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Literary Resistance in Contemporary Dalit Feminist Fiction: A Study of P. Sivakami's *The Grip of Change* and Meena Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess*

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Abstract
Dalit feminists have critiqued the conceptions of genderless caste and casteless gender in the discourses of Dalit and feminist movements in India since the 1990s. Bringing this critique into the literary and cultural sphere, this paper studies the different literary techniques used to resist the oppressions faced by Dalit women in contemporary Indian society. The modes of resistance in the artistic choices made in literary fictions by contemporary Dalit female authors are studied by closely reading *The Grip of Change, and Author's Notes* by P. Sivakami and *The Gypsy Goddess* by Meena Kandasamy. Using textual and formal analysis, this paper will identify the literary devices used in these works of contemporary fictions, to not only represent the oppressions faced by Dalit women, but also textually resist the oppressive forces of caste and gender. I will argue that through such literary resistance, Dalit feminists radicalise the political unconscious of the contemporary Indian society.

Keywords
Dalit Feminism, Contemporary Indian Fiction, Literary Resistance, Political Unconscious, Narrative Radicalisation, Caste, Gender

> Carrying the tales of their cunts and their cuntrees and their cuntenants, women cross all hurdles, talk in circles, burst into tears, break into cheers, teach a few others, take new lovers, become earth mothers, question big brother, breathe state secrets, fuck all etiquette and turn themselves into the truth-or-dare pamphleteer who will interfere at the frontier. And in these rap-as-trap times, they perceive the dawn of the day and they start saying their permitted say.
>
> – Meena Kandasamy, *The Gypsy Goddess*, 2014, p. 67

When the human body becomes a site of inarticulable violence, how does one make sense of the world around them? This poetic prose quoted above is precisely this attempt to paraphrase the ways in which such bodies defy oppressive forces and continue to occupy the spaces that are denied to them. Despite being trapped into carrying the reminders and threats of violence on their gender- and caste-marked bodies, Dalit women refuse to remain silent. They recognise the need to speak out, or rather, 'perceive the dawn' of a revolution. Unable to coherently narrate the pain and suffering caused by a patriarchal and casteist society, they dissent – even if it means talking in circles, bursting into tears, or breaking into cheers. They continue to foster interpersonal relationships, becoming teachers, mothers, lovers, sisters, citizens. After all, it is not just the tales of their own bodies they carry, it is the tale of the collective – of entire 'cuntrees' and 'cuntenants', with the marker of the body retained by Kandasamy through clever wordplay. After all, when democratic protests – 'hunger strikes, hartals and road rokos, demonstrations and processions' – are not enough to quench their defiance, their protests shall 'take dramatic forms' (Kandasamy, 2014, p. 81). This paper is an attempt to closely study such dramatic forms of protest by contemporary Dalit women.

In this paper, I closely study the language and narrative modes of Dalit Feminist literature to better understand the language and significance of its politics in the contemporary world. I textually and formally analyse two novels by Tamil authors: *The Grip of Change, and Author's Notes* by P. Sivakami and *The Gypsy Goddess* by Meena Kandasamy. The importance I give to analysing the formal aspects of these novels stands to acknowledge and highlight how language, characterisation, plot, humour, and other literary devices used in these texts work to destabilise the realist novel form and resist their reading as merely representational. In other words, I argue that Dalit feminist fictions are a 'dramatic form of protest' – or, what I call 'literary resistance' – against the oppressive forces of patriarchy and casteism. To carry the argument forward, the basic aspects and purpose of Dalit aesthetics as well as the critiques of the Dalit and feminist movements by contemporary Dalit feminists will firstly be discussed. Using this theoretical and historical framework of both movements as well as their shortcomings, I will then analyse the two chosen novels to argue for the place of Dalit feminist fictions in the political landscape of contemporary Indian society.

Introduction: Against genderless caste and casteless gender

> For a lot of people, even just talking about Dalit literature or about Dalit feminism is something they cannot bear. For the past ten years or more, a lot of people in a lot of situations have been debating whether or not Dalit literature is needed, who may write Dalit literature, whether or not there is such a thing as Dalit feminism, whether we should or should not write about the internal caste divisions among Dalit people, whether people who create Dalit literature should write only about Dalit people, whether Dalit literature should be like this, or like that, and on and on. And they have questioned whether or not anything that is written by Dalits automatically becomes Dalit literature.
>
> – Bama, *Dalit Literature: My Own Experience*, 2011

Speaking about the reception of her works and experience, another Dalit feminist writer Bama Faustina Soosairaj points out the issues with categorising a literary work: What makes Dalit literature, what does it entail, and who writes it? Specifically discussing about her landmark autobiographical work Karukku (1992) with respect to the place of Dalit literature in the Tamil literary milieu, Bama talks about how the literary devices, style and diction used in her work raised questions about the kind of literature it is; 'they decided that this is Dalit literature, that it is a new arrival to Tamil, and that this is a book that speaks in Dalit language about Dalit culture' (2011). Sharankumar Limbale (2004) has defined Dalit literature in a similar vein, as 'writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness', and he argues that its purpose is primarily 'to inform Dalit society of its slavery, and narrate its pain and suffering to upper caste Hindus' (Limbale, 2004, p. 19). The articulation of suffering and oppression endured by the community is therefore central to this categorisation of literature; as Limbale suggests, 'This literature is but a lofty image of grief' (Limbale, 2004, p. 30). In this definition, representation becomes one of the most important functions of Dalit literature.

