

The Voice of the Voiceless: A Study of Sivakami's The Taming of Women

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Abstract: My present paper reflects the trials and tribulations of the Dalit women in the patriarchal society. Besides, it shows the harsh realities prevailing in Indian society in which the women have been caught in the clutches of men and have become victims and accepted their unchangeable fate. Her novel articulates the voice of the voiceless women. They are forced to go through many trials and tribulations in course of their life and accept them as if they are an integral part in the women's life in Indian society.

Keywords: sexploitation, vulnerability, oppression, patriarchy, subalternism.

The Taming of Women (2012) is the second novel of Sivakami in Tamil language. It is translated by Pritham.K.Chakravarthy from Tamil into English. Sivakami in this novel basically portrays the trials and tribulations and the miserable plight of women and how they are subjugated and dominated by men in patriarchal Indian society. She categorically explains about the ages and generations of women who are forcefully made to undergo physical assault, sexual exploitation, gender discrimination and incestuous violence. She also depicts how the beautiful woman is forced to end her colourful life due to unbearable torture. They donot show respect to the women. Hence, dignity of women is still a question mark in most of the places in the world. The problem arises whenever women claim their demands. So empowered woman is a threat to male domain, male power and male authority. In a way, men always attempt to control women both strategically and systematically. They always thwart the voice of women and they deny their literacy and economic rights.

The feminist movement of sixties gives a huge impetus to women who are seeking equality rights. They could empower themselves through voice and literary by which they are able to dismantle the barriers set up by men. Writing becomes a powerful instrument for women to raise their voice. But the feminist movement in India consciously excludes Dalit women as marginalised and stigmatised within the predominant caste system. In a way, Rege asserts that “in the women’s movement..... caste rarely was discussed as it was assumed that caste identities could be transcended by the larger identity of sisterhood among women” (Rege,2). But later on, the caste ingredients ironically become a dividing factor both in the struggle against male oppression and also against the participation in the mainstream literary canon. Hence, this very exclusion paradoxically injects power to lead Dalit women’s separatist movement and literary expression. In this way, it is assumed that novel as a literary genre becomes a significant instrument to express the voice of Dalit women. So, they begin to challenge the caste-centered narratives in order to create a separate literary canon for them.

The novel *The Taming of Women* – portrays the discrimination between men and women in which women have to pass through manifold trials and tribulations in course of their lives in a small village. The story tells about the wretched life of Anandhayi who is married to a womanizer, Periyannan. Periyannan who is a contractor, is not content with the wealth that his farms bring him. He has an insatiable desire for power that money can only bring him. Besides, he has also an appetite for women in terms of physical needs. His only desire is to have sex with them. It does not matter for him whether she may be his wife, his concubine, his old and ailing mother, and his daughters and so on.

The novel also depicts the conflict between the village patriarch Periyannan and his wife, Anandhayi. Though Anandhayi has a voice of assertion and spiritual fortitude to question her husband’s tyranny, gradually and characteristically submits to the hands of male authority and is tamed to silence. In a way, the novel reflects the marginal position of women that has designed their ‘silenced’ identities. This ‘silenced spaces of women perpetuate the absence and the voiceless condition of woman. This is really a strategy of male structured society to dominate women. In this perspective, Kate Millet argues that women are mere victims of sexual politics in

which she defines “the term ‘politics’ shall refer to power – structured relationship, arrangement whereby one group of person is controlled by another”(Millet, 23).

In the novel, Sivakami portrays the real sufferings of women at the hands of men in the marginalised community. Anandhayi, the wife of Periyannan is about to give birth to a baby and she suffers a lot with pain. During this time Periyannan is sleeping with another woman in upstairs in his house. Even if he does not come to see her and to take care of her. He does not have any affection to her wife, Anadhayi. Rather he inflicts pains on her and illtreats her both physically and psychologically. Anandayi’s labour pain for her fifth child is obviously crucial moment of her life whereas her husband’s sleeping with a prostitute upstairs at that moment is worth mentioning. Sivakami shows minutely the dual role of typical Indian male who has a greater ambition of acquiring wealth in order to enjoy material comforts and to conquer women at the same time. Hence, the perverted male structured society always tries to equate material acquisition with the conquest of women. Here, Periyannan has an insatiable hunger for acquiring more and more money and for expanding his business, keeping with desire, he wants to make illicit affair one after one with the women. He tortures and assaults them sexually Anandhayi is the testimony to the patriarchal oppression in this novel.

