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Caste, Gender, Labour and Ecological Interdependence in Imayam's *Beasts of Burden*

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ABSTRACT:

This article offers a critical reading of Imayam's *Koveru Kazhuthaigal* translated into English by Lakshmi Holmstrom as *Beasts of Burden.* Tamil is one of the richest literary languages and Imayam has made significant contributions to Tamil Literature through this novel *Koveru Kazhuthaigal*. He has received many literary awards especially his novel *Sellatha Panam* received *Sahitya Academy Award.* This paper explores the struggles of the washer folk community whose lives are exploited by the caste discrimination, economic exploitation and social marginalization. The title *Beasts of Burden* signifies a metaphor to understand the relationship between human labour and animal burden. Animals like donkeys or mules are employed to carry loads for human beings. Similarly, the washer folk are forced to carry the physical, economic and social burdens thrust upon them by dominant communities. By connecting human exploitation with the use of animals, this paper advocates an understanding of ecological justice which recognizes the dignity of all living beings.

Keywords: Imayam, *Koveru Kazhuthaigal*, *Beasts of Burden*, Caste, marginalizations, Human Animal Relationship, Gender and labour.

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretative research methodology based on close textual analysis of Imayam's *Beasts of Burden*, translated into English by Lakshmi Holmström. The study examines the representation of caste discrimination, gender oppression, labour exploitation and ecological interdependence among the washer folk community. The primary source is the English translation of the novel, while the secondary sources include scholarly books and peer-reviewed research articles on Tamil Dalit literature, caste, Dalit feminism, labour and ecocriticism.

The theoretical foundation of the study is informed by Dalit literary criticism. Kannan and Gros, in their article "Tamil Dalits in Search of a Literature," discuss the emergence and development of Tamil Dalit literary expression and its relationship with the experiences of socially marginalised communities. Their study provides a literary and historical background for understanding the representation of the washer-folk community in Imayam's novel (Kannan and Gros 21–65).

The study also draws upon Dalit feminist criticism to examine the interconnected nature of caste and gender oppression. Sharmila Rege's Writing Caste, Writing Gender provides a framework for understanding Dalit women's experiences through the relationship between caste, gender and social power. Nitya Rao, in her study of Dalit women in rural Tamil Nadu, refers to their "multiple, interlinked identities as women, Dalits, workers, and homemakers" (Rao 410). This perspective is particularly relevant to the experiences of Arokkyam and Mary, whose lives are shaped by caste discrimination, economic hardship, gender-based violence and social restrictions.

Furthermore, the study employs a Dalit ecocritical perspective to investigate the relationship between marginalised communities and the natural environment. Mukul Sharma observes that Indian nature writing has often "missed Dalit literary traditions" (Sharma 1013). This observation provides a basis for examining the ecological dimensions of *Beasts of Burden*, particularly the representation of donkeys, water resources, traditional occupational practices and indigenous environmental knowledge. The study interprets these elements as integral to the community's livelihood, survival and relationship with the natural world.

This novel centres around five members of Arokkyam's family. They are Arokkyam's husband, Savuri, her son Joseph, her daughter Mary and her youngest son Peter. The writer expresses an important representation of the struggles experienced by Arokkyam and her daughter Mary. These two characters reveal different dimensions of gender-based and caste-based oppression.

Arokkyam is the protagonist of the novel. She is known for her hardwork and resilence. As a washerwomen she performs her duties, her work is not at all recognized. She is suffering from continuous hardships, hunger, financial depression and social exclusion. She is trapped and

suffered within the social system that offers her little love and compassion. Her prime concern is the safety and the future life of her daughter Mary. Though she is exploited and has undergone humiliation of begging for '*raachoru*' (night leftovers) her service to the village colony is an absolute moral and economic duty. At the same time she is bold enough to raise questions against even the dominant elder of that village. When a village man Azhagan speaks harshly to her and refuses to give proper wages for her labour she asks,

'If you say that, then where are we to go?'

'What does that matter to me?'

'Saami, we are humble people.'

'There is no place here for a female who talks about justice and the law.'

At the same time she asks herself for the first time and laments,

"I suffered a thousand sorrows

I endured three thousand struggles

In the end what was left?

Just a piece of cloth for my shroud. (Imayam 92)

Arokkyam is closely associated with all the families, especially in Hindu rituals like puberty, childbirth, death and assists them during harvest season. The colony's inhabitants has paid for their work in cooked rice and leftovers every night. The church is far away from her village, even if she wants to attend the church services, she has to get permission from the village people. After her requisition Ramasamy and Chadayan say:

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

'And who's 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.'(Imayam 28-29)

By the time she has got everyone to agree, Arokkyam feels that she has aged ten years in a single week. At the same time the church also fails to wipe out her tears. Arokkyam wants to invite the church priest and talk to the members of the village leaders and there by improve their wages and her financial situation. Imayam portrays how the upper caste community people like Karaikarar and Kothukkaarar deny the basic needs of the marginalized, Arokkyam.

