CHAPTER 5

KEY CONSTRUCTUALS OF IDENTITY II: i) EXPERIENCES OF EMBODIMENT AND SEXUALITY  ii) CASTE AND COMMUNAL CONTOURS

EXPERIENCES OF EMBODIMENT AND SEXUALITY

An attempt has been made in the present chapter to look at embodiment and sexuality related issues in the context of the process of identity development of girls and women. The basic premise on which the analysis is based is that in the construction of identity of girls and women, it becomes imperative to look at the perspective of embodiment, since a woman is located in the physical and psychological space as much as she is in the cultural domain.

I have made an attempt to look at the experiential and lived realities of the women characters not merely in corporeal terms, but in their social and relational contexts as well. The lived experiences of women help in understanding how society organises and shapes the everyday world of women’s experiences. The focus is thus on analysing the experiences of the ‘lived and communicative’ bodies of women. Caste, class and community become important signifiers of embodiment as they become the very agencies through which we evince the diversity of experiences amongst women. Across novels, it is seen that embodiment is depicted through the psychosocial and sexual representation of the female body. These include the treatment meted out to the physical body in the garb of patriarchy, male domination and control, sexual crimes like rape and abuse which women are subjected to, and issues related to their reproductive freedom, pregnancy and abortion. An attempt has also been made to look at old age in relation to embodiment since a number of novels focus on it. Sexuality has been analysed from the physical and social perspective. It has been specifically studied as appearance consciousness, differential sexual norms for men and
women, degree of sexual choice and freedom, and sexual experimentation and exploration. I would now like to deal with each of these issues in the context of what the books represent.

**FEMALE BODY AND IDENTITY**

The female body gets portrayed in diverse ways. The caste-class dimension gets represented through the body becoming a site of male domination. The domination is evinced not only through physical control, but also through social control over women’s freedom, mobility and their reproductive capacities. Women are denied the freedom to use birth control pills, or even resort to sterilization for economic and religious reasons. Their bodies are typified as childbearing machines. The body is also mediated by the stages of wifehood, motherhood and widowhood.

In addition, the female body is tied to notions of purity and pollution, exclusion and confinement. It is seen as part of the relational identity that women have, and so is usually denied an independent existence. It is subject to a number of constraints like denial of mobility and pleasure. It often becomes the site for mental illness on account of this. The female body also becomes the seat of family honour and appropriate behaviour for which it is subjected to several restrictions in matters of dress, posture and mannerisms.

The body is extolled for its utilitarian value and ability to shoulder the physical, economic and psychological burden. Apart from the psycho-social dimension, the emotional aspect of the body is shown through its capacity to exude warmth and comfort.
In Bama’s novel, “Sangati Events”, the female body becomes the embodiment of honour, modesty and appropriacy. This is reflected through the restrictions imposed upon girls and women in matters of dress. Pathima’s grandmother, Vellaiyamma tells her daughter that she [Pathima] should be made to wear a half-sari as “her breasts have grown as big as kilaikkai pods” (9). Sexual propriety is reinforced through the choice of an appropriate dress code. When Pathima objects to wearing it, Vellaiyamma explains to her the importance of dressing appropriately as a growing up female in order to avoid the male gaze.

“... ‘You don’t know anything, di. Look at that fellow. Instead of teaching the pack of you, he looks at you from the corner of his eye, and then comes to me with his advice. Just wear a davani and go.’…” (9)

The female body is also mirrored as a signifier of caste. Pathima, the narrator, points out the restrictions on lower caste women in earlier times on matters of dress. They were “not allowed to wear” (5) a blouse along with their sari in earlier times. She recalls never having seen her grandmother wearing a blouse.

In Salma’s novel, “The Hour Past Midnight”, the female body is typified through various epithets which devalue and objectify it such as ‘a used pot’ or an ‘old vessel’. These epithets are used with respect to married, widowed or divorced women. Further, the female body’s existence and purpose is shown to be not only the satiation of male desires, but also as having a utility value. Some of the women characters utilise their bodies for meeting their survival needs.

In the introductory section, Salma’s poem highlights the female body bearing several imprints of motherhood. The transition from womanhood to motherhood is conveyed through the metamorphoses, from an impeccable beauty to one bearing birthmarks and stretch marks. The scarred body does not appeal to the
male gaze and is no longer an object of desire. The following lines convey the metamorphoses:

“…These nights
following the children’s birth
you seek, dissatisfied,
within the nakedness you know so well,
my once unblemished beauty.
You are much repelled,
you say,
by a thickened body
and a belly criss-crossed with birthmarks;…”

The female body stands as a complete contrast to the male body, which is not subject to any birthmarks or scars. As the poetess herself reveals the difference through the following lines:

“…your body is not like mine:
it proclaims itself,
it stands manifest.
Before this too,
your children, perhaps, were born
in many places, to many others;
you may be proud
you bear no traces of their birth.
And what must I do?
These birthmarks cannot be repaired, anymore than my own decline—this body isn’t paper
to cut and paste together, or restore…”
Like Bama, Salma also represents an image of the female body being worn out with incessant childbirths. Sherifa’s observation of her elder sister, Raihaina’s body is noteworthy in this regard:

“...Her arms were like sticks; the skin hung loose on them. Her body was worn down; only her stomach stuck out, round as a pot...Her sunken eyes and nose and mouth looked like tiny versions of themselves...Sherifa felt pained to see that anaemic body and strange features...” (140)

Women’s treatment as child bearing machines is reinforced through Saitthoon’s remark. She has already borne four children and her body is worn out with one delivery after another.

