 provincial legislative council election following the British administration's introduction of diarchy. The ministry issued a communal government order reserving jobs for various Non-Brahmin communities in 1921 but this did not include Dalits and religious minorities. The Self-Respect Movement led by the iconoclastic anti-caste leader E. V. Ramasami Naicker 'Periyar' was a radical phase of the Non-Brahmin movement that attacked the social elitism that characterized Justice Party politics. Other prominent Dalit leaders like MC Rajah petitioned the government demanding a 30 percent reservation for the depressed classes in government jobs. Another response to this was the mobilization of those caste groups that had numerical strength and yet did not get a share in the political pie like the Vanniyars and later the Thevars emerged as a strong political force in the 1950s and 60s and later again in the 1980s.^{1,2} The Thevars became an unintended beneficiary of the creation of a category by the government called most backward classes among the backward classes. The implementation of the Mandal Commission however limited the growing political power of the backward classes. But Dalits despite their numbers and other religious minorities remained excluded from this powerful Non-Brahmin Non-Dalit bloc by a combination of religious and economic factors that maintained their subservient position in society.

The emergence of modern Dalit literature in the late 1980s coincided with the rise of small scale Dalit movements in the state as a response to state patronage for the Ambedkar centenary celebrations. This led to the consolidation of Dalit forces and opened up a space for their cultural expression. The early writers who thematized the discriminatory practices of the caste system in the nineteen seventies had a Marxist background and largely subsumed caste to class struggle. Many of their stories were published in the leftist little magazines of the time.³

P. Sivakami's novels emerged in the wake of the Bodinayakanoor riots that rocked Madurai district in September 1989. Before turning to a discussion of the novels a historical engagement with the Bodi riot, as Bodinayakanoor is popularly known, is only in order. The Bodi riot is not an isolated event whose occurrence is either gratuitous or unexpected; there are a host of economic and social factors that have orchestrated instances of caste violence like this one across the Tamil speaking region over centuries. There are however I wish to suggest, a set of social, political and economic factors that make the Bodi riots a reiteration of a pattern of inter-caste and intra-caste violence

characteristic of southern Tamil Nadu.

In his analysis of the Bodi riots, S. Ganeshram makes three important observations—firstly, there has been an economically driven history of deep seated resentment and hatred in Madurai district between the upper caste thevars (primarily kallars) and the Dalits that mostly comprise pallars. The inter-caste violence that erupted in 1989 is therefore not unexpected. Secondly, during the riot the upper castes united and conspired to attack Dalits despite their inter-caste differences while the Dalits were unable to overcome their inner divisions and hierarchies and stand united against this onslaught of upper caste violence. And thirdly, the thevars enjoy the support of political parties and state institutions like the police where they have a large presence. This perpetuates a culture of castist violence where the state and the upper castes are complicit in reducing Dalits to a state of powerlessness. Thus it becomes necessary to be sensitive both to the ways in which Dalits are discriminated and oppressed and to intra-Dalit fissures that preempt any monolithic understanding of Dalit identity.

There are certain socio-economic factors that have fueled the enmity between thevars and Dalits in Madurai district. Dalits, many of whom work on cardamom farms mostly owned by thevars, have been exploited. Untouchability, reserving menial forms of labor like grave digging and scavenging for Dalits and other discriminatory practices like the separate tumbler system at tea stalls are factors that have exacerbated Dalit resentment. The failure to implement anti-caste laws like the Civil Disabilities Act, the Untouchability Offenses Act has only emboldened thevars to act with impunity. The violence against Dalits that unfolded in the Bodi riots was part of a nationwide phenomenon of inter-caste violence that in 1989 led to the enactment of the Prevention of Atrocities Act that addresses both particular and systemic forms of violence and exploitation against Dalits. Anti-caste state legislation thus produced the legal category of the caste atrocity that was driven by both symbolic and economic forms of dispossession.

