CHAPTER-V
CONCLUSION

The objective of this study was to examine literary representations of Dalit women in the novels of Bama, Sivakami and Imaiyam. The study aimed at examining the dynamic intersection between gender and caste in the works of Dalit writers with a specific focus on their representation of Dalit women. Each of the three writers' novels, written between 1989 and 1999 were taken up for critical study. The decade, marked by a vibrant production of literary works by Dalit writers in Tamil was studied to explore the writers' response to issues pertaining to caste identity of Dalit community and its traffic with a gendered social matrix.

The novels under study reflect a decade of active intervention in Tamil literary discourse that engendered a new, vibrant voice that interrogated literary, cultural stereotypes, setting up new yardsticks and forging fresh perspectives on literary paradigms. Dalit writing in Tamil gained in visibility outside Tamil Nadu through translation into other languages, including English and French. Within Tamil Nadu, performative interventions on Dalit discourse like production of audio cassettes containing songs, oral narratives prevalent among Dalits and performance of street, stage plays on issues relating to Dalit identity, their position in society, reinterpreting classics, epics, legends on stage, use of Dalit actors, Dalit vocabulary and traditional musical instruments of Dalits during performances helped in enlarging the context beyond the academic, and the literary wherein Dalit fiction could be located and critiqued.

In the theoretical domain, feminism and Marxism offer perspectives and insights that have been used by Dalit writers like Bama and Sivakami and
address issues related to Dalit community. Imaiyam, the third writer under study, has reacted against feminist and Marxist thought in his novels thereby offering a counter discourse on the gender-class-caste question addressed by all the three novelists. In all the seven works under study, representation of Dalits primarily as Dalit women workers -- either within the domestic or in a feudal, agrarian set up or in an urban, industrialised milieu -- is a common link. The present study attempted to explore (a) the different facets to representations of Dalit women in Tamil Dalit fiction; and (b) the difference in representation of Dalit women as prompted by the gender identity of the writer.

At the outset of this study, it seemed as though gender identity overpowered caste consciousness of the writer. It seemed Bama and Sivakami offered positive, sympathetic representation of Dalit women as they are women first and foremost. Their novels documented women working at home, labouring in the fields, digging wells, laying roads and getting paid less than men for similar work. Dalit women's work at home went unrecognized and they were subjected to physical, psychological and sexual violence both at home and at work.

The novels of Sivakami and Bama represent Dalit women primarily as workers – honest, hardworking, poorly paid and exploited workers. They document economic and sexual exploitation of Dalit women and argue that their Dalit identity renders them more vulnerable to injustice than other women workers. At the same time, they also point out that Dalit women are subjected to violence, brutal oppression not only by upper caste, male landlords or state administration but also by Dalit menfolk. There is thus a see-saw movement between their characters' Dalit identity and their position as women in a stratified society. Bama and Sivakami critique patriarchal structure as much as they protest against casteist division in society.
During the course of this study, it was pointedly felt that perhaps Imaiyam being a man offers a qualitatively different representation of Dalit women. They are shown to be constantly lamenting, shedding tears, yearning for male protection, cursing their womanhood, bemoaning their inability to guard their chastity on their own. They are shown as victims rather than as fighters as in the novels of Bama and Sivakami. Sexual violence against Dalit women is documented at great length in the novels of all the three novelists under study. Sivakami focuses on sexual violence against Dalit women in society as well as violence against them by Dalit men within the institution of marriage.

Both in Aanandayee and Pazhiyana Kazhidalum, violence against women—physical, psychological and sexual—is rampant. Sivakami locates the source of such violence as inherent in the institution of marriage in a patriarchal society. Her novels depict how Dalit men internalise patriarchal notions of power over women's body, the masculinist desire to control women's sexuality. Hence, Dalit women are represented in Sivakami's novels as receiving violence on their bodies both at the hands of upper caste male landlords as well as their male family members—father, husband, brother, son. Dalit men act primarily as patriarchs in their interaction with Dalit women. If Dalit men are empowered politically and are economically affluent, then they extend a patriarchal control over non-Dalit women as well.

