CHAPTER-IV
GENDERING OF DALIT DISCOURSE: SEXUAL POLITICS
AND SOCIAL MOBILITY IN THE NOVELS OF IMAIYAM

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In a critical study of gender and caste anxieties that lie embedded in Tamil Dalit fiction, Imaiyam's writings occupy a problematic space. Unlike Bama and Sivakami, the two women Dalit writers, whose writings we have examined in the preceding chapters and who articulate their feminist concern and empathy for Marxist thought, Imaiyam posits a dissonant voice in Tamil Dalit fiction. His novels teem with poor, Dalit women workers but he strongly undermines a feminist or Marxist assessment of Dalit women's struggle or the plight of Dalit women workers. Other male Dalit writers like Abimani, Ezhi. Pa. Idavavendan, Unjairajan have represented with remarkable sensitivity how Dalit women are oppressed by a caste-ridden, patriarchal society. Bama and Sivakami repeatedly reinforce through their fiction how Dalit women are leading twice-cursed lives and face multi-pronged discrimination. In the context of prevailing Dalit discourse in Tamil, Imaiyam's writings underline a gendering of perception and evaluation concerning Dalit communities. A reading of Imaiyam's novels, Koveru Kazhudaigal (1994) and Arumugam (1999) shows how the writer turns the gender-caste interface on its head and offers a counterpoint and a dissenting voice to the critique of social discrimination or casteist oppression as offered by other Dalit writers. While other Dalit writers, notably Sivakami and Idavavendan point out self-contradictions or internalized hegemonic discourse among Dalits that hamper Dalit empowerment, Imaiyam foregrounds such inconsistencies most forcefully and so elaborately that his fiction reads like an apologia for the higher castes' discriminatory conduct towards Dalits. His fiction
focuses on prevalence of hierarchy and untouchability amongst Dalit communities and brings to the forefront the intra-caste tensions and conflicts. While this might well be a significant aspect in the context of Dalit mobility and social empowerment, Imaiyam nails down the Paraiyar community rather too harshly and unsparingly. In both Koveru Kazhudaigal and Arumugam, the Paraiyar community is represented as engaged in oppressing other Dalit communities or is shown as sexually permissive. It is worth recalling that both Bama and Sivakami focus on the Paraiyar community in their writings and have shown remarkable empathy towards its suffering and reposited hope in its youth for ushering in a new era of equality and brotherhood. Although both Bama (in Vanmam) and Sivakami (in Pazhiyana Kazhidalum) warn Paraiyars against replicating hegemonic hierarchical structures of power in the context of man-woman relations/ domestic milieu, nowhere do they castigate the Paraiyar community as a perpetrator of oppression towards those who occupy a social status inferior to themselves. Imaiyam bases an entire novel on the paradox of presence of casteist hierarchy among Dalit communities, exclusively targeting the Paraiyar community, the largest, most oppressed as well as most vocal and politically organized Dalit community in Tamil Nadu.

4.2 IMAIYAM'S FICTION: ISSUES AND DEBATES

Reception to Imaiyam’s fiction reflects a sharp divide among critics on the issue of appropriateness or otherwise of Imaiyam’s strictures against Dalits, in particular Paraiyars. While Imaiyam has stated in an article that, “Experience alone formulates a good literary work, not ideology.”¹, his works have been hailed or assailed on account of varying ideological preferences. Critics like Venkat Swaminathan, E. Annamalai, S. Ramakrishnan – a modernist, a linguist, a formalist, respectively, and each one of them hailing from an upper caste – have lavished praise on Imaiyam’s “honest” appraisal of contradictions among Dalits.² Noted novelist (and incidentally a brahmin born) Sundara Ramasamy
has esteemed *Koveru Kazhudaiga* as one of the best novels of Tamil literature.\(^3\) On the other hand, Imaiyam’s novels have been attacked most devastatingly by Dalit critic Raj Gautamam who sees Imaiyam as pandering to upper caste ideology and acting as a saboteur to nascent Dalit movement.\(^4\) Imaiyam’s novels have been published not by Dalit publishing houses like Bama’s or Unjai Rajan’s but by a premier Tamil publishing house *Cre-a*, owned by a brahmin, S. Ramakrishnan. This has been perceived by many Dalit critics, notably Raj Gautaman and Ravikumar as a political strategy to divide the Dalit literary and social movement and sabotage it by valorizing dissident voices. Of course, Imaiyam’s short stories have been published in Dalit and non-Dalit journals but the marketing of his novels, by an upmarket, premier publishing house, with grand inaugurals, forewords penned by a respected academic or accessibility to English-speaking western readership through early translation into English – are some of the trends associated with this young Dalit writer’s meteoric career that have prompted Dalit critics to assess Imaiyam and his writing harshly.\(^5\) He has been perceived with great hostility and resentment by Dalit writers and critics, as someone who has allowed himself, despite his Dalit identity, to be packaged and used by respectable but casteist lobbies of print and publishing media.

What has further fuelled criticism of Imaiyam’s writing among Dalit critics is his refusal to be known as a Dalit writer. Imaiyam, in fact, erases any possible reference to his Dalit birth, unlike writers like Bama, Abimani, Karikalan, Unjai Rajan, Gunasekaran, Vidivelli and others who not only affirm their Dalit identity but also put it to political, subversive use in their writing. Imaiyam observes, “I have not begun writing motivated by my suffering owing to my birth. I do not aspire to win popularity by writing about the humiliations inflicted on me on account of my birth. I do not politicize my experiences to suit current political climate. My experiences too have contributed to my writing, I cannot fully deny
that. But I do not subscribe to writing on account of any ideological underpinning."  

The above observation has been recorded after Imaiyam’s successful publication of two novels and a collection of short stories, over a decade long period. The blurb on all of his three publications highlight Imaiyam’s age (he is one of the youngest writers to be published in the early nineties), his profession as a school teacher and make an euphemistic reference to his Dalit birth as “born in a farming family.” Imaiyam’s projected as well as professed refusal to acknowledge his birth in a Dalit family captures the problematic space that his writings occupy in Tamil literary world. His writings are either hailed by mainstream, canonized writers/publishers as “great writing” or critiqued by Dalit writers/publishers as formalist, imitative and antithetical to Dalit cause. While the former group of readers/critics foreground Imaiyam’s command over spoken language, his deft handling of plot, his representation of Dalit folk arts, or valorize his firm grip over his craft and moving portraits of Dalit women, the latter group of critics/ readers point out Imaiyam’s excessive reliance on linguistic, aesthetic parameters at the expense of social concern or political conviction. While one cannot deny the fact that Imaiyam has a fine ear for women’s spoken idiom, it also needs to be pointed out that sexually abusive and sexist vocabulary abound in Imaiyam’s novels to a remarkably greater degree than in any other Dalit writer’s work.

Imaiyam’s novels represent with considerable detail and graphic elaboration, various trades and occupations practised by and assigned to Dalit communities. An almost microscopic analysis of Dalit occupations – their nature, social parameters, economic limitations, nature of the craft, language and idiomatic vocabulary associated with it, techniques employed and uncommon locales where they are often practised are accounted for in Imaiyam’s novels with such a rigor and veracity that they emerge as a learning
experience for non-Dalit, urban readers to an extent that they stand out as exotic, purple patches in Imaiyam's fiction. Washermen and women washing clothes at the river front, digging a shallow pit for storing water, specialized tasks of farmhands that are unfamiliar to urban readers, basket-weaving, hunting of hares, mapping roads, manufacturing paper, selling snacks outside a roadside liquor joint, catering for weddings, working as pimps, women soliciting customers and haggling over prices, women stitching up rags, tying up dead bodies, arranging of funerals and numerous other occupations are represented to engage the readers' interest and evoke their curiosity for the unfamiliar struggles faced by Dalit communities in Dalit colonies or pockets teeming with migrant labour in the two novels by Imaiyam. While Imaiyam's knowledge and realistic representation of Dalit life is commendable, his detailed picture of such lifestyle, ironically, renders it remote and picturesque as well. Imaiyam's writing marked by verisimilitude, authentic idiom, frequent citing of oral, traditional arts, including laments, ritual cursing, long citations of lyrical Oppaari (dirge) etc., runs the risk of representing Dalits as his reader's cultural Other.

Imaiyam's novels unlike Bama's meandering narratives are well crafted, well made tales. Even while employing a picaresque structure (as in Arumugam), Imaiyam commands a firm grasp over his narrative, almost dazzling the readers with his recourse to dramatic flashbacks, complex chronological deviations, non-linear structure, cinematic withholding and revealing of information crucial to narrative progression, use of dramatic irony, sophisticated literary techniques as well as a dash of melodrama to appease readers enthralled by populist cinema. Imaiyam's writing is sophisticated and well-crafted but one that vociferously resists, mocks any ideological underpinning. Imaiyam observes in a paper read out at a conference,

"Writing is not merely telling of a tale. One has to show the story, picturize it ... take the tale to multiple dimensions by the use of a word, a
sentence...there is a deep bond between a writer and language. My writing emerges out of my life lived out in my times. My works reflect my contemporary society. My language too is not formulated out of a language derived through education. Life alone enables good creative writing. Not principles or ideology.  

He in fact resists ideological assessments/readings of his fiction, especially those with a feminist or Marxist orientation.

Nonetheless, no writing is free from an ideological base. Valorising a writer’s aesthetic vision over his/her political conviction does not signify an ideologically neutral position. Imaiyam’s writing does belie strong preferences and biases concerning issues that are largely rooted in ideological domain. His attitude towards women’s equality, his assessment of women’s sexual choices, their sexual mores, conduct or notions regarding family decorum, women’s chastity, his attitude to rape, liaisons, adulterous relationships, his representation of prostitution and female sexual “frailties” indicate that Imaiyam’s assessment of Dalit women’s sexuality is embedded in a patriarchal mindset and bourgeois anxiety regarding morality and social respectability. Anxiety concerning women’s sexuality as evinced specifically by the middle-class, with its paronia of “what will people say” and its categorical revulsion towards lax sexual conduct among women with its rigid condemnation of “fallen” women are also aspects that are dominant in Imaiyam’s fiction. Imaiyam’s ideal concerning social/sexual conduct, chastity, motherhood, family honour/decorum are unambiguously rooted in bourgeois thought and values. Imaiyam’s dismissive attitude to Marxist or feminist readings is, in a way, directly linked to his own position regarding the woman question. Most of his women characters are primarily workers, washerwomen, farmhands, factory workers, commercial sex workers, vendors, nurses or daily wage earners. But Imaiyam steadfastly keeps out a Marxist perspective or a feminist concern for these women workers from Dalit
communities. Many of them are sexually abused at work like Mary, Vasantha, Danabakiyam, Chinnapponnu – but Imaiyam represents them outside the parameters of what E. Annamalai terms, “feminist thought or any ism”.\textsuperscript{11} Annamalai praises Imaiyam for representing women “realistically” as he borrows from “life ...experience” rather than from “ideological schools of thought like Marxism, Dalit yam, feminism”.\textsuperscript{12} Of course, such critics do not ever question why Imaiyam’s women are shown to be always lacrimose, profusely weeping, silently suffering and self-loathing spectacles of suffering. Dalit women in Bama’s, Sivakami’s, Abimani’s or Idayanvendan’s fiction do suffer and weep but their authors do not stop at “mirroring reality” (as claimed by Imaiyam and a school of critics) in an unvaryingly depressing and uncritical manner.

Along with veneration of traditional womanhood, Imaiyam also posits a strong nostalgia for the past. While presenting the plight of poor Dalit workers quite movingly, Imaiyam does not seek to explore ways of altering the same. He presents a past where there was always plenty to eat and scores of work opportunities, unsullied by industrialization or urbanization. It is rather difficult to figure out how far Imaiyam’s impulse to conserve spring from a willingness to condone or put up with stagnation. His protagonists resent urbanization, they refuse to migrate to socially more enabling spaces and cherish leading a simple, almost quaint lifestyle. Their outdated notions of family honour and women’s chastity push them to celebrate regressive values. Social mobility and development are equated in Imaiyam’s fiction with loss of women’s honour and erosion of positive values. His protagonists (Arokiyam in 	extit{Koveru Kazhudaigal} or Arumugam’s grandfather in 	extit{Arumugam}) lament casteist oppression that prevails in their rural hamlets but steadfastly refuse to migrate to the city where more enabling opportunities are assured to them. If at all they do move out of restrictive, backward region to the anonymous but more equitable cityscape, Dalits are shown to lose their chastity or compromise on sexual ethics as do
Danabakiyam, Vasantha, Darumamoorthy in Arumugam. While Sivakami and Bama focus on the dual oppression of Dalit women, gender and caste interface works within a different paradigm in the context of Imaiyam’s fiction. Imaiyam’s idealization of the past, his sharp critiquing of erosion of traditional occupations by way of development and social progress pronounce a regressive position as a solution to women’s sexual and casteist oppression, viz. that it is better for women to stay indoors and follow their traditional occupation. Those who dare to venture out like Vasantha, Danabakiyam, Mary are severely punished in Imaiyam’s narratives.

While there is no doubt that Imaiyam is an engaging writer with an excellent familiarity with rhythms of spoken Tamil, in particular, of Dalit women’s spoken vocabulary, and is a remarkable story-teller, Imaiyam’s stand on significant issues of social and cultural concern is far from progressive. While his effort to highlight lack of unity among Dalits or suffering of poor Dalit workers in a highly polarized society is not misplaced, his steady silence on any possibility or emergence of an organized movement either within or outside the fictional world undermines social realities of the nineties and the following years in the context of Dalit empowerment in Tamil Nadu.