The sparks of the riots were lit in Meenakshipuram¹, a village close to Bodi where the death of a pallar woman and the disparaging and provocative remarks by John Pandian, a pallar mass leader, created tension between the upper castes and the Dalits. The upper castes were unwilling to accept a Dalit as panchayat leader and the Dalits were unable to settle their internal differences and settle on a common representative. Soon after this a Dalit woman was found murdered with her tongue slit in September 1989. The police suspected her husband was responsible for her

death and when a group of Dalits tried to file a complaint the police refused to intervene and asked them to approach a police station in the neighboring district as they claimed the site of the murder did not fall within their jurisdiction. When an upper caste man confessed to committing the murder the police pronounced him mentally unsound and released him. Anticipating trouble from the Dalits, the police approached John Pandian, the leader of the Devendira Kula Vellalar Mahasabha, a pallar organization and a politically influential man with a long criminal record. He agreed to defuse the situation and no picketing took place.

I now turn to the writings of a contemporary Dalit woman writer, P. Sivakami from the late 1980s to the 1990s. Sivakami's first two novels are sequential ones although they were written and published eight years apart. The first one *Palaiyana Kalithalum (The Grip of Change)* (1989) draws attention to the Dalit woman as a fictional figure for the fraught relations between caste, gender and sexuality. The novel centers on the exploited and supposedly violable body of the Dalit woman, which is inscribed with inter-caste struggles for power even as it is constituted as a site of power and resistance. The female protagonist Thangam's battered body frames the opening scene; her past is constituted by her widowhood that makes her a 'surplus' woman; the harassment by her brothers-in-law when she refuses to submit to them; the sexploitation by her caste Hindu landlord and the assault on her by caste Hindu men owing to her apparent sexual misdemeanor only reinforce her abject status. Even the struggle for land is linked to her body and fertility—she does not have children and so her brothers-in-law refuse to give her a share in the family land. When she is sheltered by Kathamuthu, a Dalit paraiyar patriarch and ex-village headman, her vulnerability is exploited; she is forced to physically yield to his desires. However, the same body, through which she is oppressed and subjugated, also grants her the power to gain ascendancy in Kattamuthu's house granting her dominance over his wives. But, as we shall presently see, any access Thangam has to power is compromised by her sexual and economic exploitation, first by an upper caste landlord and then by a paraiyar panchayat leader.

Something dark loomed in the corner of the verandah. Slowly, as Kathamuthu's eyes grew accustomed to the shadows, he could make out a person crouching there, groaning in pain.

'Who is it? What...?' Kathamuthu asked fearfully.

‘Ayyo...Ayyo...They have butchered me...Ayyo...’ The figure cried like a wounded animal and finally fell down...

‘You woman...you...why are you here wailing so early in the morning? What is the matter? Get up and explain your problem without such a fuss.’ Flanked by both his wives, Kathamuthu recovered from the shock he had experienced and questioned the shrouded figure.

‘What can I say? May they be hanged. May they go to hell. The ground will open up and swallow you. You’ll eat mud. Bastards! You abused a helpless woman. You curs! Come now! Come and lick...’

What should have been an explanation turned into a torrent of abuse against those who assaulted her...

Weeping she removed the sari wrapped around her head. The whole of her torso, visible because she was not wearing a blouse, bore terrible bruises. Dried blood marked the flesh of her back.

[Thangam] ‘Sami [Lord]. Not only this, Sami. Look at my arms.’ She showed her swollen arms.

‘Look at this Sami.’ The woman lifted her sari above her knees.

The skin of her thighs and knees was scored and shredded as though she had been dragged over a rough surface.

[Kathamuthu] ‘Where are you from? What is your caste? And your name?’...

Kathamuthu took her to be in her thirties, tall and well built. Though her face was swollen from crying, it was still attractive...

[Thangam] ‘Sami, I come from the same village as your wife Kanagavalli. Kanagu, don’t you recognize me? You know Kaipillai from the south street who died? I am his wife.’...

‘Oh, where shall I begin? You know Paranjoti from the upper caste street?’ she appealed to Kanagu.

[Kanagavalli] ‘I don’t know anyone from the upper caste locality...’

[Thangam] ‘True. People like you living in towns don’t know much about the villages...Paranjoti from the upper caste street is very rich. His lands go right up to the next village, Arumadal. After my husband died I began working in Paranjoti’s farm. My husband’s brothers refused to hand over his share of the family land as I didn’t have any children. How could I fight them? I couldn’t go to court. Who can spend that much money? Even if I had won, I wouldn’t be able to take care of my share of land in peace, not without everyone hating me. I am a single woman now...But at least I have a thatched roof over my head.

