CHAPTER-II

FRACTURED IDENTITY OF DALIT WOMEN: SUBJUGATION, TRANSGRESSION AND HOPE IN THE NOVELS OF SIVAKAMI

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Sivakami occupies a rather unique position in the canon of Dalit fiction in Tamil. She is a respected writer among the first generation of Dalit writers in Tamil who began writing in the late eighties. Unlike Poomani who wrote and published even in the seventies but self-consciously declined to be identified as a Dalit writer, the group of writers writing in the late eighties, had no reservation in subjecting the question of caste (of both characters and author) to an open scrutiny and debate. Poomani's novel 'Piragu' (1979), depicted the lives of tanners in a remote village in the decade following independence. It represents their struggle for basic amenities and a share in the development fund of the panchayat, their disenchantment with the electoral process where they are manipulated by upper caste candidates, their private loss and public indignity. However, the Chakiliyar (tanner) community is invested with pathos rather than rightful anger or objective analysis unlike what Shivakami does in her very first novel published in 1989. Poomani's second novel, Vekkai (1982) glorifies and romanticizes the violent murder committed by a fifteen-year-old Dalit boy in the context of class, caste oppression in his village. The narratorial tone in both the novels remains soft, neutral and unperturbed unlike the militant, outraged, indignant or satiric voice of writers of eighties and nineties. Daniel, the Sri Lankan Tamil Dalit writer, highlighted the casteist domination of untouchable castes in the feudal milieu of Sri Lanka in his novel Panchamar published in 1979. His novels along with Poomani's are the only literary
precedents to Sivakami when she began writing. Daniel’s representation of Dalit life among the Sri Lankan Tamil community was rooted in a Marxist reading of his society that urged the joining of forces of persons and groups agitating against class and caste struggle. His presentation of sexual relationships between high caste, landowning women and Dalit, poor men gave an insight into the gendering of caste relations. This aspect is probed by Sivakami in two of her novels that we shall study in this chapter: Pazhiyana Kazhidakum (1989) and Aanandayee (1992). She however reverses the sexual equation wherein Dalit women are sexually exploited by high-caste landlords and interestingly, by economically and politically empowered Dalit men.

Sivakami as a woman Dalit writer, brought into focus, for the first time, the gendered relations among castes - upper castes and Dalits as well as among Dalits in Tamil Nadu. Sivakami’s career graph brings to focus the possibilities thrown open to Dalits through the constitutional mechanism of positive discrimination. She is an IAS officer and does extensive work among tribal communities and backward groups. Apart from her early novels and her first collection of short stories, Sivakami has written substantially on issues and persons that transcend the question of caste, largely taking up gender related issues with an incisive insight on class position of the characters represented. Her choice of form, style and narration have varied from realism to surrealist, dream sequences to post-modernist techniques. She has also taken an unambiguous feminist stand. However, her approach to feminism is tempered with self-reflexiveness and a critical awareness of the caste question and the Indian social context. She perceives a strong need to foreground the caste question within the matrix of the feminist discourse in India. She has excelled in representing how gender and class paradigms impinge on caste relations, thus, underscoring the need to develop a comprehensive, non-isolationist vision of our social culture. Her focus on class is well-nuanced, subtle yet scathing. This dimension of her writing infuses a fresh and much needed corrective
perspective on Dalit writing and criticism, which of late, has become unidimensional with an exclusivist, uncomplicated, foregrounding of caste in both short fiction and novel. In her first collection of short stories, *Naalum Thodarum* (And so it continues day after day), some of the stories bring to attention Sivakami's firm grasp of gender and caste interface within specific class structures. A self-reflexive tone, an interrogative stance, a subtle narrative voice bereft of overt anger or rhetoric, use of ironic humour and well-moulded women characters form Sivakami's literary accomplishment. She succeeds in sensitising the reader on issues that lay interrelated and complex without raising a loud outcry.

For instance, in the story, *Ore oru oorile ore oru anna* (An elder brother in a town, *Naalum Thodarum* 46-53), Sivakami depicts how sons grow up more privileged than daughters and also how parents, especially mothers pamper them but are pretty hard upon daughters. The story depicts a Sunday afternoon in the life of a family consisting of a son and two younger daughters and how the mother enforces upon the hungry girls to wait for their father's return to have their lunch while the brother demands and bullies his mother to part with money to splurge on ice-creams (alone) or serves himself lunch whenever he is hungry. He bullies his younger sisters but the mother comes to his rescue and shields him from the father's ire. Sivakami delineates very well how girls receive a discriminatory upbringing and how mothers have internalised patriarchal code and hence valorise sons, their future protector over daughters, who are considered the family's future liability. The ten-year-old Kanti and her sister (called simply, the little one) are shown to observe these discriminatory practices and their silence, their furtive but meaningful glance at the lying mother are recorded by the narrator in a controlled undertone without invoking pathos or rhetoric.
Similarly, in *Ammukutti Enru Oru Penn*, (A girl called Ammukutti) a maid's molestation by a driver in the housing complex of an upper middle class milieu, creates quite a storm at her employer's home. The wife, a feminist activist, confronts the driver's employer a judge, slaps the driver herself, raises the issue at her organization's meeting and manages to win a trip to attend the national conference on women empowerment at Delhi but chides the maid for moral laxity and asks her to attend to her chores. Written in a humorous tone, the narrator brings to focus the class affiliation of feminist activists in our metros who nurture a career but accomplish nothing substantial for the poor Dalit victims of male oppression. Sivakami thus brings, a strongly self-reflexive, critical scrutiny even towards an ideological premise, she strongly subscribes to, in this case, feminism. Sivakami alerts the reader to the precedence of class interest over gender or submergence of caste concerns within an agenda pertaining to gender issues.

Many of Sivakami's stories are based in an agrarian, rural milieu. In *Azhuda Pillai* (A child who cries out) a young Dalit farming couple defy the rich upper caste landlord and till their small piece of land and build a house on it as well. The landlord, Sugavanam, blocks the public passage leading to their home, refuses to give up a bit of his land even in exchange for another from the couple's portion, resents their children attending school, abuses them, bribes the district administration so that they disregard the couple's memorandum and complaints and makes their lives miserable. The couple pleads with him, appeals to his conscience, urges for kindness but to no avail. The wife, Rasathi, then, goes to the collector's office, confronts the woman collector, briefs her about the inhuman conduct of the landlord as well as her staff. She addresses the collector more as a fellow woman, requesting her to redress her problem. She lifts up her saree to show surgery marks on her body thereby highlighting that if the common passage remains out of bounds, she and the other villagers run a high risk of being cut off from medical amenities. The story ends on a
positive note with the collector ordering the relevant file to be brought in for her consideration immediately. Here, Sivakami depicts how Dalits have to address their problems on their own (just as a baby who cries out for milk gets attended fast), as well as how the state administration can be made more sensitive towards poor, deprived people when women are allowed to head posts of responsibility and power. In other words, the faceless, repressive state can function more efficiently when it is gender sensitised, especially in the sector of human resources.

In another story, written as early as 1979 *Innumoru Vizhipu* (Yet another awakening) Sivakami shows how the rewards of hard labour do not reach the poor Dalits as the village Chettiar transports the harvested crops of Dalit farmers to his godown as payment for their debts incurred. When Arumugam can no longer put up with his high handedness (especially after the death of his father who had borrowed a measly sum but rendered enormous service to the Chettiar), he simply hits the Chettiar with his slippers and protests that no one could make a claim on his harvest. Even in this story, the development of the plot unfolds in a controlled manner without dramatic twists. At the end, Arumugam is jailed at the behest of the Chettiar but Arukkani, his mother awaits the return of her son at dawn. Clearly, Arumugam might have been jailed, but Kodandarama Chettiar would not try this ruse ever again upon the villagers.

We can thus see how Sivakami represents the subjugation of Dalits but also points out how they are capable of transgressing and thereby creating conditions for their deliverance as well. We shall study these trends in two of her novels, *Pazhiyana Kazhidalum* (1989) and *Aanandayee* (1992). We shall also look into the question of how Sivakami delineates a dynamic traffic between gender and caste in an agararian, rural context in Tamil Nadu. She also lays substantial emphasis on ideological, collective, organised form of
action to overcome patriarchal and casteist barriers. Sivakami's intervention in Dalit fiction and criticism lies in her interrogation of Dalit premise, her refusal to study Dalit related issues in an exclusivist stand, but instead place them in a multi-layered social context fissured by class and gender concerns. She interrogates the validity of studying Dalit life in isolation on the basis of the strength of her own position as an insider. This lends a credibility of vision to her writing. Although she ruthlessly exposes the weaknesses of Dalit movement, she also paves the way for strengthening it from within.

In the following sections, we shall examine, Sivakami's representation of Dalit women and their varying social roles both within an agrarian and the urban milieu of Tamil Nadu. In the two novels under discussion, Sivakami posits family as an important and central site of struggle for power that operates within a hierarchical structure, where women have been allotted a secondary, subservient position. How do women react to, cope with an aggressively violent family structure? Do they succeed in combating, undermining male power within the family? In what ways do they transgress the patriarchal code of conduct concerning their social identity, their sexuality? Do they manage to exercise their choices or challenge patriarchal authority on issues related to their education, marriage or material welfare? The following discussion shall explore and examine the questions raised here.

2.2 SUBJUGATION OF DALIT WOMEN AS THE OTHER WOMAN

In both the novels under discussion, Pazhiyana Kazhidalum and Aanandayee, Sivakami presents memorable women characters whose social identity is rooted in their sexual position within the family structure. She examines the position of a woman who is forced to become a second wife or worse, is deemed a concubine. In either case, the woman remains outside the nucleus of the family. She remains an outsider who is never accepted by the children or the
relatives of the patriarch who has brought her within his family's fold. Whether in the rural, agrarian milieu of *Aanandayee* or in the urban township bustling with political activism as in *Pazhiyana Kazhidalum*, men prefer to "possess" a concubine or two in order to assert their "virility", to teach a "lesson" to their legally wedded wife or simply because they lust after women. It is of much significance, however, that such women happen to be always poor, without any social support and are either widows or abandoned by their husbands.

The representation of the "other" woman is a significant entry point to our discussion of power relations within a Dalit community. Such a woman is an obvious victim of male power. Her entry into the family house of her master precipitates a violent re-ordering of relations amongst the different members of the family. While the family perceives her as a usurper, as someone who enjoys enormous power over the head of the family, she, in fact, suffers utmost violence at his hands (both sexual and psychological) and remains a victim of male desire. The process of a woman singled out as the other woman and her subsequent subjugation at multiple levels, her efforts at breaking away from such a settlement, her pathetic failure in her attempt to flee from her captor/protector, her subversive gestures, her challenge of her master's authority, in a way, mirror the power relations that operate amongst Dalits and upper castes as similar to the one between Dalit men and their women. The relationship between the male master and his concubine is a subtle comment upon the hierarchical, exploitative relationship that exists between upper castes and Dalits. It also, in a significant way reduplicates a similar power structure that operates between Dalit men and Dalit women within the family.