Imaiyam’s moral conservatism and political non-radicalism run the grave risk of undermining Dalits’ struggle for empowerment and social dignity. Imaiyam is an educated, successful Dalit writer and a school teacher whose stand on sexual politics and social mobility for Dalit communities is conservative and ridden with self-contradictions. His deft handling of Dalit oral culture or Dalit women’s speech, his elaborate excerpts of songs, Oppaari (ritual lament/ dirge), funeral rites, etc., stand suspect in the context of his moral conservatism on the one hand and his upholding of aesthetic, linguistic primacy over political conviction on the other. Does he present these details as “realistic, felt experience” or is he packaging Dalit culture to urban readers unfamiliar with such Dalit specific
rituals? Why does Imaiyam display his familiarity with Dalit lifestyle even while refusing to acknowledge his Dalit birth? Such gaps in Imaiyam’s writing need closer probing. The following section would critically analyse Imaiyam’s contribution to a rigorous gendering of Dalit discourse in Tamil fiction.

While Bama and Sivakami, the other two writers under study, seek to forge feminist concern and Dalit specific issues, Imaiyam’s fiction interestingly argues for recovery of a lost past where Dalit women carried out unimaginably arduous and massive amount of labour, but were happy to live in a barter economy under a benign feudal supervision. Such a world is, of course, never depicted, but only reported or frequently recalled by characters or the narrator. Equating urbanization, migration of the poor to cities or modernization of services sector with loss of utopian/golden past on the one hand and a simultaneous loss of chastity for Dalit women is a rather sinister argument, but one that the reader invariably encounters in Imaiyam’s fiction. His fiction, thus, makes a significant intervention in gender-caste paradigm governing Dalit and women’s issues. Imaiyam’s fiction paves the way for gendering of Dalit discourse in Tamil in a rather non-simplistic, problematic way. While the need for a united, organized Dalit -women front is posited by certain writers, critics and activists, a sundering of such issues by Imaiyam raises important questions regarding role of political activism in the arena of Dalit and women empowerment.

4.3 OCCUPATION, SEXUAL ABUSE AND SOCIAL STAGNATION IN KOVERU KAZHUDAIGAL

Imaiyam’s fiction mirrors extensively various professional occupations that have devolved upon Dalit communities in Tamil Nadu over the ages. These traditional occupations have been strictly designed for specific castes and play a defining role in fixing social, caste identity of communities. Such occupations are
practised by a group of families which pass on the right to such practice to their future generations. Such a right, of course, operates as a social curse whereby, generations of Dalits have been fixed into specific professional/occupational domain and find themselves unable to find alternative, socially more enabling or respectable occupations. These caste oriented occupations, by tradition, follow principles of barter economy, often resulting in outdated, exploitative and constricting economic exchanges that are invariably disadvantageous and regressive for the Dalits who perform the assigned tasks. Imayiyam delineates this exploitative system and focuses attention on a particular family in each of his works: Arokiyam’s family of washermen in Koveru Kazhudaigal (1994) belonging to Paraivannar caste and Danabakiyam’s family of basket weavers belonging to Paraiyar caste which get disintegrated when exposed to urbanization in Arumugam (1999).

Arokiyam and Chavuri function as the washerman’s family allotted to work for Paraiyar colony in their village. They wash the soiled clothes of Paraiyars (a Dalit community), stitch up their old rags, attend to caste rituals at their family funerals, help the landowning Paraiyars during the harvest season, glean, winnow and harvest their crops and act as their messenger, attendant, unpaid menial day in and day out, through out the year. The washerwoman, Arokiyam, has the additional responsibility of washing Paraiyar women’s clothes soiled by menstrual blood, attend to puberty rituals of the community and act as a midwife to Paraiyar women and tend to the new born – washing their soiled clothes, giving a ritual bath to the young mother and her baby, offering her services at the celebratory ceremonies of birth, puberty celebration and nuptials that take place in the community. For all such services, Arokiyam and Chavuri get paid in kind. They receive either a measure of grains or spices or cooked food, usually leftovers. They also get paid the last, after the guests depart and other artisans are paid off. The novel repeatedly shows how Arokiyam and Chavuri are treated most disrespectfully even while they render services that
are indispensable to Paraiyar families. For instance, as a matter of traditional practice, it is the Paraivannan (the washerman assigned to the Paraiyar community) who acts as a facilitator at the burial ground where the Paraiyars bury their dead. Chavuri performs important rituals at burial and conducts the burial ceremony enabling the bereaved family to carry out prescribed rituals. His function is not unlike that of a priest who offers similar services to upper castes. Yet, Chavuri receives no respect or deference from the Paraiyar families. He is constantly abused verbally, heckled at and addressed derisively even during the burial ceremony. At Ramasami’s mother’s funeral, Chavuri and Arokiyam shoulder the onerous responsibility of arranging a funeral, co-ordinate with other artisans like the Paraidrummers, dancers and cobblers who assist the couple in the ceremony. The numerous tasks carried out by Chavuri and Arokiyam in the context of a funeral include, axing down trees to carve out wood to prepare the funeral bier, stitching up ornamental scrolls of cloth to hang up on the cortege, preparing the bier, knitting ropes to tie up the body, digging up a pit at the graveyard, lighting up the ritual lamp (made out of cow dung and dried twigs), carrying huge pots of uncooked rice on their heads as a final offering of food to the dead person that have been collected from the neighbourhood and extended family of the bereaved and walking behind the drummers at the funeral processions. Chavuri performs enormously arduous tasks like cutting down trees, polishing bamboo sticks and preparing a bier that would enhance the bereaved family’s social prestige. He gets to gulp down half a bowl of gruel and a red chilly brought to the site by Arokiyam from home. Ramasami grudges even their brief ‘lunch-break’ and abuses him to hurry up. The couple labours from dawn to noon and is offered no food or drink by Ramasami’s family. At the burial ground, all the rituals are carried out at Chavuri’s behest. However, Ramasami and his neighbours abuse Chavuri – ‘Mundappayale’ and treat him with disrespect. While a traditional priest would receive veneration and generous gifts from the family, Chavuri receives abuse, insults and only a fistful of coins for his labour. While the drummers, dancers
and musicians receive baksheesh as well as wages for their services, Chavuri's family is treated unjustly. Kullammal, Ramasami's wife, hands out smaller measures of rice to Vannan's family. Defying custom, Ramasami instructs his wife to dole out rice for he fears if neighbours, as per custom, are allowed to hand out rice to washermen, they would not be so thrifty and tight-fisted unlike his own spouse. (20) Chavuri and Arokiyam walk ahead of the procession, with pots on their heads, in the scorching sun. Their son Josep collects the dirty clothes of the mourners for a ritual wash while the other members of the family, Mary, Peter and Josep's wife Sakayam spread clean linen at Ramasami's courtyard to enable the family to pay respects to the departing bier. The soiled linen, of course, would be washed by Arokiyam's family.

For all such rigorous services, Chavuri only gets hoiled at. Ramasami constantly abuses him, treats him as a menial, showering a volley of threats. “Chavuri! Be quick, speak up da, hurry up da, mundappayale, what next? Quick. Hurry up! Get it over! Run! Get lost!” The coins flung at Chavuri's family, collected by them like alms – back bent, kneeling down, hands folded – do not add up to more than “two rupees”! (26) Incredible, as it may seem, this is a fact not contested by Ramasami and his aides. While the other artisans are referred to by their professional calling, Chavuri is hectored at “Vannan Vadayoy” – “come hither, you washerman”. (26) Arokiyam protests at such a pittance – “what is this Sami? This won't add up to even two rupees...” (26) She is immediately shouted at, abused and threatened. Chavuri too chides her, "would you speak up in front of so many men?" (26) Chadaiyan flings more coins at Mary than at Josep, while another man makes a pass at Sakayam, the daughter-in-law of the family.

The Paraivannan's services for the Paraiyar colony extend to several aspects of Paraiyar life-style – mundane, quotidian, social, cultural and quasi-religious. Arokiyam's family is indispensable to Paraiyars, be it in their private or public
domain. They cater to Paraiyan community's needs be they ordinary or sublime. In return, the washerman's family receives neither just wages nor patronage. The washerman's family is ordained by social practice to serve and work for Paraiyars. While Paraiyars too are categorised as Dalits by society, in this novel, they are shown as oppressors and uncaring, unjust exploiters of another community directly subsisting on their patronage. Imaiyan underlines a similarity in social paradigms that operate in a hierarchically structured society which thrives on exploitation of those who are placed lower on its scale.

Arokiyam and Chavuri are required to help the land-owning Paraiyar families during harvest time. Pariayars labour on their own fields as well as on those of their upper caste landlords. They receive wages in cash and kind from their landlords but in turn dole out only three measures of grain to Arokiyam and Chavuri for their collective labour. Arokiyam's family has no land of its own. Her family is depicted in the novel as the sole source of labour that could be hired by the entire Paraiyar colony. The couple's children too undertake the assigned tasks but are often not paid separately. They are treated only as helpers who assist the ageing Chavuri and Arokiyam. Thus, Arokiyam is shown to push her entire family into a similar, caste-defined labour without the possibility of enhancing her family income or social esteem. The family helps the Paraiyars to harvest the crops at various stages – winnowing, gleaning, collecting and storing. Arokiyam literally runs from one field to another, helping Chavuri at one end of the colony and looking up Josep and Mary at the other end, carrying food for them, placating the ever quarrelsome and short-tempered Paraiyar landlords, negotiating a larger measure of dole in addition to carrying out routine tasks like collecting clothes for wash or making the customary rounds to procure food for the family from the colony homes.

Imaiyan shows in this novel that Paraivannan's family remains oblivious to modern social mores. The family caters to Paraiyars in a rather feudal way,
offering their services and receiving (leftover) food in return. The novel repeatedly highlights how the family washes up enormous bundles of soiled clothes, stitches up old clothes or makes the rounds of colony homes to distribute washed clothes but is never shown to receive wages for these tasks. They receive only leftover food or old clothes or a few measures of grain. In such a barter system of sustenance Arokiyam's family is shown to be utterly dependent on the Paraiyar community, who are placed a step above themselves in the caste hierarchy. Paraiyar community is represented in this novel as practising oppressive discriminatory treatment of Paraivannan family. If Arokiyam protests against unfair dispensation for her family's work by Paraiyars, they threaten to bring in another Vannan (washerwoman) from the neighbouring village. Arokiyam lives in constant fear of losing her livelihood.

While Paraiyars are shown to undergo inhuman indignities, economic and social oppression in the novels of Bama and Sivakami, Imaiyan represents them as oppressors and upholders of casteist practice. Paraiyars are represented in Koveru Kazhudaigal as shadowy but menacing creatures. Their characterization lacks a graphic, realistic vision that is extended to the depiction of Paraivannans in the novel. Paraiyars live in a colony while Arokiyam's family lives in a hut at the outskirts and has to commute quite a distance in their daily rounds of colony streets to collect clothes or food. Arokiyam has to make several trips to the colony in a day. The houses in the colony are never described, their inmates never drawn with clarity. A few of them are shown interacting with Arokiyam. Each one of them is a powerful entity, endowed with land, secure income and political power. Ramasami is vice-president of Panchayat, Chadaiyan is a powerful leader of the community, Azhagan owns fertile lands that he earned through his wife's liaison with a Kounder. Azhagan's wife Karupayee detains Chavuri after farm work to satisfy her sexual needs, dismissing Arokiyam home. Sexual exploitation of Paraivannan men and women by Paraiyars is yet another dimension in the intra-Dalit relations as represented
by Imaiyam. Arokiyam loses out on measures of grain as well as her exclusive conjugal rights over her husband.

Chadaiyan rapes Mary at his home when she goes to collect clothes for laundry. Mary and Sakayam are constantly teased and sexually harassed by Paraiyar men. Josep is taunted for marrying fair complexioned, beautiful Sakayam who has also studied at a primary school: “A good catch Josep. Your wife can beat any brahmin woman in complexion. Ah! A sexy lass! What luck!” (26) Arokiyam’s younger son Peter is teased by Paraiyar boys at play. He is abused or isolated at any game on account of his caste. When he protests, he is thrashed brutally. (4) Sakayam protests that she shall not make the customary rounds of the colony to collect clothes or food at night: “No. I shan’t. At every house, the men leer at me, try to look through my saree to see what lies underneath. I shall not.” (44)

The narrative reports that Azhagan got his land through his wife’s sexual power over an ageing Kounder (upper caste) landlord. His wife Karupayee’s fling with Chavuri provokes him to deny Arokiyam her traditional share of three measures of grain for her labour at his field. Azhagan slashes her wages in kind drastically to two measures and every other household follows suit.