Anadhayi prays to god,saying: “Sami.... let the slut come down and she will get it from me. She who has climbed up has to climb down” (Sivakami, 94).

When she climbs down the stairs, Ananadhayi caught hold of her hair and shouts at her. Hearing the voice, her mother – in – law wakes up but suddenly Periyannan comes rushing towards her and gives the woman release from the clutches of Anandhayi’s grip and pushes her aside, Anandhayi falls to the ground with a loud sob and she delivers to see the new born baby and leaves her wife and goes upstairs. He does his duty everyday asusual. He wakes up in the morning and goes out for work and comes back home in the evening. But he does neither take care of his wife nor his new born baby. He is nearly a cruel representative of the male structured society. Anandhayi is suffering from depression and disappointment during this moment. Her mother-in-law advises her in this moment of crisis: “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 he wants to pine away. After all there are five children; can't she just wash her hands off him forever?" (Sivakami, 17).

Anandhayi has to face a lot of problems in order to bring up her children like Kala, Dhanam and Arul. In a state of destitute, she asserts that:

"Having a girl in the house is like having a fire in the belly.... I will have peace only when I hand her over to a husband." (Sivakami, 108)

Hence, all men select women just for physical gratification. They only see the women who are befitted into the household chores and produce children. In this perspective, Sivakami is more critical of it to raise voice against such oppression.

Periyannan is the antagonist of the novel whose prime duty is to bring down the women under his control through sex and power. Muthakka who is engaged as a maid in Periyannan's house, comes to help Annandayi in her household chores until she got back to normal form from her delivery. Periyannan, a womanizer whose basic intention is to seduce women at any cost. So, he does not want Muthakka to leave. He insists upon her to stay few more days. He goes "brushing against her body, Periyannan walked out of the kitchen" (7). His sheepish attitude is revealed when "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" (Sivakami, 21).

As soon as he heard his wife's voice, he moves to the fields. Hence, it is proved that Periyannan is not satisfied with a single woman. He is really an instrument of demoralising the society. He wants to take the virginity of women one after another. This is naturally a pathetic and tragic situation for the women to lead a secure life. Women are considered as an object of desire to the male and they commodify woman's body as for their sexual needs.

When Periyannan goes out to the town for work, he gets introduced to Lakshmi with whom he falls in love with her. Later on, he continues this secret relationship though he has a family, his wife and children. He makes frequently the physical relationship with her. At last, he

invites her and brings her at his home in the time of his daughter's marriage. He does not maintain a good relationship with her. He keeps her at his home as for physical satisfaction. He does not give her freedom. By maintaining a secret illicit relationship with Lakshmi, Periyannan does not love and care for his righteous wife, Anandhayi. Hence, in this way, the women in the male structured society are betrayed, tortured and assaulted by the hands of male members. Through the wretched condition of Anandhayi and Lakshmi, Sivakami wants to voice against Dalit patriarchy.

Whenever Lakshmi comes to the life of Periyannan, he does not provide money to Anandhayi. She has to lead a life in distress. Besides, Periyannan provides a separate room for Lakshmi in upstairs. There Lakshmi is tormented and almost butchered by Periyannan physically and sexually. Periyannan's preferred love for Lakshmi is only her attractive physical body. He is constantly insecure about her. He does not allow her to talk to anybody. While he inflicts violence upon his wife as a matter of right and pins her down through recurring pregnancies in case of his concubine, he literally locks her up in a room, comfortably furnished but cut off from human contact. Food for Lakshmi is pushed through the door by one of his daughters and a maid follows her like a shadow. Imprisoning or holding captive a woman's body, injecting psychological torment is a strategy used by Periyannan to wield power and authority over women.

Periyannan does not provide sufficient money to his wife to run his family while she buys precious and expensive gifts for Lakshmi either by selling his part of land or by mortgaging his house to anyone else. As a husband, he has really committed a crime by depriving his own wife and daughters. In a way, he is a womanizer in the true sense of the term. Unable to bear such inhuman torture and humiliation, she wants elope first with a lorry driver and then with Manickam, a young rich son of Periyannan's arch enemy Kangani. Periyannan rescues her each time by hiring a taxi and sending a vast amount of money to hunt her down and brings her home. His only desire to keep her with him is to make physical relationship with her. To him, the food for hunger is her attractive physical body. Periyannan is rich and wealthy and belongs to the upper

caste community. So, he does not care and respect the needs and wants of a poor woman like Lakshmi. She is reduced to a mere body and mere sexual commodity.