“...‘Look at me, in seven years all my time has been taken up with carrying and bearing four children...Just see the state of me. If I undo my blouse, they are all over the place, like calves which have been let loose.’...” (198)

The value accorded to the female body is seen to be related to a woman’s marital status. It is usually difficult to find a match for divorced or widowed women. Sainu thanks her stars that she didn’t get her daughter married to her sister-in-law’s son, as she would have got widowed. Her usage of epithets reinforces the valuation:

“...The only consolation was that had Farida actually married him, she would have been left a widow by now.....a new vessel would have become an old one. When there was no way to find a lid for the new pot, how could she think of the old one? Was it possible to cover the old one now? But poor Sherifa, what use was her beauty and youth?...” (134)
In “India Gate and other stories”, by Lakshmi Kannan, the female body is represented in diverse ways. On the one hand, it is merely evaluated in relational terms to its male benefactor, but on the other hand, it is portrayed as female shakti, having mystical powers. It is also shown as capable of exuding emotional and physical warmth.

In “Pain”, the female body is evaluated solely on the basis of the protagonist's relational identity to her conjugal home. Padma is not perceived holistically as an individual, instead, she is fragmented on the basis of her body parts- as a uterus, stomach and breast. The value of her life is reduced merely to her performance as a mother and wife. While she is fighting her battle with cancer, she feels that now her body has no reason to live since she has experienced complete fulfillment as a mother and wife. This reductionist assessment of her body on the basis of reproductive capacities and motherhood however, pains her.

“…she had never imagined even for a moment that this body one day would be diluted to a generic level of ‘womanhood’, that it would be taken on literal terms, that its utility would be coolly assessed, evaluated, judged often by other women. Each part, each organ, taken out of the larger concept called ‘woman’-taken out to prove a circumscribed functional point. Judged by relatives, friends, men and women who supplied society with a unique logic. After having married Seshadri, after giving birth to two daughters, her body had no reason anymore to fight for its life. She was now free to call it a day, free to donate this female body of hers, without regrets, to a hungry, burning pyre…” (57)

In Ambai’s long story, “A kitchen in the corner of the house”, the female body is represented as an embodiment of tradition. Jiji’s description of her body bears several imprints which convey the sum total of her life.
“…Her body was like a fruit that has passed its full ruddy ripeness and is now wilting…There were scars of childbirth on her lower abdomen, as if she had been deeply ploughed there. Her pubic hair, whitened, hung in wisps. Buttocks and thighs, once rounded, now shrunken, hung loose with deep creases…Dry nipples hung low, like raisins. On her neck were dark lines caused by heavy gold chains. A wide, polished scar as if she were going bald, shone at the lower edge of her centre parting, where the gold band with its heavy pendant had constantly pressed. A body that had lived. A body that had expelled urine, faeces, blood, children. A body with so many imprints…” (248)

In Sivasankari’s novel, “Bridges”, we evince the adornment of the female body with colourful dresses, flowers on hair, gold, silver and multi-coloured bangles, and its pampering through nutritious food and delicacies to celebrate puberty and pregnancy rituals. That a woman’s body has no independent existence outside her relational ties is aptly conveyed through the painful state of widowhood, characterised by the body’s “disfigurement” (216). A widowed woman’s body bears the imprints of personal loss forever. Her body is reduced to being inconsequential and is treated in an undignified manner. Sivakamu’s disfigurement spells out the treatment accorded to her body after the death of her husband.

“…Sivakamu’s brother draped one of the white saris, which she would have to wear from now on, on her shoulder. Then the sumangalis retired from the scene, and the widows removed the flowers from Sivakamu’s hair, tore the back of her blouse, and after a final lamentation went their way….The village barber then cut off her locks and her glossy hair and shaved her head close to the scalp; she was given a bath, dressed in a white sari, had vibhuti applied on her, and was sent in to an inner room…” (231-232)
On the thirteenth day, while all the family members “donned new clothes and sat down to a festive lunch, as custom demanded” (232), the widow, Sivakamu, had to stay on in eternal grief. Her shorn head and her colourless garb were a constant reminder of her grief.

In Ambai’s long story, “A kitchen in the corner of the house”, widowhood is represented as a phase of physical deprivation. Bari-Jiji, the elderly lady of the house is deprived of her three course meal. She is also forced to resort to vegetarianism on account of her widowed status. The following lines convey a distinct status ascribed upon a woman’s body owing to her widowed status.

