

THE OTHER GENDER: REIMAGINING DALIT MASCULINITY IN WOMEN'S CENTRIC DALIT NARRATIVES OF BAMA AND P. SHIVKAMI

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ABSTRACT: *This paper explores and illustrates how Dalit masculinity is constructed and portrayed in the writings of two prominent Dalit women authors, Bama and P. Sivakami. Although Dalit women's oppression and resistance voices have been the only focus of many studies, Dalit men's roles and representation have consistently been understudied and given less attention in the field of study. This study examines how masculinity develops under the interconnecting demands of caste, class, and gender through a close reading of Sivakami's The Grip of Change as well as Bama's Karukku, Sangati, and Vanmam. The article makes the case that Dalit men occupy a paradoxical position: they are oppressed by upper-caste patriarchy but frequently reproduce and display patriarchal oppression within their own communities, particularly with women. It does this by drawing on Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity and Dalit feminist critique. Instead of romanticising Dalit masculinity, both authors portray it as shattered, conflicted and in need of change.*

KEYWORDS: *Dalit masculinity; Bama; P. Sivakami; Caste And Gender; Hegemonic Masculinity; Tamil Dalit Literature*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Dalit literature has gained significant attention in the contemporary Indian literary and cultural studies for its unflinching portrayal of caste oppression, social inequality, and voices from the margins of the society. This literature has centered on Dalit women's resistance and the politics of self-representation with eminent writers like Bama and P. Sivakami foregrounding issues of gender, caste, and identity. However, the representation of Dalit men and masculinity in their writings remains equally important, though it is less explored.

The study of masculinity in India has largely revolved around upper-caste and middle-class models of manhood, often overlooking the structural marginality of Dalit men. Dalit masculinity is shaped by

two contradictory realities in general: the external oppression of caste hierarchies and the internal perpetuation of patriarchal dominance over women. In this light, Bama and Sivakami's works provide a critical vantage point to interrogate how Dalit masculinity is both constituted and contested in Dalit literature.

This article situates itself at the intersection of Dalit Studies and Masculinity Studies. By analyzing Bama's *Karukku*, *Sangati*, and *Vanmam*, alongside Sivakami's *The Grip of Change* and her candid Author's Notes, the paper explores how Dalit masculinity emerges as fractured, violent, resistant, yet also transformative. Through these texts, both writers dismantle essentialized notions of the Dalit male, portraying him instead as a complex subject marked by oppression, complicity and potential for change.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study of Dalit masculinity cannot be done in isolation; it requires an interdisciplinary framework that brings together masculinity studies, Dalit studies and feminist perspectives. At the center of masculinity studies is the work of R. W. Connell, whose theory of hegemonic masculinity has become a cornerstone in understanding how gender and power operate. Connell reminds us that there is not just one kind of masculinity, but rather a hierarchy of masculinities. At the top of this hierarchy sits hegemonic masculinity, the culturally celebrated form of being a man, usually associated with authority, dominance, and control. This dominant model not only keeps women in positions of subordination but also pushes aside other kinds of masculinities that do not fit the mold.

When we bring Connell's insights into the Indian caste context, the picture becomes even more layered. Here, upper-caste men embody hegemonic masculinity, combining the privileges of patriarchy with the privileges of caste. They command respect, authority, and power not just over women but also over men from marginalized castes. In contrast, Dalit men occupy a much more precarious space. Though they share gender identity as men, they are systematically denied the social, cultural, and political privileges that upper-caste masculinity enjoys. Instead, they are often stigmatized, criminalized or reduced to their roles as laborers. Their bodies are marked as polluted, their labor exploited and their identities erased in the dominant imagination.

This produces what we might call a fractured masculinity. On one hand, Dalit men resist violence and humiliation imposed by upper-caste men and on the other, in their own communities; they sometimes attempt to assert authority by replicating patriarchal structures. This is not simply a matter of personal choice or inherent cruelty; it is a reflection of how oppression works. Stripped of dignity and denied recognition in the broader social order, Dalit men often seek validation within the limited spaces available to them. Unfortunately, this sometimes means exercising control over Dalit women, thereby reproducing the very hierarchies from which they themselves suffer.