An examination of the position, power, the quality of subjugation, the intensity of violence that a concubine is subjected to, thus, would help us probe the larger issue pertaining to treatment of Dalits by upper castes in our society. Delving into the particular, may help us to comment upon the general, later.
What are the causes which push Dalit women to accept the position of being someone's concubine? Who are the men who manage to acquire concubines? In what ways does the illegitimate settlement between the man and his concubine reflect the exploitation of Dalits by upper castes which equally transgresses moral and legal sanction? Do concubines occupy a more privileged position in the eyes of their master or does her position remain merely a caricatured version of how Dalit women are treated by their men in their homes? The enormity of violence unleashed upon the concubine's body requires to be examined both as an appalling fact as well as a metaphor underlining the violence that Dalits are subjected to in our society.

In the novel Pazhiyana Kazhidalum, Kathamuthu is a local Dalit leader who commands enormous clout and respect among Dalits in his town as well as nearby cluster of villages. Even upper caste landlords and the police officers are influenced by him and fear him. In the novel, he is shown to have two wives – Kanagavalli is his legally wedded wife who bears him a daughter Gauri and a son Sekar, and another wife named Nagamani. The second wife, Nagamani was acquired by Kathamuthu following his liaison with her. She hails from an upper caste family. But being a childless widow, she is an easy catch for Kathamuthu despite the caste difference. He brings her home, in all probability, without any legal or religious rites. Nagamani's widowhood renders her vulnerable to sexual exploitation by different men who desert her soon enough. She receives no support from her family and her economic and social position, is rendered extremely insecure and pathetic. Kathamuthu seizes her precisely owing to these reasons. Nagamani accepts Kathamuthu as her master/protector/husband so as to escape the travails of a poor, abandoned woman, left to fend for herself. To Kathamuthu, however, she is a prize catch and he exults in the fact that he has acquired a high-born woman and brought her home. Men from her caste seethe with anger at this settlement but Kathamuthu is dismissive, "I am a man. And I am well off too. Does any one dare to question me?" He masks
his lust and casteist designs by claiming to be Nagamani’s saviour: "I have given her shelter. She was a widow and led a miserable life. I have given her a new lease of life..." (20)

Thus, gender and class position play a significant part in fixing a woman’s social identity while they aid a man in consolidating his social prestige. What is a gain for one in terms of caste pride is a loss for the other in terms of self-esteem. If Dalits are exploited for their labour and they accept the upper castes as their lord and master, Nagamani’s choice is no different either. She renders sexual labour and accepts her exploiter as her protector. In the process, she acquires the identity of the "other woman", a second wife, a chakalathi a co-wife who is privileged by the husband in bed but occupies a secondary position in the household. In plainer terms, Nagamani becomes Kathamuthu’s concubine.

Nagamani, we realise, has no alternative but to move in with Kathamuthu. It is better to concur in her sexual exploitation by one man within the confines of a respectable household than become a prey to numerous men on the street, seems to be her logic. Sivakami thus seriously questions the legitimacy of marriage as an institution that thrives on exploitation of women. Both Kanagavalli and Nagamani in this novel as Aanandaye and Lechumi in the other, are enmeshed in this exploitative, patriarchal arrangement. Both the legal wife and the concubine receive a rough deal in their bargain for respectable domesticity. Both Nagamani and Lechumi are driven by their poverty and sexual intimidation at the hands of men to give themselves up to one man who enjoys a fixed income and social prestige. In return, they offer their body to their master who inflicts (especially Periyannan on Lechumi) enormous violence and demands ceaseless service. This labour, I argue, is no less strenuous or oppressive as the Dalit farm labourer’s who is bound to his/her master’s land in return for a sack of grain and a pittance of a meal.
Sivakami's representation of the other woman indicates not only an oblique comment on the status of Dalits at large, it also depicts how the victim could also possibly subvert or challenge her protector/tormentor's easy assumption of power. Initially the male plays one woman against the other, harnessing each one's sense of insecurity and in the process gaining abject subservience from both. The predictable verbal duels between the wife and the concubine, the resulting domestic disharmony and its impact on his children are never sought to be put down by the male master. Kathamuthu enjoys this spectacle and does nothing to allay the children's fears and apprehensions. But to his dismay over a period of time Nagamani and Kanagavali become friends, in fact, allies who raise the banner of revolt against his authority. The concubine is subjected to physical and verbal violence as much, if not more than that received by the wife. After a decade of similar suffering at the hands of their common master/tormentor, the wife and the concubine develop a cherished friendship and solidarity and share an intimate emotional bond. They console each other, sustain and support each other. Nagamani treats her *chakalathi's* children as her own. There is no bitterness among the two women and their occasional disagreements are soon forgotten over their shared labour inside the kitchen or at the backyard.

This bonding between the co-wives irritates and amazes Kathamuthu. He feels lost out on his privileges and attention. The two women no longer treat each other as rivals clamouring for his attention. (30) Instead, they gang up and dump him to fend for himself. They place the cooked meal before him and retire to the kitchen to gossip or taunt him over his electoral debacle. When he calls upon them to massage his legs, they remind him that they are yet to catch up with their lunch and ask him to massage their aching heads first. (44)

Sivakami subtly brings out a shared space and discourse of oppressed women - one a neglected wife and another a runaway appendage. Once they recognise
their source of torment as male oppression sanctioned by social and familial structure, they come together to challenge such a concentration of power. Rejecting the popular cultural stereotype of two women fighting over a male and measuring up to his love and attention, Sivakami depicts the possibility of an emotional bonding between the two women victims. Indeed, they unite, organize and agitate against their oppressor almost emulating the Ambedkarite dictum propagated in the context of Dalit oppression by upper castes.

Feeling neglected and abandoned (instead of being pampered by the two wives/ captives), Kathamuthu wonders if he should bring in "another one" in order to "curb their insolence" (30). We thus see that while the victims try to subvert their master's authority, he in turn, works upon strategies to keep them dependent and insecure. The way power relations operate within a Dalit family, in a way, reflects how power is instituted and consolidated within the community by primarily capitalising on the woman question.

This is illustrated best in Kathamuthu's conquest of Thangam as his yet another concubine. Acting as his community's power broker in intra community affairs, Kathamuthu shrewdly politicises the assault on Thangam by her lover's wife's male relatives, bargains for a hefty compensation for her, pockets it himself and fixes the woman as his latest catch at his home. Masking his self-interest as his commitment to justice for the underdog, Kathamuthu succeeds in blackmailing the upper caste landlords, manipulates the police officials and uses Thangam to fill up his pocket as well as a ruse to put down his wives' increasing insubordination. Thangam's fate confirms the exploitative paradigm that governs Dalit women's lives. She is a young, childless widow, a farm labourer, whose share in her dead husband's ancestral land is usurped by his brothers and is driven away from home. She lives in a hut alone in the Dalit hutment, a little away from the huts of her in-laws. Her landlord, Paranjoti Odaiyar casts a lustful eye on her and under the pretext of assigning a task for her in the
sugarcane fields, rapes her and continues to exploit her sexually every now and then. Thangam is forced to accept this fifty-year-old, upper caste, rich master's "lustful assaults".(57) Abandoned and cheated by in-laws, without any support from her natal family, a poor, Dalit widow is unable to refuse her landlord's assaults. He gives her twenty or fifty rupees occasionally and she is asked to hire farmhands to work at his field and supervise their work. Class hierarchy and vulnerability owing to gender constraints facilitate Thangam's sexual exploitation. She can only shed tears but not, refuse the Odaiyar's arrangement.(57) His wife's brothers beat her up severely one night and the villagers and her in-laws do not come to her rescue. She walks the six-mile distance to reach Kathamuthu's place to seek his help to get justice. The novel opens with her loud lament at the break of dawn at Kathamuthu's door (10-11).

Kathamuthu seizes the opportunity. He makes this assault (engendered by class and gender bias) into an issue of casteist discrimination, drafts a complaint to the police, where he underplays the sexual abuse and twists the case to make it appear as caste abuse and an issue of upper caste's high handedness. (24) He tutors Thangam to stand by his version, forcing the police officer to take immediate action as it is a matter that is likely to precipitate a caste-riot. Thus, we see, while violence is perpetrated on Thangam's body, sexually by Paranjoti Odaiyar and physically by his brothers-in-law, Thangam is used by Kathamuthu as mere clinical evidence to strengthen his allegation of caste violence, thereby bringing political pressure on the Odaiyar. Thangam is asked by Kathamuthu to lift up her saree, show her raw, bleeding wounds on her thighs and back, orders her to make a loud oppaari (ritual lament) and presents her as a gory spectacle at the police station rather than as a person, as a victim of violence.

Dalit women like Thangam are exploited both by upper caste men as well as a leader and spokesman of Dalits. This further strengthens Sivakami's premise that women are vulnerable to male exploitation and caste is a secondary
category in the context of violation of women's dignity. While Kathamuthu gains respectability for sporting two wives and exults over "keeping" Nagamani born in a higher caste (most likely, she belongs to Odaiyar caste) he reverses the equation and seriously reprimands Thangam for having a liaison with an upper caste man. "Didn't you get a man from our caste that you succumbed to an Odaiyar?" he needles her. (16) While a Dalit male, if he is well-off, can bring in an Odaiyar woman, an Odaiyar male cannot and will not marry or bring home a Dalit woman. She can only be his concubine but cannot enter his house. They can only meet up at his fields. This is stated by Kathamuthu himself while taking pride at his claim that he has given Nagamani "shelter and a protected life." (20-21) Gender predominates over caste in the lives of both men and women. Thus, Nagamani and Thangam share a similar career graph, undergo a similar pattern of sexual abuse and further, end up as concubines to the same man as well. Lechumi, whose caste is higher than Nagamani's is treated, in fact, even worse by her master, Periyannan. Both Kathamuthu and Periyannan assert their patriarchal authority over their womenfolk and their treatment of women reduplicates dominant caste's treatment of Dalits.

While Paranjoti Odaiyar picks up the low-born Thangam to satiate his lust and assert his power over her, he castigates his neighbour Ramalinga Reddiar's wife, Shanta's liaison with the farmhand, Kaliyan. Almost viciously, he switches on his courtyard's lights in order to separate their private moments of passion. He is "nauseated" by the sight. (78) We, thus, see how men, Dalit and non-Dalit, do not grant or recognise women any sexual freedom. What they themselves practise, they deny or resent a similar pattern of conduct to their women.

To counter Thangam's FIR, Odaiyars, Reddiars, Mudaliyars and Padaiyachis gang up together, dismiss their regular Dalit farmhands from entering their fields or earn their wages, hire labour from distant villages, paying them higher
wages. A personal grievance of an Odaiyar's wife and his family's assault on his concubine turns into a political confrontation between the Dalits and upper castes involving the former's livelihood. All the land owning upper castes join hands to use this context as an opportunity to slash the wages of Dalit farmhands. They conspire to sow division between the low-castes, Chakiliyars and Paraiyars, plan to burn down Dalit hutments to "teach them a lesson." (80-83) Paranjoti Odaiyar plans to plant a theft case against Thangam, bribes the police and snatches the livelihood of an entire Dalit cluster as his affair with Thangam becomes a police case. (66-69) Kathamuthu, once again, politicises the issue. He holds a series of Dalit inhabited villages under his power and uses the incident to count votes at the forthcoming election. Reddiyar suggests, "Let's burn down each and every single hut in that hamlet. A Paraiyan who is of no use to a landlord has no right to live. Does it matter he survives or starves?" (82) Teaching the Cheri inhabitants a lesson is the sole intent of the upper castes. The Dalits in the cheri, women and men, lose their source of income and a series of huts get burnt down. Kathamuthu steps in to wrangle a compensation package from the landlords.