In Bama's works, Dalit women are beaten up by their husbands or brothers at home and ill-treated at work by upper caste landlords. Bama, however, depicts a spirited fight put up by Dalit women against male highhandedness. While Bama locates violence against women as an essentially patriarchal mindset, she also shows how Dalit women can subvert it through their humor, hard work or more importantly through access to education. Bama celebrates shrews who use their tongue to overcome male brutality or single women who rely upon
education to carve out a life free from male authority. Sivakami also posits education and collective organized efforts to counter a violent, casteist structure. It is significant to note that both Bama and Sivakami valorize educated women who opt out of marriage to escape violence and subjugation. Both the writers subscribe to feminist thought and Marxist analysis but, significantly, argue for enlarging received theoretical orientation to include, specifically, caste related ground realities in contemporary Indian society.

In the novels of Imaiyam, an altogether different perspective emerges. He represents Dalit women as bereft of self-sufficiency, as capable of finding fulfillment only in relationships with men wherein they willingly accept a subordinate position. If they happen to be the more articulate spouse (as is Arokiyam or Danabakiyam), then they are shown to subordinate themselves to their son. Women occupy a substantial space in Imaiyam’s fiction. His representation of Dalit women is more varied, vibrant and earthy than one finds in the works of Bama or Sivakami. Imaiyam captures the vocabulary of Dalit women even more astutely than the women writers Bama or Sivakami. Yet his representation of Dalit women is steeped in patriarchal assumptions and expectations. Imaiyam’s Dalit women are not what they are in real life – rugged, down-to-earth, fierce fighters and determined survivors – as indeed they are portrayed by Bama and Sivakami. Imaiyam’s Dalit women are sexually vulnerable, socially powerless and emotionally shrill and hysterical.

During the course of this study, a comparative analysis of representation of Dalit women by the three writers emerged as an inevitable exercise. At the outset of this study, it was felt that the gender difference among the writers got reflected in their differing representations of Dalit women. However, towards the conclusion of this study, a more pertinent reason for the difference
in their respective representations seems to be located not in their gender but rather in their ideological orientation.

Imaiyam holds that any of kind affinity of ideology with creative writing is undesirable and resists being open to any form of systematized thought. In his interviews, Imaiyam points out that he relies upon experiential reality and not upon an ideology driven argument in his fiction. He also expects that his fiction be read and enjoyed for its craft, plot and characters. He lays significant emphasis on use of language and a careful choice of words, idioms and syntax formation. He uses extensively, strategies of well-made play techniques, surprising readers with twists, coincidences and melodrama. He also borrows cinematic techniques of narration, using flashbacks, visual symbols, and a careful withholding and revealing of information crucial to resolution of plot, etc. Sivakami uses a realistic mode to effectively offer analysis of social mores, conduct and personalities. Bama excels in the use of confessional mode, an intimate tone, a first person narrative to link experience of self with the suffering of a community at large.

Sivakami and Bama use their writing craft to document Dalit life and evoke an intervention from their readers to alter the course of life as documented in their work. Imaiyam, on the other hand, uses his command over his craft to offer aesthetic pleasure and transport the reader to a world that is to be valued for being a stagnant, still, picturesque canvas. He creates a nostalgia for a quaint, lost little world and does not seek to alter it. He expects the readers to cherish such a world and mourn the fact that it is fading away in contemporary society. Even if Imaiyam chooses to present a contemporary locale as in parts of his second novel, Arumugam, he invests it with values that evoke nostalgia and which are no longer possible to uphold or practise.
Imaiyam has often articulated his resistance to Marxism and feminism. He thus offers in his fiction, a counter discourse to fiction by Bama and Sivakami. While all the three writers under study represent Dalit women’s lives as twice cursed, oppressed on account of gender and their caste, the difference in the ideological orientation of the writers explains the qualitative difference in such representation. All the three writers document the oppression faced by Dalit women, their strife, their survival tactics, their pasttimes and their sorrows. However, Imaiyam holds Dalit women as responsible for their sorrows. Bama presents Dalit women as bravely fighting back, often subverting their oppressor’s ploys to put them down. Bama’s works celebrate Dalit women’s resilience, their humour, their use of wit and personal integrity, their unflailing hard labour at home and outside. Sivakami unravels the complicity between patriarchy and caste oppression. Her fiction argues that women must find access to education (not merely primary but persevere to reach gains of higher education) and help in organizing, consolidating and unifying groups bound by oppression by different institutions that are in fact complicit, hand-in-glove, and inter-dependent. She shows how educated women as well as uneducated but organized women and men can work to break such a hegemonic nexus.