3. DALIT MASCULINITY IN BAMA'S WORKS

3.1.1 Karukku

Bama highlights the pervasive caste oppression Dalits face in a variety of settings, such as the church, school, and village life, in *Karukku*. In her stories, Dalit men are often shown as oppressed and constantly humiliated which erodes their self-respect and limits their ability to advance in society. However, Bama challenges the internal structures that still exist within the Dalit community itself in addition to exposing caste persecution. Despite being caste-marginalized, male authority leaders frequently perpetuate their masculine dominance by limiting Dalit women's agency in both the home and the community. As a result, masculinity in Bama's work is seen to be profoundly ambivalent, characterised by both dominance over their Dalit women and subordination to upper-caste hierarchies. In this double role, Dalit men show a broken kind of masculinity: they fight back against violence from upper-caste people while also being in charge of their own society, which makes simple categories of oppressor and oppressed less useful.

The relational hierarchy of masculinities, as defined by R.W. Connell (1995), is exemplified by this tension. Hegemonic masculinity, which is strongly associated with caste privilege, religious authority, and economic domination in India, is not available to Dalit men. Rather, upper-caste systems stigmatise and marginalise them inside "subordinate masculinities." Even if they oppose caste servitude, Dalit men frequently reclaim authority within their own communities by exercising patriarchal control over Dalit women, perpetuating gender hierarchies. In this capacity, *Karukku's* masculinity is revealed as being profoundly conflicted, characterised by dominance over Dalit women and subordination to upper-caste hierarchies. Therefore, Dalit males represent what could be referred to as fragmented masculinity: they challenge violence from the upper caste while establishing dominance within their own society, making the simple dichotomies of oppressor and oppressed more nuanced.

3.1.2 Sangati

By moving her narrative focus from the individual to the community in *Sangati*, Bama gives Dalit women's perspectives more weight as they describe their daily struggles under gender and caste inequalities. Male characters in the book are often portrayed as uncaring brothers, violent spouses, or drunken fathers. The repressive weight of patriarchy in Dalit homes is highlighted by these duties. In this context, masculinity is frequently associated with physical domination, disregard for family duties, and a lack of accountability, leaving women to bear the burden of survival. Bama's criticism does not, however, reduce Dalit males to violent or careless stereotypes. Instead, she places their actions in the context of systemic deprivation's structural circumstances, which include caste-based exclusion, ingrained poverty, and a lack of economic and educational opportunity. Destructive masculinities, which are both a result of oppression and a means of projecting frustration and helplessness onto women, are a result of these realities. By highlighting them, *Sangati* alludes to the necessity of a redesigned masculinity that is based on responsibility, compassion, and egalitarian ideals and that is able to eradicate patriarchal behaviours while acknowledging the systemic brutality imposed by caste society.

3.1.3 Vanmam

Bama focusses on how masculine ego and damaging pride frequently show up in confrontations when she examines the problems within the Dalit communities in *Vanmam* (Vendetta). In this literature, masculinity is portrayed more as a source of competition, caste-based pride, and political manipulation than as a source of group resistance. Instead than banding together to fight injustice, Dalit males are seen fighting violently, shattering communal cohesion and perpetuating cycles of retaliation. Women and children are disproportionately affected by these disputes, bearing the emotional and material costs of male aggressiveness. Through this image, Bama challenges the way that patriarchal pride, brutality, and political exploitation mould Dalit masculinity, making it self-destructive rather than liberated. Her story highlights how urgent it is to reconsider masculinity in Dalit communities and move away from divisive rivalry in favour of solidarity that permits real social change.