“…Bari-Jiji lost her rights to kumkum, betel leaves, meat and spirits; she also lost in the matter of everyday meals. Every day there was meat cooked in the kitchen. In a democratic spirit, the vegetarians in the family (actually only Bari-Jiji) were served potatoes. Bari-Jiji celebrated her loss in the battlefield with loud belching all night long, by breaking wind as if her whole body was tearing apart and then muttering in the toilet…” (237-238)

This deprivation resulted in excessive greed for food. She started storing food in the secret pockets of her heavily pleated skirt. It is also interesting to note that Bari Jiji’s deprived body sought compensation psychologically through a pretence of possession. She pretended being possessed by Goddess Amba through which she managed to extort her share of all the forbidden food items, such as meat and spirit.

“…Once in six months, Bari-Jiji began to be possessed by Amba. Amba always chose the moments when Jiji and Papaji were seated at evening times with their pappads and their drinks. At first there would be a deep ‘he’ sound which came from the pit of the stomach. When they came running to her, panting with fear,
she would yell in anger, ‘Have you forgotten me?’ The instant Jiji bent low and asked reverently, ‘Command us, Ambe,’ the orders would come. ‘Give me the drink that is due to me. I want kesar kasturi. I want a kilo of burfi. I want fried meat…’ When she was given all these things, she would say, ‘Go away, all of you.’ And for a while, there would be loud celebratory noises emerging from Bari-Jiji’s room…” (238)

Thus, the female body becomes here, a signifier of identity. It also embodies the norms of femininity through the assimilation of right posture (as will be discussed in the subsequent section on social gaze and expectations), appropriate dress and code of conduct.

**FEMALE BODY: DOMINATION, CONTROL AND OPPRESSION**

In most of the novels, the female body is represented as a site of male domination and control. Men had the prerogative to exercise control over women’s bodies in their varied roles of husband, lover or patriarch. The masculine control is manifested through women’s lack of reproductive freedom and their body’s subjection to countless pregnancies resulting in poor physical and reproductive health. The body is punished owing to its failure to deliver best results—be it in matters such as the birth of a male child, or failure to menstruate. Masculine control and domination is not only reflected through varied ways of curbing of women’s independent space, freedom and mobility, but also in some cases as rape. The class caste dimension is shown in the powerlessness of the lower caste women who were denied assertion of their sense of honour and dignity, both before their husbands and upper caste landlords.

In P. Sivakami’s, novel, *“The grip of change”*, the Dalit woman’s body is shown as a site of sexual exploitation and abuse, particularly by upper caste men.
Udayar had a patronizing attitude towards the Dalit labourer, Thangam. He believed that a lower caste woman like her should be grateful for having been touched by an upper caste man like him. That a Dalit woman had no right to assert her honour and dignity, is conveyed through Udayar’s remarks:

“…‘Ungrateful whore! Even if she was hurt, she was hurt by the hand adorned with gold! A Paraichi could have never dreamt of being touched by a man like me! My touch was a boon granted for penance performed in her earlier births! And then the dirty bitch betrays me!’…” (31)

Thangam’s sexual attractiveness is conveyed through her muscular body, “her well arranged, clean teeth and the naïve smile that brought forth dimples on her cheeks…” (32). Her body appeals to Udayar, and her caste and social status makes it easier for him to impose himself on her.

In Bama’s novel, “Sangati Events”, there is a depiction of the husband’s inviolable right over his wife’s body.

“…Even if they lay down with bodies wracked with pain, they weren’t allowed to sleep. Whether she died or survived, he had to finish his business…” (65)

The inviolable and unquestionable right is reinforced through the marital rape of Pathima’s maternal aunt, when she refused to yield to her husband’s sexual demands. “…the man was crazy with lust…he wanted her every single day. How could she agree to his frenzy after she worked all hours of the day and night, inside the house and out? He is an animal, that fellow. When she refused, he practically broke her in half…” (10)
The bodies of lower caste women are perceived not only as sites for the exercise of violence, but also for venting out male aggression and anger.

“…all that violence was because there was nowhere else for them to exert their male pride or to show off their authority. All that suppressed anger was vented when they came home and beat up their wives to a pulp…” (65)

The bodies of lower caste women are also portrayed as childbearing machines. These women lacked the essential reproductive freedom to use contraceptives or resort to sterilization as a birth control measure, owing to the fear that they may not be able to work in the fields in case they were not properly sterilized. The neglect of reproductive health, the physical as well as the psychological strain that the women go through and their inability to exercise contraception get mirrored through Pathima’s remarks:

“…How will their bodies stand it if they keep on bearing children? They don’t get proper food or drink. It’s the men who fill themselves up at home and in the shops. Women rarely go into hospitals, but deliver their children at home in a makeshift way. Many women die at childbirth or soon after. Almost immediately the men marry a second time. As for birth control, the men won’t do it. They say they’ll lose their strength if they do. And women say that if they are sterilized in a haphazard way by people without proper training, they will not be able to work in the fields as before. If they can’t work, how will they eat? As it is, the families keep going only because of the women…” (35-36)

In Ambai’s long story, “Black horse square”, Rosa’s body becomes a site for the exertion of violence, torture and power. She has been described as a woman with a “violated body” (130). One gets a glimpse of her physical mutilation and police violence through Rosa’s gruesome description of rape. The sexual
violence in the form of rape appears to be an anticipated and obvious reality for the working class woman.