Arokiyam slogs ceaselessly at a puberty ritual feast at a Paraiyar household but gets nothing beyond leftover food, not even a set of old clothes discarded by the girl. The girl’s mother Meenatchi lives in a two-storeyed house, has a liaison with her brother-in-law, while her husband remains a mute spectator, probably because his unmarried brother’s lands remain under his fold while he himself is impotent and cannot satisfy his wife’s needs. (123) Such details as these or those concerning Azhagan’s access to land and his wife Karupayee’s affair with a rich, old Kounder are interspersed in the narrative rather extensively. (34-35) These are reported ostensibly to point out how Arokiyam knows everyone’s
secrets. While Arokiyam remains non-judgemental, the narrative/narrator betrays a bias against Paraiyar community. Paraiyars work on the lands of Kounders, Odaiyars, Pillais, Chervais and other upper castes. But when they use Arokiyam’s and Chavuri’s services they treat them most unfairly. They often forget the very presence of Arokiyam waiting patiently at the door for a bowl of leftover rice. Meenatchi sends her away without the customary baksheesh and betel leaf while Chitra’s mother does not offer any wages to Arokiyam for acting the mid-wife and attending to a particularly difficult and risky labour of young Chitra. (147-50). While the Paraiyar women praise Arokiyam’s skills as a midwife, her diligence and rate of her unfailing success, they ignore her when the time comes to pay up the starved, exhausted, feverish Arokiyam who attends to her traditional duties disregarding her own health. The women acknowledge Arokiyam’s competence as a mid-wife:

“Here comes Arokiyam. She knows everything. She is a Vannathi after all. Has delivered kids of every woman of this village. If she had not been around, we women are sure to perish at child birth.”

As soon as Arokiyam arrived, women gained confidence of good news. Their worried faces relaxed. They trusted her fully. (147)

Arokiyam gets even more exhausted than the tantrum throwing young mother in labour. She bears patiently Chitra’s violent slaps, kicks and punches while in labour, gives her a hot bath after delivery, prepares a medicinal decoction, gives the mother traditional post-delivery snacks, disposes off her blood stained, urine soaked bed of hay at a fallow land, cleans up the labour room, washing it with cow-dung, collects her soiled clothes for washing and leaves only after Chitra and the baby fall into a sound sleep. And yet she returns home empty handed, forced to prepare a hot broth for herself to combat her fever.
In this novel, it is strongly underscored that while Paraiyars look to Arokiyam and her family for assistance in every important domain of their lives, the Paraiyar-Paraivannar equation suggests not inter-dependence but, rather a hierarchical and exploitative paradigm. Paraiyar men and women’s sexual misconduct, liaisons that result in monetary gain or social security as well as their sexual assaults on Paraivannar’s family add yet another dimension to the oppression of one community at the hands of the other. As both the communities happened to be Dalits, Imaiyam’s critiquing of caste oppressions by attributing to Paraiyars many of the traits and strategies practised by upper castes in relation to Dalits takes on a double edge. Imaiyam at one level, points out intra-Dalit friction and the link between social oppression and social hierarchy. Valid as his argument is, at another level, it runs the risk of diluting the very critique of casteist oppression of marginal groups, by taking a problematic stand that Dalit groups themselves are not free from oppressive structures. This results in diluting/undermining Dalit struggle against casteist oppression at a larger, social/cultural level.

While self-reflexiveness is a much needed critical intervention and it has been handled successfully by Sivakami and Bama in the context of caste-gender intersection within Dalit communities (specifically Paraiyar community), Imaiyam’s narrative of Paraiyars’ oppression of Paraivannars is lapped up gleefully by upper caste segments to counter Dalit struggle against dominant groups. Imaiyam’s narratives contradict fictional accounts as well as social documents that reflect sustained exploitation of Paraiyars. By portraying them as the real, active cause of suffering and exploitation of another Dalit community (represented by a sole family of that community), Imaiyam defies accounts as represented in Dalit writing at large in Tamil. This results in appropriation of Imaiyam’s fiction by anti-Dalit groups to target Paraiyars and divert attention from Paraiyars’ struggle for liberation from caste oppression. Besides, it is a simplistic argument to trace suffering/oppression of a
community/family as directly and solely conjoined upon another without offering a sociological, political framework. Imaiym's analysis, if one may term it analysis, is provocative, controversial but hardly insightful on social structuring or paradigms of caste oppression.

Imaiym's fiction brings to the fore certain myths regarding perception of Dalits as a homogenous, cohesive, non-self-divisive category. He points out that Dalits too inhabit a contested, hierarchical, self-divisive space and need to be looked at as a participating, aggravating as well as a protesting social entity in the larger caste-ridden, class-driven, gender-embedded social structure. However, instead of showing up the inner divisiveness in a community (which is not at all disputed), he pits one against the other, holding one as the aggressor and the other as the aggrieved and aggrieved upon. The larger, social paradigm is simply not touched upon. The complex inter dependence as well as frictions between two Dalit communities is not captured objectively. Instead, the trajectory of Imaiym's novels moves towards fixing blame on one community and presenting another as utterly abject and unprotesting. His novels thus present a blurred perspective on a complex social problematic.

Anger, protest, organized action, subversive humour are some of the tested strategies adopted by Dalit groups to contest the dominant groups control over their lives. In Imaiym's fiction, those who are trampled upon do not ever adopt any of the strategies listed above. Whether it is Arokiyam or Mary, Danabakiyam or Chinaponnu, irrespective of differences in age, location or circumstances. each one of them, when oppressed upon, takes recourse to weeping, moaning, ritual lamenting and thus indulge in self-pity. They emerge as spectacles of suffering rather than as characters who help in delineating or foregrounding social processes/phenomenon present in contemporary society.

The Paraivannar’s family is shown to be utterly unanchored socially, without any form of support system, in emotional, cultural or material terms. The family lives on the outskirts of the village beyond the Paraiyar colony. The only semblance of a social intercourse that the family enjoys is that with the Chakiliyar (village cobbler/tanner) Periyaan’s family. The Chakiliyar is placed higher than the Paraivannar in social/caste hierarchy. His services are acceptable to colony households as well as households in the village. He stays in a hut within the Parai colony. (84) Chavuri would walk across to the ageing Periyaan’s hut and converse with him. Periyaan’s grand-daughter would hop into Arokiyam’s hut to plait her hair or laze around on a summer afternoon. There is no social visit or partaking of meals between the two families. Arokiyam does not cook food at home unlike Periyaan’s family. Her young son Peter finds this strange and offensive. “Why can’t we cook rice at our hearth?” he questions his mother. (4) She chides him and explains that tradition does not permit this. The child is not satisfied. He recounts how his companions tease him about the fact that his family makes daily rounds of colony homes to collect leftovers at night. (4) They have nicknamed the boy, Peter, “Raachoru” – the very name of the ritual rounds that involve the family’s visits to Parai colony with an empty mud pot to collect food. Arokiyam’s daughter-in-law Sakayam finds this practice demeaning. She notes how the family is kept waiting, heckled at, insulted or at times simply turned away from the doorstep. Sakayam suggests that the family should demand wages in cash, procure groceries and cook at home. (5-6) Arokiyam does not see the argument as legitimate or reasonable. She merely cites convention and age-old practice: “It has been such since olden days”. (4) She recalls that she too had been teased as a young bride. But she dismisses the younger generation’s frustrations as frivolous. “Today’s kids get angry over small matters. We are low castes. Anger can’t help us survive.” (5)
Till the end, Arokiyam makes nightly rounds to collect food – in rain, in cold, in good times, in times of grief. She wades through knee-deep slush, in fever, alone or at times accompanied by an unwilling Peter or slothful Chavuri. The *Raachoru* trips indicate the marginal space where Arokiyam’s family is located. They cannot cross the threshold of Paraiyar homes, have to accept their leftover food given, at former’s discretion. Though Arokiyam holds it as her traditional right to procure food in this manner, it’s clearly a demeaning, inhuman and cruel practice that denies self-esteem or dignity of labour to Paraivannars. This also happens to be one substantial form of social contact between the two communities that starkly highlights that there could be no social intercourse between them.

Arokiyam voices concern, time and again in the novel that the daily rounds have begun to yield less and less over the years. Chavuri fondly recalls how as a young lad, he used to collect huge amounts of food and delicacies to his heart’s fill. The number of houses have increased manifold, but people are no longer generous, he bemoans to Periyaan. (84) *Raachoru*, in fact, becomes a significant indicator of changing times, changed lifestyle and a favourite, self-indulgent, nostalgic trip for Arokiyam–Chavuri. They often describe to their children that in good old days, their patrons never grudged food and how the Vannan’s family was treated to delicacies and generous amounts of food. Such a description, is unfailingly, undermined by the narrative, where we see the couple, returning home with a barely half-filled bowl, often turned away rudely from every doorstep and we see how humiliating an exercise is this daily round of procuring *Raachoru*.

No wonder, the youngest child of Arokiyam, Peter, rebels against this practice. He demands that his mother cook food at home. Her daughter-in-law suggests that it is more respectful to demand wages in money for the services rendered by the family and manage the hearth on one’s own. Arokiyam chides Peter and
holds Sakayam unfit to take over the domestic/professional reins from her. She steadfastly adheres to this practice, irrespective of bad weather, illness or plain nonchalance from her patrons in the colony. It is because she looks up to her Paraiyar clients as her patrons that Arokiyam is not able to rise above the exploitative, feudalistic, barter economic mode. Her daughter-in-law, who has studied in a primary school and hails from a town is branded by Arokiyam as a modern brat, unwomanly homemaker who argues that the family adopt professional practices followed by Vannars in towns. Sakayam’s irreverence towards the portly, unhelpful Saamiyar, her refusal to make daily rounds to collect soiled linen or leftover food from colony homes, her insistence that her husband Josep wear a shirt or set up a shop to iron clothes and go for a contemporary haircut are fiercely contested by Arokiyam. (6-9) Arokiyam resents and disapproves of every suggestion/observation made by Sakayam and a stereotypical mother-in-law vs daughter-in-law spat follows every argument between the two women. The narrative tends to focus on Sakayam’s fondness for cosmetics, her frequent combing of hair and powdering of her face to indicate she is a town girl unfit for domestic harmony. However, Sakayam’s observations are based on practical needs and call to attention changing mores in professional practices among the Paraivannar community.

Sakayam nags her husband to quit the village and join her brother at the nearby town, Chinnachelam. Arokiyam sees this as an indolent housewife’s fantasy or a glamorous dream. However, Sakayam’s contempt for the villagers arises as she is subjected to constant teasing by lecherous patrons. She resents their constant stares, penetrating glances that seek to look beneath her robe, their comments on her fair complexion, calling her a ‘good catch’ and teasing her husband over his good-luck. Dalit women workers are subjected to sexual abuse as a matter of routine in Koveru Kazhudaigal. Sakayam alone musters courage and talks against it, protests and finally walks out of such a sexist, sexually oppressive environment. (40-41) While the narrative paints her a vamp
who breaks family ties, her courage in resisting sexual abuse by Paraiyar clients is to be appreciated. Arokiyam brushes off Sakayam’s complaints of stares, pinches, verbal abuse and teasing as, “nothing new. Such things have been there since ages. When I was young, I too was not spared. My sisters-in-law used to accompany me to ward off unpleasant advances.” (4-5) Arokiyam recalls that she did not go to collect food or wash linen when she was a young bride to avoid possible sexual assaults by Paraiyar or high caste men. Arokiyam preferred to slog at home and serve a large, joint family. Sakayam refuses to encounter lecherous men outside or reheat Raachoru for the family at home. She demands a more self-respecting and dignified way of life within the domestic space. She protests by sleeping in the long afternoon unmindful of the piles of clothes lying around for a wash. (30) She refuses to play the assigned role of a Vannathi or that of a daughter-in-law. Mary, Arokiyam’s daughter, is a foil to Sakayam. She obeys Arokiyam to the last letter, collects Raachoru, gathers dirty linen from homes, accompanies Josep for gleaning crops at Paraiyar fields and stitches up torn linen of colony women in the afternoons. Mary is never shown to be powdering herself before the mirror or trying out new hairstyles as Sakayam is shown to do. And yet, what Mary is unable to escape, Sakayam managed to, owing to her subversive speech and protests. While Sakayam, engages in a verbal duel, shrewish speech with Arokiyam and flatly refuses to walk through the Paraiyar colony to collect food or clothes (43-44), Mary pacifies her mother and her sister-in-law and volunteers to collect clothes from colony homes. (45) Sakayam is grateful to Mary and shares with her, her knowledge of movies, film songs and also teaches Mary to write her name in Tamil and English. Mary, in turn, teaches Sakayam oppaarr; Tiruvizhah (temple festival) songs and folk songs. (46) While Sakayam uses subversive speech and manages to quit the village with Josep and set up shop in town, Mary is stuck with a Paraivannathi’s tasks at the village. In carrying out one such task, Mary is raped brutally by Chadaiyan, an influential, wealthy Paraiyan in the village. Sexual abuse of women Vannathis is a practice that Sakayam
protests against, Araokiyam recognizes as the given order and what Mary is violently subjected to. The novel, nonetheless, represents Sakayam as a shrew, as a home breaker, as a villainous character who causes Arokiyam sorrow and makes Josep a henpecked husband (47-50). Mary emulates Arokiyam in shedding copious tears, in her frequent appeals to god and church, in showing forbearance, patience and maintaining silence against oppression. When Sakayam leaves with Josep, Mary understands her mother’s sorrow but feels happy that at least Sakayam “could escape these villagers” (48). In the chapter following Sakayam’s exit, Mary’s rape by Chadaiyan is reported. (54-57)

Chadaiyan is an influential member of his community. His power over the panchayat extends to the extent of dismissing Arokiyam’s family as the official Paraivannathi. Always eager to track others’ faults, Chadaiyan is known to levy a heavy fine on poor workers at panchayat meetings. When Mary makes the rounds of colony streets to collect dirty linen from every household in the absence of an ailing Arokiyam, Chadaiyan cunningly orders her to pick up the bundle of soiled clothes from the inner courtyard of his home as his wife is confined to a corner owing to her menstruation. Chadaiyan traps Mary in his double-storeyed home and rapes her, not heeding to her pleas of

