

Emasculating Caste: Honour killings as portrayed in *Pethavan (The Begetter)*

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Abstract: This paper discusses the idea of honour killings and sexist mentality towards women in the novella *Pethavan* by Imayam which has been translated as *The Begetter* by Gita Subramanian. The paper analyses the caste discrimination and violence against women for the sake of caste chastity which results in the exploitation of Dalits. In Tamil Nadu, many deaths related to honour killing and caste exploitation go unreported or passed off as suicides. Social fiction writers like Imayam have excited the conscience of the general population to understand the tribulations brought about by the terrible social dissimilarities and exploitations. He has reacted sufficiently to the interest of removal of the painful desolations of the socially low-born and low-placed into the world. Imayam makes it a point to make his writings as social eye openers.

Caste pride and considering women as assets are the prime factors behind honour killings. Often, these killings are committed on the fact that women are considered as preserver of the virtue of genealogy. As indicated by Imayam, intermediate communities cannot digest the idea of exchanging their progeny to other downtrodden communities through their women. For this reason, men resort to viciousness when their women fall for Dalit men, yet would not fret their men wedding a Dalit woman.

The novella *Pethavan (The Begetter)* will shake the grounds of disbelief, and influence one to understand the barbarities that are committed in our society. Indian culture is caught up with bragging about the enormous change and advancement in the public eye. This purportedly clears a path for fairness and helping individuals move past rank personalities. Imayam highlights by portraying a stunning story of individuals caught inside the pointed barbed wires of caste pride and honour killing.

Key Words: Caste pride, caste purity, *The Begetter*, *Pethavan*, honour killings

I have certain questions and criticisms about the society in which we live, against its psychology, against its social and cultural values, and about its system of justice. This is the substance

of all my writings. My intension is to raise questions. Raising questions and the quest for answers form the basis of writing; not providing all answers or conclusions or solutions. - *Imayam*.

It was a Sunday. The busy market of Udumalaipettai was thriving with various activities. Suddenly, a few men with sickles landed on the market and started attacking a couple. The husband did not survive but the wife battled for her life with severe head injuries. The whole market was stunned to witness the hoary cinematic incident. And in fact, Tamil Nadu would not forget the name Shankar and Kousalya, who fought a legal battle against her family members including her father. The rest is history. The killing spree in the name of protecting the purity of caste is not new neither to India and nor to Tamil Nadu.

The caste idealists have named this act as honour killing, which has neither honour nor humanism. Whether the conscience of people has approved of it or not, honour killing has come to stay in the society that slurps its bloody tongue on young people who establish their autonomy transcending the caste-creed barriers of the society.

Imyam's *Pethavan*, which has been translated as *The Begetter* by Gita Subramanian, manages to present the idea of honour killings and sexist mentality towards women in the novella *Pethavan (The Begetter)*. It also narrates how parents are forced to kill their children in the name of protecting the purity of caste system.

The writer presents the fact that death is inevitable either for the girl or to the members of the girl's family for she has committed the sin of falling in love with a man of a lower caste. In *Pethavan (The Begetter)*, Palani is expected to kill her daughter Bhakkiyam who has fallen in love with Periyasamy, a dalit. In order to save her daughter Bhakkiyam, Palani commits suicide leaving his wife and second daughter in quandary.

Origin of Caste System

Caste has been a fundamental part of Indian life. Caste has been utilised as an instrument by the power-hungry people and different malignant bodies to control and manoeuvre society. Religion and caste have been the bone of contention in India. Religious and caste clashes have portrayed their pernicious faces every once in a while, damaging the lives of innocent people and unleashing retribution and retaliation in the hearts and psyches of the general population.

There are two stories with respect to the birth of caste system in India. As per the Hindu folklore, four unique types of vitality for humankind were shaped out of Brahma's body. Brahmins were created at

dawn, Kshatriyas at early afternoon, Vaishyas at sunset and Sudras during the evening. It is to be noticed that these were the Varnas [colours] and not positions as now thought of today.

The Rig Veda recounts another account of birth story. It is said that the universe started with the extraordinary penance of the creator. From the head came the Brahmin class, Kshatriya from the arms, Vaishyas and Sudras from the feet. Over the span of its recorded progress, the Hindu dharma made the idea of Varnashra Dharma, which partitioned human race into four fundamental classes: the priests, the warriors, the traders and humble labourers.

This sort of Varnashra Dharma was imagined as a sort of system to encourage the execution of work. Over the span of the recorded progress in Hindu religion, a method for seeing formality as a certified articulation of religion came into vogue. The individuals who performed religious customs were viewed as better than other individuals, offering approach to refinements among people. An expansive gathering of individuals, drove in to destitution and obliviousness and were treated by others as low and sub-human. They turned into the objective of affront and assault and misuses. They were exposed to different sorts of biased frames of mind like rejection from premises of the sanctuaries. Their touch and sight were viewed as sin. Thereof, a blurry anguish built up their life.

Dalit Literature

Dalit writing, a crucial wing of Indian writing, has been conceived out of torment and destitution. Dalit writing, managing the abused, shot into noticeable quality after 1960's beginning with Marathi and was trailed by different dialects like Hindi, Kannada, Telugu and Tamil through accounts like ballads, short stories and collections of memoirs. Dalit writing depends on the encounters the dalits viewed in their reality.