“...what happens when a woman is dragged into the police station? That’s exactly what happened. They fell upon me like blocks of wood. Every time I started to faint, they threw water on me. When they were finally finished with what they were doing, they used sticks and twigs and wire. Anything that could go in. Then they burnt my breasts with cigarette butts. Once they found the fellow who set fire to the godowns and there was nothing more they could do to my body, they let me go…” (145)

The fact that it is a woman’s body, which is vulnerable to violence and masochism is also being pointed out by one of the women characters, Ganga.

“...in every village when those that have money and power want to punish the powerless, it is the women who are their butts, the ones who get dragged in and destroyed…” (154)

Rosa's violation is not merely physiological but also psychological and emotional. The violence meted out upon her body leads to abortion. She laments about her loss of motherhood.

“...It was a horror among several horrors. It seems that some women here don’t even have the freedom or right to carry a life for a full nine months…” (145-146)

In “Sangati Events”, Bama has highlighted the stress and strain which the lower caste women are subject to. Their bodies become vulnerable to mental illness owing to the mundane existence that they lead, from which there is no escape.
The psychological explication of the body’s possession by spirits has been furnished through the following lines:

“…‘The peys catch the women when they are alone, without a circle of friends or relations. If they are menstruating, or if they are terrified in the first place, definitely the peys will catch hold of them…It’s just that they don’t catch men. And that’s because men don’t carry the same fear in their hearts. And they won’t catch women either, if they dare to walk past without fear.’…” (58)

The oppressive practices which subject the body to such strain have been traced to fear socialisation and imposition of restrictions, which induce these women to succumb to such possessions. The confluence of their physical and psychological vulnerability is reflected through the following lines:

“…Women are overwhelmed and crushed by their own disgust, boredom and exhaustion…The stronger ones somehow manage to survive all this. The ones who don’t have the mental strength are totally oppressed; they succumb to mental ill-health and act as if they are possessed by peys…” (59)

In Salma, Vaasanthi and Sivasankari’s novels, the denial of reproductive freedom to women is evinced through their non-usage of contraceptives. In “Bridges”, women’s subjection to unwanted pregnancies induced them to resort to lethal self abortive practices. The Muslim women in Salma’s novel were shown as neither being allowed to use birth control pills, nor being permitted to go in for sterilization without their husband’s consent. Masculine domination and control is interestingly exercised by inducing a fear of religion in these women. Saitthoon’s helplessness, lack of autonomy and her neglect of reproductive health is vividly expressed in the following lines:
“…‘Why do I get pregnant? Well, what do you suggest I do? He says I shouldn’t use any kind of contraception. You tell me now, how many more children can my body bear? What strength do I possess? You can’t take hold of a pinch of flesh anywhere from my body. If I go to see the Doctoramma, she gives me a terrible scolding, saying I’m anaemic. With this one, it will have been seven children in ten years. What is the rest of my life going to be like? As for him, he quotes the Shariat and the Hadiths that children are our wealth and that it is a sin to prevent them. But who is it that bears the brunt of it all? Is it the man? Not at all; it’s the women, of course…‘I’ll bear these children as long as I can, and go and die when I can’t’. Saitthoon’s voice betrayed her absolute helplessness…” (202-203)

For some women, the sole purpose of their body was to provide pleasure to the male. Mariyayi, the Hindu labourer, who had illicit relations with her employer, Karim, was made to go through sterilization in order to avoid pregnancy. Initially, when she became pregnant, Karim asked her to go for an abortion, for he did not want her to bear his illegitimate children. He wanted to continue this relationship at his convenience, without bringing any disrepute or dishonor on himself. Mariyayi had to forego her right to motherhood for the sake of his love.

“…She considered her relationship with Karim a special privilege to the extent that she even accepted his arrangement to have herself sterilized…” (66)

It was a male prerogative to extort his share of pleasure from a woman’s body, irrespective of her consent, desires or feelings. As one of the women points out as a typification of other women:

“…‘But what does it matter whether we have blouses made or go without? As if any husband appreciates his wife! They only stumble and fall on you in the darkness, like goats or bulls; then they are up and off.’…” (200)
In Vaasanthi’s novella, “Birthright”, the control and domination over women’s bodies is linked to their production of a male heir. As Manohari sarcastically shares one of her patient’s husband’s dialogue with her after his wife gave birth to a male child.

“… ‘It’s enough now, please do the operation,’ the husband said …in a large hearted way. Meaning, No need for her to be in this business any more, she’s performed to our satisfaction, she can retire!…” (8)

What is highlighted as the plight of women is that most of them were anaemic and hardly had the strength or stamina to bear children. Daughters were deemed as unwanted and were therefore aborted even before they were born.