Having been deemed 'impure' and thus relegated to the margins of society, Dalit literature emphasises the expression of a collective anguish particular to the Dalit community and hence, in its very form, assumes a social character. This kind of a social and collective nature then calls for themes of rejection and revolt 'directed against an inhuman system that was imposed on them' within these writings (Limbale, 2004, p. 31). In other words, Dalit writers insist on a specific aesthetic – one that is 'life-affirming and realistic' (Limbale, 2004, p. 19). Such a conceptualisation of an aesthetic necessarily focuses on the material and social aspects, as opposed to the traditional, upper caste aesthetic of 'satyam, shivam, sundaram', which translates to truth, divinity/the holy, beauty.[1] However, this importance given to the social value of Dalit literature does not mean that these works are read simply as biographical or ethnographical accounts. Pramod Nayar (2011) writes about the dangers of such a reading:

> Treating these texts simply as sociological tracts on the Dalit condition is to ghettoise them and reject their attempts to develop a distinctive form and voice. It also absolves literary critics from addressing questions of language and narrative modes – they simply consign them to the category of 'authentic representations of the Dalit experience' or affix a label such as 'political/subversive texts' […] Politics of any kind has a language, and subaltern, victim, atrocity texts deploy particular kinds of narrative modes. (Nayar, 2011, p. 366)

Studying the language and narrative modes of Dalit literature *in addition to* its representational function becomes crucial in order to understand the language and significance of its politics in the contemporary world, and thus avoid ghettoisation.

While this paper focuses on the modes of articulation of suffering in specific works of Dalit literature, it is pertinent to dwell upon the kind of representation and expression of suffering Limbale centralises in his theorisation of Dalit aesthetics. The experience of anguish is a 'collective experience' rather than an individual one; he argues that even in writing about the life one has lived, experienced, or seen, the character of its expression is necessarily collective as it stems from their desire for freedom (Limbale, 2004, pp. 31–32). Given the focus on the term 'collective' here, it becomes pertinent to ask: Are everyone's voices being heard through the collective experience of the Dalits? Would the impulse to formulate and theorise a Dalit aesthetic encompass the voices of those who are doubly marginalised within this community? In her introduction to the book *Writing Caste/Writing Gender* (2006), Sharmila Rege points out that one of the important challenges to the scholarship on caste came from Dalit feminist critiques of both the Dalit and feminist

[1] Limbale argues that the concept of *satyam*, *shivam*, *sundaram* is a 'selfish mechanism of upper caste Hindu society' that has been fabricated to divide and exploit people. He instead proposes an aesthetic centred on Humanity (Limbale, 2004, pp. 20–22).

movements in India in the 1990s, raising questions about their conceptions of genderless caste and casteless gender, respectively (Rege, 2006, pp. 3–4). While the narration or articulation of a collective anguish of the Dalit community stresses on caste and class identities, the positionality of gender cannot be ignored. After all, the term 'brahminical patriarchy' is used precisely because brahminism 'aspires to control the reproduction function of all bodies' (Soundararajan, 2022, p. 150). Uma Chakravarti explains that 'caste and patriarchy in the social formation of early India required not only a control of women's reproductive power of the upper castes, through whom the closed structure of land and ritual quality was to be preserved, but also of all castes to ensure an adequate labour supply' (Chakravarti, 2018, p. 33). Gopal Guru (1995) argues that Dalit women 'talk differently' on the basis of an 'internal factor' on the one hand, where patriarchal forces work within the Dalit community as Dalit men reproduce – against the women of the community – the same mechanisms of oppression used by the upper caste (Guru, 1995, pp. 2548–2549). On the other hand, the issues of Dalit women are homogenised by non-Dalit forces in feminist movements, forming the 'external factor' for their 'talking differently' (Guru, 1995, p. 2548). This kind of elision of Dalit women's voices hinders the representation of the social realities that has been emphasised in both anti-caste and feminist movements, especially from an epistemological standpoint: 'the less powerful members of a society have a more encompassing view of social reality than others because their disadvantaged position grants them a certain epistemic privilege over others' (Guru, 1995, p. 2549).