From Periyannan, Mani, his son also gains and learns the role of patriarchal authority. After the first elopement of Lakshmi, Periyannan and Mani both drag her from the gate to the room and beat her too much. Hence, both the father and the son play the crucial role of patriarchy where no woman is left out whether she may be the unmarried daughter and sister. They resent the visits of the married ones to their natal home. Though Lakshmi is concubine, she as a woman longs for love and care. By enduring a lot of humiliations, she wants to lead a comfortable and peaceful life, which is reflected in her assertion:

“It is not that I want sex that desperately. I want love, a relationship, a support, a comfort, a kind word not like this, everyday torture, kicks, punches and slander” (Sivakami, 216).

Though she wants to lead a new lease of life, circumstances do not allow her to remain such. She has to witness a tragic death at the end of the novel. Her frustration and depression stimulate her to commit suicide and die. She consumes poison to free herself to ceaseless torture. At death she finds freedom and liberation from the inhuman torture. Hence, she affirms her claim to an identity beyond the body.

Periyannan is really intolerant in terms of his daughters but he loves his sons too much. Danam, who uses speech in a more subversive way than the other daughters, is thrashed the most. Kala, an assiduous reader amongst the three is taken out of school forcibly. Besides, Arul, the most imaginative and cherished by her father having brought him luck at her birth, is forced out of home. But the two sons are really never shown to be beaten by his father if they have done misdeed. He always gives priority to the male members and women are only his object of pleasure. So, the discrimination of gender is obviously deep rooted to the society.

Besides, Periyannan's daughters do not get share of their father's property. They forcibly got married before they turn fifteen. They are deprived of all privileges. But, Arul who is an intelligent and imaginative girl, announces her wish to remain unmarried and denounce

motherhood. Arul is the mouthpiece of Sivakami through which she wants to ventilate her spleen against all oppressions and to resist against the so-called rigid norms of the patriarchy.

Periyannan is so cunning that he does not his daughters to be educated. He knows that if they become literate, they do not remain under his clutches. Hence, he does not send any daughter to any academic institution to study. Though Kala is a studious girl and a voracious reader of fiction, he prohibits her to continue her study. Once she borrows books from her friends and reads at her home. But, when Periyannan looks at her reading, he quickly snatches the books and interrogates:

“From where did you procure this?” Again, he raises a question: “How dare you bring books over from a male fellow? Has your mother let you loose on the streets?”(Sivakami, 148).

Hence, a question comes to our mind that “being born as a woman on this earth is the sin on her part.”

Sivakami depicts the deplorable condition of women in Indian society. Vellaiyamma who is the mother of periyannan, does not want to remain under the domain of male structured society. She wants to live by using her own finances. If anyone gives advice to her to depend on and live by son’s income, she gets infuriated and raged. She usually avers:

“I am an able woman. Why do I have to depend on him? I will eat from my earnings” (Sivakami, 63).

Sivakami’s depiction of ‘able woman’ like vellaiyamma is worth mentioning and by which she wants to break the shackles of patriarchy.

At the end of the novel, Anandhayi got angry at the frequent tortures and betray put forward by her husband. As she raises her voice against patriarchy and puts question to her husband:

“Sure I sit home entertaining every passer-by. Who is here to stop me? Because you want to hide, your shady doings, you are shifting blame on me. How fair is that” (Sivakami, 59).

Hence, Sivakami's women in the novel *The Taming of Women* are not generally subjugated to male chauvinism rather they flare at the oppression inflicted by men. They bring feminist consciousness to empower themselves as Dalits and women in order to emerge as free individuals. The question of fidelity is a burning question where it cannot be seen as an important quality by men but the same behaviour in females is cause for comment. So, Sivakami teaches the readers how a woman is being treated in the society and how she should be treated. She raises her voice against the so-called rigid discrimination in terms of caste, creed and gender and wants to bring equality among people in the society.

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