“Do not do so, Chaami...,
This is wrong Chammi...,
It’s not good Chaami...,
I would lose my honour Chaami...,
I cannot show my face in these streets Chaami...,
My family would be destroyed Chaami...” (55)

While Mary is articulate about honour, family prestige and reputation, Chadaiyan is silent but menacing. Mary is rendered totally motionless out of fear. Trembling all over, she holds on to Chadaiyan’s feet and pleads for mercy.
Mary's fear extends beyond the immediate physical, overbearing strength of Chadaiyan. She is held captive and helpless owing to Chadaiyan's social power. He could dismiss Arokiyam-Chavuri from their professional duties and Mary is rendered inert by the fear, "where shall we go, if we are driven out from here?" (56) It is indeed, their position as Paraivannar coupled with their Christian, specifically Roman Catholic identity which has rendered them a minority, unsupported by social mainstream that haunts Mary at this hour of trauma:

"If these people drive us away, to which village could we turn to? Where could we possibly go? When everyone in the village worships Maariayee, Murugan, Venkatachalapathy, Kaaliyamman, why do we worship Yesu? Why are we Christians? Why a Vannan? Had we been Hindus, we could have escaped washing others' linen. We would have had more relatives. None would dare to harass our women. Why are we Christians, that too, why Roman Catholics, Mary wondered for the first time, even as Chadaiyan's grip hardened on her shoulders." (56)

Following the rape, Mary weeps uncontrollably, slapping herself hard on her head, breasts, thighs, on the floor. Her weeping continued endlessly, we are told. She walks back home in a daze and the ailing Arokiyam recognizes the cause of her daughter's state: "Arokiyam grasped everything in a trice. She too was a woman. Having lived in this village for ages, would she not understand what has befallen Mary?" (57) Arokiyam joins Mary in weeping, lamentation, self-reproach and bemoaning one's pre-determined fate: "This is god's will...Written out as our fate long back, before our birth...oh! Anthoniyare! oh! blindfolded god!" (57)

Sexual abuse of Paraivannar women is perceived as an inescapable fate, a given order of things by these women. Sakayam shared this knowledge but chose to walk away from such an environment. Arokiyam accepts the given
order of things as fate, as god's will and counsels her daughter to maintain silence concerning her rape. Mary is apprehensive about possible reprisals to her family, confides to none, shuts herself up in the hut, sheds tears and alternates between a sense of self-loathing and self-pity.

The fact of rape is kept a secret by the mother and daughter. Even Chauvri is kept in the dark. The two women betray high level of "middle-class" anxiety regarding chastity, family honour and respectability. Both adopt careful measures to keep the neighbourhood unaware of the incident. They are most fearful regarding others' reaction if the incident comes to light: "What will people say?", remains the single most overpowering anxiety for Mary and Arokiyam: "This should not come to anyone's knowledge. We must see to it... If anyone asks how shall we answer?... One's most precious treasure is lost. What she (Arokiyam) had always endeavoured to protect and cherish has been lost for ever. They have been robbed. Utterly looted." (57-58)

It needs to be noted that the narrator's reporting of the two women's inner thoughts very quickly gets submerged within the narratorial voice. In other words, the narrator endorses and shares the recognizably middle class sensibility regarding woman's chastity, notion of honour and the bourgeois anxiety to cover up the fact of rape from public knowledge rather than seek justice or act to punish/expose the offender. Imaiym weaves in dramatic irony, and loaded, cinematic dialogues into the context before moving the narration further. On the day of the incident, Chavuri is not in town. He returns home late in the evening and is shocked to see bundles of unwashed clothes, piled up in a corner. He fears the clients' anger but is nonplussed by the mother-daughter's stony silence. "This house looks like a house in mourning," observes Chavuri. A little later, Mary serves him food. Chavuri finds the rice stale and unpalatable. He questions Mary, "Why has the rice turned 'bad'? She answers him, "I am not responsible for its turning bad." Chavuri observes, "It has turned
bad for someone must have laid a hand on it." (59) In Tamil, turning "bad" is a phrase that can be used to refer to food turning stale as well as to a woman, losing her chastity. Such phrases carrying loaded cultural connotation and dual implications are extensively used in Tamil cinema. The notion of "Karpu", woman's chastity and honour, carries an exaggerated level of valorization in Tamil films. Imaiyam’s novel undermines rape of a Dalit woman by a socially empowered, wealthy, powerful man as an act embedded in power relations, social hierarchy, economic inequality, sexist social code or deal with it as a question of casteist politics and social injustice.

Imaiyam has added yet another dimension to this incident, namely intra Dalit friction. Chadaiyan, the rapist, is not only powerful and wealthy, but also happens to be a Paraiyan who subjugates a Paraivannathi (Mary) on account of his caste power over hers. While in the larger context of Tamil Nadu, Paraiyars are an oppressed Dalit group, in this novel, they dominate and exploit a Paraivannan family. This dimension renders the caste-gender discourse as put forth by Dalit writers in Tamil – Sivakami, Bama, Abimani, Idayavendan, Gunasekaran, Inkulab and others – ineffective and invalid in Imaiyam’s Koveru Kazhudaigal.

Within the novel, Imaiyam, nullifies whatever possible discussion could emerge out of the issue of sexual oppression of Dalit women in society. As Arokiyam and Mary suppress the fact of rape, Chadaiyan retains his power and prestige. His attitude to women, including Paraiyar women is not touched upon in the novel. The novel posits rape of Mary as an incident to illustrate Arokiyam’s sufferings. It does not locate the incident in a context of sexual / caste politics. The incident is deployed to evoke pathos not outrage in the minds of the readers. The mother and daughter weep continually. Anger, protest, agitation or collective action that mark Dalit writing on a similar situation are entirely absent in Imaiyam’s novel. Imaiyam’s use of aesthetically pleasurable devices
like double entendre, dramatic irony, well timed entries and exits, use of visual imagery, colourful rhetorical language renders the fact of rape of Mary – a Dalit woman worker – a dramatic incident, a moving moment in the narrative rather than an issue of social, political concern in the novel. Thus, the novel, although, it purports to depict caste oppression of Paraivannars in Tamil Nadu, proceeds to depict merely a spectacle of suffering as experienced by a family, chiefly, by Arokiyam. Arokiyam’s suffering as a mother is the focus of the novel. Chastity of women and motherhood, Karpu and Taimai, remain the valorized notions in the novel, just as they have been over the decades, in Dravidian ideology, in its literature and film scripts that have served as a vehicle for such ideology and its politics.

A fundamental contradiction that arises in Koveru Kazhudaigal as well as in Imaiyam’s second novel, Arumugam pertains to the gap between professed claim and accomplished fact. Both the novels focus on Dalit, oppressed characters but their suffering is represented in an apolitical, culturally non-specific context, inhabiting a space that is silent if not naively innocent of caste, gender, class problematic. While the novel cites instances of sexual liaisons (Karupayee-Kounder), extra-marital relations (Meenatchi and her brother-in-law) among Paraiyars or alliances of convenience acceptable among Paraivannars like Mary’s aunt, Teresa’s co-habitation with her brother-in-law following her husband’s death, nowhere does the narrative invoke bourgeois discourse of respectability, family honour, chastity or moral censure as it does most rigorously in the episode involving violation of Mary by a powerful Paraiyan, Chadaiyan. Imaiyam, it can be noted, fails to posit the issue of rape in a perspective that takes cognizance of personal, cultural, political implications both to the victim as well as to the social structure under discussion.

In this context, it is equally perturbing to note that the novel valorizes Arokiyam’s refusal to re-locate herself and her family to an anonymous
cityscape even if it offers better social conditions and more rewarding job opportunities.

4.4 MATERIAL STAGNATION VS. NOSTALGIA FOR A LOST PAST

It has been noted earlier that Sakayam is dismissed from the narrative as an incompetent homemaker, as a woman hankering after glamour, cosmetics, films and unbecoming fashion. She quarrels with Arokiyam, nags Josep to shift base to Chinnachelam, a nearby town, and take up a more modern practice of their traditional, family livelihood. Her brother runs a mobile ironing shop and she persuades Josep to join his ‘shop’ and live a dignified life rather than roam the colony streets collecting soiled clothes and Raachoru. Josep, his mother’s darling, her hope in old age and a reliable co-worker is thus taken away by the bickering daughter-in-law, believes Arokiyam. She suspects that local gossip regarding Josep-Sakayam’s conjugal life was not perhaps unfounded. Sakayam, according to gossip, bargained with Josep that she would allow him to bed her only if he left the village. (49) The narrator offers no alternative perspective. The decision to migrate to the city by Josep and Sakayam is represented as a stereotypical struggle for control over the son/husband; a typical domestic squabble between the ageing mother-in-law who has sacrificed a lot for the family, and the shrewish, work-shy, tantrum throwing daughter-in-law. The narrative’s focus is more on the mother’s sorrow, her dashed hopes, her sense of desertion and her continued indulgent affection for her first-born son. Every night, following Josep’s migration, Arokiyam is shown to forgo sleep, shed copious tears and sing oppaari until dawn. (47-50) The moving, colourful lyrics of the oppaari effectively nullify any possible rational discussion or perspective on the issue of migration of caste-oppressed families to a caste-indifferent city.

Sakayam repeatedly puts forward the argument that setting up a shed to iron clothes or use of a mobile ironing-unit cart, could be a more dignified way of
earning one’s livelihood. She also argues that the family should demand wages for their services in cash rather than carry empty bowls to every client’s home to collect leftover food. (4-7) Arokiyam’s vehement opposition to such arguments, her unrelenting resistance to such suggestions are prompted by utterly illogical, rather unreasonable beliefs. Arokiyam rejects Sakayam’s proposal for a more respectable mode of livelihood as “unsuited to our caste” (5). Her resistance to migrate or demand wages in cash are grounded in arguments that are not only regressive but also self-destructive in nature. Refusing mobility or better living conditions, Arokiyam is shown to hold on to age old, casteist, hierarchy-based, professional practices that are humiliating, oppressive and impoverishing to the family. Yet her constant refrain that the family should adhere to convention and custom reflects a rigid, blind, inflexible clinging on to one’s past under the most unrewarding conditions. For every suggestion that comes forth from her children or later from Chavuri to setup a mobile wash/ironing kiosk, Arokiyam’s stand is “Namma Chadiku Eetra Thoyilla Adu?“: “Can such occupation / professional practice be appropriate to our caste?” (78)

The failing of Koveru Kazhudaigal lies precisely in the narratorial/authorial valorisation of its protagonist’s failings. The novel glorifies, offers oblique appreciation of Arokiyam’s almost suicidal, opionated, inflexible beliefs. Every single practice associated with the washerman’s profession or lifestyle as delineated in the novel is demeaning, economically unrewarding, socially humiliating, sexually exploitative in nature. Yet Arokiyam almost launches a crusade to uphold each one of such practices, steadfastly refusing to quit the village and move over to Chinmachelam. Sakayam and Josep entreat her time and again to join them and live in comparative comfort. After her marriage to Draviyaraj, Mary too invites her parents to her town to lead a quiet life. Arokiyam overrides Chavuri and refuses to migrate. Every night, she laments, moans and recalls a past of plenty and social commraderie. But she refuses to
quit her dehumanizing, impoverished present and thereby rid herself and Chavuri of a stigmatized, isolated life.

The pile of clothes have shrunk over a period, Raachoru is insufficient to satisfy their hunger; the donkeys have been sold off to take care of marriage expenses; the setting up of a tailoring shop and a mobile washing/ironing unit in the Paraiyar colony have rendered Arokiyam’s family occupation rather redundant; her style of washing clothes in a water pit is outdated and resisted by the clients; the family is increasingly kept out of traditional share – both in terms of services and privileges – and their earning during a ritual sacrifice, wedding or mid-wifery have become negligible if not downright eroded. (26, 37, 103-04, 120, 125, 173) Yet Arokiyam refuses to migrate to greener pastures.

Arokiyam oscillates between her lament for a lost past when she was loved, respected, was ever busy and happy and her assertion to never quit her present place and occupation. Her ritual laments, oppaari, every night, bring forth colourful images of a harmonious, prosperous village that cared for her and valued her services. However, in the narrative, Arokiyam is shown to be spurned and neglected by the very community for which she has pledged her unwavering loyalty in glorifying terms. If a character’s nostalgia for a golden past is represented with gaps, silences, contrasts with an uncongenial present or presented in an ironic mode or as a sign of social decadence, reader’s sympathy for the character in question could be garnered or played upon or censure evoked. But Imaiyam’s narration endorses Arokiyam’s reveries (which seem to be plain, wild fantasies to a reader familiar with rural social inter-course that is steeped in casteism and inequality) by providing information concerning lifestyle in the past that are difficult to withstand examination by social historians. Nor can such descriptions be perceived as metaphors for cultural degeneration.
A rigid social structure that upholds an inflexible caste hierarchy as delineated in *Koveru Kazhudaigal* cannot possibly validate an image of Arokiyam’s prosperous past as reported by the narrator thus:

Even in the days of severe drought, the granary at Arokiyam’s house used to be always brimming with grains. She would store barley first then maize, jowar, bajra tied up in individual cloth bags, sealed up with cowdung. In the months of Aipasi, Kartigai, during spells of rain and dampness, people would queue up and buy grains from her. Arokiyam was the only one in the village who could sell grains during a drought. Arokiyam’s house had more storage utensils than found in prosperous householders’ homes of those persons who frequented Panchayats ... Now, the house looks empty and forlorn, as if, fit to sustain on alms. (67)

The setting up of a tailor’s shop in the colony has robbed Mary of an opportunity to augment family income by stitching up torn clothes of colony women (64-65). The invasion of machine is represented as loss of livelihood for Arokiyam’s family which in fact holds on to obsolete methods of working and is unwilling to upgrade its skills. Draviyaraj fondly recalls the rhythms and music that accompanied manual irrigation of fields that have been replaced by motorized engines which have paved the way for impersonal, songless irrigation. (70) Arokiyam and Mary curse the tailor and the presswalah for taking away their livelihood (75). Arokiyam is appalled that barbers in Chennai and Chinnachelam cut their customer’s hair without inquiring into their caste identity (166). In her village, Dalits cut their hair themselves or were catered to by an assigned barber who was not allowed to offer services to other castes. (166) The characters assume such practices and any form of what one would term development as taboo, as outrageous excesses signifying the gap between a golden past and an appalling present (65, 67, 70, 75-86). They fail to
notice that significant erosion of caste consciousness, social anonymity, upgradation to motorized skills and wages in cash are gains to Dalits in the decades following Independence. Arokiyam recalls having cast her vote in four general elections. But her lifestyle remains unaltered and old-fashioned. What is remarkable, in fact, is that she prefers it that way, strongly resisting any phenomenon that hints at development, social progress or a loosening of rigid, feudal social structure or alter a barter economy that privileges pseudo charity over a fair exchange of wages for services. And herein lies the core of the problematic in the novel’s discourse.