‘My husband’s relatives spread the story that I had become Paranjoti’s concubine. That’s why Paranjoti’s wife’s brothers and her brother-in-law, four men, entered my house last night. They pulled me by my hair and dragged me out to the street. They hit me, and flogged me with a stick stout as a hand. They nearly killed me. No one in the village, none of my relatives, came to help me...They abused me and threatened to kill me if I stayed in that village any longer. They called me a whore.’...

[Kathamuthu] ‘Okay, okay.’ Kathamuthu studied her, ‘Now tell me the truth. What did you do? Nobody would have assaulted you like that unless you had done something first.’

[Thangam] ‘I didn’t do anything wrong...’

[Kathamuthu] ‘That’s enough. Take your story to someone else who might be fool enough to believe it.’...

[Thangam] ‘...How can I hide the truth from you? Paranjoti Udaiyar has had me...true,’ she said, with a mixture of fear and shame.

[Kanagavalli] ‘Why do you have to spoil someone’s marriage? Is that good? You’ve hurt his family,’ Kanagavalli stressed the last part for the benefit of Nagamani [Kathamuthu’s second wife] who had come to the verandah with hot water. Nagamani directed a scornful look at Kathamuthu.

[Thangam] ‘Sami, is there anywhere on earth where this doesn’t happen? I didn’t want it. But Udaiyar took no notice of me. He raped me when I

was working in his sugarcane field. I remained silent; after all, he is my paymaster. He measures my rice. If you think I'm like that, that I'm easy, please ask around in the village. After my husband's death, can anybody say that they had seen me in the company of anyone, or even smiling at anyone? My husband's brothers tried to force me, but I never gave in. They wouldn't give me my husband's land, but wanted me to be a whore for them. I wouldn't give in...I'm a childless widow. There is no protection for me.'

Kathamuthu interrupted her, 'All right, it happened. Now tell me, why didn't you go after someone of our caste? It's because you chose that upper caste fellow, that four men could come and righteously beat you up. Don't you like our chaps?'

Hesitating at the crudity of his remarks, she answered, 'Sami, how can you ask me such a question? I didn't go after anyone. I am not a desperate woman. I feel so ashamed. It was wrong, horrible...I gave in to Udaiyar...You should abandon me in some jungle. I never want to go back to that village. But before that I want those men who beat me up to fall at my feet and plead.' She angrily grabbed some mud from the front yard and spat on it. (Sivakami, 3-8)

The novel opens dramatically with Thangam's battered body—a spectacle to be witnessed by Kathamuthu and his two wives. She is initially shrouded but then removes her sari to expose her mutilated body. She claims she has been raped by her upper caste Udayar landlord Paranjoti and assaulted by his brother and brothers-in-law for her rumored affair with him. Although she swears she never desired or encouraged Paranjoti, Kathamuthu is incredulous and suspects Thangam's sexual reputation while his wife Kanagavalli accuses her of ruining a married man's family. Note that Kathamuthu reads her assault and rape as punishments she deserves for violating the sexual integrity of caste that forbids sexual relations between upper caste men and lower caste women. The above passage also suggests Kathamuthu's own desire for Thangam.

Thangam's alleged sexual indulgence effectively fictionalizes her rape by making her complicit in the loss of her own reputation. She is deemed an unreliable witness to

her own rape, which is invalidated by her past acquiescence and presumed consent to what in reality is an exploitative relationship. While Kathamuthu interprets her sexual relationship with an upper caste man as a threat to the integrity of caste patriarchy—a threat that has to be regulated and controlled—the double standard that governs the caste regulation of sexuality is made evident by Kathamuthu's marriage to his younger wife, Nagamani, a poor upper caste widow he took under his care. A sexual hierarchy thus coincides with a caste hierarchy when Thangam's alleged affair with an upper caste man preempts any claim to her own desire and body. Her widowed status is further interpreted by men as a sign of her sexual availability, which ostensibly justifies potential threats of rape.