It is such an understanding of the need for an epistemological perspective that also brought about a significant shift in feminist movements across the world in the 1980s and 1990s. Feminist discourses stated that there exists a political system of male domination in the public and private spheres of this society. The attempt to restructure such a social order, however, must not forget the intersecting forces of power relations that exist in this complex society. The voices of 'womanhood' in the mainstream global feminist discourses had been dominated by white, middle class, educated feminists, leading to exclusions around race, class, ethnicity, caste, etc. in the conceptualisation of a new social order (Rege, 1998, p. WS40). After all, '[t]he articulation of any inquiry is not free from the influence of the socio-economic-political status of the articulator' (Arya & Rathore, 2019, p. 137). Feminist movements across the globe have therefore emphasised the need to consider the differences in experiences of women due to identities of race, class, sexuality, disability, caste, etc. since the 1980s. This meant that there has been a rejection of universalism and collectivities in favour of 'difference' and 'fluid, fragmented subject' in feminist analyses (Rege, 1998, p. WS40). In the specific context of Indian Feminist thought, Sunaina Arya and Aakash Singh Rathore (2019) identify two major challenges to the development of a 'more authentic feminist theory': Firstly, caste-privileged feminists have been at the forefront of the discussions, claiming to represent all Indian women's issues. Secondly, there is an inability to homogenise the category of 'woman', and therefore a contemporary theory of gender seems to be impossible in India. The latter challenge noted here seems to be in response to the former; in fact, this emerges from the critique of the movement from the Dalit feminist camps itself according to Arya and Rathore (Arya & Rathore, 2019, p. 1). Rege argues that such an inability to categorise 'woman' stems from the centrality of 'difference', where plurality replaces a politics of agenda (Rege, 1998, p. WS40). This leads to the danger of lack of engagement in the political arena of feminist movements in India, where caste would be seen as the concern solely of Dalit women, leaving upper caste feminists to abstain from critically engaging with the complex history of caste and gender oppressions; or, Dalit feminists assume an 'impossibility in transcending caste identities', thus equating upper caste with brahmanical (Rege, 2006, pp. 3–4). This would be the result of simply naming the differences that exist, dissolving the struggles of women to identitarian politics agenda (Rege, 1998, p. WS39). Instead, the differences must be historically located in constructing the category of 'women' within the specific social contexts of their struggles.

Although a digression from the original discussion of Dalit politics and aesthetics,

the above paragraph highlights the need to consider caste within the contemporary Indian feminist discourses since the 1990s, mirroring the need for gender to be considered within Dalit movements outlined earlier. Anupama Rao also notes how the anti-caste struggles for 'equality, rights, and recognition […] have complemented similar struggles by feminists, yet they have not led to the formation of alliances between feminists and anti-caste activists until quite recently' (Rao, 2003, p. 2). There is therefore a need to work within the intersections of caste and gender. Moreover, focusing on this intersectionality allows us to 'unearth how in various complex and everyday ways these intersect to shape the conditions of marginalities and the complex histories of oppression' (Banerjee & Ghosh, 2019, p. 7). While intersectionality of caste and gender are explored in several ways in contemporary society, this paper focuses on the literary renditions of representation and resistance. In this vein, the current paper aims to demonstrate, through textual analysis, that contemporary female Dalit fiction is an important area of study to locate the differences and delineate the category of Dalit woman within the specific social contexts of their struggles. This is traced not merely through the representation of the oppressive powers of brahminical patriarchy, but, more importantly, through their forces of resistance against such dominant powers. This will be achieved through closely reading the devices of literary resistance in the two chosen works of fiction, to finally argue for the place of Dalit Feminist aesthetics within the political movements of contemporary India.

Writing from the margins: Literary works of Dalit feminists

> When the margin is the centre, every word becomes an arena for contestation.
>
> – Meena Kandasamy, *And One Shall Live in Two…*, 2007, p. 197

How do Dalit women navigate an arena where both Dalit and feminist movements in their immediate social reality are at the point of mobilisation? Is it possible to speak out against marginalised groups, when the dominant discourses, including that of the marginalised, keep a section of that group in a double bind of discrimination? This would include an insistence on plurality and difference within communities, and a continuous resistance to oppressive forces in our everyday lives. Female Dalit fiction is one such arena where literary resistance is built in response to the oppressive forces against Dalit women, in turn allowing us to study the place of a Dalit Feminist aesthetic within political movements in contemporary India. The two works of female Dalit authors are taken up in this section for this cause: *The Grip of Change, and Author's Notes* by P. Sivakami and *The Gypsy Goddess* by Meena Kandasamy. It is important to note here that both these authors come from the state of Tamil Nadu, and while *The Grip of Change* has originally been written in Tamil, *The Gypsy Goddess* was originally published in English itself.

The Grip of Change (Pazhaiyana Kazhithalam) by P. Sivakami, which was published just thirty-five years ago, has been credited as the first Dalit female Tamil novel. In 1997, the novel was republished with an additional section, *Author's Notes* (Asiriyar Kurippu). The republished version, along with the additional *Author's Notes* was translated into English by Sivakami herself in 2007. In addition to being a writer, Palanimuthu Sivakami (b. 1957) is also a well-known Dalit activist and an Indian Administrator Service (IAS) officer born in Tamil Nadu, whose works often deal with issues of caste and gender (Prema & Kalamani, 2016, p. 139). Of her novels other than *The Grip of Change*, collections of poetry, essays, and short stories, only *Anandhayi* has been translated into English as *The Taming of Women* (2011), by Pritham K Chakravarthy. *The Grip of Change* (2007) is set in the neighbouring villages of Athur and Puliyar in Tamil Nadu. Kathamuthu lives in Athur with his first wife, Kanagavalli, and their children, Gowri and Sekaran, and Nagamani, an upper caste widow he had had an extramarital affair with and later married. Kathamuthu is a local leader in Athur, who hopes to become a member of the legislative assembly and is well-

known in the neighbouring villages for working towards the welfare of the Dalit communities. The novel begins when a wounded woman hailing from Puliyar is found at the doorstep of Kathamuthu's house, seeking his help and protection against the upper caste landowners who had attacked her. The events that follow makes up the plot of this novel, depicting the ways in which gender and caste inform the social and political landscape of that region. In other words, the contents of this fictional text first written in 1989 by a Dalit woman provides a literary representation of the oppressions faced by Dalit women, and hence can be categorised as female Dalit fiction through an extension of Limbale's definitions. The question that rises then is, what drove the author of the first Tamil female Dalit novel to republish the novel with an additional Notes section? Is the representational function of literature not enough to bring out the nuances of the intersectional forces of casteism and patriarchy?