It is not that Imaiyam’s resistance to ideology has rendered his work objective. Bama and Sivakami might see possibilities of deliverance for oppressed Dalit women in action backed by specific ideological thought. However, their writing never betrays any form of political rhetoric or shrill noises of a particular mode of thought. Besides both Bama and Sivakami are aware of limitations of Marxism and feminism in the context of Dalit life and their struggle for empowerment. Bama views herself as a “Dalit feminist” and ticks off Marxist writing that tends to become propagandist. Sivakami believes in activist intervention in real life situations and calls for a remoulding of western feminist thought to eschew class, race anomalies. Both Bama and Sivakami use feminist,
Marxist ideology with an awareness of their limitations and reiterate the need to contextualize them or remould them to address the Dalit question.

Imaiyam’s fiction, on the other hand, is coloured by rightist ideology. His novels posit women as objects of male desire. Women workers in his fiction risk violent assaults, rape, sexual harassment at workplace and severe taunts, insults and enforced compromise of self-esteem. The subtext in Imaiyam’s fiction seems to put forth the conservative, regressive idea that if only women would stay indoors, all would be fine with the world. Besides, what is diagnosed as wrong or unfair with the world, anyway, pertains to women’s sexual misdemeanor. Women’s sexuality is to be rigorously contained, argues Imaiyam’s fiction. By implicating Paraiyar men in the sexual violence against Dalit women, Imaiyam complicates the issue of caste oppression. His purported effort to point out intra-Dalitstrife does not result in an introspective social analysis. Instead, what emerges is a sensationalizing, provocative, polarizing phenomenon that further divides Dalits.

Bama and Sivakami too point out to Dalits that they should refrain from imitating or duplicating upper caste mentality and erase intra-Dalit tensions. But unlike Imaiyam, they do not present Dalit women’s sexuality as the source of Dalits’ social oppression or cause of friction among Dalit communities. Instead, their fiction urges unity and organizational consolidation among Dalits. Imaiyam betrays his bourgeois anxieties over women’s honour and the moral fall-out of migration of rural Dalits to urban pockets, the erasure of feudal values of loyalty, service and non-confinement of women to domestic domain rather excessively in his fiction. His notions of chastity, honour, vitality of language and aesthetic beauties in literary work uphold the rhetoric of women’s chastity on the one hand and purity of Tamil language on the other as advocated by Dravidian political parties. If Imaiyam rejects “feminism, Marxism or Dalitiyam”,

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he also aligns with Dravidian politics in his representations of Dalit women in his fiction even while claiming that his fiction is life-derived and not ideology driven.

In fact, while Bama and Sivakami present rape as patriarchal as well as caste violence against Dalit women, Imaiym presents it as a traumatic loss of reputation and honour for the family and a deep sense of guilt and self-implication in the woman victim’s psyche. Thus, at this point of the study, the earlier perspective that biological differences of the writers influence their representation of Dalit women’s lives in Tamil fiction, stands revised to underscore ideological differences of the writers and its impact on their representation of Dalit characters and issues concerning their social position.