What is of particular interest and this becomes the focal point of the novel, is the elision of sexual violence by caste violence. Although both these forms of violence are implicated in Thangam's raped and battered body, it is the visible signs of physical assault that are privileged over her rape. Her battered body is perceived purely as an instance of castist violence and not as a rape, which in any case, is an unverifiable event ostensibly legitimized by her past acquiescence. Kathamuthu dictates a petition to his daughter Gowri on Thangam's behalf that is addressed to the police. In the petition he overlooks Thangam's rape and distorts her account of her brutal mutilation by upper caste men in the Dalit locality by accusing her assailants of assaulting her for walking through their street. The misrepresentation is thus not merely the elision of what was also the sexual violation of an individual Dalit woman, but the politicization of Thangam's battery as an incriminatory instance of upper caste aggression. By relocating Thangam's body from the secret confines of sexual assault to a caste encoded space like the upper caste street, Kathamuthu's distorted petition strategically diffuses Thangam's victimhood to implicate the entire Dalit community. Thangam's sexed body is thus displaced by her caste body that materializes the brutal effects of an unsolicited expression of upper caste violence. In what follows, Thangam's caste body becomes the site where the inter-caste struggle for political power plays out.

At the police station Kattamuthu urges Thangam to tearfully remonstrate at the inspector's feet. Kattamuthu has faith neither in his own caste community that lacks the solidarity to confront upper caste violence nor in the impartiality of the upper caste police. He tries to win the inspector's trust and sympathy by strategically drawing

attention to his own status as a perpetual victim of castism. Kattamuthu bitterly recounts his past as a bonded laborer who against all odds got educated to become a village elder. He claims he would have become a member of the legislative assembly had it not been for the jealousy of his own community. The inspector is quick to assert his and by extension, the law's indifference to social distinctions of caste in the delivery of justice. Kattamuthu immediately switches strategies to remind the police inspector of the contradictory role of the modern democratic state that on one hand has to arbitrate social conflict while remaining above all forms of partisanship and on the other, has to intervene by introducing affirmative measures to ensure equal access to all resources. Kattamuthu warns the inspector of the possibility of ruining his career if he is accused of colluding with upper caste culprits and fails to arrest them. Caste, Kattamuthu says, is both pervasive and invisible, "it is something that exists even if they do not recognize its existence." (Sivakami 22) The ideological presence of castism is so pervasive that it cannot always be recognized even by the law and its representatives, particularly when they are potentially implicated. The inspector, as Kattamuthu anticipates, is provoked into opening an enquiry and prepares an arrest warrant lest the investigations prove the veracity of Thangam's complaint.

During the police investigation, the attack on Thangam gives rise to further fabrications, which become the pretext for new inter-caste feuds. The police inspectors appointed to carry out the inquiry interrogate Thangam's in-laws who first spread rumors of her illicit relationship with Paranjoti. One of Thangam's in-laws corroborates Kattamuthu's distorted version of Thangam's assault to ensure the Dalit quarters are not accused of being complicit in the attack. He claims he saw Thangam waking up to a stomachache and walking to the village tank behind Paranjoti's house where the Padaiyachi street begins. She is spotted by Paranjoti's wife Kamalam who abuses her by her caste name for entering the upper caste street. She is later assaulted by Kamalam's brothers. The Chakkiliyars, another untouchable laboring caste, confirm the rumors to the police believing them to be true and accuse the Padaiyachi men of assaulting Thangam for her affair with Paranjoti. While one of the investigating constables assumes Thangam's rumored affair is true the other dismisses the possibility that Thangam may have coerced Paranjoti into a sexual relationship when his wife Kamalam is clearly "not being smart enough to keep her husband" (Sivakami 29). Both the constables blame the women for Paranjoti's infidelity.

Paranjoti is shocked to discover Thangam's police complaint. He is embarrassed by the possibility of his affair becoming public knowledge. He realizes he is unable to use his financial power to turn the case to his advantage now that he has been accused of a criminal assault. He silently curses Thangam for being ungrateful to him,

Ungrateful whore! Even if she was hurt, she was hurt by the hand adorned with gold! A Parachi could have never dreamt of being touched by a man like me. My touch was a boon granted for penance performed in her earlier births! And then the dirty bitch betrays me! How can I face the world with my name thus polluted? (Sivakami 31)

Paranjoti's patronizing reaction reflects his anxiety with caste pollution and the consequent loss of reputation rather than his rape.

