

CHAPTER II

SILENCE OF THE SIDELINES

India's social structure is different from that of other nations because of Indian caste system which can be described as an elaborately stratified social hierarchy. Patriarchy has itself made evident in various forms of discriminations, inequalities, hierarchies, inferior status and position of women in society. It is a social and ideological construct which considers men as superior to women. Patriarchy is based on a system of power relations which are hierarchical and unequal where men control women's production, reproduction and sexuality.

Patriarchy is not constant because gender relations are dynamic and complex and have changed over the period of history. Subjugation of women varies from one society to other as it differs due to the differences in class, caste, religion, ethnicity and the socio-cultural practices. Thus in the Indian context, tribal patriarchy and Dalit patriarchy are different from each other. Patriarchy within a particular caste or class also differs in terms of their religious and regional variations. But in all these, women suffer due to subjugation.

The predicament of the marginalized women either does not find space or has minimal representation in the writings of men. Even the first wave and the second wave feminists turned a blind eye towards the issues concerning the marginalized women. They had always been neglected by the society at all levels due to gender discrimination. It is an incontrovertible fact that women throughout the world still struggle for their rights as individuals in society. Brutal patriarchy within Dalit

communities becomes part of Dalit feminist discourses. Swati Margarete's appeal to the young Dalit women in this regard is worth considering. She says,

Young Dalit women should not get subsumed in the relatively macro identities of mainstream progressive movement such as the male Dalit movement or the upper-caste feminist movement. It is only by retaining our unique voice within these movements that we can contribute meaningfully to these movements and benefit from them. Giving ourselves a separate space does not mean we want a complete break with these movements. (n.p)

Gender oppression is often linked with oppressions based on caste, class, community, tribe and religion. In our society and in such multiple patriarchy, man as the principal oppressor was not easily accepted; Caste, class and gender system, is the outcome of severely imbalanced social, economic and political power equations. Dalit women are thrice discriminated; they are treated as untouchables and outcastes due to their caste; they face gender discrimination as women; added to these is their suffering of economic impoverishment due to wage disparity. Caste, class and gender discrimination prevent Dalit women from enjoying their basic human rights, they are not able to live with dignity and equality and they are deprived of the opportunities of their development.

Due to social marginalization, the Dalits undergo social oppression, exclusion, vulnerability and discrimination. Marginalization is a slippery and multilayered concept and whole societies can be marginalized at the global level and communities can be marginalized from the dominant social order. Similarly Dalit groups are neglected and

discriminated by the upper classes because of their lower status as the Blacks are by the White. Bansode brings out the plight of the Dalits through one of his poems:

Where the wind treats us as strangers,
 Where the monsoons give us only famines,
 Where the water plays with us,
 The most inhumane game of mirage
 We are rejecting this
 Unclean and poisonous life.(45)

When many writers express their concern that all human beings should be given their due rights like equality and dignity, the Dalits too talk about their sufferings as they want them to be alleviated. However, if the voice is not loud enough, there is every possibility that their voice may not be heard at all.

To be heard, one has to speak; to be answered one has to question; and to be recognized, one has to speak louder. There are many writers who are trying to speak clearly and loudly and writer Sivakami's voice is loud and clear; sonorous and sound; it is not only heard by one but all. She has raised her voice not only for herself but also for her people who remained unseen and unheard. Sivakami emphasizes that no region is free from the menace of inequality. Throughout her novels she describes the pathetic condition of women and interrogated why they have been treated like nonentities and worthless creatures as if they were non-human species.

Sivakami's and Imayam's writings point out that because of their status in the society, Dalit women are more likely to face the collective and public threat of rape, sexual assault and physical violence at work place and in public. Both the novelists

expose the ways in which the upper caste landlords in the villages sexually abuse Dalit women. Since these women have to work in their fields and earn their living, many times they keep mum and succumb to male lust. Moreover due to their position in the society even if they tell about their plight, nobody would listen to them.

The Indian women writers as Lata Mishra points out expose the unequal relations between the two sexes. They also challenge male domination and suggest a deconstruction of the patriarchal system. It can also be said that their characters are 'realist' in the sense that they are fully aware that in order to achieve a limited scope for autonomous action and agency, they need to seek accommodation with prevalent ideological systems and arrive at an understanding of social responsibility that can supersede gender conflict and their own isolation. In order to achieve equality and resolve tension between the genders, the traditional ideological systems that deprive women of their rights should be reviewed.(212) Women should have the right to decide and determine things in their lives. Jasbir Jain, an Indian critic highlights the condition of women writing in India in the following manner;

. . . women's writing is the literature of silence. Its meaning lies enclosed and camouflaged. It is also the literature of silence, for it seeks to express that which has been submerged and suppressed. Writing in itself, has always been an act of courage. And women have often resorted to different strategies to say what they wished to get across.(212)

Writer Sivakami, who has taken to writing with the purpose of bringing about changes in the society in an article published in *The Hindu* says, "Tell me which constituency is not communally sensitive? The problem persists across the country. If it is not religion, it is caste. This should change the last ten years the world has changed a lot

and you cannot afford to remain unchanged”(7). Her work, *The Grip of Change* is indeed powerful enough to speak this truth for itself.

Sivakami’s book *The Grip of Change* has a glimmer of hope and change as it tries to accelerate the morale embedded deep inside the heart of the Dalits. The novel opens with the exploitation of the low caste Paraya woman, Thangam, wife of Kaipillai, who has been betrayed and cheated out of her inheritance by her brother-in-law after her husband’s death. Cornered by her circumstances she has no other go but to bend and succumb to the carnal pleasure of the ‘high’- caste land owner, Paranjothi Udayar. Thangam was seduced and is beaten on the street by her brother and brother-in-law. She had been insulted and had been dragged on the road. She was cursed and ill-treated for a mistake she hadn’t committed. Added to this male domination and oppression, she suffers at the hands of her own gender. Her sister-in-law, Valliammai indeed took pleasure in abusing her, “ ‘They beat her up. Good! Why did they leave her alive? That whore thinks too much of herself. She thinks that she’s very beautiful. That’s why she went after that Udayar. When she loses her shape, he’ll throw her out, and she, ’ll be in a state worse than a dog’s’ ”(28).

Unable to bear the brunt of this she appealed to Kathamuthu, the leader of the Parayar community, for justice. The domineering Kathamuthu, who had been a Panchayat president, managed to get justice for Thangam though he had his own selfish motives in dealing with the case. What Mukta Mittal points out in her book *Dalit Women in India: Survival and Current Dilemma* is very pertinent in this context:

Even today, in modern times, we see the severe oppression and exploitation of Dalit women. Dalit women face multiple oppression that violates their economic, political, social and cultural rights. The most

deprived section of society comprises Dalit women who are poor, illiterate and easy targets for sexual harassment. They face not just caste violence inflicted by the dominant castes, but also state violence.(35)

Sivakami's novels portray the story of the rustic and their conflicts and struggles between tenacious women and tyrannical men in the contemporary society. The central male characters, Periyannan and Kathamuthu in the novels *The Grip of Change* and *The Taming of Women* live in the poor villages; both are not only hungry for the power that money could bring them but also tyrannical in their attitude towards women, be it their wives or their old and ailing mothers or their daughters or the other women for whom they had an insatiable appetite. By portraying the reality of the situation Sivakami brings an important aspect of Dalit's life that has been less recognized and little known in Dalit writings in Indian literature.

Sivakami brings women of many generations in her novel *The Grip of Change*. The character Kathamuthu who brings everyone under his control is an example of the tyrannical and charismatic male characters. The novel for the most part portrays the discrimination between men and women in the small village and also the sexual violation against Dalit women which has been seen as something natural and spontaneous. The Dalit girls are not allowed to attend schools after attaining puberty and are subjected to sexual assaults by much older husbands and are sexually harassed or raped by fathers-in-law or brothers-in-law if they are widowed; they are also subjected to regular beating by alcoholic husbands and are burdened with heavy labour at home and also in the fields apart from nurturing their numerous children. The ignorant Dalits do not understand the importance of educating women.