Women occupy a subordinate position as they are subjugated by upper castes, state, institutionalized religion and by Dalit men, point out Sivakami and Bama. Imaiym’s fiction nails the blame on rapid modernization, urbanization and moving away of Dalits from their traditional occupations and social spaces. As a corollary, Dalit women too would escape oppression (always equated with sexual excesses in his fiction) if they would tend to their hearth instead of venturing out for work outside home/ traditional occupation. In *Koveru Kazhudaigaal*, Mary is raped when she steps out of her home to collect soiled laundry from the colony homes. Arokiyam and (indirectly the novel) laments that if only Peter had accompanied Mary or the old, ailing mother had gone instead, the ‘mishap’ could have been avoided. Danabakiyam, Vasantha, Chinnaponnu – a widow lured into adulterous affair, a factory worker assaulted at work, a prostitute killed off by her clients – fervently believe that Arumugam’s presence – at different points of time in his life – 8 years, 16 years or 19 years – would have rescued the concerned women from eternal perfidy i.e. sexual misdemeanor.
The altered/revised perspective of this study merits further analysis and examination by researchers in future. What are the ideological underpinnings of Dalit fiction? How do they affect the narration? What kind of social signals or message do they convey to the reader? How does one promote ideology or undermine Dalit empowerment? Do Dalit women need to be examined by specific paradigms? How much of their oppression is common to members of their gender? If they are oppressed more on account of their caste, how do we eschew class or gender nuances from their lives? Is such an exercise desirable? How rewarding would it be for Dalit women to highlight their gender oppression? Could mainstream feminism help them or do they need to reformulate or construct a radically alternative feminist paradigm?

A brief examination of plays written/performed during the period coinciding with the publication of the novels under study would help us in estimating the interventionist, agitational activist phase of Dalit literary discourse in Tamil Nadu. This exercise would also throw light on the dialogue pertaining to issues involving Dalits and Dalit women. We shall notice that playwrights like Inquilab, Gunasekaran endorse the argument posited in the fiction of Bama and Sivakami that Dalit women are leading twice cursed lives wherein they face oppression on account of their caste as well as their gender. The poet Anbadavan also foregrounds in his poems how Dalit women workers are exploited by various agents of oppression and argues that the caste gender interlocking in the lives of Dalits requires a forceful nuancing in Dalit writing. Abimani in his short stories points out that Dalit girls, women Dalit workers are more unjustly treated than Dalits at large. None of these writers share the anxieties we encounter in Imaiyam’s fiction regarding Dalit women’s sexual conduct. Neither do they endorse Imaiyam’s privileging of past or traditional Dalit occupations. Like Bama and Sivakami, other Dalit writers like Abimani, Anbadavan, Idayavendan, Gunasekran and Inquilab represent Dalit women as more unjustly
positioned in casteist, patriarchal, capitalist social structure. These writers at various points in their work subscribe, refashion, extend or endorse feminist, Marxist critique of class, gender oppression and argue for a sharper focus and emphasis on the need to forge the Dalit question with that of the Dalit woman question. Imaiyam’s fiction offers a dissonant voice in such a discourse. Imaiyam’s counter discourse, could thus, be placed in an ideological framework rather than be attributed to a biological difference of the writer.

Inkulab’s collection of plays, Kuralkal (Voices; Velicham, 2003) highlights how Dalits are targeted by landowning class, elected panchayats and the state machinery. Dalits are denied constitutional rights and often their hamlets are burnt down, an entire Dalit colony is liquidated. The culprits, despite glaring evidence are let off by the judiciary on grounds of flimsy, technical, procedural lapses.

Fusing incidents from real life with dramatic narration of violence against Dalits, Inquilab’s play Meetchi (Rescue) underlines the nexus of political power enjoyed by the zamindar, police, church and the judiciary. The sanction for caste oppression perpetrated on Dalits by landowning class is constitutionally validated and actively supported by the church. Conspiracy by upper caste landlords to hire agricultural labourers from outside the village, denying fair wages to Dalit labourers from the village, bribing police officials, refusal to allow Dalit Christians to participate in church ceremonies or prayers, killing, or burning Dalits alive or implicating them in fictitious charges and gaining favourable verdicts for perpetrators of oppression are some of the incidents that take place in the play Meetchi which are also found in Sivakami’s Pazhiyana Kazhidalum and Bama’s Karukku. Dalit women in Inquilab’s plays as in the novels of Bama and Sivakami stand up against police atrocities, help in rescuing their menfolk from landlord’s henchmen unleashing violence. They act as crucial
witnesses of cultural, political, bureaucratic repression of Dalits' constitutional rights. Their agency in countering or challenging the nexus of power among the oppressors is documented in *Karukku, Sangati, Pazhiyana Kazhidalum, Vanmam* and to a limited extent in *Aanandayee* as in the plays, *Meetchi, Tottil Todangi* and *Bali Aadugal*. The sutradar in *Meetchi* is a Dalit woman who initiates the audience into a participatory witnessing of the play and relates, reiterates the links between performance and actual events in contemporary society. As in *Karukku* and *Sangati* where the woman narrator demands activist intervention from her readers to usher in an equitable social structure, the woman sutradar in Inquilab's *Meetchi* or the women chorus in Gunasekaran's *Tottil Todangi* (From The Cradle Onwards) exhort the audience to intervene, alter and challenge the existing casteist, patriarchal social order.