While Kathamuthu bargains, the landlords grudge them a pittance and scheme to get the collectorate to grant them power over public land at the outskirts of the village. The poor Dalits hardly gain anything substantial. For a meagre increase in their wages (50 paise), the landlords force the Dalits to work for an hour longer, thereby nullifying the marginal gain. Kathamuthu bullies the Odaiyar to settle for a private panchayat over Thangam's case. (116) He blackmails the landlord to offer a residence for Thangam at his mansion. When he is outraged by the suggestion, Kathamuthu quickly suggests a monetary compensation. "Give her ten or twenty thousand and wash your hands off her," he argues. (121) The Odaiyar hands over a ten thousand and vanishes. Thangam, of course, is overwhelmed by Kathamuthu's help and hands over the money to his wife for safe keeping. (122) He asks her for a loan but of course
gets to keep the entire booty to himself. (123) Thangam wishes to get her share of her husband's ancestral land. Once Kathamuthu manages to get the matter settled in Thangam's favour through courts, the land promptly gets transferred to his name. He buys up sarees, gets lavish food cooked at home, insults Kanagavalli and Nagamani, praises Thangam who feels extremely obliged to him. But of course she is also forced to remain dependent on him. (131-140) Unable to return to her hamlet, as she holds herself guilty of the caste disturbances at her cheri, resulting in burning up of huts, she also has handed over the compensation money and the land to Kathamuthu. Hence, she has "no alternative" but to stay put at Kathamuthu's house and be his concubine. (140)

On a Sunday, Kathamuthu serves liquor and meat to his family, locks up the women (wives and daughter) while they catch up an afternoon nap and rapes Thangam while she is in a drunken stupor. (139-140) Thangam pleads incoherently, "You're like an elder brother to me" but Kathamuthu has his way with her. (140) While Nagamani resents Thangam, their skirmishes are settled by Kathamuthu by punching the former and supporting the latter. Kanagavalli tries to maintain peace between the two. Thangam works at Kathamuthu's fields and supervises the farmhands. (141) In essence, she does exactly what she did at Odaiyar's farm following his assault upon her. (57) The minor difference being, Kathamuthu keeps her at his house while the Odaiyar kept his liaison a secret. Kathamuthu is, in fact, shrewder than the Odaiyar. While he pretends to the villagers that he has given Thangam (a childless, poor widow) a home, he also usurps her land and money. Thus, both the upper caste community and Kathamuthu take the Dalit villagers and Thangam for a ride, exploit them in the name of patronage and justice and fill up their personal coffers. Thangam's violation, the sexual and violent physical assault upon her, her cry for justice are forgotten or cleverly stage managed to suit the privileged from both the groups. The district administration (sub-collector and the
inspector) who intervene to help negotiate between the Dalits and the landlords accept bribes, placate the landlords by way of grant of official lease or favourable auction of public land and heave a sigh of relief at scuttling a caste riot. The Dalit farmhands and Thangam find notional benefits but end up as losers in a more substantial sense. The woman question that began it all has thus been scuttled and settled in women's disfavour. Kanagavalli and Nagarmani have to accommodate Thangam in their already constrained space, while all the three women end up at Kathamuthu's harem, as his virtual slaves. Subjugation of Dalit women as the 'other woman', consolidates male power and grants sweeping control of women's sexuality and their very social existence.

Lechumi in the novel Aanandayee reaffirms the image of a destitute woman ending up as a concubine. Like Nagamani and Thangam, she too is a childless widow. Her youth is exploited by numerous men, the last one abandons her at a lodge. Her sexual exploitation results in a damaged uterus and she is unable to conceive or retain a pregnancy. Periyannan is introduced to her as a rich childless widower (he has, in fact, a wife and six children) who is enthralled by her beauty and sets her up in a house in the town away from his family home. He pampers her with clothes, jewellery and holidays at hill station. Lechumi born in a Tevar's family was the favoured and only daughter surrounded by brothers and doting parents. Her post-widowhood lifestyle alienates her from her natal family and she fears a violent reprisal if she ever returned home. She is happy to live with Periyannan. When his young son dies at home and he finds it difficult to sustain two households and manage his official work (procuring contracts to build bridges and roads), he persuades Lechumi to move into his family home. He reassures Lechumi that his wife is a patient woman who remains submissive to him and therefore Lechumi need not fear her rival: "My elder daughter would be married off in a few months. My son shall go to the city for studies. The rest are small kids. Aanandayee is a patient woman. She got married to me even before she reached her puberty. Till this
day, she has lived with me *in fear, submissive to me ever.*" (124, emphasis mine)

In this novel, at many places, the wife emerges as the "other woman". While Periyannan has numerous liaisons, with professional prostitutes, with distant relatives, even with the mid-wife Muthakka who visits to help his wife deliver his fifth child, Aanandayee is held always a captive by repeated pregnancies, enormous amount of domestic chores, work at the far-flung family land and is constantly subjected to severe violence by her husband. In fact, even when she is in labour, Periyannan pushes her on the floor, assaults her and mounts the stairs to sleep with another woman. While he is enamoured of Lechumi's seductive beauty and pampers her, he refuses permission to his wife to abort her seventh pregnancy. He refuses to give her money so that she may visit a midwife to abort her foetus. He orders her to carry on with her pregnancy, "You had better give birth." (211) When she points out that her health is fragile and she can't bear the burden he pushes her aside violently and shrugs it off. She ultimately pawns her nose jewel to meet the expenses of abortion. Lechumi, once she enters Periyannan's house, although given a separate room upstairs, is tormented and almost butchered by Periyannan physically and sexually. Periyannan asserts his patriarchal power by repeated, brutal acts of violence on all the women in his household - his aged mother, his adolescent daughters, his wife and his concubine.

In *Aanandayee*, women, irrespective of age are subjugated by physical violence. Periyannan remains absent from the house for long and each time he returns home he brutally assaults Aanandayee, scolds her for being a careless housewife, insinuates that she courts secret lovers during his absence. He takes no interest or responsibility for their children's upbringing, blaming Aanandayee for every minor lapse of any of their children. He creates an atmosphere of sheer terror during the brief intervals he stays at home. Home, far from being a
woman's haven or shelter offers no protection to Aanandayee or to her daughters. The eldest son, Mani, also joins his father in bullying his sisters or hitting them violently. Patriarchal control of women – of their gait, their laughter, their lifestyle, choice of clothes, of food, their education, their marriage and most significantly their sexuality, preferences or choice over sexual partner (spouse, friend or lover) is most severely upheld through brutal violence on women's body.

A concubine is perceived by men merely in terms of a woman's body, never as a person. For all his proferred love, Periyannan tortures Lechumi's body almost every night. He is constantly insecure about her, does not let her talk to anybody and often has sex with her violently. While he inflicts violence upon his wife as a matter of right and pins her down through recurring pregnancies, in the case of his concubine, he literally locks her up in a room, comfortably furnished, but cut off from human contact. (238) Food for Lechumi is pushed through the door by one of his daughters and a maid follows her like a shadow, if at all she is ever permitted to visit the fields. Imprisoning or holding captive a woman's body, causing psychological torment (by insulting her natal family or insinuating a licentious conduct) is a strategy used by Periyannan to wield power and authority over women. He never gives sufficient money to his wife to run the home while selling off parts of his land or mortgaging his house to give expensive gifts to Lechumi.

Unable to put up with his violent conduct, Lechumi elopes, first with a truck driver plying to her hometown and later with Manickam a young, rich, philandering son of Periyannan's arch enemy Gangaani. Each time, Periyannan hires a taxi, spends vast amount of money to hunt her down and brings her home. Violence and sexual abuse increase manifold after her return home. Periyannan also grows more suspicious and insecure about her. Instead of releasing her from the pact of living together mutually agreed upon earlier, he
beefs up security to hold her captive. In a way, the freedom to break away, a privilege enjoyed by the concubine, denied to a wife in a traditional society (legal separation is unheard of) is hardly open to Lechumi. The points of intersection that intrude the lives of Lechumi and Aanandayee are barely distinguishable. They are both subjugated, assaulted and held captive. As Periyannan is rich, he hardly bothers about Lechumi’s poor but upper caste family. He throws a wad of currency notes on her father’s face and drags back Lechumi to his house. While motherhood ties down Aanandayee and she is unable to even commit suicide (she attempts once but unclasps the noose when she looks at her infant daughters sleeping at her feet), Lechumi is bound by the rigours of her sexual identity. (181; 152) As a concubine, she has to put up with whatever methods her master may employ to extract pleasure through her. She is reduced to a mere body, to the position of a mere sexual commodity.

While Kathamuthu swindles Thangam’s money, Periyannan buys up Lechumi with money. Whether in terms of gifts, jewellery, sarees or hiring men and cabs to locate her whereabouts, Periyannan flashes money and keeps a check on Lechumi. When he brings her home after her first elopement, he along with his son, Mani, drags Lechumi from the gate to the room, beating her up viciously. (160, 178) Mani assaults her violently and she is numbed with shock. After all, she had treated him like a son. (78) The ageing Periyannan needs Mani’s physical prowess and henceforth does not chide him over his failure in studies or his secret drinking bouts. (180) Thus, Mani establishes his patriarchal authority in the household by exercising (like his father) physical violence on women. Both the father and the son beat up the unmarried daughters/ sisters and resent the visits of the married ones to their natal home.

Lechumi, finally, consumes insecticide to free herself of ceaseless torture. Periyannan weeps bitterly at her death but soon turns to Aanandayee with
vengeful violence (for she is rid of his mistress). Lechumi finds freedom only at death, when she liquidates her own body. Through her suicide, she affirms her claim to an identity beyond the body. Aanandayee is left to face the ire and viciousness of a husband who had lost his material prosperity (owing to his largesse to Lechumi and numerous other extra-marital flings) and official clout resulting in a diminished income. He also becomes a more desperate man as he can no longer get even with Lechumi after her successful attempt at an escape from his clutches through her suicide. He keeps Aanandayee worse than a maid, denying her any money even for her personal expenses. His neglect of his children’s upbringing and education result in their irresponsible, disrespectful, abusive conduct towards their mother. As they always saw their father keep his wife subjugated, the children grow up to deny their mother any subjectivity. While Aanandayee put up with Periyannan’s brutality on account of her responsibility towards her children, his ill-treatment of her has, however, forged a callous, abusive behaviour among her children who fear their father’s authority and look down upon their mother as powerless and therefore dispensable. (302-03)

Aanandayee and Lechumi help each other at the kitchen (213), nurse each other’s bruises (277-79) and plead with Periyannan to refrain from beating the other. While Aanandayee and Lechumi could be perceived as rivals, as Chakalathis, they are both equally, albeit in different forms, subjugated by their common male tormentor, Periyannan. The othering of a Dalit woman within her home, thus, gets a complex, ironic texture. This phenomenon foregrounds gender oppression of Dalit women within their domestic space over their casteist oppression (never denied as a fact) outside their homes.
2.3 VIOLATING/VIOLENT DAUGHTERS