The affairs between a low-caste woman and a high - caste man provoked a bitter conflict between the upper and lower caste people. The clash led to a series of events such as bribing the police, boycotting the services of the Parayars in order to break their movement and even burning the settlement of the Dalits. The second book of the novel *The Grip of Change* consists of the author's note which projects a caste- driven society where humiliation and discrimination have become the order of the day. *The Grip of Change* is not only a novel about caste-discrimination but it also unveils the truth that caste can be used as an axis along with power which can be exercised. Thus the novel retains the humility of the oppressed.

The Dalit women are oppressed in two ways. Firstly being a woman, one is oppressed by men belonging to one's own community in the patriarchal society. Secondly, being a Dalit, a woman is oppressed by the upper caste men and women. Imayam's novel represents this dual oppression of women. The Dalit women who are the downtrodden sections of the society have been exploited and oppressed not only by their men but also by the upper caste men and women. Dalits have always been one of the most exploited and marginalized groups in the society. Arokkyam the central character of the novel, *The Beast of Burden* represents the suffering of the Dalits in the society. About her painful sufferings and the condition of the Dalits, the author says,

But she really had to suffer for it at the hands of the kothukkaarakar and the karaikaarakar. Ramasaami and Chadayan were the ones most prone to leap at her in anger.

'what need is there for you to go to the church at an ordinary time like this?'

'And who to wash our clothes meanwhile?'

‘If anything happens in the village, good or bad, who’s to deal with it?’

‘Are there four vannaans in the village or what? Thieving rogues!’

‘Exactly What I say.’

‘If you push off with your entire family on some sudden whim, who’s going to put up with it?’

‘The way you are carrying on just isn’t right. There’s nothing else for it but for us to bring another vannaan here instead of you.’

‘We don’t need all this showing off.’ . . .(3)

The novels of Sivakami and Imayam can be compared with the novels of Om Prakash Valmiki, Tony Morrison, Lorraine Hansberry and Alice Walker which also deal with the discrimination between the black and the white and the upper caste and the lower caste people. Toni Morrison, the eminent African - American woman writer envisions the black women as the new emancipated subaltern women; they are the ships sailing towards new horizons and are provided a haven for the black culture and tradition. Like Alice Walker, Toni Morrison expresses her desire through her work *Sula* that the black women must “re-possess, re-name and re-own their culture bonds”(8). Through their friendship and solidarity they should realize that the definition of self must come from within and that they should be self-reliant, independent and individualistic.

The Dalit women writers Sivakami and Imayam raise a clarion call for the upliftment of their Dalit counterparts. Dalit women must create gender and caste equity by subverting from the dynamics of caste and transcend the interstices of identity. Various external and internal factors influence the evolution of selfhood. The development of self depends on physical and cultural environments externally and

biological and psychological factors internally. Regarding the relationship between culture and self, Toni Morrison says in her work *The Bluest Eye*, “culture and self are reciprocally related phenomena. Culture has both external and internal representation. Externally it is represented by various institutions- familial, educational, political, religious and economic artefacts. Internally it is represented by various values, belief systems, world views and epistemologies” (288).

This definition offers myriad possibilities in the evolution of self depending on the external and internal factors. Evolution of self is tremendously significant for the African American and Dalit women than the others because of their predicament as the oppressed of the oppressed and the slave of the slave. The black man suffers under his white master and in turn, he retaliates for it not on his white boss, but on the poor, black female within home, little realizing that he is subjugating his own class and race. The black woman in this manner is de-humanized not only by inter-racial oppression but also by intra-racial oppression. Hence the black woman suffers under the triple burden of race, gender and class as the poor, black female. Alice Walker lists many of the dominant stereotypes that have been applied to Black women since slavery by saying,

Black women are called, in the folklore that so aptly identifies one’s status in society, “the mule of the world,” because we have been handed the burdens that everyone else refused to carry. We have also been called “Matriarchs,” “Superwomen,” and “Mean and Evil Bitches.” Not to mention “Castraters” and “Sapphire’s Mama.”(61)

If the black women suffer under the triple oppression of race, gender and class as the poor black female, the Dalit woman reels under the triple oppression of caste, gender and class as the poor Dalit female. Countries and culture prevailing in them may be

entirely different, but the prejudices against human beings are common and deep - rooted. Wherever they may be, the Dalits are marginalized as untouchables, discriminated against and denied even their basic human rights. *Sula* of Morrison deals with individual rights in general and women's rights in particular. Even today the black women do not have complete freedom and remain passive. Their white counterparts look down upon them as inferiors; moreover they are also branded as bad women. Sivakami reflects the same thought when she laments in *The Grip of Change : Author's Notes*, "recollections caused old wounds to bleed, as though salt had been rubbed on them." (144). Toni Morrison's novel, *The Bluest Eye* poignantly depicts this anguish which is quoted here extensively for a better understanding of not only the situation but also the position of the suppressed.

Everybody in the world was in a position to give them orders.

White women said, "Do this". White children said, "give me that".

White men said "come here". Black men said "Lay down" . . . But they took all of that and re-created it in their own image. They ran the house of white people, and knew it. When white men beat their men they cleared up the blood and went home to receive abuse from the victim. They beat their children with one hand and stole for them with the other. The hands that felled trees also cut umbilical cords; the hands that wrung the necks of children and bugged hogs also nudged African violets into bloom; the arms that loaded sheaves, bales and sacks rocked babies into sleep. They parted biscuits into flaky ovals of innocence - and shrouded the dead. They plowed all day and came home so nestle like plums under the limbs of their men. The legs that

straddled a mule black were the same ones that straddled their man's hips. And the difference was all the Different there was.(108)

Om Prakash Valmiki, an acclaimed poet and literary critic in Hindi, was born in the Chuhra caste. He grew up in Barla, a hamlet located in West Uttar Pradesh. His struggle to survive in this world of humiliation and oppression is depicted in his novel, *Joothan*. In his review of the novel Narayan Badri says that it “is an autobiographical account of Valmiki's journey from his birth and upbringing as an untouchable in the newly independent India of the fifties to his present as a Dalit” (93). It is the autobiographical story of his painful growing up, continual struggle for survival in this caste - ridden society. The Chuhras, the Dalits that the writer belonged to live in the Chuhra basti; they were poor and they did not have proper clothes to wear. He describes the reapers from the untouchable castes of the Chuhras or Chamars in *Joothan*, : “They had clothes on their bodies in name only” (11). They did not have enough food to eat; the narrator and his family relied on the leftovers from the caste - Hindu families. The narrator Narayan in *Joothan* says:

. . . sit outside with huge baskets, waiting to collect the dirty *pattals* or leaf Plates to save the *Joothan*- pieces of *pooris*, bits of sweetmeats, and a little bit of vegetable-sticking to them. The bridegroom's guests who didn't leave enough scrape on their *pattals* were denounced as gluttons. The pieces of *pooris* that were collected from the *pattals* were dried in the sun. A cloth would be spread on a *charpai* to dry them. Valmiki was often placed on guard duty because the drying *pooris* attracted crows, dogs and hen.(9)

The living condition of the people was very poor. They did not have a proper shelter. Valmiki vividly recounts those days of the rainy season that made life in the Dalit dwelling more miserable. He narrates with pain how they had to walk in the slush of pig's excrement to reach their huts. The readers are quite appalled when they read about the well in their *basti* that was "full of long worms during the rainy season"(20). They did not have any other alternative but to drink the water.