In the new publication, Sivakami re-names the novel *Kathamuthu: The Grip of Change* and adds another section, *Gowri: The Author's Notes*. The newly added titles shed further light on the domination of Kathamuthu as a central figure in the novel, further reinstating the authority he holds in the story.[2] In the second section, which has been named after Kathamuthu's daughter, the novelist revisits her writing and deconstructs the novel based on her own self-reflections and the criticisms she received for the original publication. In an interview, Sivakami asserts:

> *The Grip of Change* appears too real to be called a fiction. […] The unedited Dalit patriarchy, as portrayed in my novel, created a furore to the extent that the male world refused to recognise it as a Dalit novel. But to their surprise and discomfort, the book has been doing the rounds in the same tag. (Pathak, 2012)

It is, as the author blatantly states, the 'unedited Dalit patriarchy' that makes the book not sit very comfortably in the category of a Dalit novel within the male world – a world that perched in a conception of genderless caste. But how did the book come to be recognised as a Dalit novel? I argue that it is through the careful use of the literary devices that the novel sufficiently establishes its political identity instead of relying on an external source of authority for validation. And this unapologetic self-attestation is further consolidated through the addition of *The Author's Notes*.

Interestingly, Sivakami uses third-person narration to present the novelist's reflections, allowing her to become a character, author, and critic of the text all at once. The third-person narrative voice of *Kathamuthu: The Grip of Change* becomes established as a character, referred to as 'the novelist', in the new section.[3] This is made clear to the readers as the section opens with, 'She was at the town mentioned in the novel, *The Grip of Change*' (Sivakami, 2007, p. 131). *The Author's Notes* raises an important set of questions regarding the form of the novel itself as the novelist finds herself constantly questioning her own position as Gowri. In addition to the section being titled *Gowri: The Author's Notes*, this becomes obvious in the very first chapter of the section, during an interaction between the novelist and her Periappa (uncle): 'The novelist and the character in the novel, Gowri, must be one and the same person' (Sivakami, 2007, p. 134). This realisation forces her to revisit her relationship with her father, and as such, with the male Dalit authority figure, inside and outside the text.

While *The Grip of Change* explicitly talks about the experiences of Dalit women within their communities, Meena Kandasamy's debut novel *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014)

[2] The paper discusses the authority of this male character in more detail in the final section.

[3] Please note that I will be using the term 'the novelist' in this paper to refer to the narrator of the first section and the central character of the second section of this novel, following Sivakami's insistence on maintaining a distance between herself as the author of the text and 'the novelist' as the narrator of the first section.

narrates the story of a real life massacre of forty-four people in a village by landowners as a punishment for striking under the red flag of Communism in hopes of better working and living conditions. Meena Kandasamy (b. 1984) is a Dalit poet, writer, translator, and activist from Tamil Nadu. Prior to the publication of this novel, she published two collections of poetry titled *Ms Militancy* (2010) and *Touch* (2006). She is also the author of *When I Hit You, or The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Wife* (2017) and *Exquisite Cadavers* (2019). Kandasamy has been vocal about the accessibility of regional language texts, especially from Dalit authors, and has often spoken about translation as activism in this context. She argues that there is a gatekeeping of voices along the lines of class, caste, gender, and race inequalities. As a result, 'the Anglophone Indians would read/discuss/debate issues that were being written about in the English media, and then on the streets of Tamil Nadu, there would be another discourse' (Danek, 2019). Further, she chastises the practice of non-Dalits translating texts by Dalit writers, in which there is 'a complete absence of Dalits in the production process' (Venkatesan & James, 2018, p. 146). Her own works often deal with themes of issues of caste, class, and gender. *The Gypsy Goddess*, in its very content and form, deals with these questions as it shall become evident in this paper.

The novel can be best described as a poet's attempt to narrate the story of the Kilvenmani Massacre on Christmas Day 1968. I use the term 'attempt' here to highlight Kandasamy's various uses of poetic and literary devices to articulate the inarticulable trauma and injustice that surround this horrific massacre that took place in a village near Nagapattinam only a few decades ago. In this sense, this novel too is a narration of Dalit lives and Dalit consciousness by a Dalit writer. The book has been divided into four sections, in which the latter three details the events in various different ways – from those leading up to the massacre to the aftermath of the massacre. The first section, however, sets the background for the tale, the title, and the narration style. In a highly metafictional style, Kandasamy begins this section by confessing to her inability to forgo poetry while writing proses. She begins the tale with a familiar opening line: 'Once upon a time, in one tiny village, there lived an old woman' (Kandasamy, 2014, p. 13), but immediately disrupts the storytelling to provide her notes on the act of storytelling and using those notes to revisit and revise the opening line over and over again for the next few pages. She then proceeds to present the history of the town, drawing attention to the inconsistencies within her narration. To use her own words, poets are 'unreliable when it comes to facts and incapable when it comes to fiction' (Kandasamy, 2014, p. 19). The narrative is constantly disrupted by the narrator herself in this self-sabotaging manner throughout the text. Nevertheless, the author is deeply unapologetic about the narrative mode of her novel; for instance, she states: 'I shall surmise and theorise, assume and presume, speculate and conflate and extrapolate every detail revealed by my field research in order to make it fit into the narrative mode of my novel. The age of apologising authors is long gone.' (Kandasamy, 2014, p. 100).