Family as an embodiment of patriarchal structure makes a strong claim to protect and safeguard daughters and sisters. Sivakami repeatedly delineates how family as an institution abuses daughters and violates their primary rights within the family. In the name of protection, it imprisons them and restricts their movement within and outside home. It discriminates between sons and daughters in their food intake, lifestyle, education and right to property and inheritance. Family interferes most violently in the arena of daughters' sexuality and their choice of partners. In the previous section, we have noted how Nagamani, Thangam and Lechumi end up as Kathamuthu's or Periyannan's concubines mainly owing to the negligence by their natal family in their hour of social destitution. Their marital families also deny them the right to a share in their husband's property and actively push the widows on to the street. In this section, we shall examine, how the young daughters in Dalit homes are treated by their fathers and brothers. Both Kathamuthu and Periyannan are materially well-off, own land, enjoy political clout, send their daughters to school but severely violate their dreams and personal preferences and use physical and psychological violence upon them. Despite their middle class position economically, both the men do not grant a liberal upbringing for their daughters. Sivakami thereby indicates that cutting across class or caste strata, fathers deny freedom - social, economic and sexual - to daughters. Their restrictive treatment of their wives is extended to the next generation of women within the home. Thus, development or social progress in the arena of gender remain stagnant and sterile. Women, adolescent or middle aged experience a similar violent, violative mode of treatment at the hands of their fathers, brothers and sons. The mothers/ wives get in fact beaten up more severely for the perceived violations of family code by daughters.
Periyannan and Aanandayee have three daughters - Kala, Danam and Arul. Severe, savage violence is meted out to each one of them by their father or Mani, their elder brother. Their younger brother Anbu reports about them maliciously to the parents, gets a larger share of the eats from the grandmother and blackmails them to indulge him or else be ready to face their father’s ire. Each of the daughters gets beaten up by the father or by both the father and the elder brother. At times, they are even dragged to the cowshed and thrashed. Of course, none of them gets to have any say concerning her marriage. After marriage, their father strongly resents their visits to his house or their bonding with their mother. Danam in fact is beaten up by her husband at her marital home and violently threatened/chided by her father during her visits to her natal home after marriage.

In the lives of all the three daughters, Periyannan’s intolerance of a woman’s attempt at self-articulation or her interrogation of male injustice precipitates enormous violence against them. Danam, who uses speech in a more subversive way than the other daughters is thrashed the most. Kala, a voracious reader amongst the three is taken out of school forcibly. Arul, the most imaginative and cherished by her father for having brought him luck at her birth, is forced out of his home when she tries to counsel him to give up drinking. The two sons are never shown to be beaten up, even for their grave lapses. By the end of the novel, Periyannan successfully isolates Aanandayee in her ageing years. The married daughters are not encouraged to visit their natal home or converse with their mother while the sons are kept tightly under a leash by him. If they raise a whisper, they would get no share in the property, he threatens. Thus, all the children are controlled, treated harshly by the father and are moulded by him in such a manner that they perceive their mother as someone who deserves the violence she receives from her husband. Thus, he subverts the mother-daughter bond and the daughters, brought up on a staple diet of violence, grow up to be violent towards their mother - abusive and
bereft of empathy. Victims of patriarchal abuse themselves, the daughters turn abusive towards their mother or resent Lechumi. They are not equipped with education or sensitivity to perceive the two women as fellow victims. Although abused by their father, they are in awe of his authority and power. As economic power and social prestige rest with their father and their mother is reduced to a domestic drudge and a child-bearer, the daughters fear the former while feeling ashamed of the latter.

Such a perception of patriarchal authority and its victims is reversed in Pazhiyana Kazhidalum where Kathamuthu's daughter shows positive affinity towards her father's co-wives and rebels against her father. She, in fact, undertakes an earnest attempt to educate and liberate her mother and Nagamani to help them emerge out of Kathamuthu's subjugation. She questions her father's authority and chooses an alternative political ideology, offering him a challenge in his political arena as well. The difference in the attitude of Gowri and Aanandayee's daughters lies in the quality of education, social exposure and political training received by Gowri which is utterly denied to Kala, Danam and Arul. While Gowri, backed by her ideological conviction uses speech to interrogate and subvert her father's authority and his abuse of power, Danam, a school drop-out uses it only as emotional outburst, to vent her frustrations or wound fellow victims of her father's authority. While Sivakami holds out Gowri as a positive ideal, she refrains from denouncing Danam and her sisters. She shows how their violent upbringing and abusive treatment of their mother has moulded their conduct within the framework of violence and abuse. Their marital lives being qualitatively unlike their mother's, further, shows them up as victims of a patriarchal society who have not had the good fortune of receiving an enabling perspective to discriminate, challenge or observe male power as oppressive to women at large. Deprived of education, a comfortable home and conjugal happiness, these daughters of Aanandayee are too self-absorbed and frustrated to help or show empathy to other women.
Gowri makes a political choice. She refuses marriage and makes ideological intervention through writing and through praxis. She, thus, violates patriarchal code concerning women's role within the family while Aanandayee's daughters have been so violated upon that they too adopt violence in their inter-personal relationships.

Kala, the eldest of the three daughters is a studious girl and a voracious reader of fiction. (44-45) She borrows books from her friend's brother and devours them after school hours, reading up a novel a day. The novels are usually, detective thrillers or spooky tales. Her father, during one of his rare visits to home catches a glimpse of her reading. He quickly snatches the book and interrogates, "From where did you procure this?" The younger siblings report "from Dingumalli Annan." (48) Dingumalli is the mentally retarded brother of Kala's classmate Maariayee. Periyannan flares up, "How dare you bring books over from a male fellow? Has your mother let you loose on the streets?" and thrashes her, hitting her hard on her head with the book gnashing his teeth like "a wrathful dog." (48) He turns around and hits another child for munching uncooked rice and swirls over to grab his wife's hair and hit her for her "incompetent" child-rearing skills. He then leaves home leaving behind a dazed and numbed family. (49) Kala is found that night, lying on the cold floor of the terrace, staring blankly at the stars.

When Kala attains puberty, the unwritten rules are, "she should not converse with men, not even with her father. She should move back when she spies even his shadow. She should not answer back. She should answer only in monosyllables to the questions posed to her. She should not cross the line of decorum, should not stand at the window. Be a modest girl hovering in some corner of the house." (102) when Kala grows up into a pretty figure with hip-length hair and a slender frame, Mani resents her curls on her forehead or
stringing flowers on her hair. "If we don't restrain her now, you shall regret later", he warns his mother as well. (102-03)

Kala learns to cycle from her friend Bhanu while her father is busy electioneering. He sees her cycling on the back lane one day and asks her to return home. At home, he drags Aanandayee by her hair, abuses her character, thrashes her until she faints at the kitchen by the hearth. (105) When her grandmother shields the young Kala, Periyannan hits his old mother and thrashes Kala black and blue. (106) Kala receives a further punishment from her father, when she is stopped from going to school. She is hardly thirteen or fourteen and she is punished so harshly for such an innocent activity like cycling. (108) Unable to satiate her intellect or socialise with her peer group, she becomes petulant, buys up snacks from every vendor, refuses to help her mother at the kitchen, dresses up every afternoon, stands at the window casting longing eyes at every passing cyclist. (127, 138-39) She is married off to a school teacher but is unhappy as her husband is unable to provide her luxuries but instead helps his elder brother financially. She comes back to her natal home after a bitter fight with her husband. Her husband hits her hard in the presence of her brother-in-law and abuses Kala over her father's sexual escapades. Her father however resents her stay, calls up her husband and despatches her to her marital home. Kala receives no affection or support from her natal family either before or after marriage. Getting beaten up by father and brother before marriage and by husband after marriage seems to be the fate of both Kala and Danam.

Danam, although more assertive than Kala, receives harsher treatment from Periyannan and Mani. Even when she is hardly three years old, Mani punches her on the face for her loud lament over a painful sore on her knee. The trusted household help, Chinnasami, picks her up to pacify her and takes her to the garden where he molests the unsuspecting child. In the case of Danam, it
seems, she gets more viciously treated as she speaks up for her rights and condemns her father's affair with Lechumi forthrightly. She picks up quarrels with Lechumi, abuses her mother for allowing her husband to still bed her ("even at this age...Thoo!", 166), condemns the disorder, violence and expenses concerning Lechumi's elopement and her enforced return: "Chee...is this home? What a fare one is blessed with...". (177) Her well-articulated anger, her honest appraisal of Periyannan's high-handedness towards womenfolk, her moral condemnation of Lechumi's presence in the house result in savage violence upon Danam's body. A young adolescent, growing in beauty, highly emotional and forthright in her speech, Danam is most violently violated by Periyannan, Mani and after marriage by her husband. While other daughters suffer discrimination silently, Danam speaks up and protests. She questions why she cannot have lunch along with her brothers instead of being served cold food after the menfolk eat and depart. (192) She demands pocket money to buy her undergarments and cosmetics but gets none. Denied of every rightful privilege and a harmonious domestic space, Danam rebels against her condition. She sells off groceries from the kitchen or old brass utensils to meet her expenses and needs. (190) While Periyannan pampers Lechumi with sarees, imported liquor, five course meal with meat and poultry, he neglects his adolescent daughter's basic requirements.

When Danam washes her mother's blood soiled petticoat, following a secret abortion, she feels nauseated: ".Chee... this is what they are upto...with grown up daughters around...It is better to marry any ass of a man than stay in such a house as this...". (212) Her affair with Daniel while studying in X standard has to be placed in such a context.

Aanandayee warns her of her father's ire if found out, but Danam remains unfazed. When Lechumi catches the young couple redhanded, locked in a room on an afternoon, Danam abuses Lechumi and claims that her philandering
father has no right to question her conduct. (222) Both Kala and Danam assert at different points that their mother is a naïve dupe and they would never allow their husband to behave like their father: "Had I been in my mother's place, I would have driven you out with a broom," tells Danam to Lechumi. (223) Kala tells her husband, "My mother was negligent. Had I been in her place, I would have wielded a broom to throw her out." (301)

Danam, instead of using her speech for subversive or critical purpose (like Gowri does in Pazhiyana Kazhidalum), puts it to abuse her oppressors most violently. Her use of swear words, explicit sexual vocabulary and her assertion that her affair with a Christian boy is as legitimate as her father's right to bring in a concubine can be read as bold protest given her orthodox upbringing. However, such protests result in a self-destructive, sterile anger that causes as much pain and harm to herself as to her targets. Nonetheless, Danam's perception of events and character are insightful. While Aanandayee moans over Ayyakannu's murder and praises Periyannan's fortunate escape with minor injuries, Danam points out that one should not attribute it to fate or divine intervention as the incident was a planned, violent assault between two feuding groups. (255) When her father is hospitalised, Danam and the younger siblings have fun, rake up a ruckus at the Thinnai. "We can have fun only when father is away," points out Danam only to be silenced and threatened by Mani: "What a ruckus at the Thinnai, girls? Do you think there is none to check you?" (256). Danam can only murmur, "How many do we fear? Fear father. Fear elder brother. Fear your husband's concubine. Is there any end to this fear?" (257) Thus, Danam is most vocal and forthright in speech and fearless in conduct. Such a girl is curbed even more violently by masculinists like Periyannan and Mani.