Imayam's novels are considered a public declaration of Dalit female consciousness. His novels are acclaimed for celebrating Dalit women's lives, their wit, their humour, their resilience and their creativity. The Dalit women are discriminated against on several accounts. In the novel *Arumugam*, the woman character Dhanabhagyam is ill-treated by the dominant Raman as a servant.

Dhanabhagyam tried to run outside, but he was too quick for her. He laughed, tightening his grip. . . She tried her best to wriggle out from his crushing grip, pushing and kicking at him. "Bullheaded brute, my nose rings – my earrings – you've torn my blouse! Murderer ! Ayyo, you brute, paavi, chandala . . . cholera take you. Haven't you anything better to bite than my nose and ear . . . ? Ayyayyo, my god, did that old man send me to you for this? May he fall and break his bones – crush himself to death.(13)

In the patriarchal society men always treat women without any dignity. The male specific values begin to be inculcated in women soon after their birth and they are made to conform to a certain kind of behaviour sanctioned by patriarchal ideology. The advent of modernity has brought with it further overburdening of Dalit women who now find no free time to even care for their children. Dalit women are always busy in their work from morning till late in the night.

Imayam's novel *Arumugam* shows how the Dalit women constitute a lower segment in the Indian society. They have to struggle hard to secure their basic necessities of life like food, shelter, water, clothing and firewood. These are some of the specific problems that the Dalit women confront in a casteist society when compared to other women in India. After the death of her husband, Dhanabhagam tries to protect her small boy Arumugam and her own self; she has to face the society also:

Men and women who met her on the way criticized her, as did those in Krishnapuram. Doesn't know how to make a living. Imagine, a woman like her, in this day and age! Shouldn't she have some sense? Its enough if you bear a child, is it?"

They even reproached her for going to Pootthurai and staying there for four months. Some curled their lips with derision; others raised hands to their mouths in astonishment (42)

The wide range of nomenclatures attributed to Dalits speaks for their socially known disabilities irrespective of the laws enacted for their protection and welfare. Ironically, majority of the oppressed classes remain the same. A study of the Indian society enumerates the widely known disabilities of the Dalits as: social, economic, political, religious and educational. The geographical limit disconnects the Dalit writers and their life styles; the traumatic experiences of the Dalits are identical. Valmiki from the North of India and Sivakami and Imayam from the South document almost the same kind of experiences in their literary creations. A comparative study of such novels may tell us more about the various disabilities of the Dalits and about the oppression they undergo in their lives. Valmiki devotes considerable attention to sketching the vexing experiences of the Dalits etched out on his mind as a child in his novel. Worse was the

condition of the students during the examination when they were not able to drink water like others. The students had to face the ignominy of hailing from a lower caste. Nothing can spare them from it because their stay in the Bastis, the chuhras, their unpaid job of disposing the cattle and above all the frequent taunts of their own teachers confirmed it.

Through their literary creations Sivakami, Imayam and Valmiki, have in their own way expressed the voices of the oppressed-the parayars and the Chauhras respectively.

Sharankumar Limbale brings out the wretchedness of Dalit life in his book *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit literature*:

There is in it ignorance, sexism, violence, internal rivalry and conflict, competition for survival, drunkenness and death. Authentic representation, then, involves an unromanticized and unpitiful reflection in literature of the materiality of Dalit life in all its dimensions. Dalit (auto) biographical and fictional narratives and poetry neither hide nor romanticize anything. The people that inhabit these texts are not objects of pity. Their life is often miserable, humiliating, and filled with daily reminders of their impurity and pollutedness .(13)

Their attempt to champion the cause of their people through creative expressions is indeed successful. When Valmiki in *Joothan* achieves it through an autobiographical narrative that deals with several incidents of subjugation and embarrassment, Sivakami throws light on the afflictions imposed on the female Dalit student at home.

The two writers Sivakami and Imayam portray a lofty image of the grief of Dalits who are devoid of the inevitable essentials such as liberty, honour, justice, education, security, rights and freedom. Their lower position in the patriarchal society relegate them even below the margins, lower than their menfolk and make them victims

of familial, social and religious marginalizations. When Thangam is pulled up by hair, dragged out to the street, flogged with a stick and accused of having an affair with Paranjothi Udayar, she cries out:

‘My husband’s relatives spread the story that I had become Paranjothi’s concubine. That’s why Paranjothi’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. I begged for mercy, but they wouldn’t stop. They abused me and threatened to kill me if I stayed in that village any longer. They called me a whore.’(6)

Imayam’s *Beasts of Burden* also portrays, how the character Arokkyam has been subjugated to various harassments due to caste discrimination in the Tamil society.

‘Blockhead, are you still asleep, or what? Shouldn’t you be up and ready the minute you hear a single call? How can you sleep so heavily at your age, da?’

‘I was dog-tried, saami. Don’t get me wrong, saami.’

‘Saami?’ said Arokkyam.

‘Why are you waiting, da?’

‘Saami?’

‘The old lady’s gone. We must send her on her way. There’s all the rites and rituals to be done. Couldn’t even find a fellow to come and fetch you. So I had to come myself.’

‘Saami,’ said Arokkyam. She looked eastward. The darkness was clearing.

‘Come on then, Savuri.’

‘By your leave, saami.’

‘A funeral the very next day after we return from church.

Whatever next,’ exclaimed Arokkyam, sitting down in a state of shock.

Undoing his vetti from his waist and wrapping it about him, Savuri ran. . .

(23-24)

Discrimination is a disease that has plagued the Dalits from time immemorial. Marginalization has made them live their life at the mercy of those who don’t own them. They are let to live only because of their usefulness. They are thrown out as garbage, after the essence of life has been squeezed out of them. They live, breathe and work just to escape from the monstrous clutch of poverty and starvation. When a Dalit is abused, he or she is given prominence and the issues are dealt in terms of caste and not in terms of their beings individual. When Thangam was molested by Paranjothi Udayar, a compensation of ten thousand rupees was given to Thangam, since she was a lower caste woman and not because she had been seduced violently or because she was a woman. Here caste has been used as a bait to acquire material and money. Since they are not able to gain money, they use these strategies to gain profit in a crooked way. This attitude becomes a stumbling block in their advancement.

When Kathamuthu was elected as a member of legislative assembly, the Tahsildar of the village failed to offer him a seat. The Tahsildar, the village officer grumbled about being forced to treat Kathamuthu, who was a Parayan, as their equal. When Kathamuthu had reported this to the Thanjavur collector, who was his friend, the collector advised Kathamuthu to beat the Tahsildar with his slipper. As per the instruction of the collector, Kathamuthu hurried with a gang of men to the Tahsildar's office and the gang of men taught him a good, lesson. They gave him good, asking him, "so you called him a Parayan? You couldn't spare a chair for him?"(140).

Imayam's validation of Dravidian ideals in the context of Dalit women's lives in the domain of sexuality and the impact on prevailing caste equations and its role in silencing and manipulating of early Dalit voices tell about the contemporary Tamil Dalit society. They don't accept a relationship between an upper caste boy and lower caste girl, opposes the relationship when it is between a lower caste boy and an upper caste girl. The writer discusses in the novella *The Begetter* the upper caste panchayat in his society.

The whole village assembles and says that we should chop up and kill one of our own children! Will the gods approve? You should get that boy here and rough him up. Or, you should fetch his parents here and give them a sound thrashing. Warn them that we will drive them out of the village! If they do not come round with that, get hold of all three of them, tie them to an electric pole, and skin them alive. Or, parade them stark naked round the village four times. Instead of doing that, what kind of idiotic panchayat are you holding here?. (4)

When power is bestowed upon the Dalits, due to the enthusiasm of gaining power, they misuse it or they use it so unjustly that the bestowing of power in itself seems unjust. Dalits react like the rubber balls which bounce back with the same force after being hit.