During the inquiry there is a meeting of laborers and farmers at Kattamuthu's house. Kattamuthu announces his decision to constitute a *panchayat* or village council of elders to punish Paranjothi, his wife and his in-laws if they are proven guilty. His intention is to charge Paranjoti with castism that would lead to the loss of his Dalit voters and undermine his political power. Kattamuthu is convinced Paranjothi will neither confess his relationship with a Dalit woman nor permit his wife to be taken to court and consequently beg him for mercy. When the police inspectors give Paranjoti a copy of the complaint, he realizes the complaint has been framed as a caste related assault that has nothing to do with his rape. Paranjoti appeals to the inspectors and offers to pay them if they promise to rescue him. One of the policemen suggests he lodge a counter-complaint against Thangam by secretly planting a transistor and a large sum of money in her house and accuse her of theft. He encourages Paranjoti to file a complaint before Kattamuthu files a report.

But Kattamuthu spots one of the inspectors at a toddy shop getting drunk on arrack. He discovers the inspector has been bribed by Paranjoti. The inebriated inspector reveals Paranjoti's plan to press charges against Thangam. Kattamuthu immediately sends his men to guard Thangam's house through the night as she convalesces at hospital. Paranjoti's men fail to place the transistor and money in Thangam's hut although they manage to escape from Kattamuthu's guards. Paranjoti, anxious that the counter-charge of theft against Thangam may backfire for lack of evidence, decides to accuse all the Dalit men of attacking his brothers-in-law when they entered their

street to recruit laborers. Soon, there are rumors of the Paraiyars' (Dalits) attack on the Udaiyars (Padaiyars). The Paraiyar women laborers who work for the Udaiyars discover to their anger and desperation that they have been replaced by Chakkiliyar women. Paranjoti is determined to let the Paraiyars starve to force them to relent and withdraw Thangam's complaint. He threatens to burn the Dalit locality if she refuses to take back her charges.

The attempt by wealthy upper caste farmers to entice workers from neighboring villages with higher wages fails because of the political support that Kattamuthu enjoys in these villages. Other smaller farmers desperately in need of workers to plant their crops before the end of the planting season direct their rage towards the Paraiyars. A large part of the Paraiyar slum and some huts on the Chakkiliyar street are set on fire by some Udaiyar men. The moment the Dalit locality is set on fire the wealthy Reddiars join forces with the Udaiyars, the two castes being equal in status. They are also united by their shared allegiance to the ruling political party to ensure that no land reforms are implemented or land holdings registered under false names. The Paraiyars, the Chakkiliyars and the Padaiyachis are divided not just by caste but by their struggle for survival, which preempts any solidarity in the face of caste aggression. Kattamuthu tries to prevent the Paraiyars from potentially destroying themselves by controlling their desire for revenge. A gathering of the *tahsildar* (the revenue officer), the inspector, Paranjoti Udaiyar and some of his men, and Kattamuthu is organized to settle the dispute.

What was initially a case of rape and exploitation is politicized into an issue of caste and class oppression. At the gathering, Kattamuthu argues that the Dalits have been relatively underpaid for the time they spend planting paddy when laborers in the surrounding villages are paid much more. He accuses Paranjoti of burning the *cheri* or Dalit quarters as the Dalits refused to work for lower wages. The Udaiyars and the Reddiars are embarrassed by his accusation and as per Kattamuthu's demand are made to compensate the Dalit victims with money and clothes. Kattamuthu is clear that the Dalits and the upper castes need each other for their own survival and negotiates an agreement with them "I have been telling you from the beginning that the relationship between us should not break down. You have to take care of the Harijans (Dalits) as if they are your own children." (Sivakami 69) Generously quoting from the Hindu epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and Gandhi's autobiography *My*

Experiments with Truth, Kattamuthu urges the upper caste men to cooperate with the Dalits and foster a mutually beneficial relationship. He assumes the Christian/Gandhian position of expiating caste prejudice by internalizing its pain and suffering to spiritually transcend the bane of caste. He tries to convince them that their conflicts can only be resolved and their solidarity renewed if they “bear their suffering in patience...[for they] will ultimately rule the world” (Sivakami 73). Kattamuthu’s Gandhian position clearly does not suggest the dismantling of the caste system; on the contrary, it upholds the caste system and the interests of all its (male) stakeholders.