Mani follows Danam to verify the school principal's complaint, discovers her affair with Daniel, punches her face at the crowded bus stand, pushes Daniel
down and stomps upon him. Ignoring Aanandayee's pleas, Mani drags Danam
to the cowshed and beats her and kicks her to his heart's content. Her father
watches the spectacle with approving silence. While Daniel commits suicide,
Dana is taken out of school and married off to a boorish peasant. Deprived of
comforts, beaten up to a pulp by her husband, Dana gets threatened by
Periyannan that she is likely to receive a similar treatment at his hands if she
comes home for succour. (306) When her mother pacifies her and requests her
to hold her tongue to escape beatings, she protests, "women...women...chee!
For everything, a woman has to hold her tongue, restrict her feet...". (307) Her
father grudges her even food, calls up her husband to take her back, with a
warning to her: "Don't you come back here, again, after a fight." (310)

Periyannan's daughters get no share in their father's property. Nor do they get
any streedan at the time of marriage. They are married off before they turn
fifteen and are denied any privileges (even a simple courtesy like a feast or gift
of clothes) if they visit their natal home. Arul, the youngest, an intelligent,
sensitive girl who is given to speaking to creepers and trees, announces her
wish to remain unmarried and denounce motherhood. (295) But, of course, she
is married off as Aanandayee comments, "Do you think your father is going to
pamper you and feed you all your life?" (295) After marriage and two kids, Arul
grows fonder of her mother. Once when she defends her mother when her
father chides her for no fault, Periyannan gnashes his teeth threateningly at
her. On another occasion, she suggests that Mani would be cured of his
addiction to alcohol, if his father would set a precedent. For this, Arul barely
escapes being thrashed at and seeks refuge in the kitchen. Her visits to her
father's house come to an end following this incident. (320) Thus, all the three
daughters are left to fend for themselves and receive no support from their
family - either material or emotional.
Sivakami foregrounds such a denial of affection and comfort of the hearth as oppressive to women. Striking at the root of female bonding, at mother-daughter bond, validating physical violence and emotional abuse upon daughters/sisters and wives, denying sexual freedom or inheritance rights, restricting their right to education at wilful, male discretion, family as an institution operates as an oppressive structure of power against women of all age groups. In the following section, we shall study how some women manage to transgress such a rigid oppressive structure and subvert its hegemony over their lives.

2.4 WOMEN WHO TRANSGRESS

Although inhabiting a patriarchal world, some women manage to transgress their allocated space and make a dent into the rigid code pertaining to women’s conduct and perceived role in society. They challenge the code of decorum imposed upon them and refuse to don the role or accept choices made on their behalf by their family or the men in their lives. Many of these women live on the margins of society. They, however, defy the patriarchal mindset that perceives women only as subordinate beings, dependent upon a male presence or subsist only within the institutional framework of marriage. It is interesting to note that the women transgressors leave their impact on society the most in matters relating to female sexuality and women’s choice of a sexual partner. Some of them reject marriage, choose to function as single mothers or inhabit a liminal space that defies accepted categorisation of women as wives, widows or concubines. We shall examine Sivakami’s representation of such women transgressors in this section. It is interesting to note that these women characters hail from different strata of society. There is for instance, Poongavanam, a poor girl, daughter of a daily wage earner who earns her livelihood through hard labour in another’s fields. Gowri is brought up in a semi-urban, middle class milieu while Neelaveni lives in a rural, landed, wealthy,
politically powerful family. Angammal is a poor widow without a steady income but has a large family to support. Vadakathiyal is an oppressed wife and mother who is a daily wage earner. Although each one of them is a Dalit, they belong to diverse class background. Each one of them, we shall see, makes a significant dent into patriarchal code concerning women's behaviour, conduct or choice.

Poongavanam, the daughter of Vadakathiyan and Vadakathiyal, the couple who works at Periyannan's farm and house, is a studious girl, very eager to study. However, her parents thrust their younger infant son upon her tender shoulders. On the day of her maths examination, her alcoholic father falls sick. Her mother orders her to get a cup of tea and pick up medicines from the local quack for her father. She skips her morning gruel so that she may reach school on time. A bright student, she fares better than other girls who are well fed and pampered at home. However, when her father dies of diarrhoea, she is taken out of school and accompanies her mother to work in the fields. She is thus unable to pursue school beyond the fifth standard. She labours at fields, helps out Anandayee at kitchen or works as a maid at Gangaani's house. Although enamoured of his son, Manickam, she is warned by Neelaveni to keep a distance from him: "Never desire above your station. You shall suffer if you do."

(188) Manickam is a philanderer and, "many girls from the village have landed up at Waheeda's, thanks to him." (188) (Waheeda is a midwife who carries out abortions for women burdened with unwanted pregnancies.) Poongavanam is employed by Periyannan to escort Lechumi to the fields and restrain her socialising. Ironically, Poongavanam ends up as a go-between for Manickam and Lechumi, thus, indirectly facilitating their elopement. She has to suppress her desire for Manickam as she is too poor and ill-suited for his social stature.

While working at Naicker's fields she falls in love with her co-worker, Duraisamy (this time, her social equal). Duraisamy, however, abandons her, when she gets
pregnant, after making very many promises to marry her. Hoping to wed him soon enough, she carries on with her pregnancy, only to be ditched by her lover at a later stage, when an abortion is ruled out by Waheeda. (311) Her mother dies, a couple of months after her delivery, her elder brother sets up home separately, her younger vagabond brother flits in and out of jail. (312) Duraisamy returns to claim his child and shows willingness to marry her. Poongavanam throws him out, "Get out, you dog... if you touch the baby, I shall use the sickle on you." (312) She declares, "I affirm, he's not your child. What other proof do you have for your paternity?" (313) She refuses to accept marriage to him as counselled by her neighbours and friends. When Aanandayee counsels her, "It's proper for a woman to live with one's husband", she retorts, "but he never did marry me...Yes it was wrong on my part to conceive through him without marriage. Blame me for it. But do not ask me to marry him. What if he burdens me with another baby and departs? I have been taken for a ride once. If I don't learn my lessons now...". (316)

Poongavanam makes a conscious, difficult choice of remaining a single mother without male support. The entire community knows who has fathered her child but she chooses to deny his paternity, thereby asserting that she shall take sole responsibility for her transgression – one, of pre-marital liaison and conception and second, the onus of her child’s upbringing. In society’s perception, both are acts of transgression - a girl ought not to become an unwed mother and secondly, she is incapable of her child's upkeep without male support, either of her brother, husband or a male master. Poongavanam challenges such a perception. She asserts her dignity, she shall not allow a man to play with her emotions, her trust or exploit her body. She conceived a love-child but refuses to be tied down by an exploitative man masquerading as a lover. She could have chosen the easier path of forgiving Duraisami and letting him "tie a thali around her neck", a yellow string that bestows social dignity on her. But she chooses the less trodden path, for it gives her dignity of self.
Poongavanam’s schoolmate, Malarkodi’s husband abandons her after fathering two children, followed by a liaison with a widow. She stays and works at her in-laws’ home, tending to her children. After a few years, when her father-in-law attempts to rape her, she lands up at her natal home with her children. She works at fields and struggles to bring up her children. Poongavanam asks her, "Would you go back if your husband recalls you?" She replies, "I have struggled through my youth. A few years more, my children would be on their feet. I can earn my gruel myself. I cannot put up with a husband and his vagaries anymore." (314) Younger women like Malarkodi or Poongavanam defy patriarchal dictum to lead a parasitic life, leaning upon male support. They choose to live independently and accept the struggle and hardship that go with it. They work and earn their living as well as their independence. On the other hand, middle class women like Aanandayee’s daughters cannot think of walking out of their abusive, violence-ridden marriage.

Angamaal, the wife of Ayyakannu, a cousin of Aanandayee and Periyannan’s associate and stooge, becomes the unwary victim of a violent feud between Periyannan and Gangaani and their respective coterie. Enraged by Lechumi’s elopement with Gangaani’s son Manickam and harassed by his other son’s meddling with Ayyakannu’s field, Periyannan along with Ayyakannu and other hangers on attack Gangaani’s son and Ayyakannu loses his life when they retaliate. Periyannan refuses to help the widow Angamaal monetarily. He even gets angry with Aanandayee when she supplies the widow with groceries. He kicks his wife hard and questions her whether she brought those groceries from her father’s farm. (266) In such a context, when even a wife is answerable to every meal she eats at her husband’s home, Angamaal courageously asks for compensation. She demands that Periyannan arrange a job for her eldest son. She refuses to accept what Aanandayee doles out as charity. It is the wages for her husband’s labour – he spilled his blood to settle Periyannan’s quest for revenge, she points out. Aanandayee supports her. When Periyannan objects to
her generous help to the widow, she reminds him, "I too work hard at the fields. I work at home, day and night. Give me my wages. The grain that I have given her is part of what I have earned by my work, at home and in the fields." (256) She reminds him that had Ayyaykannu budged a little on that fateful day, she and her children would have been in Angamaal's state. While Periyannan rages, Angamaal demands her rightful dues, defying yet another patriarchal dictum that a woman should accept her widowhood silently as god's design and live a shadowy life. While she is unable to withstand Periyannan's might, who dismisses her nonchalantly, when she asks for Rs.200 as a loan to feed her family, Angamaal proclaims a ritual curse upon Periyannan, "Like me, thou shalt suffer without your spouse's company." (269-270) Periyannan breathes easy after dismissing her but the reader cannot forget her fight for her lawful dues. Sivakami, brings home the truth, through her representation of Angamaal that neither a woman's work nor a woman's loss is ever compensated by men. In such a context, a woman is left with no other recourse but to fall back on her traditional weapon – her speech, her ability to curse her oppressor. In fact, Angamaal's curse ironically comes true when Lechumi dies leaving Periyannan utterly distraught.