As mentioned earlier, the focus of this paper is to analyse the language and formal aspects of these novels to understand their literary resistance. Although the two novels have been published nearly twenty-five years apart, in different languages and styles, their similarity lies in their attempt to use the literary form to go beyond representation in order to resist the oppressive forces of caste and gender. In this vein, it is of note that both the novels discussed here are dialogic in the Bakhtinian sense. The constant self-reference to the novel and its narrative devices, as well as the direct addressal of the readers using the second-person pronoun, makes *The Gypsy Goddess* highly dialogic. Kandasamy even states that it is important to engage with the text before the central plot of the text begins, '*Shall we start?* / Yes, it is important to engage' (Kandasamy, 2014, p. 74). Moreover, the addition of the *Author's Notes* to *The Grip of Change* establishes the narrator as a character (the novelist) and a character taking the position of the narrator (Gowri), making the novel polyphonic. This additional section by Sivakami can also be read as a deconstruction of the text in the novelist's world through critical self-examination. This attempt to take apart her novel is guided by one of the criticisms the novel faced:

> The author of *The Grip of Change* had criticised the leadership of the Dalits – the lowest of the low – at the point when the Dalit movement was gaining ground. She had poked fun at the leaders of Ambedkar Associations in villages just as they were engaged in consciousness raising (Sivakami, 2007, p. 150).

This reveals how the text and its narrative is aware of its reception – of there being a reader and a critic in its immediate social reality. This kind of an awareness of the readership is inevitable within texts that, by definition and form, assume a social character (Limbale, 2004, p. 31). In fact, the very nature of writing about the issues of Dalit women in literary works is dialogic as the work is necessarily responding to the current political landscape of the society. Moreover, the content of the text involves conflict as it highlights the internal contradictions that exist in its social reality, thus unravelling the postcolonial and subaltern theories that attempt to have neat formulations on India. In the translator's introduction to *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*, Mukherjee argues that Limbale's attempt to theorise Dalit aesthetics is necessarily dialogic as it involves conflict, especially in reference to the existing literature on Dalit Literature by upper caste writers (Limbale, 2004, pp. viii–ix). Since such attempts at theorisation necessarily excludes already marginalised groups (Limbale, 2004, p. 18), writings by and about these groups becomes dialogic.

In addition to the dialogic nature of these texts, another common occurrence within these texts is their attempt to destabilise the traditional realist form of narration as well as the autobiographical or ethnographical genre. These novels make no attempt to provide a tale of development of the self into a fully actualised individual. The rejection of the realist form is made blatantly visible in *The Grip of Change*, with the addition of the *Author's Notes* to its narrative. In one of her ruminations, the novelist visits her uncle in the village, who indirectly asks her why she was so cruel in depicting her father as Kathamuthu. During that conversation, she asks him to narrate one of the puranic stories as he used to when she was younger. As she is listening to him narrate the story that is in no way realistic, she finds herself questioning her compulsion to narrate her novel in the realist form:

> If Kuttiappan could enthusiastically narrate stories without ever questioning their premises, why did she have to try so hard to justify her work? Look at her! Here she was, analysing her novel, trying to fit all the pieces into logical patterns. To whom did she owe explanations? (Sivakami, 2007, p. 134)

This moment of questioning the need to narrate in a realist form stems from the constant attempts of critics and readers to 'ghettoise' Dalit narratives, as pointed out by Nayar (Nayar, 2011, p. 366). Meena Kandasamy, too, has been vocal against the traditional realist form of the novel in her writing style. She is more obvious with her rejection of the realist mode of writing, given that *The Gypsy Goddess* has been written in an experimental and postmodernist style. She has also discussed the need to focus on the literary within Dalit writings at multiple junctures. For instance, in an interview with Sathyaraj Venkatesan and Rajesh James, she points out that focusing solely on the purpose of writing about Dalit experience ('writ[ing] for society's sake' instead of 'art's sake') leads to these works not being treated as 'literature' (Venkatesan & James, 2018, p. 144). It is important to note that her insistence on the literary and poetic does not imply that Dalit writing must ignore the political purpose of narrating pain and suffering of the Dalits to upper-caste Hindus, as theorised by Limbale. Speaking specifically about the genre of Dalit autobiographies later on in the same interview, Kandasamy argues that they are in fact the least political, technically and structurally, as they can easily fall into the trap of being read as an individual chronicle rather than a collective struggle. Dalit autobiographies, she believes, are the site 'where the middle class nurtures its sympathy', thus becoming 'the literature of compassion' (Venkatesan & James, 2018, pp. 150–151). I contend that this destabilisation of the dominant/traditional realist form as well

as the autobiographical or ethnographical genre becomes an important way for these female writers to resist the attempt to 'ghettoise' their works as only a sociological text (Nayar, 2018, p. 366). It is precisely through such a resistance – where 'every word [is] an arena for contestation' – that Dalit feminists make space for themselves in the literary genre.