In Sivasankari’s novel, “Bridges”, the reproductive strain is manifested through the countless pregnancies and childbirths that women have to endure. Annam, who went to live with her husband at fourteen, had “conceived ten times in the next eighteen years…” She remarks about her suffering “misery, vomiting, dizzy spells” (209). She feels that “one might as well be dead” (209) than undergo such suffering. She even thinks of resorting to using home remedies to induce an abortion.

In Vaasanthi’s novella, “Birthright”, the vulnerability of the female body to experimentation by the “local medicine woman” (111) for purposes of abortion is highlighted. Interestingly, the cause for their seeking an abortion was not necessarily related to the sex of the child. These poor women were usually sexually exploited by powerful men, such as the policeman, as in the case of Shanbagam. Her body was being used by Perumaal, the police inspector for the satiation of his lust. Shanbagam was lured by the promise of getting more
contracts in return for the sexual favours. When she became pregnant, she came to doctor Mano for the abortion medicine. However, when it proved to be ineffective, she went to the local medicine woman in Mano’s absence, and finally came to her clinic with a “septic abortion” (117). Subsequently, she died.

Even in Ambai’s story, “A Deer in the Forest”, Thangam Athai’s body becomes a site of exploration and experimentation. When she fails to menstruate even after marriage, her body is subjected to varied forms of physical and emotional torture. The following lines from the story illustrate this.

“…How they wounded and gored your body… there was no medicine that had not been tried on Athai’s body. She was sure to receive the preparation of every vaidyan visiting the town. Athai was given English medicines also. Sometimes, after taking certain medicines, she would sleep as if forever. They even offered ritual worship with neem leaves and rattle drum. In the hope that a sudden fright would help, they had a dark, shrouded figure jump on Athai when she went into the backyard one late evening. Athai fell down shrieking, and knocked her head against the granite stone used for washing clothes. She still has the scar at one end of the forehead. When the next vaidyan arrived, Athai, it seems, cried out, “Leave me alone, please leave me alone’…” (73)

FEMALE BODY IN RELATION TO THE SOCIAL GAZE AND SOCIETAL EXPECTATIONS

The female body embodies social and familial norms and is expected to internalize traits like modesty and virtuosity which are upheld by society. Its failure to subscribe to these notions of ideal feminine conduct, often results in severe punishment, either through painful death or dishonor. Rigid socialisation practices become the means to achieve this. Girls and women thus become the
objects of what may be termed the social gaze. This gaze takes on different forms at different stages of a woman’s life. In Salma’s novel, *The Hour Past Midnight*, the female body becomes a signifier of family honour. Maimmon had to undergo a painful abortion in order to escape social shame and ostracism, when she conceived a child out of wedlock.

“...The agonizing pain that Maimoon suffered after the ointment was applied continued on and on, into the early hours, until dawn broke; the four women holding her down to stop her from screaming...Maimoon’s life ended that day, along with the baby that dropped from her body as fragments and shreds and clots of blood...” (45)

Another illustration of this is seen in the same novel through Firdaus' character. Firdaus's death by poisoning on account of the punishment meted out to her body for having violated the sexual and social norms.

“...Her throat and stomach were burning, as if on fire. She swallowed back the pain, determined to die without making a noise... she could not believe she was actually dying, nor understand why she had been driven to this pass. She asked herself again whether it was a huge sin to be with someone she loved; she had asked this so often...she wanted to hold on to life...Quietly she died...” (389-390)

In Salma’s novel, the female body’s vulnerability to social pressures is reflected in Mumtaz’s pregnancy anxiety. Mumtaz is anxious that her bodily and reproductive failure might induce her husband, Suleiman to remarry. He makes it clear to her that he has sexual intercourse with her only so that she conceives. Mumtaz's body and mind face the consequences of not conceiving. The allied strain results in her becoming mentally ill.
The social gaze that a woman is subjected to is well illustrated in Salma’s novel, “The Hour Past Midnight”. When Wahida menstruated after marriage, it was not only her mother-in-law, Sabia who expressed her “displeasure clearly” (421), but the other neighbourhood women also exhibited their concern and curiosity about Wahida’s periods and pregnancy.

“All the women who lived along their street had come and commiserated. A few had comforted Sabia, saying, ‘Don’t worry; it will stop next month.’ Wahida had been shocked by all this. Something that was her own private affair, which had always been kept hidden, was now the talk of everyone in the town…” (421)

The social gaze in Salma’s novel is used for mediation of appropriate social conduct in girls and women, especially for dress and behavior. Farida is reprimanded by her mother, Sainu, for being unmindful of her dress, especially when she notices the driver, Mutthu, coming out of their house.

“Her davani had slipped, baring her breast sideways. Sainu was furious. ‘Look at the way the she-donkey sits, without any notion of seemliness or decency.’… ‘…you’re a girl; cover yourself decently and put your legs down when you are seated. Don’t act as if you are a boy.’…” (207)

The female body’s subjection to deprivation and denial of pleasures is mirrored through the restrictions imposed upon widows like Sherifa. She is forced to practice self-negation by denying herself the smallest pleasures, such as wearing good clothes.