It is in the arena of women's sexuality that men are most fiercely restrictive and anxiously protective. A woman's breaking out of traditional roles (as codified by patriarchal society) is considered the most objectionable deviation embarked upon by her. This anxiety explains the male tendency to legitimise the presence of a concubine by categorising her as his second-wife, although he enters into no legal or religious contract with her. Kathamuthu's relationship with Nagamani or Periyannan's authoritative treatment of Lechumi are cases in point. Yet, at times a woman may defy all socially sanitised categorisation. Such a woman exudes sexual charisma, social stigma even while occupying a space that subverts male perception of a woman's place at home and outside. Neelaveni is one such woman in the novel Aanandayee.
Neelaveni is the younger sister of Gangaani's wife and lives with them along with her sister's three step sons. It is widely believed in the village that there is a liaison between her and Manickam, Gangaani's son. She is a thirty-year-old spinster. It is said that she finds faults with every prospective groom and rejects marriage. Right from her school days, Neelaveni has to live with the reputation of being a girl of easy virtue. Her male teachers sexually abuse her in the staff room, her classmates keep away from her. (36-37) Neelaveni's sexual molestation by her teachers is however perceived as her deviant sexual conduct. After failing in her X standard, she stays at home, in fact, stays within doors, hardly ever venturing out even to the thinnai where an eager crowd of Gangaani's neighbours assembles every evening to catch a glimpse of his attractive, scandal-ridden spinster sister-in-law. The novel gives no evidence whatsoever of Neelaveni's sexual misconduct. Her male teachers clearly exploit an attractive girl student who is condemned to live in ill-repute. One night, Manickam molests her while she is sleeping. Neelaveni swiftly brushes him off but is intensely traumatised and shocked by his conduct. Manickam, although her sister's stepson, is treated like a nephew by her. She further tries to make herself even more invisible, hereafter. We thus see that while Neelaveni is perceived as a deviant or subversive presence in a middle class home for being a spinster with a reputation of loose moral character, she views herself, quite correctly, as a victim of male power. Aggressive, male sexuality causes havoc with her life and worse with her reputation in society. Neelaveni is perceptive enough to note how society treats men and women of a similar repute differently. While she is condemned and isolated, Manickam, a confirmed flirt, a philandering bachelor is looked at indulgently. He is addressed as "Minor", an indulgent term for a rich man's philandering son. Despite his numerous liaisons and betrayals of women made pregnant by him, why is it, questions Neelaveni that young women still fall in love with him while she is shunned by respectable company? (187)
While Neelaveni is stigmatised for her alleged sexual misdemeanour, Lechumi is thrashed for exercising sexual choice. Resenting Periyannan's restrictions on her movement and his violent behaviour in bed, Lechumi runs away from his house, not once but thrice, the last being in the company of Manickam. Each time Periyannan locates her and brings her back only to thrash her severely and abuse her sexually. He would embrace her so tightly as to hurt her, bite her under the guise of kissing her, pull at her hair, slap her or stomp all over her body. This kind of behaviour would either precede or follow his sexual intercourse with her, increasing in intensity and venom after each of her elopements. Her elopement, in fact, is not a mere attempt at an escape from such torture but also to offer a public defiance and challenge to his male authority. Lechumi, unlike Aanandayee, hits back at Periyannan physically as well. She kicks him on his groin, raises a sickle against him, hurting him but in turn getting brutally beaten up by his son, Mani. (158-60) When violence does not work upon her, Periyannan isolates her in a room, sending up food like dog feed. (238) If Lechumi spits at him, he beats her up with a cane. (281) Thus, physical violence cannot empower a woman although, she can resort to it to challenge a man's notion of manhood and authority. Lechumi, thus, transgresses the code of feminine decorum and challenges her oppressor directly on his ground, using similar tactics. She resorts to violence as she has no one to fall back on, her parents are poor and easily threatened by Periyannan's political clout. She has no friend or institutional support. She does not call upon god either as women victims invariably do. She believes that god too stands by patriarchal power structure. She comments, "Where is god? What kind of a god...Is he a god to let all the women in the world to suffer and watch the spectacle silently?" (280) Surely, she argues, such a god would be a creation of masculinist mind, equally oppressive to women, as the creator of such an image, man, is.
Lechumi, however, gets even with Periyannan at a different level. Unable to equal him in physical violence, she however succeeds in exercising immense authority over him, when she becomes "divinely possessed" (sami puduchiruku) following the death of Paatti, Periyannan's mother (273). The old woman had healing powers and had predicted that after her death, her divinity would be passed on to her daughter-in-law. Much to Aanandayee's chagrin, it is Lechumi who takes upon the mantle. Every Friday, she sways and screams, dancing to an unheard melody. She calms down only after Periyannan reverentially lights up a tray of camphor and bows before her! (273-74) She thus succeeds in ascending from her earlier transgressive but derogatory position of being a concubine to a transgressive and venerated position of a divinely possessed woman. Her oppressor bows before her, offers her ritual worship and elevates her to divine status. She also finds a safety valve to release her anger against the unjust, restrictive code held out for women. She lets out screams, trumpeting sounds, angry, wordless outbursts which are denied to women in the name of seemly conduct and feminine decorum. While silence is enforced upon women, Lechumi, under divine possession, is able to scream her frustrations out. (274)

Aanandayee is represented as an archetypal victim of domestic violence. Not only her husband or her sons but even her daughters abuse her. She receives support and sympathetic counsel only from her mother-in-law or women workers on her husband's fields. Her mother-in-law, fondly called as Paatti by her (she is indeed Aanandayee's maternal grandmother's elder sister), shields her from Periyannan's violence, both physical and sexual. She protects Aanandayee when she was a pre-pubescent bride from getting assaulted by a burly Periyannan. (323) Aanandayee, an orphan child, neglected by her uncle and aunt, employed as a maid, ill treated by her employers is married off to an adult Periyannan even before she attained puberty. (321-22) He assaults her soon enough, initiating a life of pain and trauma that continue throughout her
marital life. When Lechumi is brought home, after a steady string of mistresses, Paatti counsels Aanandayee: "Is a husband everything for a woman? Don't you have children, don't you have lands? Property? Cattle? Let him stray around. Why should you weep for him? You have had five babies through him. Wash him off your hands." (25)

Paatti's counsel is the most subversive speech in the novel in the context of women's oppression by men in the domestic arena. She asks Aanandayee to choose an alternative lifestyle, to manage her cattle and farm, to work in the fields and claim them as her property amassed through her physical labour. She thus valorises women's work over male inheritance. She also asks her daughter-in-law to deny sex to her husband if he picks up women from the flesh market. She thus argues for a role for the wife within the domestic space that is positive, circumvents sexual, conjugal abuse. She counsels Aanandayee to choose an enabling, self-affirmative role that denies the husband any power over her body. Instead of crying over his infidelity or bear his acts of violence, Paatti asks Aanandayee to subvert his power over her by transcending conjugal union.

Paatti herself rears a couple of sheep and earns money. (80) When rural land is sold off and cinemas or flats come up in their place, Paatti is enterprising enough to sit on the roadside and sell vegetables and fruits, plucked from the family farm. (112) She thus retains her economic independence and sets an example for Aanandayee. She even helps Aanandayee rear a pair of goats and earn for herself. (130)

Vadakathial points out to Aanandayee that it is an immense relief to be a widow. Her husband frittered away all his earning on alcohol, subjected her to regular beatings and died of illicit liquor. (131) After beating her, he would have forcible sex with her as well. (93) She has mementos of his violence upon her -
a dangling tooth, a scar on her cheek and withered youth. She drives out her elder brother-in-law who harasses her sexually after her husband's death. (131) When Aanandayee points out that it's a miserable life for a widow, Vadakathial snaps at her, "What misery? It was worse as a wife. Now I work, earn for my family and sleep in peace without unwanted sex. Even when he was alive, I could not afford flowers or kumkum. So I don't miss their loss now." (132)

While Paatti and her women friends counsel Aanandayee to walk out of her abusive marriage, she stays on owing to her responsibilities as mother. (177) Besides, she has no natal family to return to. (176) However, Aanandayee feels truly enabled when she attains menopause. She is no longer threatened with or plagued by pregnancies. She has arthritic pain but it's much bearable than her recurring, enforced confinements or beatings at Periyannan's hands. Her husband still deprives her of even essential needs. When she requires money for buying betel leaves and areca nuts, Periyannan flings a fifty paise coin at her and uses insulting language. Aanandayee performs a supremely transgressive, her first and most decisive act of defiance by flinging the coin back on his face. It falls on the thinnai with a ringing sound. (324) Although, her act of defiance takes place at an advanced age, it is indeed, a bold act, an unambiguous protest against Periyannan's excesses of power. She rejects his ability to wound or insult her anymore. She, thus, asserts her dignity as an individual. The fact that she flings the coin back at him in the presence of her grandchildren, is a significant restating of equation of power in the domestic space. Unlike Paatti who was beaten up by her son in the presence of her grand children, Aanandayee asserts her position as that of an equal, if not as a young wife, then as an ageing matriarch.

While other women transgress patriarchal code by their conscious choice of being spinsters (Neelaveni, Gowri), single mother (Poongavanam), worker (Paatti), Aanandayee shows another enabling possibility. She affirms freedom
for post-menopausal women, a stage in a woman's life that is traditionally viewed as sterile and eroded femininity. Aanandayee carries out a new, self-affirming, confident identity that offers enabling possibilities for womanhood when it is freed from the burden and threat of motherhood. The fact that the coin flung by her hits the *thinnai* is significant. *Thinnai* is a traditional space at the threshold of a home where women are not allowed to sit or linger around. Men sit around at *thinnai* in small groups and gossip, debate, deliver judgements on social mores/conduct related issues or analyse family/national politics. Aanandayee's act is, thus, a direct challenge to male space and discourse within the domestic domain.

### 2.5 The Context of Dalit Leadership: Imitative vs. Transformative Intervention

While a Poongavanam or a Neelaveni may transgress socially allotted spaces or subvert social perception pertaining to women or lower castes, emancipation or empowered participation of Dalits in mainstream social culture is possible only when they present an organised front; decide to sink internal differences and work together for common good. In *Pazhiyana Kazhidalum*, Sivakami expresses her strong reservation over the internal squabbles that plague the various Dalit communities. She shows how the different upper caste communities stand together and how their solidarity is put to use to hamper the interests of Dalits. Upper caste hegemony over Dalits is sustained primarily owing to the organised, united assault of the former on the latter group. On the other hand, Dalits uphold a rigid hierarchy amongst themselves. Although landless and earning their daily bread through hard labour at the fields owned by upper castes, they squabble over who is more of an 'untouchable' than the other: "One without an alternate set of loin cloth looks at another similarly positioned one and labels him a 'Pallan' or a 'Paraiyan'. A Pallan mocks at a Paraiyan; while a Paraiyan considers a Chakiliyan lower than himself, a Chakiliyan holds a
Paraiyan in contempt. Together all the three of them subjugate a Paraivannan (washerman allotted exclusively to cater to Pariyar community) and hold him the most degraded of Dalits. Does this mean everyone is happy to hold someone else under one's subjugation?" (101) Incidentally Imaiyam takes up this reading of Dalit ethos most comprehensively in his novel, 'Kouveru Kazhudaigai' where he depicts the travails and exploitation of Paraivannan community.

In *Pazhiyana Kazhidalum*, the battle against Patriarchy and casteist hegemony is spearheaded by the educated youth who break free from the centre of concentrated power in the village, viz Kathamuthu. The title, *Pazhiyana Kazhidalum* indicates the passing away of the old/past. The novel unfolds the closing of an era, of a particular style of functioning, the ethos of diffident thought and confused conduct of Dalits, their easy acceptance of arrogant opportunism as leadership and also the gradual emergence of a radical, ideological, alternative mode of thinking, functioning and perception among the educated, socially engaged Dalit youth.

Kathamuthu, at the beginning of the novel, enjoys immense clout among the Dalit villagers. They accept him as their leader, their spokesperson, someone they immensely trust to intercede on their behalf and ensure them their rights and entitlements. When Thangam gets assaulted by Odaiyar's henchmen, she proceeds to Kathamuthu's house straight (a good 6 km away from her *cheri*) even before break of dawn to "get justice." (47) When the huts in the Dalit hamlet get burnt down, the panchayat decides to wait for Kathamuthu's arrival on the spot and follow his counsel. (100) The out of court settlement between Thangam and Paranjoti Odaiyar is arrived at on the terms and conditions set by Kathamuthu, at his house, where he presides over an unofficial panchayat meeting. Odaiyar presents himself at his *Thinnai* and pleads for a lenient verdict. (120-22) Poor people look up to him for succour while upper castes
fear his popularity. The police officials find him powerful enough to cause them annoyance and the district administration permits him to negotiate between Dalit villages and upper caste leaders for amicable settlement over simmering issues. Kathamuthu, thus, is a respected and powerful arbiter between important segments of society. He formulates and controls public opinion. Dalit votes are cast at any election as per his diktat.