'Yes. It is important to engage': Literary resistance in Dalit feminist aesthetics

> Nothing in the novel was untrue. But the novel was false, she felt.
>
> – Sivakami, *The Grip of Change*, p. 150

It has been stated and studied how representation of violence and oppression is a crucial aspect of Dalit literature. The central plot of *The Gypsy Goddess* is the real-life massacre of forty-four members from the *cheri*, i.e., the settlement of lower-caste families, in Kilvenmani. The central problem raised by the text right from the opening line is how one can bear witness to, and provide testimony *in the face of*, violence and oppression. The work then becomes a response to the pressing need to narrate, despite the validity of the testimony being constantly challenged by dominant and oppressive forces. The massacre is narrated and re-narrated through various perspectives and forms to the readers: it is told through a police report (Chapter 8), a witness report (Chapter 9), the ramblings of a man providing his statement to a reporter (Chapter 11), and it is repeated all over again in the setting of a courtroom (Chapters 13–14). *The Grip of Change*, on the other hand, begins by baring open the wounds of brahminical patriarchy inflicted upon a woman's body. The novelist, too, showcases the need to acknowledge the reality and fictional nature of the novel in the *Author's Notes*, defending the political nature of her novel, as she declares: 'Nothing in the novel was untrue. But the novel was false, she felt' (Sivakami, 2007, p. 150). The plot of this novel commences when Kathamuthu finds the wounded woman, Thangam. It is revealed in the first chapter that she was beaten up by the Udayars, the upper caste landowners on whose farm she worked as a daily-wage labourer. She was attacked by the wife and brothers of the man who raped her, as they accused her of 'having an affair with an upper caste man' and 'ruining their family' in the process. She is a widow with no children and was therefore an outcast within her own village. So, as she escaped for her life, she had to walk to the nearby village and seek help from Kathamuthu. Thus, both these texts are, from the very setting up of their narrative arcs, expressions of the pain and suffering of Dalit women in Indian society. Thus, in line with Limbale's definition of Dalit literature, these works were written by Dalit women with Dalit feminist consciousness about Dalit women's suffering, to inform the world about the oppression faced by them, and can therefore be called works of Dalit Feminist literature.

In an interview with Jaydeep Sarangi, Bama describes Dalit literature as 'the literature of oppressed people, telling about their pains, agonies, disappointments, defeats, humiliations, oppressions and depressions' (Sarangi, 2018, p. 2). We have seen a similar definition of Dalit literature provided by Limbale earlier in this paper. However, Bama continues:

> It also speaks about their vibrant culture, dreams, values, convictions and their struggle for annihilation of caste in order to build a casteless society. It reveals their resistant and rebellious character, their strength and stamina to live amidst all odds and their resilient nature to love life and live it happily. It brings out their inborn tendency to celebrate life and to fight against the caste-ridden society by breaking through this inhuman system without breaking themselves. It liberates them and gives them their identity. It heals them and strengthens them to fight for their rights. (Sarangi, 2018, p. 2)

While this resilience for life and culture seems to go against Limbale's assertion that it is a 'lofty image of grief' (Limbale, 2004, p. 30), this love and happiness can be read as an aesthetic that is necessarily life-affirming. The representations of suffering in such works, while testifying to the violence of casteist and patriarchal forces, refuse to become objects of pity. The resistance of these texts then lies in their defiance to be broken by the patronising and objectifying gaze of the readers.

In the case of *The Grip of Change*, Thangam's body becomes a site for more caste violence as Kathamuthu picks up the incident of her assault and changes the narrative to make it solely an issue of caste. He carefully drafts a letter of complaint to be lodged at the police station that constructs the incident as Thangam being beaten for walking through the upper caste streets (Sivakami, 2007, pp. 11–12). It is important to note that the narrator here does not undermine the role of either caste or gender in the interpersonal relationships and social formations of Indian communities. The novelist in the *Author's Notes* responds to such accusations: 'The impression created was that the upper castes had handled the incident as a man-versus-woman problem, whereas the lower castes had given it the caste slant. How did the novelist dare to distort history with such impunity?' (Sivakami, 2007, p. 155). Kathamuthu plays an active role in making visible the caste violence inflicted upon Thangam, but replicates the gender violence towards the end of the novel, when he gropes a drunk and barely conscious Thangam (Sivakami, 2007, p. 93). The same is seen through the upper caste female characters: a victim of patriarchy herself, the wife of Paranjothi Udayar, Kamalam, is introduced with the line 'Kamalam's casteism had exceeded all limits' (Sivakami, 2007, p. 55). The section then proceeds to describe how she interacts with the twelve year old boy who works as a bonded labourer at her house. The characterisation of various characters through a third-person narration in this novel thus highlight the dangers of instrumentally focusing on a singular issue.

The access to the perspectives of multiple characters due to the third-person narrative voice also helps in destabilising the authority of the central character, Kathamuthu. Given that the section is titled after his name, the novel makes it clear for the readers that this is a man who holds authority. His authority within his house and village is once again demonstrated through the opening lines of the novel:

> Kathamuthu arose and checked his veshti for the right side, and tied it around his waist. He picked up the sari from the corner and tossed it over Nagamani [his wife]. 'Cover yourself, I'm leaving.' Without waiting for an answer, he unlatched the door, went out into the hall, and peered through the window into the next room. (Sivakami, 2007, p. 3)