The air in the rubber ball is like the power given to them. The power and the pain that has been caused during the hit make them bounce back. In *Karukku*, Bama states,

Life is difficult if you happen to be poor, even though you are born into the upper castes. When this is the case, the condition of those who are born into the Paraya community, as the poorest of the poor, struggling for daily survival, doesn't need spelling out. Such people have just enough time, if they wake up well before cock-crow, to sweep their front yard, collect water, swallow some gruel if possible, and rush off to work as best as they can. (68)

The condition of the Dalits is measured mainly by their outward appearance. It is important that the Dalits should be aware of their attitude and the way of talking and dressing in the society. The lines taken from the poem "Mohandas Karamchand" in Meena Kandasamy's book *Touch* is appropriate to be mentioned here.

you knew, you bloody well knew,
caste won't go, they wouldn't let it go.
It haunts us now, the way you do
with a spooky stick, a carie laugh or two.(21-22)

Thus caste has a great influence on the life of the poor. The poverty of the poor is like an epidemic that has paralyzed the host. Caste system has denied these people the right to self-assertion and human dignity. Oppression and injustice are the gifts given by caste-discrimination to the untouchable life. The touch of poverty and misery is so much felt by them that the miserable lots are not able to make out a living without them.

Resistance and revolt are the two sides of the coin of caste oppression. An analogy can be seen in Bama's *Karukku* .

In this society, if you are born into a low caste, you are forced to live a life of humiliation and degradation until your death. Even after death, caste difference does not disappear. Wherever you look, however much you study, whatever you take up, caste discrimination stalks us in every nook and corner and drives us into a frenzy. It is because of this that we are unable to find a way to study well and progress like everyone else. And this is why a wretched lifestyle is all that is left to us. . . . If you are born into a low caste, every moment of your life is a moment of struggle.(26-27)

This fact is clearly portrayed through the incident that happened during Gowri's college life. Gowri had been a sincere, industrious and talented student who was yet to know the ways of the world.

She had been active in the students association in college. An oratorical contest had been conducted and she had been in charge of putting together the marks given by three different judges. One of the contestants had wanted to know the marks before the results could be announced. When she had refused to reveal the marks, the contestant had walked away after calling her a 'Scheduled caste bitch'. The contest had nothing to do with the caste system. She was left wondering why men and women of the upper castes were governed so strongly by caste and employed it to abuse others at every possible opportunity. Perhaps the novelist

had been affected by such prejudices. (140-41)

Arokkyam of Imayam's *Beasts of Burden*, describes the condition prevailing in the country. She recalls the past life and is scared of her dream, the death of a young child. Arokkyam's pathetic condition is described in the following manner:

All my life's struggle is to fill the belly

Like a donkey I carried bundle after bundle

Night and day I carried my vessel and stood in

front of every house

It's all in aid of this stomach

All the abuse and bad words thrown at me

It's all for this belly

It's like an ocean that can never be filled

Even if I struggle all my life, I'll never fill it

All that I have suffered was for its sake

But my belly is never full

For fifty years I've walked between thorapaadu and

colony to earn my food

What am I but my stomach

The world is its stomach

O Saint Anthony. (295-96)

The condition of Arokkym is more or less similar to the state of most of the Dalits. They have to struggle a lot for filling their belly. In their quest for food, which is a basic necessity, they lose their identity. Having concentrated more on their belly they have forgotten the idea of betterment and hence they do not lead a meaningful life. Prasad quotes the words of life while talking about the condition of the Dalits. Madhukant Kalpit's poem "*Amadavad*".

Crushed under the road roller

of inhuman behaviour

The ugly face of my tragic history . . . (109).

In addition to the marginalization of the Dalits, suppression of women and intra-dalit strife are other issues on which light has been thrown upon in the novels of Sivakami. Even Bama's third novel, *Vanmam* argues for forging of better unity among Dalit groups so that intra-dalit strife could be avoided. These novels bring out the fact that the intra-dalit strife helps the domineering spirit of the upper caste people and the politicians who are already suppressing them. There are hierarchies that exist even among the lower castes. Intra-dalit strife is well illustrated in Sivakami's *The Grip of Change* in which the upper caste Udayars have burnt the huts of the Parayars and the Chakkiliyars, for lodging complaint against Paranjothi Uadayar for illtreating Thangam. When the Chakkiliyar's houses are burnt, Ponnusamy from the Chakkiliyar street asks, "they set fire to Parayar houses because you chased their men away and stopped going to work. But what did we do? Why were our houses also burned down?" (61-62). This shows that the Dalits lack care and concern even for their own group of people. They want to live their own life comfortably and safely without any regard for the life of others. Bothering about one's own belly is another reason behind the intra-dalit strife.

‘You thought, “Let the Parayars deal with their fate,” and went to work for Udayar, now you can see how you’ve been paid for that. For us, Parayan, Pallan, Chakkiliyan, Valluvan and Vannan may be different. For them, we are all the same –all untouchables. Do you think they would make *us* stand outside their houses and take *you* inside and feed you milk and rice? As long as we continue to differentiate among ourselves and beg for their favour, they will continue to manoeuvre and hammer us into submission.’ (62)

The central male characters, Periyannan of *The Grip of Change* and Kathamuthu of *The Taming of Women* who live in poor villages, are not only hungry for the power that money could bring them but also tyrannical in their treatment of the women in their life, be it their wives or their old and ailing mothers or their daughters or the other women for whom they had an insatiable appetite.

The opening chapter of the novel *The Taming of Women* is introduced with a bang. Periyannan’s wife Anandhayi was in labour, without having any concern for her, he took another woman upstairs to sleep with him. She was brought to him by the midwife with whom too, Periyannan often had physical connection. The male domination in a woman’s life is brought out clearly in this novel. The pragmatic Anandhayi had no illusions about him, though she wished that he would not get his women home. The physical violence they saw and are subjected to on the basis of their being Dalits made one daughter Dhanam, a rebel, while the other Kala became apathetic. Periyannan was the king of all he surveyed under his control. Periyannan married Lakshmi, whom he got home as his second wife. When she did not yield to his desire, he saw it as a blow to his

egotism. He risked everything like his wealth, respect, work and status in his attempt to gain control over Lakshmi.

The main woman character in the novel *The Taming of Women* is the industrious Anandhayi who is married to the womanizer Periyannan. The characters in the novel like Anandhayi and her mother-in-law, Chinnasami and Lakshmi are infused with originality. These men preferred to possess women as their concubines in order to assert their virility or to teach a lesson to their legally wedded wives or simply because of their lust for women. It can also be noted that such women happen to be always poor without any social support and are either widows or abandoned by their husbands. The representation of the other women is a significant entry point to the discussion of power relations within a Dalit community. Such a woman is an obvious victim of male power. “Even before he was done speaking, he grabbed a bunch of her hair. ‘Heck, let go . . .’ She initially tried to break free. Then she let her hair remain like a goat ready to be sacrificed on Deepavali. He rolled her head around as if it were a pestle and then let go after a few abusive words”(140).

Through these novels Sivakami portrays the painful real life of women suffering at the hands of men. The man who has committed a crime by harassing a woman has no feeling of guilt. The men conveniently blame the women, making them feel as if they are worthless and pitiable. Both Chadayan and Paranjothi Udayar thought that women are born only to satisfy their carnal pleasures and to serve them.