The moot question, in the context of Dalit empowerment, is, does such a powerful individual hold out any hope for the well-being of Dalits? Kathamuthu, at the very outset, emerges as an opportunist, scouting for personal gain. His notion of gain is translated both in terms of votes in his favour at the forthcoming civic election as well as monetary gain that he could pocket himself without public knowledge. While victims approach him to procure them justice, Kathamuthu scans the case to carve out private profit. (29) He intercedes in public matters of the village in order to "find a way to help his own interest." (29) He is always eager to "wield power over others"; words like "humility or modesty find no place in his dictionary." (29) He has a natural flair for rhetoric and earthy vocabulary. He is also adept at embellishing his speech with anecdotes from the Ramayana and Mahabharata. (29) Kathamuthu uses his talents and social skills for personal aggrandisement rather than for the welfare of his community. In the village, he alone inhabits a two storeyed, pucca house. He gets his land ploughed by sundry hands, dependent upon his political clout, for settling pending cases at the court. Often, we see Kathamuthu sponging on others to arrange for his tea, snacks or lunch. Whether it is the Naicker owning a jewellery shop outside the police station or a poor Arunachalam who has to part with the last five rupee note in his torn pocket that he had kept aside to hire oxen for his farm work, Kathamuthu has no qualms in pocketing their money or ordering a favour to be carried out. (31, 72) He employs the unemployed Subramani to run his errands even while abusing him as a parasite.
Kathamuthu understands the primacy of caste in social relations. Instead of seeking to neutralise its hold, he uses it, plays upon it to his advantage. He tells the inspector, "Caste is present everywhere. It permeates everything. You might not like the issue of caste but you cannot wish it away. It shall survive me and you and our children to boot." (40) Kathamuthu has no agenda to fight against or eradicate caste discriminations. He affirms it, exploits the mechanism and consolidates his position. He is well aware of the inner divisions and intra caste rivalry among Dalits. (39) He does not counsel them to bury their differences. He would rather play one against the other and earn his living. He is a professional arbiter of power. Hence, Dalits can never find deliverance from their exploited state through his intervention. He holds the village under his thumb but shall not release them from his power.

In a way, Kathamuthu imitates the upper caste landlords and binds the Dalits in an exploitative, subservient system. He betrays their unquestioning trust in him. He arranges loans for poor, Dalit farmers from cooperative society and takes "fifty or hundred rupees" from each one of them as his commission. (60) He, of course, without remorse pockets the entire compensation packet of Rs.10,000 that Thangam gets from the Odaiyar, transfers the plot of land in her name to his own and makes her his concubine. He thus acts no different from the money-lending landlord who usurps a poor Dalit's land under the guise of helping him out at a crisis. Kathamuthu's leadership is thus imitative rather than transformative in the context of Dalit empowerment. Leaders like Kathamuthu can retain their power and clout only when their community remains ignorant of their constitutional rights, remains economically subservient and socially downtrodden.

Kathamuthu is an individualist, who rises up in social esteem through his determination and personal talent. He however fails to qualify to lead the Dalits
in their struggle for liberation or community development as his interest remains purely personal, narrow and petty. He proudly recalls that he was "the first one to put on slippers and walk through the upper caste street" or go in for a "modern hair-cut" or "ride a bicycle". (107) Dalits were forbidden from doing such things by upper castes. Kathamuthu thus poses a serious challenge to upper castes' hold over Dalit lifestyle. When he gains political prestige, he arranges for wells to be dug up, build a school and recreation room in the village. (106) However, these accomplishments are cited to garner continued support and unquestioning subservience from the community. He makes no effort to decentralize power, delegate work or spearhead a participatory movement involving the entire community. He bullies the cheri inhabitants, demands gratitude, silences protests voiced by educated youth and takes every opportunity to reassert his power and hold over the community.

When an official meeting takes place to discuss the compensation package for Dalits whose huts have been burnt down, Kathamuthu seizes control over the meeting and allows no one else (either Dalits or upper caste landlords) to speak up or make suggestions. Relying on his acidic tongue, his oratorial skills and arm twisting tactics, he negotiates for a lump sum amount for each of the victim by appealing to the "generosity" and "prosperity" of the upper caste landlords. (109) The young men from the community point out that such a negotiation smacks of "pleading with a begging bowl" to their oppressors. "Since ages we have been begging for mercy and a magnanimous dole ... that is why, they have the audacity to ill-treat us" (109), points out Rajendran, an unemployed, graduate Dalit youth. Kathamuthu shouts him down, insulting him before the assembly and trumpets his "experience". He fears that these intelligent young men should not upset his plan or his "spoils". (110)

His bargaining with the upper castes always culminates in a paltry settlement for the poor Dalits. A ridiculously scaled down amount is agreed upon and
handed over to him for disbursement. (115) Kathamuthu is a conservative politician who still refers to Dalits as "Harijans", a term considered derogatory to Dalit self-esteem by Dalit ideologues and activists since the fifties. As he accepts the terminology of "Harijans" coined from a casteist mindset upholding segregation and categorization on the basis of one's birth, Kathamuthu follows the upper castes' attitude of referring to Dalits as their "dependants", their "children" to be cared for by them: "You are elders of the village; Harijans are like your children". (109) Such a mindset inevitably places Dalits in a secondary, subservient position. Kathamuthu thus imitates upper castes' ideology and imbibes their attitude and perception regarding Dalits' position in society. His political strategies of appeasement and blackmail/arm twisting mirror the action and attitude of mainstream, upper caste dominated political parties.

Kathamuthu is thus as corrupt a leader and mirrors the popular perception of a leader ('neta') in our society. Such a leader is guided by self-interest and personal ambition. Dalit politics demands a leader who is as unlike Kathamuthu as possible. Sivakami does not stop at criticizing Kathamuthu but manages to represent an alternative leadership – Dalit friendly, ideologically clear-minded and praxis driven, educated, socially conscious and responsible young men and women who endeavour to work collectively for the cause of Dalit empowerment. Thus, Sivakami rejects individualistic, idiosyncratic, self-absorbed leadership and posits an ideal possibility of Dalit leadership working for the common good of the community. The novel posits a collective, organized leadership of educated youth that represents aspirations of Dalit community and possibilities for a social transformation. Unlike Kathamuthu's imitative politics, whereby his action/perception mimics the oppressors' worldview, the younger leaders like Chandran, his colleagues, Gowri, Rajendran and a few others work towards organizing Dalits under a banner that is ideologically committed and constantly strives to put its consensual plan of action and programmes into reality. They focus consistently on putting ideas
into practice. Such a transformative polity holds immense promise for Dalits. Moving away from rhetoric and populist jargon, these young minds pour over books and journals, discuss contemporary social issues; argue, debate and arrive at a consensus regarding evolving a strategy that would address the given problem adequately. Chandran, who heads the group is Kathamuthu's nephew. His claim to ancestral property is cunningly scuttled by Kathamuthu as he discredits Chandran's father at the Panchayat and passes on arid lands of the family property to him as his share. Chandran works at a ricemill and motivates his colleagues to form a union. (156) He reads out news and articles from journals to his comrades. They analyse social issues and slowly train themselves to discuss "what is good" for themselves and the community at large. (199) Their concerted efforts culminate in a movement that derives its theoretical strength from Marxist ideology which they redefine within the familiar context of a casteist social order. Chandran points out that the factory owners have emerged as yet another "dominant caste" in our times. (169)

This collective Dalit leadership scores over Kathamuthu by virtue of its ideological framework and committed awareness to social justice. They do not blindly adopt the Marxist ideology but rather imaginatively fuse it to their specific social condition. While recognizing the unequal economic structure that results in class struggle, they aptly bring in the specific social category that is peculiar to Indian society viz caste. The confounding of class and caste disparity is recognized by these Dalit workers as a complex issue that they need to address rigorously. Chandran observes "Along with economic disparity, caste hierarchy too is an inextricable, pervasive structure. Where does one begin? From where does the other sprout? Which is the head, which is the tail of this snake? Ultimately, both the aspects lie submerged in every single issue pertaining to our lives." (169)
While the followers of Kathamuthu do not dare to sit before him but occupy a meek position, stand with folded hands and nod in agreement to whatever he says with a "Yes, Sir"; young men who surround Chandran, question him, argue and debate with him and when convinced or persuaded by his argument, consent with a democratic stand, "What you point out seems right to me." (169-170) The difference lies not only in the functioning of Kathamuthu and Chandran or their respective followers but rather in the ideological fabric that governs their thoughts and action. Besides, Kathamuthu treats his followers as a don would treat his henchmen while Chandran looks upon his followers as his comrades, as soldiers working for a common cause.

At Chandran's wedding, Kathamuthu learns the hard lesson that times have changed. He feels insecure and threatened by Chandran's popularity. Chandran's comrades refuse to be treated like Kathamuthu's errand boys who could be ordered about and compensated with an odd meal now and then. At weddings, guests hand in cash gifts, which are accepted by the host and a record is maintained. Among Tamil communities, the custom is called 'Moiy'. The guest partakes of the feast only after offering 'Moiy'. While Kathamuthu expects Chandran's friends to hand in the 'Moiy', they present 'Vazhthu Medal', a commemorative verse/greeting to the bride groom. This is a more dignified form of expression of joy at a friend's wedding and indicates the emergence of self-esteem and progressive lifestyle among the younger generations of the community. While Kathamuthu's acquaintance like the Naickar hand in the Moiy but refuse to partake of the wedding feast, as it has been cooked by Dalits, Chandran's friends wish him heartily and partake of the community lunch with gusto. Kathamuthu is least offended by Naickar's refusal to eat at his nephew's wedding. (178) He believes such an act as an expected and acceptable form of social conduct among upper castes. He thus shares the mindset and world view of upper castes and legitimizes their discriminating attitude towards his own community. Chandran and Gowri protest against such
a practice and encourage community participation at social events. Chandran's colleagues protest to Kathamuthu "Don't divide our 'Sangam' (organization) on caste lines". (179-80) Kathamuthu's political survival is possible only when Dalit groups fight and dissent among themselves.