“People would talk badly about her, hereafter, were she to dress herself in silk saris, or put on makeup. Could she not, just once, put on a good sari, fill her hair with flowers, wear all her jewellery and admire herself in the mirror?…” (317)
Thus, a widow had no right to adorn herself or look good. This right was only meant for married women. Since the sole aim of the female body was to give pleasure to the male, in this case the husband, it was deemed sinful in case the widow dressed for her own sake.

The social restrictions reinforced through the restrictive posture imposed upon young girls or women in the garb of appropriacy and appropriate conduct is revealed through the following lines: “…Even though her neck was hurting, she sat with her head bent low, afraid that were she to sit up straight she would earn a bad reputation for lack of modesty. Rahima had warned her, that the way a bride held herself on her wedding day would be remembered and spoken about to the end of her life…” (301).

The control over the female body is reflected in the notions of purity and pollution that are associated with it. In Madina’s case, after she comes of age, she is neither allowed to “cross the threshold of the house” nor “allowed to go to school” (413). A married woman’s body was seen as liable to get polluted. In fact, it was mandatory for her to have a bath immediately after she has had sex with her husband in order to cleanse the pollution from her body.

“…she [Wahida] began to pour the water over her head and bathe; to wash away the pollution from her body…she remembered very well what Zohra told her: that immediately after sex she must have a bath and wash her sheets and pillow case…” (316)

The maintenance of ritual purity magnifies the body bias in addition to the gender bias. While a woman’s body was liable to incur pollution, the same didn’t hold true for a man’s body.
“…‘After you have been with your husband, you must not drink even a mouthful of water without having had a bath. It’s a sin.’…She knew she had to clean all the places in her room where she had walked around, and was worried about that as well’…” (402)

Even in Rajam Krishnan’s novella, “Lamps in the Whirlpool”, the female body becomes representative of societal rituals, customs and traditions. Girija, the main protagonist has to practice ritual purity, referred to as “madi” (4). Her body is subject to several restrictions such as repeated baths and fasting while cooking meals for her elderly widowed mother-in-law. The concept of purity and pollution is firmly reinforced through the practice of “madi” (4), which had to be solely practiced by her. Her husband and son were excluded from such rituals.

In Sivasankari’s novel, “Bridges”, taboos of purity, pollution, confinement and exclusion are allied with menstruation and childbirth. The menstruating women had to stay “out of sight” (14) and were allocated a certain place outside the house, lest their “menstrual pollution” (14) affected anybody through “contact or propinquity” (14). It was mandatory for these women to observe exclusion for a period of three days. When Sivakamu had her periods, she “changed into a sari that was kept in the room just for this purpose” (164) and had her bath early in the morning in the “area set apart for those in a state of pollution” (165). Women who had younger children to nurse and breast feed, their babies were sent to them unclothed. When Sivakamu had to stay outside and the children “insisted on being with her… they were undressed and sent to her” (165). As has been pointed out in the book, “…Children are immune to pollution, but clothes aren’t…” (165). Entry into the house was permissible only after the “ritual bath” (166) on the fourth day, excepting to the kitchen or the puja room. However, on the fifth day the body was deemed to be cleansed of all sorts of pollution, especially after the purificatory bath.
“…On the morning of the fifth day she had her ritual bath. Her mother-in-law placed a sieve on her head and poured a jug of water through it. The pollution was now officially over. She took a fresh sari from the line, put it on, and entered the kitchen to take over her regular duties…” (166)

The concept of bodily pollution is once again reinforced through Sivakamu’s exclusion after childbirth.

“…The front room was set apart as the delivery room, and Komu and Sarada kept Sivakamu company alternately. The others avoided the room, not wishing to be polluted…” (139)

Sivakamu’s period of pollution was over after the purifying bath in the "rejuvenating waters" (142) of the river Kaveri.

The notion of pollution was closely allied with mobility of girls and women. If the girls went to school, they were liable to incur pollution from outside. It was therefore, obligatory for them to change their school clothes before entering into the house.

Thus, the social gaze not only gives an insight into the rigid socialisation practices reinforcing traits of appropriate conduct and behavior on matters related to dress, demeanour and posture amongst women, but it also magnifies the body bias.

**FEMALE BODY IN ITS POSITIVE CONTOURS: NEGOTIATION, AUTONOMY AND UTILITARIANISM**

A significant trend which appears in many novels is the autonomy and freedom that women exhibit to make use of their bodies through skills of negotiation. They
use their bodies either to meet their survival needs or to meet the stresses and strains of modern day living. Writers like Ambai, Lakshmi Kannan and Bama celebrate the strength, multitasking ability and emotive capacity of women to spread warmth and affection upon others.

In P. Sivakami’s novel, “The grip of change”, the female body negotiates power through sexual services, as is seen in the relationship between Udyar and Thangam. Even later in the novel, Thangam’s acquisition of power and authority as well as her physical transformation are negotiated through the sexual services rendered to Kathamuthu, in whose house she takes refuge.