The first page of the novel reveals the authority of Kathamuthu within his own polygamous household by introducing a domineering character whose conversations with other members of his family are in the form of orders and commands. Despite this section being titled 'Kathamuthu', and despite the character's own attempt to control the narrative, the intervention by the female characters, i.e., Thangam, Kanagavalli, Nagamani, and Gowri, bring out his inadequacies and inauthenticity. For instance, when he blames Thangam for 'choosing' to have sexual relations with a married upper caste man, Nagamani stops him with a retort: 'You don't have to hurt her any more, talking like that' (Sivakami, 2007, p. 8). Soon after, he laughs upon learning Thangam's name, which translates to gold. Nagamani sneers at him once more, 'Had you not always indulged in cheap jokes at others' expense, you would have become a member of parliament by now. You never behave with the dignity appropriate for a man of stature' (Sivakami, 2007, p. 9). Following this comment, the third-person narrator shifts perspective to Gowri, the daughter of Kanagavalli and Kathamuthu, who is silently watching the events unfold and in great distaste of her father's ill-tempered and coarse nature. Very quickly into the novel, the authority of the character who is supposed to have centrality, whose very name is the title of the section, is questioned and destabilised.

Moreover, it is made clear that the women in his proximity do not see him as a saviour, despite his boasts of fighting for their rights. This adds a tone of irony that brings in humour within the text, thus destabilising his position as a political leader right from the beginning. *The Grip of Change* is thus able to overcome making Dalit women objects of pity through satire and humour.

It is not only through the plot and characterisations within the novel, but also the language that brings out the themes of rejection, revolt, and resistance. A recurring theme in both the novels is language as a caste indicator and the stark difference between spoken and written (often, the standardised dialect) languages. In *The Grip of Change*, the differences in the use of Tamil as a language within the caste context is brought up even in the English translation. For instance, we see Gowri editing her father's words as he dictates the letter to lodge Thangam's complaint (Sivakami, 2007, p. 11) and Naicker entertaining himself with the 'crude phrases that Kathamuthu could get away with' that he himself could not use as he belonged to an upper caste (Sivakami, 2007, p. 18). While the English translation only makes the use of curse words and obscene language apparent within the narrative text and the quoted dialogues of the two novels, Sivakami's *Author's Notes* mentions the criticisms the novelist faced in her use of language for narration, and also for the stereotypes she perpetuated about the Dalit spoken language. On the accusation that those who laboured for the upper caste were 'hardly referred to with respect or endowed with dignity', the novelist responds, 'Had she written like that? The novelist had to concede that some accusations were true' (Sivakami, 2007, p. 152). Despite it being written in English, Meena Kandasamy too finds herself defending her use of language in *The Gypsy Goddess*: 'It has no invention; it has no order, system, sequence, or result […]; its English a crime against the language. / For the sake of clarification, its English is *Taminglish*' (Kandasamy, 2014, p. 31). She further emphasises her use of Tamil in the beginning of the novel, when she insists that the novel is 'Tamil in taste, English on the tongue' (Kandasamy, 2014, p. 12). This taste of Tamil can be felt in both novels in the use of regional proverbs, metaphors and similes specific to the cultural context in both the novels,[4] as they defamiliarise the written form of English in these translations (into another language and/or culture).

Taking special note of this kind of defamiliarisation of the written form, Nayar argues for the politics of form within Dalit fiction and asserts that Dalit aesthetics depends on 'narrative hybridisation' and 'narrative radicalisation'. Narrative hybridisation is achieved through a careful merging of different registers or languages within the narrative – the mythic, which uses the oral and folkloric language; the immediate, which draws upon the personal, everyday language of the individual self; and the historical, which draws upon the language of history (Nayar, 2011, p. 368). This hybridisation of languages is crucial in Dalit writing to disrupt the 'received modern (upper-caste) language properties' and thus 'expose and discredit the existing language, its grammar, its refinements, and its falsifying order as symbols of dominance' (Gauthaman, as cited in Holmström, 2005, p. xiii). The appropriation of different languages within Dalit fictions therefore does not simply bring out the 'taste' of

[4] For instance, in *The Grip of Change*, 'No wonder! The rat is out and running naked' (Sivakami, 2007, p. 30); 'the upper part lay twisted like a Brahmin's sacred thread, snug between her breasts' (p. 32); 'Must have been a mohini pisasu […]. Seems she is roaming around as a mohini' (p. 37); 'He was hare-lipped, with hair like a bird's nest' (p. 55); 'The serving spoon never knows the taste of curry' (p. 88); or even the reference to the disrobing of Draupadi at the performances arranged for the temple festival (p. 84). Some examples within *The Gypsy Goddess* are: 'He witnesses the effigy of his villain being burnt at street corners across the country. He hears stories of men, reeling under the influence of his epic heroes, cutting off the noses of women who have lust in their eyes' (Kandasamy, 2014, p. 42); 'the informers dismissed the light of our torches as the fire-breathing tongue of the *kollivaai pisasu*' (p. 86); the juxtaposition between, on the one hand, the death of Jayabalan's mother-in-law due to starvation, scarcity of food and famine conditions and, on the other, the image of the local deity Sikkal Singaravelan being bathed in milk six times on the same day (p. 103); 'what happened to the rules of a novel? / They are hanging on my clothesline over there' (p. 128); 'his rice-white teeth shine' (p. 144).

the regional language in the English 'tongue'.[5] Nayar argues that this representational strategy of Dalit fictions also helps blur the generic boundaries of the narrative. Nayar maintains that narrative hybridisation is often paired with its radicalisation as well, making Dalit writing a political project. This is achieved through the introduction of the language of law, rights and dignity within the common usage (Nayar, 2011, pp. 365–380). We can clearly see this mixing of the personal, mythic, historical, and legal registers at work as Sivakami introduces the landscape of the Puliyur village in her novel:

> The village of Puliyur must have derived its name from the abundant tamarind trees surrounding it. In the month of Chittirai, the flat, sour fruits, delicate shelled, were always plentiful, the lime-green leaves in Aavani after the summer rains were especially beautiful. In Puliyur, the village and the cheri were almost joined. Perhaps it was those few tamarind trees positioned in between them that kept them apart.*
> * The Dalit communities are confined to the cheri, a ghetto located at the margins of the village. The village or gramam is that part where the caste Hindu live. The term village in the Tamil context denotes both the exclusive habitation of the caste Hindus and the combined settlements of all castes—touchable and untouchable.[6]

These couple of lines are a great example of the merging of different languages or registers. The beauty of the village and its changing nature is the narrator's personal register. This is confirmed in the *Author's Notes* as well, when the novelist/narrator talks about returning to the poetic substances of fields and forests, to her own memories that have been softened through the passage of time (Sivakami, 2007, p. 160). Further, the space is introduced to the readers through an origin myth of the land, that is, through the way the land got its name. The political register is noted in the way the people have been organised within that land, with the same tamarind trees drawing a boundary between the caste Hindus and the Dalits. The annotation in the translation (in the form of a footnote) becomes an important reminder of this language of the historical and political. It reminds readers once again how the language of laws in contemporary India which has criminalised untouchability interacts with the oral, personal register. The Puliyur village encompasses the *cheri* (lower caste settlements) as well as the caste Hindu settlements, seemingly bringing together the two groups, but there is still a divide between the village and the *cheri*. The village is still inaccessible to the inhabitants of the *cheri* despite the legal definition of the *gramam* or village including the *cheri* within its boundaries. That disconnect is made known to us through the description of the setting where the narrative takes place. This kind incorporation of the language of rights and laws into these historical, personal, and mythical registers is what Nayar describes as 'narrative radicalisation' (Nayar, 2011, pp. 365–380).

The Gypsy Goddess incorporates the legal register in not just the language but also the form of the novel. The prologue is a memorandum submitted by the landowner Gopalakrishna Naidu, to the Chief Minister of the then-Madras, requesting protection against the daily labourers on strike under the red flag. Chapter Five is a pamphlet by the Marxist Party announcing the murder of one of its comrades by the hands of the landowners, calling for action against them, and outlining the prior achievements of the Party. The incident of the massacre itself is presented through police reports, witness testimony, journalist interview, and court proceedings. The use of the language and templates of various official legal documents not only hybridise the novel form/language, but also work to highlight the failure of each of the four pillars of Indian democracy – the Legislative failed in outlining the rights of the landless agriculturists as seen in the Marxist Party Pamphlet (Chapter 5); the Executive

[5] Meena Kandasamy writes in *The Gypsy Goddess* that the novel is 'Tamil in taste, English on the tongue' (Kandasamy, 2014, p. 12).
[6] Please note that the explanatory note followed by the asterisk in this block quotation is a footnote provided by the author in the translated version of the text. See, Sivakami, 2007, p. 25.

failed in protecting the villagers of Kilavenmani despite being aware of the plans to massacre them (Chapters 8–14); the Judiciary failed is providing justice to the survivors of the massacre (Chapters 12–14); and the Media failed to report the voices of the Kilavenmani village dwellers (Chapters 13–14). The narrator's attempt to recount the incident through these templates, using the legal register, is therefore read as an act of resistance against the systemic silencing of the voices of the Dalit community within the Indian 'democratic' state. Additionally, the dialogic nature – specifically the drawing in of the reader by the use of the personal, second-person pronoun ('Dear Reader' and 'you') – and obstinate demands such as 'Yes. It is important to engage' (Kandasamy, 2014, p. 74) ensure that the readers are active participants in the narrative. This pushes for a mobilisation for the social and political causes the text clearly stands for. The use of language in this manner thus achieves narrative, and political, radicalisation.

By using language, characterisation, plot, humour, and other such literary devices in the narration of their fictions, Sivakami and Kandasamy destabilise the traditional realist novel form, reject the autobiographical/ethnographical genre, and resist the reading of their texts as merely representational. Furthermore, these literary devices help resist against the oppressive forces faced by them and their community members as Dalit women in the contemporary Indian society. On being asked if she considers her writing as 'militant' in an interview, Bama responds: 'To a certain extent, yes. The language that I use, the content that I write, the characters that I create in my writings and the values and convictions that I advocate through these characters are all of militant nature. I strongly believe that writing itself is a political act and it is one of the weapons that I use to fight against this dehumanising caste practice' (Sarangi, 2018, p. 4). Through a narrative hybridisation achieved by bringing together different registers or languages, these novels by the other female Dalit authors also manage to be militant and achieve narrative radicalisation as defined by Nayar. Following Frederic Jameson's assertion that a narrative is the articulation of a political unconscious, Nayar argues the converse that a radicalisation of the narrative form epitomises a radicalisation of the political unconscious as well (Nayar, 2011, p. 366). Thus, the literary resistance in these contemporary fictions assist in the political project of their Dalit Feminist authors in their fight against the oppressive forces of brahminical patriarchy in the contemporary Indian society.

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