Unable to settle on a suitable compensation for the affected Dalits, Paranjoti begs Kattamuthu to settle the dispute in a *panchayat* meeting. When Kattamuthu informs everyone of his decision to join the Ambedkar Association’s protest against police inaction in the Thangam case, Paranjoti grows anxious that his relationship with Thangam may be settled in court. Finally Paranjoti and Kattamuthu agree on an out of court settlement and Thangam receives monetary compensation. Thangam gives Kattamuthu her compensation out of gratitude and offers to cultivate and harvest his land in return for his protection. Kattamuthu’s desire for Thangam empowers her over his wives. Her disputes with his jealous wives often end in violence. Thangam is transformed from being a poor and emaciated widow to an adorned and healthy woman who enjoys Kattamuthu’s patronage (Sivakami 87). She assumes the responsibility of paying the laborers who work on Kattamuthu’s land and receives people who come in search of him (Sivakami 93). She gradually becomes a part of the family and the household. Kattamuthu’s wives who are initially hostile and jealous later have no choice but to befriend and accept Thangam. But Kattamuthu’s protection and his sense of responsibility for Thangam come with a price—the exploitation of her body. Although the text does not voice Thangam’s concern for the loss of her bodily integrity, her silence suggests this loss for her is clearly not primarily a matter of reputation. She seems to come to terms with her loss that for her is I suggest an unfortunate but necessary compromise to secure relative power and protection. She acquiesces to Kattamuthu’s sexual advances and continues to work for him even after she wins the case in court and regains her land from her in-laws. That she is represented as a victim of caste rather than sexual violence enables Thangam greater access to public spaces of legality like the court and the village council of elders that are exclusively occupied by men who possess legal authority and political power.

Towards the end of the novel we see the emergence of a new generation of educated young men and women of different castes who are united in their attempts to transcend social and sexual hierarchies—Kathamuthu’s daughter Gowri refuses to get married and becomes the first Dalit woman in her village to complete her college education. Her cousin Chandran becomes a worker at the rice mill and joins the workers union that unites Padaiyachi and Parayar workers whose shared labor concerns enables them to potentially overcome their caste differences. He gets married in a secular ceremony that does away with the Brahmin priest and rituals. He promises “his wife would be an equal partner in the marriage” (Sivakami 117). Rasendran, a Paraiyar youth who is entrusted with the responsibility of guarding Thangam’s hut, protests Kathamuthu’s conciliatory attitude towards the upper caste Udaiyars and Reddiars at the gathering of elders. Elangovan, a young Parayar banker has an open affair with an upper caste woman, Lalitha who defies her mother’s injunctions.

Aasiriyar Kurippu: Gowri (Author’s Notes: Gowri) (1997)

Sivakami’s second novel *Author’s Notes: Gowri* is the author’s re-visitation of her earlier novel, *The Grip of Change*. This novel initially sets out as a revisionary critique of the earlier novel and explores the tension between the fictional world of the novel and the social circumstances that enabled the creation of the novel. The novel dramatizes the author’s anxious urge to constantly question and justify the premises of her earlier work. But the more she tries to eliminate the disjuncture between social reality and the representational claims of her earlier work, the more she is confronted by the irreducibly simulative quality of fiction that is neither false nor representative of any absolute or inclusive notion of truth. She discovers fictional writing is a deliberate process of selection and omission that is always already informed by experience, which is itself not innocent but socially and politically constructed. Her conflicted identification with her earlier autobiographical character/self, Gowri, for instance, enacts the author’s attempts to question and legitimize the truth of her fictional representations. The author returns to visit her home town Puliyur where she meets among her several relatives, her mother’s cousin whom she calls uncle. In her conversation with him, he reminds her of something she had done as a child,

[Uncle] ‘Do you remember, during school break you would come and ask for five or ten paise? Once you got the money, you’d leave bright and happy, playing with the coin.’ Such petty memories. What else was

he going to trot out?

[Uncle] ‘Your Kalimuthu periappan once said that you had stolen a four anna coin from his pocket. His wife went around announcing that to everyone in the street. I told them, she’s just a child.’ Is that why Gowri, the girl in the novel, had such a poor opinion of Kalimuthu periappa? The novelist and the character in the novel, Gowri, must be one and the same person.