A collage of modules depicting various forms of oppression against women, Dalit as well as non-Dalit, in contemporary society as well as those as they are found in legends, literary classics and in history are taken up in Dalit theatre. Gunasekaran's *Tottil Todangi* ably dramatizes issues and events that underline the need to forge links between Dalit and feminist concerns. These playwrights foreground oppressive caste structures and patriarchal structures and how they conspire to marginalize Dalits and women from mainstream social life. The twin structures, the plays point out, repress Dalit women the utmost. Gunasekaran's *Bali Aadugal* (Sacrificial goats) foregrounds the interlocking of gender and caste questions most forcefully. Landed power and priestly power conspire to offer a human sacrifice to appease the village deity. They trap a man to act a willing sacrificial goat but a eunuch aids him to flee the village. The playwright brings in feminist notions of androgyny, subjugation of female body and celebration of otherness without shifting focus from the plight of women in general and Dalit women in particular. The priests lay their hands on a Dalit villager and order him to offer himself as a sacrifice to the deity waiting to board the chariot. This
time, the Dalit man persuades the priests and the panchayat that as gods do not discriminate between men and women, they might offer his wife as a sacrifice and that his life be spared.

The notion of equality of sexes is thus subverted by this argument underlining the fact that Dalit males are co-opted into patriarchal ideology. While Dalits are not allowed to enter the temple sanctum, Dalits are offered as 'Nara Bali', human sacrifice by upper caste – Priesthood – panchayat bodies. The eunuch observes, "All men join hands to sacrifice a woman at the altar. Women are a caste lower than the parai caste. Why do you trample women like withered grass?" (32-33) The Dalit woman chosen for the sacrifice, is given no name and is simply referred as “Uduman’s wife”. The playwright thus highlights the fact that Dalit women do not have a Dalit identity but are perceived only as Dalits’ wives. Here again, gender overrides caste in the lives of Dalit women. Inkulab’s Tadí (Stick) and Gunasekaran’s Aríkuri (Signs) highlight occupation-related segregation of Dalits and social alienation of Dalits as a result of the policy of reservation. Dalit students are heckled, humiliated by upper caste students for receiving grant/scholarship from the government while upper caste landlords burn down the huts/ crops of Dalit households in the villages. By collating forms of discrimination in rural/ urban pockets, in poor/middleclass societies, the play captures the victimisation of Dalits at micro/ macro levels in our society. In the play, Tadí, a vettiyan (a Dalit who cremates the dead) renounces his traditional occupation to subvert indignities, privations and discriminations that are directed at him on account of his occupation. He assert that it is not his tadí, a stick that completes the cremation rituals but rather his anger against caste structure that helps him raise his stick against the dead to complete the funeral ritual of breaking open the skull of the dead body at the cremation. (69)
While Imaiyam mourns the erosion of traditional (even if oppressive) occupations of Dalits in his fiction and celebrates the suicidal conservation of old spaces and traditional employments as allotted to Dalits in society, Inquiiab in *Tadi* celebrates the renunciation of demeaning, socially discriminatory occupations by Dalits and valorises their anger and their symbolic raising of the stick against existing social order. Inquiliab does not undermine Dalits’ resorting to violence to counter state/landed interests’ violence against them but Imaiyam highlights Dalits’ patience, silence, forbearance and shedding of not custom but rather only shedding of tears. In *Tottil Todangi*, Gunasekaran underscores the need for (Dalit) women’s participation in electoral democracy and sharing of political power. An elected woman representative is murdered by politician’s henchmen as they refuse to ‘take orders from a woman’. (94) Police officials take Dalit women into unlawful custody, rape them at the police station to settle scores against their father or husbands who managed to evade the police net. Gunasekaran’s play points out as do Sivakami and Bama’s writing that the state, landed gentry, police, panchayat, clergy are manifestations of a patriarchal structure. Hence, women in general and Dalit women in particular are vulnerable to oppression. Such a perspective is not shared by Imaiyam. His fiction offers some of the most memorable Dalit women characters like Arokiyam, Danabakiyam, Chinnaponnu or Mary but represents them either as victims or implicates them in their own undoing on grounds of ‘moral’ misconduct. The notion of moral conduct however, in Imaiyam’s fiction is deeply embedded in patriarchal ideology and sexual politics.