Imayam's In *Pethavan (The Begetter)* is a Dalit writing but the story which revolves around the life of non-dalit girl and her sufferings for falling in love with a Dalit boy who has achieved a socio-economic status through his education and his job.

The pathetic status of Dalits is that they cannot escape their demeaned-dalit identity however they change their status based on their education and job. The Dalit-tag sticks to them and throughout their lives the tag heralds them a scornful and demeaning look from the so-called upper caste people in the society.

Imayam, a standout amongst the most notable writers of the nation, is a teacher in Tamil Nadu. He was granted a Junior Research Fellowship from the Department of Culture, Government of India and respected with a State grant. His works like *Koveru Kazhudhaigal (Beasts of Burden)*, *Arumugam* and *Pethavan (The Begetter)* have built up him as one of the noticeable writers of Dalit writing.

Reflecting on his story *Pethavan* 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 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. (Pethavan, 2015: xxvi)

Imayam's acclaimed novella *Pethavan (The Begetter)* catches the predicaments and difficulty of a father confronting the danger of social boycott and ostracisation and ends his life allowing his daughter to run off with her Dalit lover. It is a story grabbed from the focal point of numerous happenings. It is as fragmented as life itself. The suicide of Palani abandons women of his family to fight for themselves against life and issues in their village.

The story *Pethavan (The Begetter)* shockingly resembles the story of Divya-Ilavarasan romantic tale in Dharmapuri in 2012 and Shankar - Kousalya in Udumlaipetti. There are much more similar stories of Dhivyas and Ilavarasans. The case of Dhivya is more pathetic as she was barbarously assaulted and raped by her very own family members for marrying a Dalit boy besides being lynched by the upper caste people.

As a writer with social consciousness, Imayam records similar events in the life of Bhakkiyam in the novel. The story throws light on the savage act called 'honour killings' done by local panchayats aiming at protecting the purity of their respective caste system.

According to P. Sampath, president of the Tamil Nadu Untouchability Eradication Front (TNUEF.), the death of the Dalit youth Ilavarasan of Dharmapuri district, who married Divya, a Vanniyar girl, has emboldened castiest elements. He has claimed that in the last few years the state had witnessed around 98 honour killings, but most of these cases were covered up as suicides.

He expresses his concern that even though parents accept the inter-caste marriages of their children, the society threatens the parents with weapons such as humiliation, social boycott and ostracization. As a result, parents break the marriage or they forcefully resort to honour killings as they need to be part of the system which is ready to throw them out.

In Hindu religion, one discovers two types of marriages - Anuloma (hypogamous) and pratiloma (hypergamous). While the previous is endured however not encouraged, the last is cruelly sentenced as it

alludes to marriage between a lower varna man with a higher varna woman. As per Manusastra, the progeny of a Shudra man and a Brahmin woman are the 'fierce' untouchables. (Doniger and Smith 1992: 236).

Imayam's *Pethavan (The Begetter)* hurls light on the treatment of women who are continually sexualized and commodified and are under a steady danger of assaults and rapes. Every single line of *Pethavan* filled with powerful feeling of desperation; there is nothing excessively abrupt and nothing excessively inconspicuous. This cruel truth is depicted in a straightforward story of battle and enduring. With each turn of the page, the reader cannot overlook or maintain a strategic distance from caste bitterness unbridled in our society.

Pethavan (The Begetter) portrays the breakdown of a poor Hindu family after a young woman in the family gets into a relationship with a Dalit man. The lead character in the story, Bakkiyam, becomes hopelessly enamoured with Periyasamy, a Dalit man while at college. At the point when their relationship is at long last found by the town people, they restrict the relationship. The endeavours of the couple to run off from the town flop hopelessly as the locals figure out how to stop them and severely rebuff them by pummelling them in general visibility. At the point when they endeavour to run off the third time they are gotten and a request is passed for her 'honour killing'. The panchayat allots this job of killing the girl to her father Palani himself. They additionally caution that if the woman is not killed, she will be assaulted and killed by the locals. To stay away from such a radical loathsomeness, Palani consents to kill his daughter. Capitulating to the supplications of Bakkiyam's grandma, mother and sister, Palani chooses to conflict with the panchayat's choice and plans to spare his daughter. The same night, Palani makes Bakkiyam elope with Dalit boy Periyasamy.

In the story, Imayam in his typical style goes specifically into the fury filled and tense event when Palani, Bhakkiyam's father who was mortified by the upper-caste crowd and women who sneered, embarrassed and offended him for not taking care of business to murder his daughter. The disposition of the group towards Bhakkiyam is so bitter to the point that she is frequently depicted as an animal in heat.