C.S.Lakshmi’s question found in the appendix – “Once upon a time there was a novel” of *The Grip of Change* is worth mentioning here in this context, “Why does sexual power work differently for women and men of different castes? Why is it that the lower

caste woman is raped by the upper caste man, but the lower caste man always sexually satiates the upper caste woman?.”(199)

Sivakami in *The Grip of Change* portrays Kathamuthu as a domineering Dalit, usurping the rights of others. Only a selfless person can lead a community and can lift it up, whereas Kathamuthu proved himself to be a self-made leader disregarding the needs of his own people. He profited himself in the name of helping his people; when an elderly man requested Kathamuthu to make arrangement for the loans in the co-operative society, Kathamuthu replies,

That’s my main job, isn’t it? I have no other work! Do you know when I had breakfast yesterday? At nine in the morning! After that I had to bathe and leave for the police station. I just got half an hour’s rest after lunch. Every day something or the other happens and I have to skip breakfast or lunch. My health is spoiled. And I have to work on my land too. You spend all your time in your fields and enjoy the benefit. You have fresh vegetables, fruits. Look at me. I can’t pay any attention to agriculture. I have to go every day to the vegetable shop to buy stale, not fresh, food. I have no money to educate my daughter. The rules of the cooperative society are such that without cooking up accounts you can’t get a loan – all that takes money. And if I keep doing your work how will I make a living?’ (36)

These lines highlight the egocentric nature of Kathamuthu. His speech elucidates the selfish nature of the Dalit leader. Such leaders prove themselves to be hypocrites who exploit their kith and kin. In the author’s notes to *The Grip of Change*, the author remarks:

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 upon 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.(148-49)

The Dalits have darkness spread around them and also within them. To wear the new clothes of hope, advancement and aspiration, they have to get rid of the torn clothes such as submission, intra-dalit strife and illiteracy. Sivakami emphasizes the unity of the Dalits so as to attain equality:

The lower castes are also the have-nots, and the haves are the upper castes; the division is clear. They cannot avoid clashing with each other. As the lower castes are several and divided, they are not able to offer a tough fight to the upper castes. The lower castes should shatter their particular identities and identify themselves as one class. The Dalits form the last rung of the labour class. If the struggle is centred on the Dalits, class and caste equality will be attained.(180)

Most of the Dalit women get married out of compulsion and circumstance. They are forced by the manmade destiny to lead their life as prescribed to them. Oppression to a greater or lesser extent produces anger or hurt and oppression and injustice form an inheritable part of an untouchable's life, especially in the life of women, which has become a life of tolerance and sacrifice. The atrocities that are carried out on Thangam had greatly affected her psyche, completely changing her way of life and thoughts.

Whenever she remembered her life in Puliur, she wept. She equated the incident in the sugarcane field with the repulsive experience of stepping on shit while walking on a riverbank. She could not recover easily from the troubles she had suffered. The shock of being dragged out by her hair in the middle of the night to be beaten up like an animal had affected her mind deeply. She would gasp awake at night at the slightest sound.

She hated the memory of Udayar's sexual use of her body. Once she used to plait her long hair, but she no longer bothered with that. She pinned it up without any care and covered her head with her sari.(87)

In the same way the character of Lakshmi of *The Taming of Women* is also described. When she was mentioned to Periyannan, she was referred to like this; “ ‘Fair? Imagine saffron drowned in warm milk-or a rose petal. Whether you look at her from front or from behind, you will keep looking forever.’ ”(90). All such words lasted till he was satisfied. But after that she was treated like a bitch by Periyannan, who always tried to bring the women under his control. Voracious in his appetites, for both power and sex, Periyannan proved himself to be a domineering male character.

As long as people make themselves available to be dominated there will be dominators. Periyannan and Kathamuthu had always dominated their people. They tried to control, suppress and silence those who were under their control. The poem “*We will Rebuild Worlds*” written by Meena Kandasamy talks about the caste – ridden society which wants to continue on the line of caste.

but the crimes of passion

our passion

your crimes
poured poison and pesticide the ears-nose-mouth
or hanged them in public
because a man and woman
dare to love
and you wanted
to teach
other boys and other girls
the lessons of
how to
whom to
when to
where to
continue their caste lines.

And we will refresh your mind with other history of how
you brutally murdered and massacred our peoples
with the smiling promise of
heaven in the next birth
and in this
a peace that
never belonged.(60-62)

Sivakami towards the end of the novel laments how even for a modern and educated Dalit woman, life still continues to be a struggle and caste a marker of identity in the society. In other words, caste and oppression of women go hand in hand.

Darshana Trivedi in the article “Literature of their own: A critical survey of Gujarati Dalit Literature” *Multicultural Literature in India: Critical Perceptions* says about what the Dalit writers could achieve with Dalit literature:

Dalit literature must cross the boundaries of national literature and seek to create a space in World literature. Like Black literature it must be everyman’s literature. Black literature talks about the sufferings and pain of Negroes, yet from the personal sufferings, Black literature rises to the summit of universal literature through the writings of Toni Morrison, Maya Angello and Alice Walker. This is because of the creative attitude which the writers adopt. If Dalit writers move beyond the mundane and superficial; if they strive for expression of human experiences in the universal sense, then they will be there to stay.(33-34)

Dalit women’s experiences of the joint oppression of caste and gender are reflected in the novel *Beasts of Burden*. The experiences of the Dalit women are narrated through the character Arokkyam. Iyamam’s novels *Beasts of Burden* and *Arumugam* analyse Dalit women’s oppression as a triple hazard of oppression where poverty becomes the third hazard added to the already existing double patriarchies. Discreet patriarchy dictates that power rests with men in the community and in the institutions led by them – the caste courts, the church, the panchayets etc. Iyamam traces out the portrayal of how the Dalit women are being sexually exploited by the patriarchy of the upper caste. In *Beasts of Burden* the writer portraying the character of Arokkyam and her

sufferings, presents how poor Dalit women are exploited by the upper caste landlords. Her daughter Mary was sexually harassed by Chadayan, a Kothukkaaran, a long established resident of the colony. A poor Dalit like Mary cannot resist him and Mary's helpless condition is described by Imayam in the following manner:

The grip on Mary pressed down and tightened.

It's the vannaati, saami

I'm a woman who will soon be married, saami

My whole family will be ruined, saami

I could become pregnant, saami

I'll kill myself, saami

I touch your feet, ayya

Think of me as the daughter of your own body, ayya

If you want, you can kill me, burn me to ashes. . . (101)

Dhanabhagyam of the novel *Arumugam* was also sexually abused in Auroville by Jerry Albert. She was doubly oppressed by the patriarchal and caste tyrannical society. She did not have endurance or indomitable spirit to bounce back against all odds. So she simply accepted her fate and wanted to put an end to her problems by committing suicide, without realizing that suicide cannot be a solution to the injustice done by the patriarchy.

“ Dei, do you add salt to your food at all? she shrieked. “ You brute, may your family be laid to waste – may your home turn into a burial ground – your clan ground into earth ! There shan't be a name to keep it alive – your people will be wiped out without a trace and disappear into dust. Just as I've lost my son, just as

I stand here, heart-broken – so shall you stand in the street too, miserable and wretched . . . You chandaala, I warned you so many times – but you listen? My son gone – who’ll accept me as rice, or discard me as chaff? I’ve sat under a palm tree for shade, and I’am being accused of drinking toddy! . . . (105-106)

In the Dalit community, only a few women try to voice against the familial and sexual violence in the patriarchal Indian society and even if they speak, they would hardly be heard. Bama who has also suffered a similar fate, brought those experiences through her novel *Sangati*. She portrays the marginalized women’s lives and experiences in various aspects. Dalits are afraid to keep their teenage girls at home and as soon as girls attain puberty, they are married off. Dalit women are at risk when they go for gathering firewood. They were subjected to sexual assaults by men. Sivakami’s *The Taming of Women* talks about the way in which Periyannan takes advantage of the condition at home;

‘I ask you water, and you come upstairs, eh?’