Does the novel merely record a character’s consciousness and her response to changing social mores? Or does it endorse the character’s anti-development discourse, her stiff resistance to vertical mobility as the only laudable voice upholding simplicity, value for tradition and community as an extended institution of the family? The narratorial voice in Koveru Kazhudaigal does not rupture or subvert the protagonist’s constantly wailing, weeping, nostalgic reverie as does Meeran’s in his novel, Chaivu Naarkaali where the narrator maintains a distinct, sardonic, ironic voice while recording the central character’s nostalgic reveries, fantasies, dreams of a glorious past even while languishing in a decadent, bankrupt, disenchanting present. Mustapa Kannu’s self-indulgent trips of nostalgia are juxtaposed to the narrative’s critiquing of his impoverished but selfish and decadent lifestyle that fails to reckon with the changed times and social mores.

Imaiyam’s novel sets up a binary, an irreconcilable set of values, whereby one is valorized while the other is decried without underlining the inter-connections, inherent contradictions in the two categories. While the novel succeeds in offering a realistic representation of suffering endured by Arokiyam and her family, its representation of the course of social history impinging upon Arokiyam’s time and place is unrealistic, superficial and sentimental. Arokiyam hates the presswallah and tailor, considers them her personal enemies and
professional adversaries who have jeopardized her livelihood. At the same time she refuses to upgrade her professional skills, adapt to demands of the times and take up professional tactics of her competitors. She has the option of either joining her son at Chinnachelam, join his flourishing shop, work with him and earn more than her present income or set up a shed offering similar services near home as Mary suggests and put the goodwill earned by her among her clients to her professional advantage. Arokiyam rejects both the options. She avers, she shall never quit this village nor take up work that she considers inappropriate to her caste. Her notion of inappropriateness is entirely self-defined and socially regressive. After all, her professional rivals too are drawn from her own caste. Arokiyam, thus, chooses stagnation over material progress, and the novel valorizes sentimentalism without critiquing her imprudence or inability to adapt to changing times. Far from critiquing Arokiyam, the novel foregrounds her vision of a stagnant, socially regressive, feudalistic, casteist, hierarchy oriented, nostalgia-driven social space as a desirable, affirming one. The novel does not probe or question her assumption that the past was a positive, protective, non-oppressive space for Paraivannars. Was there no oppression of Dalits in the past? Did they never go hungry? Were Dalit women never raped or sexually harassed in the past? The novel sets up a trajectory whereby development is slated as anti-Dalit and alternately posits recent past as a utopian, golden dream!

Arokiyam and Chavuri constantly wail, “times have changed.” Their Chakiliyar neighbour, old, blind, story-teller Periyar rephrases it, “people have changed.”

Certain privileges and legitimate rights made available to the village during Arokiyam’s lifetime are held Dalit unfriendly by her and the novel shares and wallows in her trip of nostalgia. For instance, Mary informs Arokiyam about the upgradation of the village school from a primary to secondary level. “Teachers
dress up in trousers and shirts now. Even women work as teachers. It is no longer like before.” (77) This information is juxtaposed to reduction of their clientele with the entry of Periyasami, the presswalah and Sayabu, the tailor. Arokiyam gets to wash only bedsheets not any other linen. “The Vannathi smashes the clothes on the washing stone and weakens the cloth. Clothes are shredded to pieces,” the villagers complain. (77) If Arokiyam has a grouse, “village has changed” (83, 156, 164), villagers have a complaint too, “Vannathi does not wash clothes well like in earlier times. She just rinses the clothes in plain water and spins them dry. But of course, she would make umpteen trips to our street for collecting food and grains.” (144) Arokiyam, however, refuses to upgrade or modify her style of washing. Imaiyam painstakingly describes the hardships suffered by Arokiyam and Chavuri, their hard labour under indifferent weather, combating age and ill-health, digging up pits, walking long miles in knee-high mud and dirt, attending to every errand and getting ill-treated by one and all. But he exempts them from his critical purview for their resistance to change or adopt machinery or skills that would mitigate their harsh labour, guarantee them a better quality of life materially or culturally. This, in a way, renders the writing a mere spectacle of suffering and a lyrical lament rather than a probe into social injustice or a possibility into qualitative improvement in professional, personal contexts of oppressed Dalit communities.

Idealisation of past finds a validation in the long, rambling, conversations/tales shared by Chavuri and Periyaan. Apart from citing mounds of food collected in the past as *Raachoru*, generous helping of grains during the harvest or their enormous appetite or recalling guileless villagers, the two men also offer comments on a decline in sexual prowess among today’s youth and contemporary women’s unfirm, sloppy breasts following childbirth as signs of social decadence! (85). “Today’s young men ejaculate even before the women take off their sarees. Oh, come on! Those days, even after delivering ten babies, a woman’s breasts were firm and solid like a palm fruit. See now! One
baby comes out of her and her breasts hang down an arms length.” (85)
Narrating such male gossip as genuine lament of Dalit workers for a golden past, pushes the novel into the locales of sentimental melodrama rather than that of social, political comment as befits a novel’s literary stature.

Imaiyam’s novel *Koveru Kazhudaigal* posits a fantastic assumption that there was no exploitative, oppressive social structure in the past just as it recognizes that no social protest or revolt exists or is possible in the present. The novel does not interrogate or critique or challenge or subvert the caste system or its practice of untouchability. It merely pleads for a more charitable system, wherein, caste bias, hierarchy, power relations can uphold the status quo, wherein Dalits would be willing enough to remain subservient and hard-working, if only they would be treated with kindness and charity. Mary is happy to get an old blouse from her Paraiyar friend Rani as her wedding gift. The novel highlights such gestures as desirable and praiseworthy. Chavuri claims his hunger is assuaged only if he gets to gulp down at least a morsel of *Raachoru* as food cooked at his own hearth never satisfies him! (109)

Arokiyam not only refuses to join her son Josep at the nearby town, she also firmly rejects a proposal from the priest to dedicate her younger son Peter to church. The priest’s emissary, his cook, argues with Arokiyam at great length over a two-day visit but fails to convince Arokiyam to part with twelve-year-old Peter. Chavuri feels persuaded that the call from church would enhance Peter’s future and benefit his family’s material condition. But Arokiyam steadfastly spikes down the proposal. The novel analyses her emotional conflict and valorizes her motherly, protective instinct but surely, Arokiyam’s material life would have changed for the better, her old age would have been nurtured with care and comfort and Peter would have received quality education, social grooming, a steady job, and an assured, stable future within the church corridors. The cook cites numerous examples of poor boys turning into
respected, powerful, enabled churchmen, empowered to help their family and
society better. But Arokiyam weeps, laments, and holds back Peter from this
god-sent (literally!) opportunity for a better social life on the ground that Peter
is her only succour in old age. With Mary being married off, Josep lured away
(!) to another town by his wife, Arokiyam argues, Peter is her sole support and
aide in failing health and advancing age. (112-13) For all her superstitious,
blind, unquestioning faith in the church, her frequent appeals to the priest for
intervention for every minor problem she faces, Arokiyam resists the church
offer with remarkable clarity and, one must concede, with dignity. She takes
this decision on her own and the episode stands out as a glaring exception
where Arokiyam stands up for her beliefs and pronounces a resounding "no".
She tells herself that while Peter would undoubtedly gain a lot, she could not
bring herself to dedicate her son to a life of celibacy. (113)

Arokiyam’s refusal to part with Peter is presented as an act of resistance, an
assertion of self and a positive acceptance of her professional/occupational
responsibility to the community at large. She reasons with the cook, “if
everyone joins the priestly class, who shall wash the clothes?” (117) her
decision affirms family as an institution and mother-child bondage as far more
compelling than socially empowering lifestyle.

However, Arokiyam’s decision further crystallizes the novel’s valorization of
motherhood on the one hand, material stagnation on the other and an overall
resistance to material progress, social upgradation as well as vertical mobility.
Arokiyam’s decision can be hailed as a supreme affirmation of her motherly love
and protectiveness. At the same time, it is equally an enormously imprudent,
impractical, myopic perspective that robs her of a fabulous opportunity to rise
above the economic deprivations, social indignities that plague her family and
an insecure future that awaits the couple. She is unable to feed or clothe Peter.
He roams the streets during the day, gets into a brawl with the boys, refuses to
collect Raachor (which, in any case, is drastically scarce) and pesters his mother to allow him to join the presswallah to improve the family's fortune. (109) Peter has been the rebellious child from the beginning. Much before Sakayam’s rebellion, Peter had demanded that the family give up their nightly rounds to collect leftovers and instead cook at home. (4)

The most painful irony in the narrative follows soon after Arokiyam’s successful resistance to a proposal from the church. Peter runs away from home, deserting his ill mother, carrying off her savings put aside by her to buy silver trinkets for her grandson. (133) Peter runs away to Chennai with a friend. Arokiyam’s decision to retain Peter at home has been utterly nullified by his running away to an unknown metropolis. Neither Josep nor Peter ever reappear in the novel after they leave the village. They are only fondly recalled and lamented about in ritual songs by their mother. Arokiyam thus remains alone in the village as she chooses to stay back and resist migration to the city, to a place that offers anonymity, impersonal social intercourse and perhaps a less rigid social stratification.

Arokiyam’s isolation, her tragic separation from her sons are inextricably linked to her resistance to change, her refusal to migrate, her willingness to stagnate rather than adopt mobility. The novel seeks to depict the slow disintegration of a family, of community-oriented social intercourse, the inevitable shift from rural to urban milieu and its accompanying loss to selfhood, family bonding and alienation of individuals from traditional social structures. However, the novel’s present design highlights migration as desertion, mobility as loss of self-esteem. It also celebrates stagnation as fidelity to tradition. It shows an individual’s clinging on to an obsolete lifestyle as honesty and authenticity of self. However, conserving of one’s past cannot be seen as a positive phenomenon if it involves self-annihilation.
Arokiyam, at the end of the novel stands alone, carrying on with her traditional work heroically but the novel ends without any qualitative change in the nature of social oppression that the family was shown to live under at the beginning of the narrative. While the sons have left home, the daughter comes back to her natal home as a widow with an infant daughter. Mary’s doting husband dies of a cobra bite and Arokiyam brings her home. The novel ends with the old couple’s visit to Torapattu — the place for washing clothes in a pit near a stream. Mary with her baby follows the couple to the site despite Arokiyam’s protests. (179) Chavuri with a bundle of unwashed linen on his bent back, Arokiyam with Mary’s daughter at her waist are stark images underlying the old couple’s twin responsibilities — professional and familial that have fallen upon their fragile shoulders.

They get back to work in the familiar site with added responsibilities and emotional burden. The oppressive social system or the unjust recompense or sexist, casteist biases have not been reordered. The system is never critiqued or interrogated in a systematic manner. An organized protest by the oppressed is never hinted at or proposed. Even a faint possibility of an organized movement against caste oppression or unjust work conditions is not ever explored in the novel.

Other Vannars are talked about, their presence during funeral or weddings, their non-Catholic identity is highlighted more than once in the novel. (90-92) But a joining together of those Vannars, discussing their mutual problems or their awareness regarding Dalit movements for liberation in the province are issues on which the novel maintains a rigorous silence. The old couple’s return to a familiar, unaltered system has left the unjustness of their situation more intense and stark. Arokiyam and Chavuri’s return to routine could have been perceived as manifestation of resilience. But the routine is marked by absence of qualitative change in the social, cultural context. Hence, Arokiyam’s earlier
choice to stay back, to prefer stagnation over material progress made possible through migration has placed her return to Torapattu as an option enjoined upon her by circumstances. She has lost the option to choose, to decide for herself. How is she going to fend for Mary and her daughter? The declining piles of clothes, the negligible doles of Raachoru, the presence of sexist panchayat and the absence of younger men from the household – Josep, Peter, Draviyaraj – have rendered the odds against Arokiyam and Chavuri, rather worse than earlier years. The two of them have indeed replaced the Koveru Kzhudaigal, the two donkeys who acted as their beasts of burden. They have in turn, become beasts of burden for a lifetime.