All through the novella, Imayam makes it a point to highlight that caste violence has no gender and no age. This view is purportedly expressed by a young mother towards Bhakkiyam. She says: "You should pour pesticide down her throat and lock her in a room. However, much she screams or shouts, don't open the door and don't give her even a mouthful of water. In a very short while the story will be over." (Pethavan, 2015: xxvii)

Another villager suggests an easy way to execute the murder of Bhakkiyam:

It won't even take the time to take a piss - just take the sari she is wearing and twist it tight around the neck and hold it - and finished. Then, if you cremate with four kilos of sugar added to the logs, in just half an hour everything will be ashes. Then, gather it all up and throw it into the tank. Only then will the females of this village know some fear. *Pethavan (The Begetter)* 6-7

Imayam's *Pethavan (The Begetter)* hurls light on the treatment of women who are continually sexualized and commodified and are under a steady danger of assaults and rapes. As opposed to the youthful mother, Bhakkiyam's grandma is depicted as a woman with expansive outlook. She, at a few events, addresses the standards of the general public. She beseeches her son Palani not to murder Bhakkiyam. She likewise indicates out the two-fold standard of the male dominated society existence where men marrying women of the lower-rank is allowed and not vice-versa. She additionally questions why just women must be rebuffed for settling on a decision.

The novella beautifully portrays the status of women. The women are always questioned for everything besides being made into commodities. Women whether she belongs to upper caste or lower caste, suffer at the hands of men and women as in the case of Bhakkiyam in *Pethavan (The Begetter)*. Bhakkiyam receives threat of rape and humiliation from her kith and kin in various aspects. Bhakkiyam is constrained into turning into a casualty of customary and social aspects such as respect, caste, religion and different ethics. "About twenty and thirty young men took off their dhotis and exposed themselves saying "This is what you are running after- how many do you want-take!". *Pethavan (The Begetter)* 21.

Imayam also exposes that women, educated or uneducated, are just treated as mere sexual objects. Women are mere objects of lust for men. Besides, any act of autonomy of woman is attributed as an act of lust. Throughout the book, Bhakkiyam is presented as an animal in heat. The villagers showcase their anger – anger to save caste purity, anger against women's education and fear of women who would refuse to subjugate.

So, she did not like our boys? Her privates should be churned with a large truncheon. Only then will she be rid of her heat. Because they have been made to sit in the shade of the school house, they go around the village looking for fodder. If we take her to the cashew plantation and beat her up, she will be rid of her heat very easily! *Pethavan (The Begetter)* 11

The male 'subject' expects the gendered subalterns 'the other' to remain mere shadows of their subjects. The patriarchal society has made it rigid that gendered subalterns cannot speak. Bhakkiyam's mother Samiyammal words reveal that she has lost her love for her daughter. She utters the following words

with a vengeance: “The same as Maama. Bring me a bottle of Polidol. I will turn her into ashes without anyone seeing what happened.” *Pethavan (The Begetter)*³

In her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, Spivak states that “Subaltern cannot Speak” by introducing the factor called elements of noise. The communication between the male ‘subject’ and the gendered subalterns ‘the other’ is lost due to noise, which is influenced by racial, cultural, caste, socio-economic factors. The aim of communication is to convey the desired message to the receiver. In the case of the subalterns, communication is interrupted by the elements of noise.

Though the novel talks about Bhakkiyam, an upper caste woman and her sufferings at the hands of her own kith and kin, Imayam subtly weaves the life of Dalit man Periyasami and oddities he faces in his life. It is very pathetic to note that Periyasami does not receive his due respect as a sub-inspector. He is perceived as a Dalit first and as a sub-inspector later. He is not allowed to transcend the caste barriers in spite of his education and socio-economic status.

We’ve beaten up that fellow four times at Vridhachalam bus stop. Making it appear to be an accident, twice we set fire to his house. In the dead of night, we freed the goats and the cows tethered in his house. Once we slaughtered two of his goats and ate them. We set fire to his cane fields. We set up caste panchayats and had him fined five times. His parents have been tied up and beaten black and blue; ... *Pethavan (The Begetter)*⁴⁻⁵

Imayam, set on thinking about society and the human condition, expects on bringing up issues we don't normally address. The father figures out how to break societal system and influences his little girl to escape from the town, for all he needed was for her to be alive and happy. The passionate, heart-tearing scene of Bhakkiyam's blame and her last cry of endeavored recovery can lessen any connected with reader to tears. While the story gradually advances amidst perplexity and vulnerability, the end is the thing that will stun you.

In the morning those who went to the fields came running back and said, “Vandikkaran House Pazhani has consumed Polidol and is lying dead in the fields. The dog is running in circles around the dead body. The whole area is reverberating with its howls. *Pethavan (The Begetter)*⁵²

The father, who abandoned his own life to spare his daughter’s, said in a town panchayat some time back in the story, "kill her. Tomorrow, by this time, my daughter’s corpse will burn” *Pethavan (The Begetter)*¹².

Pazhani gave her copious chances for suicide for substantiating her autonomy in choosing her own partner. Not once did Pazhani prevent the residents from beating his girl with a wooden log. Palani was so frail before these superstructures that work on political and cultural dimensions.

In *Pethavan (The Begetter)*, Imayan strikes the crude nerve of the general public about the inter-caste marriage especially hypergamous marriage. It also stresses the need to deal with sensitive issues collectively so that violence in the name of honour killing can be alleviated.

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