2.6 HOPE FOR DELIVERANCE

Sivakami shows the emergence of alternative leadership as a studied, gradual but inevitable process in Dalit movement. It is not depicted as a romantic, utopian alternative. Chandran and his friends work upon their union activities, formulate a programme for Dalit empowerment after much debate and discussion. Although the novel compresses events in the latter section of the novel, it does clearly indicate a chronological progression. The movement under Chandran's leadership takes shape in a decade's time. (156-159) This coincides with Gowri's higher studies. After completing her schooling, she moves over to the city and stays at a hostel to pursue her higher education. This in itself is perceived by her as immense personal freedom as she can escape seeing her father everyday and putting up with his authoritative, abusive treatment of the women at home. Gowri completes her post-graduation, acquires a doctoral degree and works as a lecturer in a college. When she comes home during a vacation, she works upon Kanagavalli and Nagamani, imparting to them a feminist awareness concerning patriarchal subjugation of women and encourages them to revolt against domestic abuse and sexist treatment within the confines of home. (191) Gowri, whether at home or at workplace constantly strives to practise what she propagates. The close network between ideology and practice that Chandran and Gowri imbibe and implement forms the central rationale for a promising future for their cause – Dalit emancipation and social empowerment.
Sivakami depicts yet another context of Dalit leadership in the portrayal of Nallasivam, a school teacher who floats a Vanniyar sangam (a caste organization comprising of Vanniyar or Padaiyachi members). His community although socially backward, is economically placed on a higher scale than other Dalit communities. Nallasivam offers free tuitions to students of his caste, grooms them for civil services, tracks down well placed bureaucrats belonging to his caste and promotes an unhealthy, disharmonious competition between Vanniyars and other Dalits. (181-187) Nallasivam is represented as a variant of Kathamuthu. Both are individualistic, their power and political conviction are delimited by personal aggrandizement and narrow, short-term gains. While Kathamuthu eyes compensation packets, Nallisivam hankers after a higher share of reservation for his caste. Sivakami’s novel rejects both these leaders and for what they stand for – individualist, centralized, ambitious, divisive authority. The novel repeatedly underlines the importance of collective, organized uprising of Dalits. It stresses upon their social consciousness and a will to put up a collective bargain regarding their rights and demands. The novel highlights, in the concluding sections, a radical change in the social perception and outlook of Dalits:

Earlier when a public road developed a pothole, people would dig up the mud and level up their front yard. Today, people march in high numbers and repair the road themselves to draw the attention of civic authorities. When the government turns a blind eye to dowry deaths, women (today) take a procession of blindfolded women to register their protest. They no longer remain helpless when the traders supply adulterated grains. Instead, they have floated a Consumer Grievance Redressal Forum to tackle the erring shopkeepers. Those who idolized individuals and subscribed to personality cult have now learnt the lesson of collective problem-solving. They have entrusted themselves to organized forums and citizen friendly movements to address their problems and resolve them to their satisfaction. (188-189)
Gowri and Chandran, thus, are representative leaders of Dalit communities of the late eighties and early nineties when political awakening among Dalits was on the rise. The novel reports: "Nallaisivam and his likes could not withstand the awakened Dalit masses - they could try to manoeuvre the initial four (rebellious, dissenting voices). But how can one individual stand up to the ever increasing collective - "from four to four thousand to forty thousand to four lakh" members of a disciplined, organized movement? (189) Kathamuthu, we are told, "is like a snake without its venom" now. (190)

Gowri battles against casteist, capitalist and Patriarchal hegemony in rural society. Sivakami's writing (both the novels under study and in her two collections of short stories) does not subscribe to any social movement that operates in isolation. She does not endorse a unidimensional Dalit movement. She constantly strives to point out the inter-penetrative, multilayered dimension of exploitation of Dalits. Their marginalisation takes place at multiple levels. It would not be adequate to identify or target a single dominant force as the sole cause of their suffering in society. A multipronged assault is suggested in her writing whereby Dalits can find deliverance from discrimination.

Gowri rejects marriage as a patriarchal institution that legitimizes gender oppression. At 32, she prefers to affirm her single, unmarried status. She rebuffs Kathamuthu's suggestion for marriage, "Do you want me to suffer at someone's hand like my mother has at your hands?" (190) Chandran places as much emphasis on class division based on economic disparity as on caste politics. Together, the movement spearheaded by Chandran and Gowri stands for working towards an anti-capitalist, anti-casteist and anti-patriarchal structure/framework in which Dalits can live a life of dignity and equal opportunity. The novel concludes with Gowri's article wherein she foregrounds the need for evolving a "strong movement that would join hands with backward, oppressed and poor castes." (193) Her brother Sekaran advises her
to work in coordination with Chandran who would help in translating "a vision into reality". He comments: "It is not enough to write. He (Chandran) knows how to put it into action". (193)

It is significant that organic metaphors are used to describe this movement and enabling possibilities for the oppressed that it posits: "The Jasmine creeper had shed its blooms of the previous day on the ground. Buds ready to bloom the following morning were swaying in bunches, waiting for the moment to bloom and spread their fragrance. Gowri noticed Nature's necessity and its inevitable course. She smiled." (194) Her smile reflects the confidence of the new leadership that works in unison with the community to realize its potential and aspirations.

2.7 CRITICAL RECEPTION TO SIVAKAMI'S NOVELS

Sivakami has carved out a significant space in Tamil Dalit discourse. She is a prolific writer with more than fifty short stories and numerous novels to her credit. Her novels and short fiction in the latter half of nineties and thereafter have adopted innovative, non-realistic (unlike as in Pazhiyana Kazhidalum (1989) and Aanandayee (1992)) post-modernist form and experimental narrative strategies. Her later fiction also traverses diverse landscapes as against the largely agrarian, rural, semi-urban locale of her two novels discussed here. In Kathaigal, a collection of short stories (2003), her stories are located in Japan, Chennai, Kodaikanal or a landscape beyond the ordinary, a magical world of dreams. Another collection of stories, Kadaisi Manthar (1997), discusses social issues from women characters' perspective, often capturing mindscapes and dreams. Her writings in the Journal, Pudiya Kodangi vary from novels (serialized), essays with comments on politics, culture, feminist theory, Dalit identity, gender-class-caste intersections to sharing of her experiences at
workshops, training organized for Dalits, tribals and other marginalised communities.

Sivakami plays an active, interventionist role in Tamil Dalit literary and cultural arena. Her fiction, however, has not received as wide an attention as has Bama’s. There is hardly any critical commentary in English on her work or a book-length study on her work in Tamil. Nor has her writing provoked heated debates or embroiled in controversies as has Imaiyan’s. Venkat Swaminathan has traced this relative critical silence to Sivakami’s stature as an IAS Officer. It may not be true, though, as critics in Tamil are quite unsparing, as a matter of rule.

Velammal Picchan’s monograph on Penniyam (2001), comments on Sivakami’s handling of gender oppression of Dalit women by upper caste landlords as well as Dalit men. She notes that Sivakami highlights poverty as one of the major reasons that lead to sexual exploitation of Dalit women. She further observes that there is no “fundamental difference between (how) an Odaiyar male subjugates a Dalit woman (Thangam) or a Dalit male (Kathamuthu) subjugates her. The incident, however, acts as an apt opportunity to settle scores with Odaiyars who had subjected Dalits to untouchability for ages.”

Raj Gautaman in Poi+Abatham ⇒ Unmai (1995) observes that Sivakami’s novels seem to argue that “Dalits should aim at achieving a middle class lifestyle; that Dalits should abandon old, regressive customs … adopt hygiene, attain higher education and move up in socio economic ladder.” He comments that Sivakami’s argument that Dalits retard their material progress owing to their regressive habits or lack of education is not entirely tenable as Dalits are denied opportunities for higher education on account of poverty which also enforces them to live in unhygienic conditions. Raj Gautaman holds that Sivakami seems to hold Dalits responsible for their social backwardness.
However, Raj Gautaman observes in his Preface to his book, *Dalit Panpadu* that “Dalit struggle / movement for liberation runs close to women's struggle / movement for liberation. Dalit and women are the only two groups who stand oppressed on account of their birth”. He thus endorses the central focus of Sivakami's fiction which is an analysis of intersectionality of caste and gender in the lives of Dalits.\(^1\)

Sivakami’s fiction reformulates feminist precepts in the context of Dalit life even while locating Dalit discourse within the arena of sexual politics. As Sudish Pachauri comments, "Dalit discourse and feminist discourse, in future, are most likely to forge a dialogue amongst each other – and it would emerge as a crucial one."\(^15\) The writer Ambai observes that Sivakami is one of the few women writers who chooses not to “compromise” and accommodate received notions of literary subject, language or style. Ambai comments "Sivakami's language, subject appear to be choices made by herself. That is why she is able to infuse depth into her writing."\(^16\)

### 2.8 CONCLUSION

Sivakami’s fiction foregrounds gender oppression of Dalit women within domestic space. In her fiction, women attain dignity only when they transgress social stereotypes and enter the public domain. In the process, women in Sivakami’s fiction, are shown to attain limited success, partially fulfilled aspirations. They are, however, happy with such a realization of selfhood. While recognizing the fractured identity of women, Sivakami, nonetheless, celebrates their will to struggle, their courage to defy and transgress and their capacity to affirm an evolved identity rather than put up with a culturally allotted one. From the perspective of a patriarchial society, women in Sivakami’s fiction are stuck with a fractured social identity.
They are either spinsters, single mothers, concubines, deserted wives or co-wives. The women themselves are happy to have evolved a distinct albeit socially transgressive identity. When Poongavanam is deserted by her lover, she chooses to remain a single, unwed mother and refuses to accept heterosexual relationships, henceforth. Malar and Vadakathiyal valorize their widowhood/desertion and celebrate freedom from sexual assault that they were subjected to in the hands of male members of their marital family. Gowri rejects marriage as she perceives it to be a patriarchal institution that subjugates and even celebrates subjugation of women. Lechumi or Nagamani, when forced to become a married man's concubine develop a positive bonding with the first wife and her children. They, thereby, evolve an alternative family that defies in a brilliant stroke, patriarchal definition of a family. Instead of the father/husband heading a family that consists of his wife and their children, Lechumi and Nagamani or Thangam evolve a close knit family with no male head. Lechumi is lovingly referred to as Chinamma (younger mother) by Arul and Anbu while Nagamani and Thangam dote upon Gowri. Thus, while society places them (and exploits them) as concubines, the women are able to subvert societal restrictions, male violence and share the joys of motherhood and female bonding.

Paatti, Aanandayee's old mother-in-law, valorizes work over conjugal life that is restrictive and exploitative. She advises Aanandayee to work in the fields, manage her cattle and enjoy her children's company rather than lament her husband's philandering ways. Paatti, herself, although half blind and lame, sits on the footpath, sells vegetables or rears goats and earns a handsome profit. Aanandayee shows enabling possibilities for post-menopausal women when she flings the coin at her heckling husband's face and asserts her dignity. Dalit women of all age groups, of different class backgrounds defy Patriarchal stereotypes and evolve a distinct, personally fulfilling identity. Women are denied inner or material happiness within the home. Within the domestic space,
that has been traditionally designated as women's domain, women – wives, daughters, mothers, beloveds – receive unchecked violence and discrimination. Hence, they seek deliverance outside traditional roles.

Education, work, ideological consciousness, participation in collective, organized, socially committed movements – these are some of the positive alternative strategies that Sivakami opens up for women in order to emerge out of patriarchal control as well as caste oppression. In Sivakami's writing gender oppression overrides casteist exploitation of Dalit communities. She presents patriarchy as an over-riding, pervasive, oppressive structure that binds women and perhaps men as well to a hierarchical, violent, restrictive social identity. Hence, she advocates simultaneous, relentless, social confrontation of both caste and gender injustice.
NOTES


4 *Naallum Todorum*: 139-158.


6 Sivakami, *Pazhiyana Kazhidalum*, (Sivagangai: Annam, 1989) 20. All subsequent references to the novel are to this edition, translation mine for the purposes of this research. Hereafter, page references are incorporated within the text.

7 Sivakami, *Aanandayee* (Chennai: Tamil Puthagalayam, 1992) 124, emphases added. All subsequent references to the novel are to this edition. Translation mine for the purposes of this research. Hereafter, page references are incorporated within the text.


15 See S. Pachauri’s interview to Umashankar Choudhary, “America mein Blacks ko aarakshan hai” (In America Blacks have reservation) in Hans (Delhi, August 2001): 207, translation mine.