[Gowri] ‘I don’t recall that. Did I take money from Kalimuthu periappa’s pocket?’ she asked in a shocked voice.

[Uncle] ‘You can’t remember that, you were too young. You know, your father Kathamuthu liked me a lot. He would insist that I sit next to him and tell him stories. He had so much love and respect for me.’

In the novel, Gowri’s father was never shown expressing respect to elders. In describing Kathamuthu’s character, why had she paid so little attention to rudimentary truth?

...If Kuttaiappan could enthusiastically narrate stories without ever questioning their premises, why did she have to try so hard to justify her work? Look at her! Here she was, analyzing her novel trying to fit all the pieces into logical patterns. To whom did she owe explanations?(Sivakami 133-134)

Sivagami devotes most of the novel exploring her ambivalent relationship to her oppressive father. She acknowledges her father’s fictional representation is informed by her bitter memories of his sexual insinuations and authority. Like her autobiographical character Gowri, she remembers being humiliated by her father for dressing up like a whore and who attributes her arrogance and rebelliousness to her college education. She is rendered impotent by her father’s financial support, which is an unfortunate necessity for her to potentially attain any kind of freedom. Although her initial impulse is to offer a more dispassionate perspective of her father, she ends up presenting literature as a way of challenging and trivializing paternal authority and as a form of self-empowerment. Fiction for the author redeems her memories of her violent and abusive father; her father’s fictional representation is “a revenge of sorts...[that] at the end...reduced her father to a counterfeit coin...she and her cousin had been

transformed into revolutionaries. Family squabbles made for restricted politics.” (Sivakami 144-145)

She is particularly put off by two of her father’s qualities—his polygamy and his coarseness.

...She had to provide answers to some questions. Was a polygamous man a sex addict? What was the novelist’s opinion on fidelity and morality? Why were her male characters betrayers of women? Disgust seemed to inform her attitude to sex. What was the truth? (Sivakami 147)

But she also acknowledges certain facts about her father’s life had been deliberately omitted. She betrays her admiration for her hard working father who “worked on his farm with enthusiasm” even when he was well off. He even established the first women’s hostel in their town to encourage female education and employment (Sivakami 148). He had also helped the poor and fed them. Sivakami realizes “The author of *Grip of Change* had constructed an effigy of her father and burned him in her novel. It was the author’s perspective rather than the whole truth. She wanted to prove that there was no such thing as the full and complete truth” (Sivakami 148). Sivakami seems to suggest that the truth can acquire value of any kind only when it is a particular perspective.

Although Sivakami begins by reevaluating the premises of her earlier work she ends up reasserting them. She admits a writer can never avoid “subjective conclusions” that invariably determine any fictional work (Sivakami 148). She affirms her literary representation of the contradictory dynamics of castism not only disfavors lower castes but is endemic to the lower castes. She argues castism and corruption are so constitutive of inter and intra-caste relations that they have to be acknowledged if a democratic ideal of equal opportunity is at all possible to achieve. By making such a claim, Sivakami anticipates potential criticism from Dalits who may accuse her of betraying their cause.

What does the *Grip of Change* reflect for its readers? It wasn’t simply that the upper castes exploit the lower castes. A lower caste leader might exploit his own people. It is not only upper caste men who prey on lower caste women. Men like Kathamuthu are perfectly capable of taking advantage of vulnerable women. The overall picture presented by the novel is that rich or poor, upper caste or lower caste, the seeds of corruption exist at all levels.

Did the novelist have to write about the caste system to prove this? If she had really attempted to write about the caste system, she should have talked about equality of opportunity rather than the universality of corruption. She had acted like a self-appointed judge delivering a verdict.

Could the two aspects—her father's polygamy and his coarseness—alone give her the right to judge and condemn him? In the novel, her father intervenes on behalf of a widow. Once he has sorted out her problems he forces her into having sex with him, though she pleads, 'You are like a brother to me.' Did the novelist witness this scene? Or did she hear someone narrate it to her? (Sivakami 149)