She dribbled two drops of water into his ear and gently leaned his head towards her. His head landed on her firm breasts . . . action followed with no apparent coyness, almost by habit. . . Muthakka propped the child on her outstretched leg and began to bathe her. Anandhayi was in the kitchen draining out the kanji. He chose to come, avoiding Anandhayi’s line of vision, and on the pretext of fondling the child, he brushed his hand on Muthakka’s breast. She reprimanded him, as if she did not like it, ‘watch where your hands go!’ (21-22)

Dalit women are assaulted and abused physically, emotionally and sexually. Imayam narrates this aspect realistically in the novel *The Beasts of Burden*. The most

enervating experiences of Dalit women are sexual assaults at home and rape or custodial rape at workplace. Dalit women workers are compelled to keep tightlipped and tongue-tied for their livelihood when such rapes or harassments take place.

Chadayan was a kothukaaran, a long-established resident of the colony. He could do what he pleased to Mary. Nobody would be able to question him. When the panchayat met, he always handed out severe penalties and beating, so people did not have the courage to cross him . . .

Don't, please, saami.

It's wrong, saami.

It's not right, saami.

I'll lose my reputation, saami.

I won't be able to show my face in the street, saami.

The family will be finished for ever, saami. (99-100)

Both writers explain the way in which Dalit women are exploited and oppressed. The women portrayed in Sivakami's novel *The Taming of Women* revolt against their bad tempered alcoholic and violent husbands. Other women tussle with their men while few of them try to walk out of the wedlock leaving their acrimonious husbands. Sivakami shows how the wife resists her husband when a physical assault takes place between wife and husband. The marital life and struggle of the women in the Dalit families are pathetic. Bama narrates about this in her novel *Sangati*

Pakkiaraj was abusing her in a vile and vulgar way, and was just about to hit her. And Raakkamma was giving it back to him, word for word. Even before his hand could fall on her, she screamed and shrieked, Ayyayyo,

he's killing me. Vile man, you'll die, you'll be carried out as a corpse, you low-life, you bastard, you this you that. . . Go on, da, kick me, let's see you do it, da! Let's see if you are a real man. You only know how to go for a woman's parts. Go and fight with a man who is your equal. . . and you'll get your balls burnt for your pains.(61)

The novels of both the writers may be understood as the cultural biography of a community. It is a powerful Dalit feminist narrative of the dual oppression of Dalit women on the grounds of gender and caste. This kind of self-reflexivity of Dalit feminist discourse on the issues of gender and caste is the predominant theme of Tamil Dalit feminist literature. Their works mention the voice of an individual and community, they point out how the Dalit women suffer from an identity crisis apart from being discriminated for their low social order. Imayam's novel *Arumugam* is an insightful and touching account of life in a caste-ridden village of Tamil Nadu from a child's point of view. As a young boy he is not aware of untouchability and all the caste system.

Kannamma of *The Grip of Change* is an old woman who lived in Puliur. Her son married a woman who is good and hard working. One day her son drank wine heavily and scolded his wife using foul words. Hence she hanged herself. Kannamma said "two years ago, her daughter-in-law had committed suicide leaving behind two children, aged four and two. The daughter-in-law had become depressed when her husband, who was usually good to her, had got drunk on toddy and called her a whore. So she had hanged herself to death" (57).

Imayam's novels reflect the contemporary society in Tamil Nadu. They are labourers constantly struggling with land and nature. Labour is their strength and that makes them struggle with nature. All the characters do not even dare to dream, because

for them life revolves around their stomachs. They live their life the way it happens. They are the subjects of ridicule, insults, and humiliation. Many women become sex workers in their life. In his novels the characters are those who have accepted the life destined for them without any complaints. They never questioned why others in the society determined their lives. But they live their lives with passion, complete involvement and to the fullest.

After the bitter incident with Udayar's family, Thangam lived in Kathamuthu's house. Kathamuthu also misused her. One day Kathamuthu serves wine to Thangam while she is lying on the kitchen floor. Kathamuthu entered the room and

Thangam was still lying down, on her stomach, her hair damp with sweat. Kathamuthu bent down, intoxicated by the alcohol and posture. Why don't you eat something he muttered into her ear. She did not answer him. He smoothed her hair and snaked his palms through her armpits and pressed her breasts. She turned over and he fell on her . . . (92-93).

When Thangam considered him as a brother Kathamuthu did not think like that. He seduced her. It shows that there is no difference between Kathamuthu and Paranjothi Udaiyar and both treat women as a sedative element. These activities express male domination and how Dalit Women are exploited even by men of their own caste.

Imayam's point of view that literature must deal with the core of human relationship, with minimum words and if possible with silence which would convey

more than words. He feels that only literature than can deal with both words and silence would create the space for varied readings. Reflecting on his story *The Begetter* he said:

The objective of my writing is to observe the glories and degradations of human life, to know the moments when human beings succumb to nature and to understand the emptiness of life. Along with the reader, I would also like to raise some questions about life and society looking at the way life is and life happens to be. The novella *Pethavan* is the answer to one such question; it is not a story I have written, rather it is a story written by society.(xxvi)

It is worthwhile to compare the conditions of women portrayed by Iyamam and Arundhati Roy who examine the discriminated status of the women who are denied a life of their own. His short story, *Expectations of a Young Girl*, portrays the voice of scripture and patriarchal authority speaking through as the girl Kokila dreams about her marriage. Iyamam says in the book *An Anthology of Short Stories from Bengal and Beyond*,

There were many alliances that had come seeking Kokila's hand before; especially, a groom from Athur had come and liked her; the boy was good looking and there was no demand from the boy's side. But Kokila refused, mainly due to the reason that she had to continue the practice of relieving herself in the open field for her ablutions as she did in her village. That is why she agreed to marry Selvamani, since he was in Madras and lived in an independent house where there would be a toilet!(504)

Dalit women are not yet completely released from the clutches, of their cruel oppressors. Girl babies are always considered inferior and are given less care. When she

grows up to be a Dalit young woman, she will be sexually molested by the upper caste men. Dalit men enjoy the liberty of falling in love and inter- caste marriage, which are deprived to the Dalit women. All these worst social discriminations and atrocities are excellently portrayed by the Dalit Assistant Commissioner of Police, Kamal Jadhav who faced similar discrimination in her employment. She reports in her interview,

The higher officers from other [non Dalit] castes favor their own candidates, so I could not get a promotion for a long time. They spoiled my confidential report, and that affected my service record. Since we belong to lower- caste back grounds we have to work harder to prove ourselves, our aptitude. Otherwise they always call us names. Sometimes even our community does not understand our problem. I used to commute daily and the officer from our caste complained that I am not punctual. He also tried to transfer me to police station in slums or ones with fewer facilities. However, I have learnt to respond to such discrimination. (n.p)

The women victims of the harsh patriarchal system emerge nevertheless as gritty survivors strong in their tenacious grip on the realities of their world. They are sometimes shrill but always blunt commenting on the state of affairs that swirls around them like an evil milestone. It is as revealing as it is humbling in its implication of what it is to be a female in India, Karam Singh Yadav in the article “Gender Constructions and Patterns of Resistance in Contemporary Dalit Women Writers: A Study of Bama’s Novel *Sangati*, points out that

Dalit family life is male oriented. The biggest hurdle is man. A woman is always restricted even from stepping out of the house by a husband or a

brother or a father. The constant hammering of correct norms of behaviour, of dress, of speech make her feel unequal from childhood itself. These husbands, brothers and fathers need to be freed first if Dalit woman is to be freed.(141)

This definition offers myriad possibilities in the evaluation of self depending on the external and internal factors. Both the writers Sivakami and Imayam explain that the evaluation of self is tremendously more significant for the Indian and the Dalit women of Tamil Nadu than the others because of their predicament as the oppressed of the oppressed and the slave of the slave.

Gowri of *The Grip of Change*, entered a college for her higher education. She was one of the privileged young women to enter the college, with dreams and desires. Nobody really took pains to know who Gowri was. She “blended among the many intelligent and attractive young women in the college and it pleased her”.(95) The entry itself gave her so much of joy and happiness. Gowri was exuberant with joy as she was free from her father’s nagging moments and caste discrimination at the village. The way Sivakami compares her desire to cross boundaries is done in a very beautiful manner.