“...Thangam swaggered with newly acquired power. She assumed the responsibility of paying those who worked on Kathamuthu’s land; she also received people who came in search of Kathamuthu. Her once bony hips had acquired outward curves, having accumulated layers of flesh....” (93)... “...Her settled life and regular meals began to show on Thangham. The Sunday meat lunches added a glow to her skin...” (88)

In Vaasanthi’s novella, “Birthright”, in addition to providing physical warmth and comfort, the body is endowed with the capacity to heal the rift in a relationship. When Mano’s mother was assured that her husband had given up his plans of remarriage for a male heir, she disarmed him completely with the “extraordinary love of hers”, thereby establishing “her right over him, because that was the only way she knew”. (29) She thus made herself indispensable to her husband by doing everything for him to win his “approval” (30).

In “Sangati Events”, Bama has extolled the capacity and strength of the female body by delineating its ability to take up the physical, economic and the psychological burden. Even in Lakshmi Kannan’s story, “Muniyakka”, the
female body stands out in terms of its agility and ability to do work. Muniyakka brushes aside the constraints of old age and does all work to the best of her capacity, without being dependent on others.

“...Carrying herself on thin, spindly legs that looked more like a pair of drumsticks, Muniyakka was surprisingly mobile as she went about her work...Sweeping, mopping, washing vessels and clothes, cleaning the courtyard in front of the houses, sweeping the front yards and decorating them with kolam patterned skillfully with finely powdered rice…” (104)

In Lakshmi Kannan’s novel, “Going Home”, the female body is mirrored through a utilitarian dimension. The idea that is portrayed is one in which a woman’s body is one which apart from the burden of domestic or household chores, has to also endure an active work life. Gayatri takes good care of her physique and maintains a slim and fit body by devoting time to dance, aerobics and yoga in order to combat the stresses and strains of everyday life. Her strict regimen of yoga and aerobics is not to look youthful and girlish, or to delay the onset of ageing, but to stretch her body to its maximum to meet the demands of the modern day living. Like Bama, Lakshmi Kannan has also delineated this utilitarian aspect of the body.

“...My face looked ravaged. But my body below was slim and supple. The face and the body. They looked like separate entities, somehow unrelated to each other...This figure that they talk about, it is a thing that I have merely subjugated for my million odd needs by whipping it unsparingly... I keep a strict control over my body so that it can cope with the strain of living. A life that all but drowns you, a life that overwhelms you with work and responsibilities at office and home. Naturally, I had to keep my body fighting-fit...” (88)......Yoga helped me to keep my body supple, it helped to make it resilient so that it could bend and yield to the
many demands of living. I hoped yoga would also help me quieten the protesting noises my creaking joints made. Hopefully it would also soothe the rusty hinges that so gratingly herald the onset of ageing. I had to face this life somehow. I was not in a position to quit my job. Without my salary we could not endure the cut in our budget made by our monthly payment to the DDA. I have to therefore groom and strengthen my body to work hard and fight life on its own terms. To think that people interpret the effect of this discipline as a figure that is ‘youthful’, ‘girlish’ and so on…I must admit though, in all honesty that there was a time when I used to accept these compliments with eagerness and always thirsted for more…But now? Things are so different…” (91)

In Salma’s novel, the utilitarian perspective of the female body is presented as women’s autonomy to use their bodies for survival needs. Characters such as Nurnissha, Kairunissa and Nuramma resort to prostitution as they had “no other means of livelihood” (329)

“…the lack of any other income was the reason for Kairunissa’s choice of life. Once Nuramma came of age, Kairunissa herself began to arrange and invite clients for her daughter. Soon, Nuramma became used to her means of livelihood. She even liked it, and welcomed her clients warmly…Not only had she entered into prostitution without being compelled into it; she also invited her younger sister to join her…” (329-330)

Nurnissha resorts to prostitution as the only means of survival after her husband’s death. When her brother, Sayyed refuses to help her monetarily, she is left with no other option to feed her three hungry children.

“…Nurnissha struggled along with her three children, hard put even to get enough to eat. Then she began to take up with various men…” (191)
The body as a site of care and concern is mirrored in Sivasankari’s novel, “Deception”. The body of the mothers of new born is pampered with good food and necessary dietary supplements so that they gain the necessary energy and stamina. The pampering makes them look healthy and “attractive” (34).

The emotive capacities of the body get mirrored through Lakshmi Kannan’s novella, “Glass Walls”. Here the female body is upheld for its capacity for giving sexual comfort to the man. Mythili describes a woman’s body as a “deep, salty sea”, which is “vast” and “expansive” (20-21). The power of the female body is reflected through the following lines:

“…The vast, expansive sea…The generic woman who can melt the hardest of men to this extent. She makes them seek her in order to dissolve themselves, liberate themselves and find peace on their own terms…For the moment, I am the sea offering the fortifying salt…” (20-21)

Mythili’s body provides sexual refuge to her husband in which he finds “peace” (20).