3.2 DALIT MASCULINITY IN P. SIVAKAMI'S WORK

3.2.1 The Grip of Change

Among the most potent and sophisticated criticisms of Dalit masculinity in modern writing may be found in Sivakami's 1989 book *The Grip of Change*. Thangam, a Dalit lady who experiences double and triple oppression, is at the heart of the book. prejudice, first based on caste and then on her own community's gender. Thangam's battle highlights the great burden that Dalit women bear, since they are frequently the unsung victims of both gender inequity in the home and systematic caste persecution. The male head of the Dalit community, Kathamuthu, on the other hand, personifies the dichotomy of Dalit masculinity. On the one hand, Kathamuthu is presented as a social and political figure dedicated to Dalit advancement. He consistently advocates for justice, organises against the

horrors of caste, and presents himself as the spokesperson for his people. Sivakami, however, meticulously exposes the inconsistencies in his leadership. In spite of his stance as a supporter of Dalit rights, Kathamuthu takes advantage of women, plays on their weaknesses, and upholds the same patriarchal systems that he publicly opposes.

R.W. Connell's (1995) idea of hegemonic masculinity, which describes how male authority frequently normalises women's subordination while marginalising alternative types of masculinity, might provide light on this conflict. Being denied the benefits of upper-caste hegemonic masculinity, Dalit males frequently establish their dominance in their own communities, particularly with regard to women, sometimes by controlling Dalit women. The actions of Kathamuthu are indicative of what is known as fractured masculinity, a state in which Dalit males oppose caste discrimination while yet reproducing it in their homes and social circles.

3.3 COMPARATIVE INSIGHTS

Together, Bama and Sivakami's writings offer a nuanced critique of Dalit masculinity that defies easy classification. Both writers draw attention to the fragmented character of Dalit male identity, which is torn between the perpetuation of patriarchal dominance in their own societies and opposition to persecution by the upper caste. Bama often draws attention to the damaging effects of patriarchal masculinities in Sangati and Vanmam: males who, after losing their position of leadership in the caste system, reclaim it via drinking, domestic abuse, or rivalries that erode communal cohesion.

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However, Sivakami addresses the contradictions of Dalit male political leadership in a more direct manner. This dichotomy is best illustrated by Kathamuthu in *The Grip of Change*, who, while advocating for Dalit rights as a leader, takes advantage of women like Thangam as a male, thereby sustaining gender inequity in the very movements that are supposed to achieve emancipation. Sivakami challenges both caste systems and the masculinist inclinations of Dalit movement by highlighting this contradiction.

The two authors' refusal to glorify Dalit males as either valiant rebels or unredeemable oppressors is where they overlap. Rather, they present them as multifaceted individuals who have been influenced by both internalised patriarchal standards and systemic oppression. However, their points of emphasis are different: Sivakami focusses her criticism on the institutional and political aspects of male power, whereas Bama emphasises the common realities of Dalit women negotiating male authority in homes and communities. When combined, their writings broaden the conversation of Dalit masculinity beyond victimisation or villainy dichotomies. Instead, they focus on acknowledging Dalit men's conflicted and sometimes contradictory standing, which creates fresh opportunities to rethink gender and caste relations in a more equal manner.

4. DISCUSSION

The way Dalit masculinity is portrayed in Bama and Sivakami's works highlights the necessity of reconsidering caste-based studies of masculinity. Although Dalit males maintain a lower status than men from higher castes, they are powerful in their own homes and communities. The intersectional character of oppression, where caste and gender are inseparable, is revealed by this dual posture. These authors challenge idealised portrayals of male resistance and demand responsibility and change by highlighting the flaws in Dalit masculinity. According to their stories, the destruction of patriarchal systems and caste hierarchies is necessary for Dalits to achieve real independence. Dalit

masculinity must therefore shift towards egalitarian and collaborative futures, eschewing aggression, ego, and dominance.

5. CONCLUSION

According to the argument made in this essay, Bama and P. Sivakami offer important insights into the tensions and creation of Dalit masculinity. They undermine oversimplified ideas of victimisation by portraying masculine characters that are both oppressed and tyrannical. Rather, they portray Dalit masculinity as conflicted, broken, and in need of change. This study emphasises the significance of examining caste and gender together by fusing the frameworks of Dalit feminist criticism and hegemonic masculinity. While keeping Dalit women's perspectives in mind, future studies must delve further into the ways that Dalit masculinities are being altered in modern political, cultural, and international contexts.

6. REFERENCES

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