During floods waters from over flowing wells mingle with the waters of huge water bodies, transgressing their boundaries. Gowri felt that she had crossed over human made boundaries – her father, her caste, and her village – and merged with the ocean of people. But when the rain stops, the floods recede and thorn bushes emerge. Whenever she went back home for holidays, caste revealed its murderous teeth like an invincible monster.(85)

Thus her happiness is only short lived. The Dalit women rarely go out of the city limits and so their experiences are very limited. But women like Gowri and Dhanabhagyam, come out of the family and they have to respond and their response is rejection of social standards, values and the traditional life pattern. When Dhanabhagyam comes back her physical appearance is symbolic of her new life. Gowri, as Kathamuthu criticizes “you go to school in full make up like a movie-extra, a cartload of that black stuff on her eyes ashamed of carrying a sack of rice on her head ”(9).

Sivakami presents her stories with obvious aggressive protest against the oppression of Dalit women. Dalit women are constantly vulnerable to sexual harassment and illtreatment in the world of work. Within the community the power rests with men, caste-courts and churches etc. When her father asked her about her marriage, Gowri protests and vehemently argues with him and the reasons she gives for her refusal were like blows dealt to him. The society thinks that women cannot remain at home without getting married. The condition of women has not improved even after their education Bama also has talked in her novel *Sangati* about the problems she faced because of being a Dalit woman living alone.

. . . when I finished my studies and began to look for jobs, I realized that even with an education one has to face many difficulties when trying to earn a livelihood. Being a Dalit creates a problem. On top of that, being a Dalit woman makes it more difficult. The biggest problem of all, I realized, is trying to live alone as an unmarried Dalit woman . . . because I have remained unmarried all this time, people assume that I have known many men as a prostitute; they gossip about me. They seem to think that once a woman is married and has a tali round her neck, she is also signed,

sealed, and delivered over to one man. They assume that otherwise she is the common property of many fellows, and they will leer at her suggestively. Why? Why shouldn't a woman belong to no one at all but herself?(119-120).

Imayam describes himself as a Dalit writer hailing from agricultural, rural working class background. This self description neatly sums up the social exclusion namely caste, gender and class that he experiences in his own life. In his novel *Arumugam* he discusses the Dalit women's life. While the Dalit women let the male world subject them to unimaginable crude sexual violence and perversity they rebel. This has opened up a whole lot of questions about the traditional understanding of marriage, sexuality, family, man-women relationships and so on.

In the course of her duties, Pushpa Mary developed intimate relations with a Doctor, making her resort to abortions four times. The doctor transferred himself and was now married to someone else.

"Now she hates men as a whole," explained Vasantha. "Oh god, why must these things happen? But there are all kinds of people in the world. The things one has to do to make a living, and keep body and soul together!" Vasantha lamented, as tears filled her eyes.(202-203)

Dalit life especially that of women possesses an innate wisdom born out of their practical experiences of life. They are afraid even to call themselves with their own names. When their husbands left or died the society falls upon them like a bird of prey. Women are supposed to be confined to the four walls of the house and are not given any

freedom in the society. They are marginalized first in terms of gender and then with caste. They are often treated as objects or show-pieces without any identity. Sushila Singh in her book *Feminism and Recent Fiction in English* says,

Woman has not been defined as a subject in her own right but merely as an entity that concerns man either in his real life, or in his fantasy life.

There has enlisted all the same, a distinctively female literature tradition grown out of the anxieties of a women's life situation its "interrupted" nature perhaps, is the reason for a close affinity between women and fiction writing. (qtd in kovilpillai 15)

In India women are treated as inferiors and are considered to be gentle, dependent, submissive and passive. In this point of view Mahasweta Devi's novel *The Glory of Sri Sri Ganesh* unveils the neocolonial problems and tradition of the lower caste women at the hands of the high caste virile Rajputs. She presents the suffering of the lower caste women in Barba village, dominated by the upper caste Rajput males. Mahasweta Devi's discourse that the low caste women always remain mute in spite of all their sufferings is worth considering here.

The sufferings of lower caste women are uncountable. They are abused and exploited as beasts. The novel reveals that a woman is unsafe in the city like Mumbai or in a village similar to Barba. She is always controlled and ruled by men. The social workers were treated like whores and for Ganesh, "women were only commodities for their use."

The woman did not reply. Impossible to. Their role in this life has not been freely chosen by them. Sometimes they are landless farmers evicted

from their land, sometimes kept women – these roles were decided by the higher castes. This time too the women remained silent.(86, 95)

However, all Indian women Sivakami portrays are doubly marginalized. She pictures the caste based slavery of women in India. In their world women are stripped, harassed and molested for a long time. She presents the subordinate position very realistically. The duty of a writer is to hold a mirror to the society and by lending voice to the voiceless she emerges as a fighter for human rights. The Dalit women who are the victims of the society have been exploited and oppressed not only by their men but also by the uppercaste men and women. As a result they have become one of the most exploited and marginalized groups in the society. Both the patriarchy and the caste system are responsible for the oppression of the lower caste women. Veni of *The Taming of Women* is sexually harassed by her own sister's son Manickam.

Did he not know whom he was touching? I am his aunt, for God's sake! Of course he knew it was me; after all, he crossed the other two sleeping beside me to get here. I know I have a reputation. But that does not mean he can do this to me! Isn't fingering me like fingering his own mother? Perhaps he thought it was my cousin. She could not stop fuming. Tears pooled in her eyes. I cannot even speak about this to anyone, lest they split on my face. As it is, my name is in the mud. People will think I am teaming up with Akka to complain about the first wife's son. I still cannot believe where he chose to touch. How do I even look at him tomorrow?(148)

She has to spend a sleepless night due to her mental agony. Imayam's novel *Arumugam* also focuses on the struggle of the Dalit women. The novel is an account of the experiences of the writer and his village people and the prevalent caste discrimination. Another most important aspect of the novel is the plight of the upper women and Dalit women workers who look after and graze the cattle besides preparing food for a large family. Women suffer at the hands of men only because they are women.

The manager's molestations had gone beyond tolerable limits as the days passed. Vasantha was trapped. The watchman, an accomplice of the manager, informed a Krishnapuram youngster of what had occurred. The boy, in turn, threatened Vasantha that he would expose everything to her family, writing it out on the walls of the village, to boot. Vasantha had yielded to him too, helpless, giving up her body to him like a toy in the hands of a child.

News of the transgressions reached the village, nevertheless. Vasantha's brothers, sister-in-law and relations erupted in anger.

"Cut her up and bury her, the brazen little bitch. How dare she, and at her age, too?" "Shave her head – strick her face with black and red dots, and throw her out of the village – the blasted whore's thrown the honour of our Nayudu clan to the winds!(190)

Women have historically been essentialized into silence. It is curious to note that the voices of Dalit women have remained silent even when the silence of upper caste women finds vent and voice in the so called feminist literary representations. Sivakami's

books are an attempt to create a space for Dalit women in the male dominated domain of Dalit literature. Dalit literary writings tend to be male- specific, male-centric and defined by patriarchal representational strategies. Her writings seek to deconstruct the image of the Dalit women in Dalit literature and attempt to reconstruct alternative Dalit female selves. Although efforts have been made to study the thematic issues and narrative aesthetics of Dalit writings not much attention has been paid to the ideological and linguistic questions concerning Dalit women's writings.

Sivakami's work challenges the reigning paradigm of 'dalitist' and feminist discourse by analyzing the overlapping structure of caste patriarchy and gender regulation in an attempt to subvert them both. Men are complicit in considering women as a 'sexual class' within the larger exploited social class, ignoring women's multiple identities like class, caste and gender are inextricably linked and they interact with shape each other, the structure of marriage sexuality and reproduction is the fundamental basis of caste system.