4.5 SOCIAL MOBILITY; FEMALE SEXUALITY: CASTE RIGORS; MALE BIASES

Arumugam, Imaiym’s second novel was published in 1999, five years after his Koveru Kzhudaigal (1994). In his second work, Imaiym’s yardstick for assessing notions like women’s chastity, motherhood, female sexuality on the one hand and his stand on issues like social mobility for Dalits in an industrialized, urban milieu on the other are evolved with far greater rigidity and self-righteousness than in his earlier novel. The central protagonist, Arumugam, a boy of seven at the opening of the novel traverses a rigorously stratified, sexist social milieu and his travails over a period of nearly two decades form the central focus of the novel. A deftly crafted plot, Arumugam presents a sophisticated narrative structure encompassing flashbacks, cinematic images, visual metaphors, melodramatic situations, careful positing of culture–specific, community–specific life-style, minute adumberation of unusual occupations, a delineation of varied, seamy habitations in a fast changing traditional society caught up in an onslaught of industrialization that has thrown up a multitude of migrant, Dalit artisans into an unfamiliar, socially anonymous, dehumanizing, sexually exploitative scenario where they are left to battle to
survive and sustain (rather invariably fail to sustain) their old, moral matrix. Imaiym’s careful attention to the craft of a novel, a tight plot mechanism, an absorbing narrative, use of colourful, spoken vocabulary of Dalit labour force, authentic detailing of milieu and cultural nuances are juxtaposed to his equally careful positing of an ideological position that critiques urbanization, industrialisation, the trend of migration of Dalits from rural to urban pockets, the enrolling of Dalit women into urban work force and his authoritative equation of Dalit women’s social mobility with unfailing loss of chastity and honour that could be salvaged or affirmed only through an act of suicide, preceded by a lyrical, impassioned rhetoric. Imaiym resorts to such a resolution not once but twice in the novel: in the song and suicide of Mutthu Kizhaver (79; 65) and later in Danabakiyam’s speech and suicide (203-06; 207).

The protagonist, Arumugam, is a passive male hero who stands by, a mere observer and recorder, steadfastly refusing to act or intervene. Whether as a young boy of seven or eight years old or as a young adult, things happen to Arumugam. He does not choose to act or alter what happens to him or around him. His passive recording of events, however, is juxtaposed to an active, moral assessment of events and people participating in those events. Thus, Arumugam witnesses action and acts as its moral witness. His agency is restricted to his moral censure of social changes and of people, specifically of women who take part or precipitate such changes in society. Interestingly, the only mode of action that he envisages for himself in such a milieu is to offer or threaten to “run away” from the scene of action. As a child, when his mother refuses to divulge any information regarding the destination of their journey, he threatens, “if you do not tell me, I shall run away”.17 His mother asks him, “where shall you go?” and he replies with assurance, “I shall run away to some place.” (1). He, in fact, does not grow out of this stand even at the close of the novel. He runs away from home, from his workplace, from one job after another, from one residential habitation to another. He is on a run, throughout
the novel. Each time he runs away from a spot, it is because, he senses a sexual scandal. The enormity of sexual misdemeanour does not matter. He starts “running” the moment he senses a compromise of social decorum by women. And his notion of sexual decorum as well as his understanding of a compromising conduct are enormously inflexible, absolute, static and exacting.

In his second novel, Imaiym has hardened his ideological convictions with as much rigor as he has honed his writing craft. *Arumugam* is a more ably written novel than *Koveru Kazhudaigal* just as it is a more regressive work of writing in its attitude to Dalit women’s life style. This novel is a more systematic censure of Paraiyars and a more uncharitable tale of “fallen” Dalit women than the writer’s earlier novel. While Imaiym’s increasingly assured command over the novel form, use of language (spoken and narratorial), characterization, superb machinations of plot, borrowing of cinematic narrative strategies and his confident, credible display of Dalit women’s spoken vocabulary dazzles the reader, his unforgiving moral code, his sexist, patriarchal depiction of women characters and his biases against a specific caste and women of that caste are alarming and dismaying. Good writing employed to communicate regressive morality and selective censure spells alarm and concern indeed.

*Arumugam* starts off as a tale of a young Paraiyar widow, Danabakiyam – a pampered, only child of basket weaver MuthuKizhavar in a remote village is married off to Raman, a Paraiyan without social or familial moorings, a worker at Auroville at Pondicherry. The young Danabakiyam is widowed within eight years of marriage. She is persuaded by neighbours to seek a job at Auroville as compensation and move to a hamlet closer to her work place. She quits her natal as well as her marital village much against her father’s wishes and sets up home at Pondicherry. She brings up her son single handedly, admits him to a good school, easily picks up a modern/urban lifestyle and wishes to provide every possible comfort to her son; it becomes the chief goal in her life. She
wears her saree like a city dweller does, not as village women don it, a few metres above her calves; carries a hand bag, lipstick, wears slippers, applies talcum powder, etc. Interestingly, talcum powder is almost a leitmotif for erring womanhood in Imaiyam's novels. One may recall, the censure of Sakayam in Koveru Kazhudaigal for her fondness to apply talcum powder and frequent combing of her hair. Danabakiyam is unable to ward off the attentions of Jerry Albert, a European, empowered employee at Auroville, who had arranged for her job. One day, when Arumugam returns home earlier than usual, he finds his mother in bed with Jerry Albert. He runs away from home that very moment. He continues to run away from issues and situations throughout the novel.

Although presented as an arresting, almost cinematic image of a couple discovered naked in bed by a child, the situation is clothed in melodrama and sensual language. It is however, not an implausible situation. Danabakiyam is a young widow, a single parent, a village belle who has landed up a job for a princely sum (as per her standard) besides receiving a substantial amount as compensation for her husband's accidental death. She is grateful to Jerry Albert and is unable to show him the door. While getting ready to leave for work, she is confronted by Jerry Albert who forcibly enters her home and pulls her indoors. She is physically overpowered by a well built European who happens to be her boss as well. She protests at his conduct and expresses anxiety regarding, "What would happen if my son sees" her with Albert. However, Albert is insistent and pulls her inside the house as deftly as "an Iruvan (a snake-catcher) would pullout a snake by its neck from its pit deftly with his two fingers" (62).

The situation is not very unlike Chadaiyan's physical overpowering of Mary in Koveru Kazhudaigal. While Imaiyam concedes, Chadaiyan has raped Mary, in Arumugam, he holds Danabakiyam complicit in the said transgression.
Danabakiyam, in fact, is as much a victim as Mary, just as Jerry Albert is as powerful, socially respectable and a guarantor of work as was Chadaiyan in the earlier novel. Yet the novel holds Danabakiyam guilty and punishes her. She suffers, self-loathing not unlike Mary and is besieged with guilt. While Mary’s rape is used to represent Paraiyar’s high-handedness and unjust conduct towards Paraivannars and is left without further recall at the level of plot, narration or structural texture of the novel, Danabakiyam’s fate at the hands of Jerry Albert becomes the central focus of the novel — thematically, structurally and most significantly as an issue of immense concern in the novel’s ideological contour. The incident helps to frame the ideological core of the novel. It also becomes a marker to indicate Paraiyar women’s moral degradation in society.

It is worth pointing out that the incident under discussion is never sought to be represented as rape or non-consensual sex despite the operation of power-equation among the two parties. At the level of narration, the incident is juxtaposed to the young son’s censuring aversion to sexually explicit posters of movies plastered on walls enroute his return from school (63), the son’s recall of his grandfather’s swan song and act of suicide, (79) and Danabakiyam’s frequent pleas to her young male child to “protect” her, to never “desert” her (60) or her frantic hugging, weeping over her inability to ‘guard’ her body. “How do I Kabandu this body of mine?” she wails (25). Kabandu suggests a guarding over, to protect or restrain, in short, to raise a fence around a precious commodity, in this novel, the notion is invoked always in reference to a woman’s body.

Into this discourse, a subtle subtext is interwoven that lays bare the son’s instinctive hatred of Jerry Albert (31-32). The novel does not concede the oedipal aspect in Arumugam’s interaction with Jerry Albert (46-50) or in the moments of physical intimacy with his mother (25, 69-70) although it is quite obvious to the reader. The novel, instead, highlights Arumugam’s abusive
language towards Jerry Albert on grounds of racial difference: that the boy abuses him as he finds the man’s white skin, brown eyes/hair rather repulsive. The boy uses abusive, sexist language insulting Albert’s mother, his sister in muttered whispers. His prejudice has to be located in his over-protective, sexually suppressed gestures of desire towards his widowed mother. Despite his knowledge/use of sexually charged swear words, Arumugam is shown to turn away with repulsion from film posters on a street wall with an unconvincing, "Chee! Karumam!" (63). A curious, even if a suppressed side-glance would have been a more natural, credible response. This response is recorded almost around the same time (a page later in the narrative) that Danabakiyam is being overpowered by Jerry Albert at home (62). Imaiym uses well-known, if not clich’d cinematic idiom of recall, zoom-in shots, to prepare the reader for the son’s rejection of his mother for her sexual transgression. His moment of discovery is clothed in a language that evokes strong repulsion for the body per se: “At the place where he slept every night, the uncovered, fat laden body of Danabakiyam yoked to a white body was visible.” (70)

Danabakiyam was initially represented as defying stereotypes. She refuses to get married, curses her father for marrying her off to a sexually aggressive Raman. She beats, punches, pinches her advancing husband, does not cook but eats meals cooked by Raman, refuses to be a docile home maker, gossips and refuses to have sex with Raman (3-5). Raman smiles, keeps calm and does not raise his hand against his young bride. However, in bed, he is extremely aggressive and appropriates Danabakiyam’s body most violently (6). He bites her ears, nose, tears off her blouse, bruises her with her nose jewel (6). Of course, the novel presents this as his passion for his bride and possibly the right strategy to contain her desirable but unyielding body (6-7).

Danabakiyam conceives within three months of her marriage and thereafter oscillates between holy, motherly instincts and unholy, sexual energy! The
novel looks at Danabakiyam either as an animal emanating sexuality or as a doting mother willing to sacrifice everything for her son (at the end, even her life). When Raman asks for her hand from her father, Muthu Kizhavar, who has brought her up single handedly ever since her mother’s death eight days after delivering her, without any sexual lapse whatsoever in his lifetime, advises Raman to take care of his motherless child. (5) However, the language he uses and the strategies he suggests to his son-in-law are excessively crude and sexist:

"Son, she is a cow that kicks. Be careful.
Yes, sir.
But she is a milch cow. You should not forget that...she would be hard to get at initially...but once she experiences the pleasures between the thighs, everything would become alright. Don't raise your hand against her, my boy.” (5)

In this novel, women, whether daughters, wives, mothers, sisters or prostitutes are primarily recognized as sexually active bodies that need to be contained, guarded over or reviled at. Danabakiyam’s slapping or pinching her groom could suggest a role reversal at first glance. But it is incorporated for fleeting moments more to evoke the woman’s alluring sensuality and the seductiveness of coping with her unrealized sexuality. Verbal violence by women, whether by Danabakiyam, Bakiyam or Chinnaponnu is overshadowed by sexual violence by men by Raman, Chinnaponnu’s clients or Vasantha’s brothers.

While Chinnaponnu or Danabakiyam are Paraiyars, Vasantha is a Naidu, a land owning upper caste, a feudal lord’s only daughter “guarded” by numerous brothers. Raman, in fact, was a bonded labourer at Vasantha’s father’s lands but was allowed to quit his services when he got a job at Auroville. Raman and Danabakiyam along with their toddler son continue to visit the Naidu’s
household on festival days and get baksheesh (108). The young Arumugam, working as a rickshaw puller and as an errand boy for the prostitute, Chinnaponnu is located by Vasantha who gets him a job at the paper mill where she too works. She should be older than Arumugam besides being a Naidu. Yet she implores Arumugam to take care of her, to protect her at the factory from the lecherous supervisor. She too, like Danabakiyam, asks Arumugam to Kabandu her (112).

When Arumugam happens to see Vasantha being harassed sexually by the supervisor, he promptly runs away from his workplace (111). He also hands over to Vasantha the fifty rupees he gets as an increment at the behest of the supervisor who has been eyeing Vasantha with lust. He is too upright to touch money laced with lust. Vasantha pleads with him, as Danabakiyam did to an eight-year-old Arumugam, not to desert her, “Is this the way you guard over (Kabandu) your lord’s daughter?” she pleads. (112)

Arumugam was born many years after his father’s release from caste-labour bondage with Vasantha’s father. The novel, however, continues to invoke, legitimize such exploitative labour practices as culturally superior, soothing bonds in comparison to an industrialized milieu. Vasantha frequently reminds him that, she is his “aanda veetu mava” (landlord-master’s daughter) who needs to be guarded over by the Paraiyan owned by landlord-master: If Raman is no more then his son Arumugam should take over. Thus, industrialization is dismissed as inhuman, impersonal, immoral while infusing feudal context and caste-relations with nostalgia and humane bonding, overlooking its oppressive, unjust, casteist, hierarchy based inter-relations.