Most of the plays discussed above were written / performed between 1994 and 1998 while *Tadi* was performed in 2002. Imaiyam’s *Koveru Kazhudaiga* (1994) and *Arumugam* (1999) stand almost as aberrations in Tamil Dalit literary/performative discourse even while entwined as they are between the plays discussed here on the one hand and on the other by the novels of Bama and
Sivakami, written between 1989 and 2002, that have been taken up for study. Short story collections like *Nokkadu* (1993), *Tettam* (2001), *Oorchoru* (2003) by Abimani, *Tai Mann* (1996) by Idaya Vendan, *Egiru* (1996) by Unjai Rajan also align themselves with the ideological orientation of Bama, Sivakami, InquHab or Gunasekaran rather than that of Imaiyam. Thus it is Imaiyam’s ideological and not biological difference that places his fiction at the opposite end of the spectrum of Dalit fiction in Tamil where Bama, Sivakami, Poets, Playwrights and short story writers discussed here have nuanced the gender-caste interface within Dalit community as much as in society at large.

Anbadavan’s collection of poems *Nerupil Kaychiya Parai* (kavya, 2003; A Parai Molded by Fire) uses the musical instrument parai, played by Paraiyars at funerals to highlight how traditional caste symbols of oppression and occupation could be recast as symbols of revolution, social anger and protest by Dalits. The collection subtitled as ‘Dalit poems’ has at least one third of the total number of the poems devoted to the question of discrimination against Dalit-women. Another aspect of Dalit life that has received significant attention involves the desirability or otherwise of Dalits’ practice of following their traditional, caste signifying occupations. In the poem, *Kavchi* while describing the gradual substitution of knives and other sharp instruments to cut, weigh and sell fish as against traditional methods of sale in terms of selling in small bundles tied up with threads to avoid polluting contact between customers and Dalit fisherfolk, the poet observes, “if one handles weapons, respect follows suit” (18). In another poem, the poet shows Dalits rising in organized unison to assert that it is “our turn now” (*ini Em Murai*, 94) and challenge acts of violence against Dalits over the decades.

Like Sivakami, Anbadavan also emphasizes on the need for Dalits to organize themselves in order to gain political power and ensure their constitutional
rights. In *Saba Varam* (A cursed boon), the poet uses fantasy to underline the terrible state of Dalits in contemporary society. The poem narrates how God’s decision to take a new avatar as a Dalit alienates him from his divine consort who refrains from any physical contact with God. On landing at a cheri, God is consecrated in urine, shit and hailed by abuses. Soon enough, God declares,

Even if born as a mosquito, I would have gained greater respect and deference
Even a God cannot lead a Dalit’s life.
To descend on earth as a Dalit without weapons
Was nothing but a foolish prank, a divine lapse. (51, translation mine)

In Dalit oral poetry, *Oppaari*, a traditional dirge is transformed to record their economic deprivations and caste oppression. Dalit women’s traditional songs which commemorate women-specific rituals also record protest against sacred symbols of matrimony that bind them in slavery. The excerpts below are taken from *Dalit Nattupura Padalgal* (Dalit Folk Poetry edited by vizi. Pa. Idayavendan and Anbadavan, Kavya 2003).

At my mother’s funeral...
As I am a daughter
I cannot cremate her
I cannot collect her bones
At the river bed.