Dalit women's experiences of patriarchal oppression are unique as well as shared with women of other castes. Feminist writers and activists often fail to address the violence against Dalit women as their class based approach to the problems of women sees caste issues as different. The analysis of the gender issues solely on the basis of the material conditions of class overlooking the caste, inevitably ends in essentialism as Sharmila Rege discerningly observes which is very relevant in this regard is quoted by Bindu and Devis Joseph in the article, "The Interstices of Silences and the Experience of the real: The Expression of Dalit Voice in Bama's *Sangati*:"

Since many of the feminists of the 1970s were white, middle class and university-educated, it was their experience, which came to be

universalized as “women’s experience.” Thus sweeping statements such as “all women are niggers” and “all women are dalits” were made. The ambivalence of the left towards women’s issues was thus countered by an assertion that women are essentially connected with other women; the “subjective experiences of knowledge” became the basis of theorizing the universal experience of womanhood. “Experience” thus became the basis of personal politics as well as the only reliable methodological tool for defining oppression. From such an epistemological position, there was either a complete invisibility of the experiences of dalit women or at best only a token representation of their voices. There was thus a masculinisation of dalithood and savarnisation of womanhood, leading to classical exclusion of dalit womanhood.(44)

The struggle of Dalit women against upper-caste atrocities, the practice of untouchability low wages and the oppression by Dalit patriarchy do not figure in the mainstream feminist discourses.

Imayam’s writing radically disrupts the critical and epistemological postulations of feminist and ‘dalitist’ writings with regard to the experiences of the Dalit women. It powerfully voices the concerns of several Dalit women from an insider’s perspective. The gendered caste subaltern’s untold material miseries due to their caste and the patriarchal oppression are to be historicized in order to bring them out of the haziness of timelessness. Hence, *Beasts of Burden* includes case histories of a number of Dalit – women the history of the injustices of caste system is presented through the narrative along with the history of the subaltern patriarchy. Dalit women’s writings have a two – pronged agenda to react against caste oppression and resist Dalit patriarchy.

Dalit women's fiction in patriarchal has successfully resisted the constraints imposed by existing hegemonic discourses and created through positive subversion an independent space for itself. The gendering of Dalit discourse unravels the multilayered structure of oppressed and foregrounds the need for recognizing the challenges from within.(110)

The centralizing of the Dalit male subject and marginalizing of the gendered Dalit in dalitist literary discourses reflect the gender bias inherent in Dalit communities. While attacking the hegemonic articulations of caste and brahminical patriarchy the Dalit writers and intellectuals often observe a sanctioned silence regarding the internal power structures. They tend to evade the very existence of Dalit patriarchy.

It is often argued that the Dalit community women enjoy a freedom and individuality which are denied to their upper caste counterparts especially in their ability to work independently and vocally assert their sexual and reproductive right. Kancha Ilaiah comparing Dalit patriarchy with Hindu patriarchy are quoted in the article "The Interstices of Silences and the Experience of the Real: The Expression of Dalit Voice in Bama's *Sangati*:"

Marriage is a human contract among them. It is governed by the rights guaranteed to women within the broad system of patriarchy. A situation of disrespect to each other's rights can result in breaking that contract and will result in divorce. If after the divorce the man or women comes across another possible partner, either by way of parental arrangement or because of his or her own initiative, such individuals have the right to enter into another contract. Because of these inherently assured rights, a wife does

not have to treat her husband as a God. A Dalit Bahujan woman does not have to perform Padapuja (worshipping the husband's feet) to her husband either in the morning or in the evening. She does not have to address her husband in a way she would address a superior. In a situation of dispute, word in represent to word, abuse for abuse is the socially visible norm. Patriarchy as a system does exist among Dalit Bhujans, yet in this sense it is considerably more democratic.(48)

Sivakami shows how the discrimination of women starts right from birth. A boy child is breast fed longer and given better food and well cared for. Periyannan of *The Taming of Women* did not treat girls and boys with equal concern. He replies that it is the traditional practice in the community. We also see a woman hurrying to attend her crying boy child leaving her child to scream all by itself. Sivakami shows how this internalization of patriarchal norms starts at an early age. For example, in peer group activities, the boy plays the roles of authority while the girls are given subordinate roles. Even in childhood role-playing, wife-thrashing is an accepted pastime.

Periyannan returned in the evening and stepped into Anandhayi's room to look at his newborn child for the first time. Gently he groomed her hair, put the baby on his lap and kissed it with misty eyes. Anandhayi lay there, expressionless, ignoring his actions.

'What the hell do you have to weep for, I say? Why should a woman who's just given birth starve? So, the husband went to a whore, uh! Still, why should you go hungry? Is he all that you have in your life? Don't you have your children, enough wealth? Acres of fields and cattle of your

own? Just because he went off with someone, here she wants to pine away.(17)

In our society caste males always controlled and subordinated the women and Dalit as creature of lesser worth. Women in capitalist society are dominated by men. They have all the power to do in modern economy although women have always worked, they are particularly exploited as low-caste laborers. They have lower pay and less job security than men. The pay rates and work conditions for women are poor in the male valued economic system. The untouchable women are the most economically poor section of the Indian society. These women perform hard domestic work as well as agriculture work. They continue to toil under the burning sun. They are also ready to take up any jobs and they are actively getting involved in different industries like construction works, well digging, they always work hard they are not given any equal wages, security, maternity benefit etc. These women feel proud that they are economically or financially independent to the upper caste women. In that Bama's novel *Sangati* she says,

Paati kept a buffalo and cow, both of which gave milk

Patti brought up and cared for her children by working as a kothachi, they say. This means that she had to go to the big landowners, ask them what sort of labour they needed in their fields, allocate the work among the women in our streets, and then go to work herself. Then in the evening she had to collect all the wages and distribute them.

Mariamamma heard that the builders who were digging in those parts gave good wages . . . only youths and young girls were suited to do that work.

Even through it meant hard labour, the youngsters went to work there hoping to pick up a few coins which would help to fill their bellies.(17-18)

Writer Imayam's work are based on the Dalit world attempts to tease out how the patriarchy works in case of women. Women are wage earners as much as men, engaged in diverse form of arduous, underpaid and unpaid jobs – ploughing, manuring, sowing, weeding, harvesting, digging wells, collecting firewood etc. The men will never let a woman talk loudly or laugh audibly they are allowed to eat only after the men in the family have finished their food. They define their roles as men and women. Shashi Deshpande in her novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* how the women in our patriarchal society explain in the following manner;

That's important . . . A wife must always be a few feet behind her husband. If he is an M.A., you should be a B.A. If he is 5' - 4'' tall, you shouldn't be 5'3'' tall. If he is earning five hundred rupees, you should never earn more than four hundred and ninety-nine. That's the only rule to follow if you want a happy marriage.(34)

Sivakami in the novel *Cross Section* she sets the local reveals the life style of the women in the society. The major character Saro who has the affair with Kumar, after left her husband she joined with him the condition of the women in the society and her maid voice the condition of the women in the society how they suffer under the patriarchal society are portray in the following manner in the conversation between Saro and her husband Ravi;

“After getting up at 4.30 in the morning, I have to get the children ready to go to school. Then I take my bath and go to office; take leave for half a

day; come back and cook; attend to the guests; how'd you expect me to keep awake till 11 pm?"

"So uninvolved you are, aren't you?"

"Ok, I fell asleep. Could you not have woken me?"

"When you are not interested, why should I disturb you?"

"Don't talk about interest or such things! Early in the morning you want to quarrel with me? That's all. I fell asleep, it's my mistake. Sorry."(3-4)

Though silence is more eloquent than words, at times words are needed to drive home the message forcefully and effectively.