In the case of Chinnaponnu, a commercial sex worker she is shown to be overwhelmed with Taimai, motherly instinct, when Arumugam hands over his salary of Rs.150 per week to her. She weeps copiously, hugs him hysterically
and laments that “I am a prostitute, a bloody prostitute, I had no man to call my own.” (98) She slaps herself with Arumugam’s hands and kisses him repeatedly. Arumugam is perceived both as a son and as a male protector/companion by her. Her sexual and motherly passion coalesce just as it did (without overt narratorial acknowledgement) between Arumugam and Danabakiyam. Arumugam, as a boy, would hug his mother from behind, bite her ears and nose in the “same way” as his father Raman did to his wife. Danabakiyam is reported to be both elated and frightened by the boy’s acts. (25) She would smile and cry alternately and worry over how to contain her “body”. “This body is just full of salt. Oh, god! how shall I ‘kabandu’/guard it by myself?” (25) Chinnaponnu, years later, appoints the young Armuguam, to stand at the entrance of her hut and drive away her clients: “if any dog hovers around, drive him away and thrash him with your slippers. Ask him to go to his mother. Tell him she too has what I have.’ (99) Thus, Danabakiyam, vasantha, Chinnaponnu appoint Arumugam at different phases of his life as their protector. They expect, deeply yearn, to be protected by him. Arumugam remains silent to the pleas made by each of them. But he too perceives himself as morally bound to run away from the location of each of these women, if he happens to see them transgressing sexual decorum. If he cannot prevent such acts, if he cannot ‘protect’ them, then he would erase his presence from their lives. He is totally unmindful of their emotional needs which impinge upon the necessity of his mere presence in their lives. Both in Koveru Kazhudaigal and in Arumugam, Imaiyam posits resilient, hard-working, determined women who are self-reliant materially but emotionally without exception, yearn for a male protector. Imaiyam’s men characters whether Chavuri, Josep, Peter, Draviyaraj in his first novel or Arumugam, Darumamoorty, Raman or the workers at the paper mill are unexceptionally passive, inarticulate men who cannot function on their own without leaning upon their women partners or women associates or relatives. Some of them like Darumamoorty even make a living out of their dependence on women. Yet the women perceive them as their protectors and
the men fail to see the paradox in perspective. The men are willing to play the protector’s role, primarily, because they, as a rule, perceive women to be potential transgressors of sexual decorum. It is not a simplistic paradox of women requiring male protection to ward off male aggression. Rather, it is an insidious equation whereby women are required to be protected from unleashing their sexual energy or desire. Imaiym’s women are shown to articulate anxieties regarding their own sexuality, constantly looking up to men, even if it is only a six or seven year old boy, to guard them, rather, prevent them from realizing their sexual needs. While Sivakami and Bama locate sexual violence and aggression by men over women’s bodies, Imaiym posits women’s body as a site of unbridled sexuality and potential social/sexual transgression. His women characters are often hysterical, paranoid, ever-weeping human beings who lament over their loss of virginity or fear of loss of chastity or loss of family honour owing to their sexual indiscretions.18

The novelist also glosses over the fact that the women’s sexual indiscretion or transgressions are invariably thrust upon them by male aggressors who enjoy social power and material affluence. However, instead of locating these women as victims of sexual violence, Imaiym’s novels, unlike Sivakami’s presents them as perpetrators of sexual violations. Instead of sympathy, his women receive punishment be it a violent thrashing as resorted to by Vasantha’s brothers or desertion as practised by Arumugam. The violence on Dalit women’s bodies, Imaiym argues, emanates from within. They themselves unleash sexual violence in society as they fail to contain their sexual desire. Hence, the frequent wail over honour or a paronia over need for “protection”, if not from within, then through male presence in their lives emerges as a refrain in Imaiym’s novels.

Arumugam meets Vasantha a few years later at Bakiyam’s vending shop selling meat and snacks. Vasantha is gaudily dressed, is made to display her assets
and attract customers for Bakiyam. Arumugam joins Bakiyam's enterprise and
finds Vasantha's pandering to male customers loathsome. He is ever conscious
that she is a Naidu's daughter and a misfit in such a violence prone place where
men vomit, women solicit and a fight breaks out every minute. Vasantha's
commodification at Bakiyam's shop is strongly resented by Arumugam. He is
furious to see Vasantha smiling at customers or letting them ogle at her.
Vasantha has joined Bakiyam's shop as she has been driven out from home by
her brothers when they learn of her sexual 'liaisons' with the manager and a
colleague at the paper mill. Far from being a willing partner, Vasantha was
harassed by these men at her workplace and was violated. Once more, sexual
violation at workplace or non-consensual sexual act amounting to rape is
perceived as a woman's sexual liaison by male relatives and the woman is
rigorously punished. (166-67) She loses her job, her brothers thrash her hard,
specifically on her private parts and she is thrown out of home at night.
Vasantha's degradation is complete when Bakiyam offers her shelter and
commodifies her body to boost the sales at her meat-vending shop. Vasantha
blames Arumugam for her present situation: "Why did you quit the company?
Until your last day at the (mill) company, I was chaste." (166) She uses the
word "patini", a woman of honour. She thus reiterates that Arumugam's
presence would have "contained" her sexuality and she would have remained
honourable. This is utterly contradicted by earlier narration whereby the
manager/supervisor constantly harasses her, doles out an increment to her
and her protégé Arumugam and she turns to Arumugam to 'Kabandu'/guard
her. (112) In fact, Vasantha had observed to Arumugam at that time that
"women face such hardships everywhere" and dissuaded him from quitting his
job. (111)

Arumugam and through his analysis, the novel raises the issue of women's
chastity in the context of industrialization and migration to cities. He feels very
upset that Vasantha has undergone such a painful experience. He recalls her
pampered childhood, her celebrated youth in a rich household, surrounded by bonded servants, indulgent parents and the best of amenities. He believes that the cause of her suffering is the 'company', the setting up of paper mills, talcum powder manufacturing units and other factories offering employment to women workers in a large scale. Following her parents' death and a dwindled income, Vasantha was enforced to seek work at factories. Arumugam reasons, "Even if she was starving, had there been no companies (factories), Vasantha would not have crossed her threshold at all for work. Such a fate would not have befallen her." (169)

Erosion of feudal economy coupled with industrialization, urbanization and migration of rural agricultural labour to city slums, argues the novel, lead to loss of women's chastity. In Koveru Kazhudaigal, Arokiyam refused to adopt modern work tools and condemned social mobility, development plans as anti-poor, against the interests of traditional workforce drawn from oppressed communities. In Arumugam, the protagonist and the narrator squarely blame social development processes as serious threats to women's honour. The implicit conclusion of Arumugam's analysis seems to be that if a woman crosses the threshold of her home and joins the workforce outside, her honour is bound to be jeopardized. Both Danabakiyam and Vasantha seek jobs outside domestic space and are violated by their male colleagues. (This in turn is labeled as the women's transgression owing to their innate inadequacy to guard/contain their sexuality). Male protection for women as well as a domestic habitation for women, according to Imaiyam's narratives, are mandatory if their honour is to be safe guarded / retained.

While both Bama and Sivakami foreground the fact that a home is no haven for women and much of sexual violence against Dalit women take place inside their homes, Imaiyam is at pains to state that women are safe only within their homes and they require constant guarding over and monitoring of their
sexuality. Male protection for women and their domestic habitation according to Imaiym are mandatory if their honour is to be safeguarded, while Bama and Sivakami represent family as a patriarchal institution that often resorts to violence to suppress and control women inhabitants. The difference in perception among the writers could be rooted in their respective gender and ideological conviction. While Sivakami and Bama uphold feminist reading of social history, Imaiyam upholds Dravidian ideology pertaining to women's chastity, sanctity of motherhood and male social identity as custodian of women's 'honour'.

In Arumugam, Imaiyam posits social mobility of Dalit communities as detrimental to women's honour. Traditional methods of work as practised by Dalits over generations is valorized in both the novels of Imaiyam. Arokiyam does not want to buy a sewing machine or an ironing unit and earn a living in Koveru Kuzhudaigal. She prefers to follow outdated methods of washing and earning leftover food as her wages. In Arumugam, Muthu Kizhavar continues to weave baskets even when there is no longer any demand for them in the village market. His baskets were bought to store cow dung at Naidu homes. As Paraiyar men no longer graze cows owned by Naidu landlords, baskets are not in demand. Paraiyar labour force has found gainful employment at Auroville ashram at Pondicheri. They have also gained access to a life of dignity and freedom from lifelong bondage at Naidu farms where they worked hard but were treated with disdain and meager wages in kind. When Paraiyars shift to Auroville, Naidus are forced to sell off their livestock. They complain, “Paraiyans have found deliverance. Why keep these poor animals rotting in the sheds? Who would take them for grazing?” (23) Clearly, Paraiyars are required to sustain Naidus' lifestyle. Instead of highlighting this facet of Naidu-Paraiyar lifestyle / interdependence, the novel puts forward the theory that as Paraiyans move away from their traditional work and migrate to cities, their women are exposed to evil ways, while Naidu women are made to compromise on their
family reputation by finding jobs at factories. The novel also censures Paraiyars for giving up their traditional work, however exploitative or ill-paying it happened to be. As a counterpoint to this phenomenon of social mobility and change in economic structures, the novel valorizes a Muthu Kizhavar or Arokiyam who steadfastly (and rather doggedly) cling to age-old tasks that have been rendered outmoded and redundant. Muthu Kizhavar asserts, "I shall weave only baskets. God has created the stream only for my use (from whose bank he gathers his raw materials). If these do not get sold in this village, I shall go to another." (23) The baskets made by him never get sold, there is no demand for such baskets in the village market. But Muthu Kizhavar continues to weave only baskets. The narrator further endorses, "the old man never sought any other work. Not for a day did he ever go for any other kind of work" (23). Neither does he quit his village. Very principled, indeed. But how did he feed himself and his widowed daughter and grandson? The novel is silent on this as it invariably is on stark material facts while waxing eloquent on abstract virtues.

Later, Arumugam tries to interrogate the causes for Danabakiyam's moral degradation. "Why did these happen? Who caused them to happen?" (83) He recalls Danabakiyam's mesmerizing beauty, her self-esteem. He concedes that there are many Danabakiyams ('fallen women') in and around his hometown:

That too, after Auroville has come up, after companies have been set up at Mettupalayam and Chedarapatti, such things have become more common. Many women have eloped. Many wives have earned a bad name and are living away from their husbands in Krishnapuram and Poothurai. Men or boys of these households never ran away from their homes. Why did I run away? (84)

Arumugam is not above 10 or 11 years of age at the time when he offers the above analysis. The character's voice and the narrator's perception have
intermingled almost imperceptibly in the passage. The writer's bourgeois anxiety over women's chastity has been imputed to a ten-year-old character. That partly explains why many Paraiyar men have stayed put with their spouses who have gone astray but Arumugam had (or was it, authorially engineered?) run away from home on witnessing his mother in bed with another man. An eight-year-old child (as was Arumugam at the time of his quitting home) would be materially and emotionally too dependent on his single surviving parent to take such a decision. More significantly, children run away from home for their personal acts of commission and omission like failing an exam, getting into a brawl with another child, to seek glamour or being lured by incentives promising fame, money or innocent pleasures. Seldom do they run away from home on moral compunction. They internalize such scruples as they enter their teens. An eight-year-old boy could also feel neglected or betrayed when his mother commits adultery but would perhaps still not take a moralistic stand on women's sexuality. On the day he runs away, he keeps running about the town the entire day. At moments he calls out "involuntarily 'Amma, Amma' but feeling ashamed of uttering the word, would spit out violently, exclaiming, 'chee, chee'," suggesting censure and revulsion (63). It is of course an irony that Arumugam who could never accept or forgive his mother's association with Jerry Albert, could stay at Chekkumedu, a brothel street, without compunction, treat Chinnaponnu as a substitute mother, attend to her when she emerges out of her client's rude clutches or later act as a pimp at Bakiyam's hovel.

It is rather disturbing to note that setting up of factories or job opportunities at Auroville are looked upon as precipitating loss of Dalit women's honour in society. Paraiyar men and women gain dignity of labour, attractive wages, acquire new, marketable skills and rid themselves of feudal bondage and casteist, exploitative practices attached with such a structure. At factories or at Auroville, Naidu and Paraiyar workers do similar jobs and get paid similar salaries. Paraiyar men and women wear clean, fashionable clothes, send their
children to school, buy up homes or rent comfortable accommodation. They are not addressed by casteist expletives or made to eat left over food or perform unpaid labour. When a worker meets with an accident at a Naidu's lands, he gets no compensation. A Naidu landlord does not even meet the expenses of his funeral rites. (34) But at Auroville, when Raman dies at workplace, following a fall, Danabakiyam is offered a job for Rs.500 as monthly salary and monetary compensation for loss of life (49). While Naidus continue to enforce traditional exploitative system based on caste hierarchy, at Auroville or paper mills or powder factories Paraiyars find freedom from caste oppression, gain regular income and a dignified lifestyle. Yet, the novel holds the factories and Auroville as anti-Dalit. Industrialisation and a complacent moral code may well be an undisputed fact and social trend borne out by history. However, Imaiyan's exaggerated anxiety, rather paranoia for loss of Dalit women's chastity owing to social mobility or gains in industrial job market or greater cohabitation of men and women in public places or slow disregard for caste identity that ferments discrimination are clearly misplaced and is a misleading reading of social history.