Kannan and Gros's discussion of Tamil Dalit literary expression provides a useful context for understanding Imayam's portrayal of the washer-folk community. Their study highlights the importance of recognising the literary experiences of communities that have historically remained at the margins of dominant social and literary traditions. In this context, Arokkyam's struggle for fair wages and social recognition is not merely an individual experience but represents the wider condition of a community whose labour is essential to village life but whose dignity is denied. (Kannan and Gros 21–65)

Imayam, one of the most signigicant Tamil writers, wrote his first novel 'Koveru Kazhuthaigal', translated as 'Beasts of Burden' by Lakshmi Holmstrom.

Author also describes how Mary has been victimized by Chadayan, a leader of the dominant community. Chadayan can do whatever he wishes. The upper caste men are extremely conscious of caste distinctions and strictly uphold caste hierarchies. Here also Chadayan finds himself alone in the absence of his wife and he shows no such caste consciousness, when Mary comes to his home to collect dirty clothes as a washerwoman. Despite her strong resistance, repeated refusals, and desperate pleas he forces himself upon her. Mary does not have much physical strength and she is simply paralysed with fear and says:

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. (Imayam 126)

Out of fear, Mary remains silent and internalises the blame for the sexual violence inflicted upon her. The villagers instead of questioning Chadayan's conduct, they will accuse Mary of deliberately provoking the upper case man and inviting his advances. Fearing further humiliation, social ostracism and the possibility that Chadayan may instil another washer women family in his village, she chooses to suppress her suffering.

Imayam exposes the double victimization of lower-caste women: they are first subjected to sexual exploitation by upper-caste men and then blamed by the very society that should protect them. Her silence is therefore not an indication of guilt or consent but a consequence of caste oppression, patriarchal domination and social fear.

Mary is not morally weak or easily seduced. She is a victim of male sexual aggression and caste based power. Her resistance to the upper-caste man's advances reflects her dignity ,moral strength and awareness of the unequal power relations between men and women. Her character exposes the vulnerability of lower caste women in a society where caste- privilege and male dominance intersect.

Nitya Rao's study of Dalit women in rural Tamil Nadu is relevant to understanding Mary's experience. Rao identifies the "multiple, interlinked identities as women, Dalits, workers, and homemakers" (Rao 410) that shape women's experiences of social power and inequality. This perspective helps to explain how Mary's position as a lower-caste working woman makes her vulnerable to both gender-based and caste-based oppression. Her experience demonstrates that sexual violence cannot be separated from the unequal social relations that govern her occupation, mobility and position within the village. (Rao 410)

Sharmila Rege's Dalit feminist perspective helps to understand that women's experiences cannot be examined independently of caste and social hierarchy. In Mary's case, her experience of sexual violence is shaped not only by patriarchal domination but also by the caste-based

authority exercised by Chadayan. Thus, Imayam exposes the interconnected operation of caste and gender in the oppression of marginalised women. (Rege)

After knowing the victimization of her daughter, Arokkyam gets angry and afterwards her anger turns into tears. It shows how the power structures work in a society and how the power structure is consolidated by the upcoming generation. Mary's appeal to St.Antony and Mother Mary illustrates how religious faith becomes a language through which suffering can be voiced when social avenues for justice appear limited. Mary sobs and prays:

> Saint Anthony
>
> Saint Anthony
>
> Saint Anthony
>
> O God O God
>
> God should have led her, but even he has no eyes. Now he has destroyed and betrayed us.
>
> Is he likely to rub off and re-write the fate he wrote for us at the moment of our making?
>
> Is this like a head-load that we can remove or change?
>
> Our lives have changed forever
>
> Saint Anthony
>
> O God O God
>
> Blind God, without eyes to see. (Imayam.127)

Here, her prayer also expresses fear, shame and a desire for protection. Christianity is an important part of Mary's life and her religion does not dissolve social hierarchy. Even after embracing Christianity, marginalized people like Arokkyam and Mary continue to experience discrimination based on their caste and social background.

The arrival of new launderers and tailors reduces the earnings of Arokkyam's family and threatens the traditional identity of the washerwoman's community. Arokkyam's nostalgic recollection that 'a Vannan's (Washerwoman's) life is a Prince's life' (294) reveals her attachment to the traditional occupational system. Her lament, 'Truly, People had changed" (134) expresses her anxiety over the loss of traditional customers and the gradual erosion of the family's livelihood. Their crises arises because of the society offers them neither fair compensation for their work nor adequate support to transition into new economic opportunities. This conflict reveals the tension between inherited occupational identity and the desire for economic independence.