Had I been a man
Oh! I would have shot an arrow
I would have raised a sword
I could have claimed a share
In our land. (66)

A girl protests at the wedding pandal:

I have been pushed into matrimony
For the sake of a bottle of toddy
I shall not touch this wedding saree
I shall not put on this shroud (88, translation mine)

The dual oppression faced by Dalit women on account of their gender besides caste identity are highlighted in numerous short stories written/published between 1993 and 2003. These stories endorse, extend and reiterate the perspective on the position of Dalit women within Dalit community as depicted in the works of Bama and Sivakami. In Unjai Rajan’s collection of short stories, Egiuru (Arise) Dalits are shown to embark upon the path of agitation to affirm their human dignity and claim their rights. In "Maruppu" (Refusal), Dalits refuse to perform tasks traditionally assigned to them if they are not paid adequate wages. They refuse to put up with leftover food thrown at them for offering their services at weddings, funerals or on farmlands. They define their “traditional tasks” as work that merits wages in cash (48-50).

In another story "uruthi" (determination), a pallar young woman Vetri Chelvi sits on a fast to claim her conjugal rights and legitimacy for her baby born to Suprimani belonging to padayachi caste. Her agitation unites Dalits and OBCs together and earns her rightful attention from administration and media. A Dalit woman’s battle for her personal, domestic space acquires political dimension. The story thus underlines the link between private and public domain, personal and political questions and gender/ caste concerns. (57-66)
In the story “Nallum” (Everyday), Unjairajan focuses on the hardships faced by Dalit women at work and at home. Valli runs her home efficiently, toils at the fields along with her husband, cooks and tends to the cattle but gets beaten up by her drunken husband, Manickum who demands sex as a matter of right unmindful of her tired body bruised by his violence and hardship at work (67-74).

Abimani’s collection of short stories Thettam (Agaram, 2001) depicts Dalit women as workers – industrious, honest, invariably underpaid. His other collection, Oorchoru (Kavaya, 2003) captures the lives of Dalit workers – male and female who are insulted and exploited by upper caste landlords. A young Dalit girl in “Paazh” (Ruin) is enforced to take care of her infant brother and forgoe her studies. An old Dalit woman who acts as a mid-wife for tevar households is not offered even a cursory greeting by upper caste young men, often born through her expertise in “Muttam” (inferior). Abimani also shows how upper caste women disregard Dalit men even while not fighting shy of using them either for their sexual needs or to combat social pressures over delivering a heir for their impotent husbands in “Padukkai” (In bed). At the same time Abimani also alerts the reader to the Dalit male’s authority over the upper caste woman’s body. A Dalit male defies the taboos of social difference as he asserts his physical and sexual power over her body. This story is an interesting subtext/variant on Dalit discourse that foregrounds gender pressures over Dalit women.

But in another story “Sandadi Pizhaigal” (Misbegotten) Ahimani depicts the bonding between a Dalit woman Suppamma and Andoniyamma when the latter’s son harasses her for money, driving her out of the house on a rainy day. The writer’s sensitivity to women’s hardships is no less than his empathy for the Dalit cause. While upper caste women are shown to internalize caste
biases in Abimani’s stories (“Oorchoru”, “Vilagal”), these women are shown to be no less oppressed in a patriarchal society. Abimani’s short fiction underlines the need to revolt against all forms of oppression. It emphasizes the need to forge a bond between Dalits and women as oppressed groups to rise against the unjust hegemonic system.

Literary criticism on Dalit literature is equally an activist intervention. Dalit critics like Raj Gautaman and Ravi Kumar are at pains to demarcate alternative paradigms – literary, aesthetic and cultural – to evaluate Dalit writing. Dalit writing does not always receive a positive reception from non-Dalit critics in Tamil. Aspects of craft, aesthetic parameters, characterization, question of linguistic appropriateness, form etc. are debated upon and Dalit fiction is declared to be found wanting in the said areas. Dalit critics evaluate Dalit creative writing and thereby perform a dual function:

(a) To evolve, formulate alternative aesthetics

(b) To act as interpreters, facilitators for readers on Dalit discourse.