The novel Arumugam is riddled with self-contradictions. While the novel and the protagonist endorse a high-pitched anxiety/censure for women's sexual transgression following modernisation and loosening of feudal dominance over Paraiyar lives, Arumugam lives with a pimp and parasite, Darumamoorty and a prostitute Chinnaponnu, from the age of eight to young adulthood. He never adopts a censuring tone towards either, or try to shift out of the slum abounding in squalor, brawls, flowing drains and filthy language. He serves Chinnaponnu with liquor and meat, takes her to the doctor to get treatment for a sexually transmitted disease, hands over his earning from rickshaw-pulling or work at factory to her and offers enduring sympathy and material support. Chinnaponnu's choice of living is never examined from a sociological angle, her personal history is not delineated in the novel. It is rather represented as a
given fact of life. Arumugam’s aversion to suggestive film posters, or his moral condemnation of his mother, or his irrational hatred of Jerry Albert are not juxtaposed to his life at brothel street. In a picaresque like structure, where Arumugam is shown to be a passive witness of events but an active critic of conduct, the brothel scenes are presented rather in a social, moral vacuum. Chinnaponnu is exploited by Darumamoorthy, by her clients and humiliated by gynaecologists on her visits for treatment. Arumugam’s silent, unquestioning sympathy for her coupled with her eagerness to act as his surrogate mother push Chinnaponnu into an abstract feminine principle rather than an oppressed Dalit woman of flesh and blood (84-86). Arumugam’s readiness to place Chinnaponnu on the pedestal of motherhood further distracts the reader from locating the brothel site as a sordid reality of metropolis. Despite Imaiyam’s successful capturing of vocabulary of brothel street, depicting typical squabbles among prostitutes over clients, the highhandedness of clients, who often pay less than promised or choose ‘new arrivals’ over ‘stale products’ (older inhabitants like Chinnaponnu), Chinnaponnu stands out in reader’s memory as a sensitive, spirited, affectionate, motherly figure. The novel thus glorifies a prostitute as a mother and brands a mother as depraved. While Chinnaponnu is killed off in the middle of the narrative over a brawl with a non-paying client, Danabakiyam is located inside a brothel hut by the end of the novel (139, 200). Chinnaponnu is given a fond farewell by the humane inhabitants of Chekkumedu who brave the corrupt staff at moratorium and ambulance personnel. On the other hand, a few pages before Arumugam discovers Danabakiyam inside a brothel hut (where befitting a populist melodrama, he has been pushed inside as a prospective client!), Arumugam is shown to be filled with hatred and repugnance at Chekkumedu. After having lived here for more than a decade, his revulsion for the place, immediately before stumbling upon his long lost mother inside a hut at Chekkumedu underscores Imaiyam’s penchant for dramatic irony, melodrama and moral censure:
His anger was laced with hatred. He felt strongly that he should quit Chekkumedu. He felt something sticky on his face. He kept wiping his face repeatedly. He felt a spitting headache. For the first time he felt as if he is lying on a sewage drain. He felt nauseated. He felt a strange fear about the place, Chekkumedu. (196 emphases added)

Soon enough, on a stroll through an overflowing drain, Arumugam is asked to enter, rather pushed inside a hut by an older prostitute, Tangamani (199). He wants to ‘run away’ from the hut, he feels ‘ashamed’, ‘repulsed’ by a sticky substance on his feet. He lights a match and discovers Danabakiyam ‘rooted on the spot like a stone’ (200).

Imaiyam employs cinematic melodrama, break in narration, flashbacks, suggestive visuals and impassioned rhetoric on motherhood, chastity, honour throughout the novel. He also represents suicide as vindication of honour, a validation of belief in women’s chastity or as an ultimate censure of women’s sexuality. Two suicides take place in the novel. Danabakiyam’s father, Muthu Kizhavar hangs himself when he learns of his daughter’s sexual transgression (65). Danabakiyam hangs herself after she locates Arumugam following nearly two decades of search (207).

The first suicide is preceded by a lyrical, loaded song about women’s chastity and male honour:

So many fences for a woman
Yet she jumped each one of them
A man without honour is naked
How should I retain my breath at all? (79, my translation)
Muthu Kizhavar sings this song in the company of his grandson Arumugam while collecting raw materials for basket weaving near the canal. He sings it many times, in a low tone (79). The following day Danabakkiyam receives the news of his suicide (65). On her last visit to her father, she guesses that her father has learnt of her association with a colleague. She is traumatized and pleads with him not to punish her with a stony silence but to no avail. She then turns to her young son at night and pleads hysterically, “Do not desert me like your father... I live only because of you. You are not just my son. You are my father. Protect me like a brother would. I fall at your feet. You are my lord, my god, my messiah. My body refuses to sleep...son have you fallen asleep?” (60)

The novel argues through Danabakiyam’s speech that a woman needs a male protector (never mind his age, his gender is of greater significance) to contain her sexuality. Her father never raises the subject of re-marriage for his widowed daughter or shift himself to her residence to help her manage child-rearing and a job. Jerry Albert is a benefactor in her eyes and she is trapped into a liaison with him. But her own upbringing and reliance on traditional morality are exacting on issues concerning female decorum. Hence, she suffers most acutely, a sense of guilt and self-loathing when her search for Arumugam ends on the infamous, melodramatic encounter at brothel street, Chekkumedu. Arumugam asks her to forget the past as a bad dream: “You are alive. That is sufficient (203)”. And the novel could have ended with a reconciliation between the mother and the son, both forgiving each other’s trespasses. Of course, the novel could have refrained from resurrecting Danabakiyam from a buried past in the first place! But Imaiyyam had resorted to melodrama, a sudden death and unresolved baggage of abstractions in the earlier novel as well. In Arumugam, Danabakiyam weeps through the night, makes a lyrical speech, underlining her dependence on her son:
I am not a fallen Parachi. The world is a fallen one...I could neither move one way nor tear myself away. What could I do? My blood was heated up...Everyone left me alone. I was like Sita left behind in a jungle or a Draupadi stripped in a hall and left to fend for herself...I was left on the crossroads alone...I always thought only of you, lived only to find you. You are my everything. You never vanished from my vision. (205-206, emphases added)

Having restored a fallen woman to a position comparable to Sita or Draupadi, the novel accentuates its rhetorical pitch further. She dressed herself up like a bride,” ties a shirt of Arumugam “around her abdomen” and hangs herself on a ceiling fan with a saree. (206-07)

Danabakiyam is thus finally vindicated in the novel as a mother. She re-enters the novel only to affirm her motherhood, her bond with her son and hang herself in an effort to prove that ‘she too was an honourable woman’. It cannot be said that this is an artistically clumsy or forced ending. It is, nonetheless, an uneasy resolution. Danabakiyam’s re-entry and her subsequent death by suicide are deliberately placed strategies by the novelist to reiterate his systematic valorization of motherhood and vindication of honour by death that lie embedded in the narrative. The ending underlines the ideological texture of Imaiyam’s novels that seek to celebrate narrow, abstract notions of chastity and honour. His writing posits motherhood as the most apropiate role for women and if a mother’s sexuality is troublesome enough to her son, then it could be smoothed away only through a rigorous punishment in the form of his desertion followed by death of the woman, preferably by killing of self by the repentant woman herself.

Arumugam shows sexuality as the central trouble spot to moral fabric of Dalit society – be it male or female sexuality. Kuppusami is a petty cook and
marriage organizer under whom Arumugam works for two years. His wife has a liaison with his brother. One may recall, Meenatchi’s liaison with her brother-in-law in Koveru Kzhudaigal. Kuppusami’s son Sivaraman is traumatized and does not know who is his biological father. Kuppusami tries to sodomise Arumugam one day. Arumugam kicks him off, spits and quits the place and his job. He does not report the incident or expose Kuppusami. He merely registers his repugnance and feels repulsion as though Kuppusami was a crawling spider on his legs. Vasantha gets a job at a hospital and gets out of Chekkumedu and Bakkiyam’s novel by sexually satisfying Pushpa Mary, a nurse deserted by a doctor-lover. This lesbian liaison is indicated through suggestive language. Arumugam’s habitual silence releases him from voicing an assessment. But his knowledge of it makes him complicit. His complicity in Vasantha’s commodification at Bakkiyam’s shop, his pimping at Chekkumedu also render Arumugam an implicated participant in an amoral social system. Yet he is perceived within the novel by other characters as a moral man. 19 And of course, he remains virginal, without being initiated into a sexually active life. Female sexuality frustrates men in Arumugam. They fail to understand its working. Nor do they succeed in grappling with it. Arumugam deserts his transgressing mother to end up as a pimp at Chekkumedu. Darumamoorty, a farmer, runs away from home when he learns of his wife’s elopement with George Stephen, a school teacher in his village. He becomes a pimp and an alcoholic rickshaw puller. Kuppusami unable to “control” his wife’s adultery, masks his frustration by trying to sodomise young boys working under him. The novel makes a careful linking of male deviant behaviour to their women folk’s sexual aberration. The novel offers a resolution that upholds melodrama and rhetoric. The woman-culprit confesses, asks for forgiveness and finally ends her life herself. Arumugam, the character is a sad sacrifice/ casualty to the ideological problematic of Arumugam, the novel.
4.6 CONCLUSION

Imaiyam’s novels valorise the past and represent the present as a painful awareness of insurmountable distance from such a past. As a consequence, the characters in both the novels glorify the past, uphold inaccessible, lofty ideals and experience a constant state of being in disgrace. Arokiyam, Chavuri, Periyaan or Mary in Koveru Kazhudaigal and Muthu Kizhavar, Vasantha, Arumugam and Danabakiyam in Arumugam are unhappy with their present as they find it far different from their imagined past. The novels refrain from a direct, objective representation of the past that the characters glorify or yearn for. Hence, the past emerges at an ideational level, as a value-loaded marker to assess the present. The persistent problems of the characters’ in their present have a social, economic bearing. Imaiyam’s novels refrain from focusing on this aspect. Hence, his novels do not put forth a social or political intervention or suggest a collective, concrete, political action or strategy to address the problems faced by the characters in the present as has been indicated in the works of Bama or Sivakami. The vision of a brighter future evolved through a collective intervention or empowered political will of Dalits as hinted at in Bama’s Karukku, Sangati or Sivakami’s Pazhiyana Kazhidalum is absent in Imaiyam’s Koveru Kazhudaigal and Arumugam.

Imaiyam’s attention to form, craft and narration on the one hand and a studied silence on organized, collective, radical struggle against oppression by Dalits on the other place him as an exception in the arena of Dalit literary discourse in Tamil.

Imaiyam’s novels present a gendering of Dalit literary discourse in a tone strikingly different from that of other Dalit writers in Tamil. His novels trace the sexual oppression of Dalit women to migration of Dalits to urban pockets, to a moving away of Dalits from their traditional, caste-defined duties / craft and to
erosion of sexual morality among Dalit women. In Imaiyam’s novels, Dalit women are held responsible for erosion of moral values among Dalits as the women, the novels argue cross their domestic threshold and enter the work force in an industrial, urban milieu.

Imaiyam’s representation of Dalit women in his fiction is significantly / considerably different from that of Bama’s or Sivakami’s.
NOTES

1 Imaiyam, Nanum En Ezuthum (on Myself and My writing), Kalachuvadu (October 2004): 58. Translation mine for the purposes of this research.


3 As reported by Raj Gautaman in Koveru Kazhudaigalum, Medaigalum in Poi + Abatham → Unmai (Coimbatore: Viliumbu, 1995) 98.


5 Imaiyam’s Koveru Kazhudaigal was made available in English translation and on the Internet in 2001. See Beasts of Burden tr. Lakshmi Holmstrom (Chennai: Manas, 2001).


7 See Blurbs in Koveru Kazudaigal (Chennai: Cre-A, 1994) Arumugam (Chennai: Cre-A, 1999) and Mann Baram (Chennai: Cre-A, 2004).

8 The debate over Imaiyam’s craft vs commitment stands polarised between E. Annamalai, Cre-A Ramakrishnan, Venkat Swaminathan, N. Sivaraman on the one hand and Raj Gautaman on the other. While Raj Gautaman critiques Imaiyam’s use of craft and language to sidetrack political commitment towards Dalits’ struggle, the others valorise Imaiyam’s linguistic skills and control over form, plot and absence of ideological orientation in his fiction.
9 Raj Gautaman expands this argument more systematically in his essay, “Punida Arumugam” in *Dalita Vimarsana Katturaigal* (Nagercoil: Kalachuvadu, 2003) 113-128.


14 Imaiyam, *Koveru Kazhudaigal* (Chennai: Cre-A, 1994): 24-25. All references to the novel are to this edition, hereafter incorporated in the text. Translation mine for the purposes of this research.

15 Various Dalit writers have dealt with rape, seduction, adultery of Dalit women with great sensitivity without depriving the Dalit woman victim of her dignity, underscoring her vulnerability in a hierarchical social structure, often representing rape of a Dalit woman as embedded in power relations and caste oppression. In Tamil, Sivakami’s *Pazhiyana Kazhidalum, Aanandayee*, Bama’s *Sangati*, Unjai Rajan’s *Uruthi* and Urmila Pawar, Kishore Shantabai Kale, Sharan Kumar Limbale in Marathi, Suraj Pal Chauhan, Mohan Das Naimi Sharay in Hindi are some of the texts / writers which/who offer a radically different perspective from that of Imaiyam’s on Dalit women’s sexuality as well as her sexual exploitation in society.
A novel that bears comparison in making a distinction between a character’s nostalgia for the past and the writer’s critique of it is Thoppil Muhamadu Meeran’s representation of Mustapa Kannu in *Chaivu Naarkaali* (Tirunelveli: Jaleela Pb. House, 1995).

Imaiyam, *Arumugam* (Chennai: Cre-A, 1999) 1. All references to the novel are to this edition, hereafter incorporated in the text. Translation mine for the purposes of this research.

Whether it is Mary following her rape by Chadiyan or Vasantha after she is thrown out of her house by her brothers or Danabakiyam when she finds out her son has left home on discovering her in bed with Jerry Albert, each one’s reaction to her situation is steeped in hysterical, sentimental rhetoric.