The changing economic circumstances of the washer-folk community also reveal the unequal relationship between caste and labour. Their traditional occupation has provided an essential service to the village, yet the workers remain economically insecure and socially marginalised. The decline of their occupation therefore represents more than a change in livelihood; it also indicates the loss of an inherited occupational identity without the assurance of alternative economic security. This aspect of the novel can be understood in relation to Dalit literary criticism, which draws attention to the social and economic experiences of communities excluded from dominant structures of power. (Kannan and Gros 21–65)

The ecological dimension of the novel can be approached through Dalit ecocriticism, which examines the relationship between caste, social marginalization and the environment. Mukul Sharma points out that Indian nature writing has often "missed Dalit literary traditions" (1013). This observation is significant because the natural environment in Beasts of Burden is not simply a scenic background. Water, animals, vegetation and the river landscape are closely connected with the everyday labour and survival of the washer-folk community. The novel therefore invites an ecological reading that recognises the environmental knowledge and practices of socially marginalized people. (Sharma 1013)

Neverthless, the family demonstrates remarkable resilience though its continuous struggle for survival. Imayam thus portrays modernization as a complex process that does not give fruits to all communities equally, particularly whose livelihoods are historically tied to caste-based occupation.

Imayam also portrays the intimate relationship between human beings, animals and the natural environment. For instance they obtain a special breed of donkey from the kuravan community, demonstrating their understanding of animal species and their suitability for their occupation. Similarly, they dig *'thorapaadu',* traditional pits or excavations, to collect and store water for washing clothes. This practice reveals their practical knowledge of water conservation and the sustainable use of natural resources. He writes,

> Each year, during the summer season, Savuri would dif a large pool in the riverbed. Once the rains came, he would have to remake it again and again. During the high summer, there would be water only in the *thorapaadu*, known as the vannan's pool. This water never dried up, even in the months of Chittirai and Vaikasi. The cattle and goats would need to come here to slake their thirst. (Imayam 150)

These practices demonstrate that the washer folk are not merely dependent on nature but are active participants in ecological system. Their livelihood is sustained by their intimate knowledge of animals, soil and water resources. Imayam highlights an indigenous ecological wisdom that modern society increasingly overlooks.

> On both banks of the river, the arali grew in abundance. It had a bright yellow flower. The vegetation was abundant: palm trees, naval fruit trees, screwpine bushes, other plants and creepers. When the floods came, half the trees would disappear into the water. Arokkyam could calculate the depth of the water according to the different trees that had disappeared. (Imayam 153)

The description of thorapaadu reveals the community's practical understanding of local water resources and seasonal changes. Their knowledge is developed through everyday occupational experience and close interaction with the river environment. The washer-folk community is therefore represented not merely as dependent on nature but as possessing knowledge that contributes to the use and conservation of natural resources. This ecological perspective also broadens the meaning of the title *Beasts of Burden*, connecting the burdens carried by human workers and animals with the environmental conditions that shape their lives.

Their relationship with nature is based on coexistence, adaptation and sustainable resource management. Despite their intimate knowledge of nature and their ability to coexist with the natural environment, they are not entirely protected from its dangers. Mary's husband,

Diraviaraj becomes a victim of a snakebite reveals the unpredictable and sometimes destructive side of nature. Diraviyaraj loves Mary dearly. Both of them wash clothes together in *'Thorapaadu'*. After finishing their wash Diraviaraj takes bathe he feels a sharp sting in his leg. He thinks that it may be a thorn and he feels another bite. Paachamuttu Servai is the one who gives medicines to the snake bite as well as for insect, scorpion and bee stings. People get healed with his medicines. Now he gives:

> "Some leaves, poured the juice into Diraviyaraj's mouth and forced him to swallow it. He went insearch of buttermilk and made Diraviyaraj eat some rice mixed into it. He made him bite into green chillies. Diraviyaraj ate twenty chillies. Then he laid his head down and died".(Imayam.327)

Through this incident Imayam reveals nature is both a life sustaining force and a source of vulnerability. Mary's husband death by a snake bite exposes the vulnerability of the marginalized people like Arokkyam whose everyday lives are closely interwined with the natural environment.

At the same time the novel explores the social and emotional suffering of marginalized communities. Mary's sexual exploitation by Chadayan reveals the intersection of caste and gender oppression. Arokkyam's suffering illustrates the hardships of a community struggling to preserve its traditional occupation and dignity. Despite poverty, exploitation and personal tragedies their religious faith provides them with emotional strength and a means of enduring suffering.Ultimately, Imayam presents a world in which human beings, animals and nature are inseparably connected and this interdependence does not give security or equality. The novel draws attention to the ecological knowledge of marginalized communities while exposing the social structures that threaten their survival.

Through the experiences of the washerwoman, Arokkyam and her family, Imayam reminds the readers that exploitation of vulnerable human beings and the neglect of their ecological wisdom are interconnected concerns. Thus, *Beasts of Burden* becomes not merely a narrative of an oppressed occupational community but a powerful literary exploration of ecological interdependence, human dignity, resilience and survival.

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