Dalit critics like Raj Gautaman and Ravi Kumar have been reviewing, critiquing both Dalit writing and re-interpreting classics and cannonised literary works. They point out anti-Dalit perspectives in canonical works. Gautaman’s re-reviewing of *Purananuru* is a case in point. His reappraisal of literary pioneers like Madavayya, Pudamaipithan, Jayakanthan, Annadurai, Rajam Krishnan, Indira Parthasarathy and others are valuable insights that show how these writers’ works are embedded in anti-Dalit perspectives. Gautaman’s major contribution to Dalit criticism has been his recognition of the link between oppression against women and Dalits. In his articles, he strongly advocates the need to evolve a dialogue between feminist ideology and Dalit thinking and experience (*Dalitiya Vimarasan Katturaigal*, Kalachuvadu, 2003). He also calls upon Dalit
writers to draw upon Dalit arts and use subversion, parody and Dalit specific vocabulary to familiarize readers with Dalit culture.

K.A. Gunasekaran, academic, playwright, activist has written extensively on Dalit oral theatre, Dalit folk arts and dance forms. He has foregrounded the need to formulate a Dalit theatre with a specific identity, idiom and agenda (Kalagamozhi, Dalit Adara Mayyam, 2003, 51-58). The contribution of Festival of Dalit Arts held every year since 1995 on 6, December to commemorate Ambedkar’s death anniversary has been of much significance. This festival (vizhah) highlights the political, activist aspects of Dalit arts that involve audience participation and brings in Ambedkarite ideology to impinge upon neglected traditional arts of Dalits and indicate how these can be used to spread awareness among Dalits and non-Dalits. The Vizhah acts as a catalyst for Dalit movement in cultural and literary domain. It is an act of celebration, an affirmation of Dalit identity and an assertion of Dalit consciousness.

Dalit literary criticism, Dalit festivals widen the arena of Dalit literary discourse to include performative, political and cultural aspects of Dalit life. Studies on Dalit fiction, in future, would be more rewarding if they were actively situated in Dalit cultural domain rather than studied within academic paradigms. Research on Dalit fiction would be invigorating if an interventionist, activist perspective is brought in. Comparative studies of Dalit fiction involving two or more Indian languages would be vital in forging links between Dalit writers and readers on a pan-Indian scale. It would be interesting to examine the various aspects pertaining to translation of Tamil Dalit fiction, poetry or plays. Are they getting translated into English or French faster than into other Indian languages? If so, what are the reasons behind this phenomenon? The present study needs to be related more closely to political domain of Dalit fiction involving publishing,
translation and reception and the conferring of literary/Academy/State awards of Dalit writings in Tamil.

Future research on Dalit fiction in Tamil could study the links between publishing houses and Dalit writing. Are some Dalit writers patronized by certain publishers? What is the symbiotic relation between publishing and Dalit writing? Does Dalit fiction find willing publishers? What are the marketing strategies of publishing houses dealing with Dalit works? A study of the role, agenda and marketability/feasibility of Dalit publishing houses in Tamil Nadu would be an interesting area of research in the near future. It would be useful to examine why Marathi Dalit fiction is accessible to Tamil readers/writers more readily while an inverse traffic does not seem visible. Similarly, a traffic between Hindi and Tamil Dalit fiction requires to be examined and its links to presence or erasure of BSP in Tamil Nadu.

Yet another area of research in Dalit studies could pertain to the links between experience and articulation. How long could Dalit fiction bank upon articulating Dalit experience in literature? If Dalit writers move away from autobiographical domain, would it affect their fiction's readability? What would be the future agenda of Dalit fiction once writers exhaust their personal, oppressed life experiences? This would help in linking Dalit writing to mainstream literature and locate its impact in the coming decades.

The present study requires to be taken further ahead in its course. It is aimed at raising issues and indicate pointers in Dalit fiction in a decade (1989-1999) that saw its blossoming in Tamil. Authoritative conclusions cannot be arrived at as this study is an on-going engagement and validates collective, academic and cultural efforts to help evaluate Dalit fiction in Tamil and posit it to a pan Indian readership.
WORKS CITED