Sivakami puts herself through intense self-examination as she explores her own identity in relation to the text. She considers the possibility of being criticized for protecting her own identity as a Dalit writer and betraying the Dalits by attacking the Dalit leadership. She dramatizes such criticism through a series of imaginary conversations where she alternately occupies the position of author and critic. In a series of rhetorical moves, Sivakami both submits to and resists her critics' charge of hypocrisy and social elitism and ends up complicating identitarian politics. She is accused of reinforcing the stigma of being a Dalit while pretending to be sensitive to castism. She resists such accusations by exhorting all castes to join forces in the fight against castism. More significantly, she draws attention to her critics' impulse to collapse the social world of the text with social reality as though the text were an unmediated reflection of the world. She continues to justify her representation of the ethical ambiguities that characterize the fraught relations between caste and gender and sexuality. Sivakami seems to be suggesting that the text's claim to truth lies precisely in these ambiguities that resist any notion of absolute truth. For instance, she recounts an incident she heard from an aunt who was raped by an upper caste landlord, following which, the author's grandfather threatens to punish the landlord. The incident, Sivakami, suggests may only partially explain Kathamuthu's motivations in the novel where he interprets Thangam's rape merely as a caste related atrocity that demanded revenge and justice. Thus Sivakami's fictional representation of Thangam's rape not only does not correspond to her aunt's rape, it complicates any understanding of rape by situating the rape within the power dynamics of caste that underwrite competing and contradictory interpretations of the rape.

Sivakami poses certain crucial questions that address the function of literature. Unlike her readers and critics, she is particular to emphasize that literature is neither a direct reproduction of social reality nor therefore restricted to a realist or moral function. She is also sensitive to her own present position as an English educated professional and the resultant sense of estrangement from her family. She poses questions that are ultimately unanswerable.

When I believe in monogamy and refinement does my emancipatory modernity then seek to civilize Kathamuthu? In doing so what are Gowri's prejudices? On the other hand hasn't modernity been always taken up as an issue by upper caste women? Or when Gowri refuses to get married is it because she is a victim of her mother's experience? Or is it a brave assertion that she is walking away from the victimhood of her mother? Or is it merely independence? (Sivakami 189)

There are no clear answers to these questions and Sivakami does not bother to answer them. But she does acknowledge the need to contextualize certain cultural values that determine notions of gender, sexuality, independence, modernity and so on. Although Kattamuthu and Gowri are antagonistic characters, Sivakami suggests that they embody competing ways of addressing the same vexed question of castism, "They fight on the same side and are prepared to fight the same enemies... Kathamuthu may dislike communism or Gowri detest his manipulation and weakness but they both envision a common end to atrocities against Dalits. (Sivakami 177)

In conclusion, Sivakami's novels are an exploration of the continuities and shifting affordances of the Dalit woman. Inscribed by multiple intersecting vectors of caste, gender and sexual oppression, the body of the Dalit woman is both the experience of social stigma and the only means of resisting oppression. Unlike many of the Dalit writers who preceded and followed Sivagami, Sivagami's works remain crucial critiques of caste patriarchy.

Notes

1. 1989 is the year for the rise of autonomous Dalit movements, 1988, early generation of Dalit writers started the Scheduled Caste Liberation Movement, many of whom were ex members of dominant political parties. They protested against the attacks of vanniyars on Dalits in Villupuram, against the non implementation of the

Illayaperumal Committee Report, public meeting condemning the Bodi riots. Other small groups included...

2. Viduthalai Chiruthaigal in the early 1980s, in the 90s then renamed Liberation Panthers; Devendra Kula Vellalar Federation (Dr Krishnasamy) against pallar-thevar clashes—Kodiyankulam, Adi Tamizhar Peravai (political ideas of Periyar, Ambedkar, Marx), Dalit Panthers etc, VC—temple rights, land rights and housing, against atrocities and untouchability, SC/ST Atrocities Prevention Act 1989. VC initially opposed to electoral politics, Thirumavalavan never terms Tamil or Dravidian culture anti Dalit, Thaiman, Melvalavu, Ravi—open better than reserved constituency.

3 Niraipirikai,(1990-2012), Manavosai, (CPI-ML), Pirachanai- ed. Shanmugam (CPM), Manitham (CPIML), Palam by Tamil nationalist groups open to Dalit writers, Dalit Murasu, Puthiya Kodangi, Dalit, Bodhi, Manusanga, Thaiman, Adi Thamizhan

4. Meenakshipuram had seen mass Dalit conversions to Islam in 1981 that however did not guarantee their freedom from castism.

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