In “A Deer in the Forest”, Ambai too projects the image of a female body in a positive light. Thangam’s body, though represented as “hollow” (72) and barren, has also been hailed as a source of emotional warmth and comfort.

“…Enjoying the total security afforded by her bosom, her hips, her arms, we would wonder what was hollow inside her. Her body was warm to the touch. It seemed to be brimming with energy, like a fruit laden with juice, and its regenerating vitality lashed over us many a time like a surging river-when she touched us, caressed us or, with a firm hand massaged oil into our bodies. The
cow yielded milk only at her touch. Seeds she sowed invariably sprouted. Amma said she had a lucky touch…” (72)

Thus, the positive aspects of the body are reflected through women’s autonomy and exercise of agency and will to use their bodies in order to meet their needs. The power of the body is also highlighted through women’s agility, multitasking skills, financial independence and their emotional capacities.

OLD AGE AS A SIGNIFIER OF IDENTITY

Old age emerges as a phase of transition- both physiological and psychological, as it is characterised not only by the acceptance of the body’s deteriorating strength, but also for the attitudinal transitions that it involves. The attitudinal transitions come across as a desire for renunciation of all worldly things and attachments on one hand, and as the zest to go on and live life to the fullest, on the other. Thus, the novels provide diverse portrayals of old age ranging from physiological degeneration, fatigue, dependence, tiredness, incessant fault finding, betrayal, cynicism and a feeling of victimization on the one hand, to optimism, receptivity, adaptability to new changes and value systems and constructive preoccupation with domestic and social issues, on the other. Why old age as a phase of life has been included in the section on embodiment is that it is also the site where social and cultural norms operate. In Salma’s novel, “The Hour Past Midnight”, one gets a negative image of old age typified through Nuramma’s character. It is depicted as a phase of dependence and loneliness and yearning for small pleasures. Nuramma is the old maid servant who served Rahima and Zohra’s household during their mother-in-law, Jamila’s time. She lived with her daughter, Fatima, who now worked in their household, and with her grandson, Iliaz.
As an old woman, Nuramma yearns for delicacies and her mouth salivates at the fragrance of different kinds of food coming from other people’s houses, especially during the festival time. When Fatima brings home a wide variety of dishes from Rahima’s house, Nuramma is delighted.

Due to extreme poverty, Nuramma fantasizes about a “jinn” (118), who is continuously on the look out to hand over his treasure to someone. She even imagines having heard the sound of his cauldron rolling and is confident that he would definitely hand over his treasure to her needy family one day. Nuramma feels that this treasure would enable her daughter to “live without hardship”. (119) Her helplessness and despondency is evident when she is made to shoulder the burden of Fatima’s elopement. The congregation banishes her from the community. She is unable to endure this social and communal exclusion and rebels against the patriarchal arrogance, hypocrisy and double standards, which only oppress women. All her rebellion comes to nothing as she only earns the displeasure and ill will of men like Suleiman, who demand that she be stoned to death. Although Nuramma is protected by her employer, Kader and Rahima, yet she feels abandoned by her daughter Fatima. Her loneliness is manifested through her constant questioning “Who is it?” (412), whenever she heard somebody’s footsteps. One evinces Nuramma’s physical and emotional degeneration owing to hunger and inward grief.

The dismal image of old age is further reinforced through the stench of urine which came from Nuramma’s house whenever anyone entered inside. She was dependent on others for basic things, such as having a bath or attending to the call of nature.

In Lakshmi Kannan’s novel, “Going Home”, we evince both the physiological and psychological transition coupled with images of death and degeneration.
Along with the degeneration of the body, the degeneration of the mind is also highlighted. Interestingly, the attitudinal transformation is depicted through Gayatri's acceptance of old age as part of the natural life cycle.

Gayatri's renunciation is mirrored through her inward feelings. Her desire to depart from the world is so intense that it induces in her a feeling of insensitivity to any news of death.

“...My nose, my ears, my eyes...I wanted to discard them all, I wanted to rub off my name, erase it altogether and just float away on this music, leave everything behind and go away. Yes, just leave. If this was an invitation, I thought I am ready. Ready to leave! My mind grew wings. It was eager to fly. But my body? Regular yoga and meditation seemed to have stretched, multiplied and expanded the living cells of my body, I had a feeling that my body chemistry, under the impact of yoga, had become unnecessarily tough... An uneasy presentiment bothered me—that my body had become so gross in its health, that its hold on life was too firm, too disgracefully, unnecessarily strong. It is so embarrassing, so very coarse to have this kind of grip on life (92-93)....Hard as stone, the body pulls me down...I want to loosen my hold, to let go but my solid body pulls me down with its weight. These days I am not moved by any news of death. My heart has been anaesthetized. It reacts to death like a block of wood. The heart has hardened into a tight knot...” (150)

The psychological degeneration is mirrored not only through the negative thought processes that afflict her mind, but also through the strange habit of talking “aloud” (141) to herself. The images of death, negativity and decay are mirrored through Gayatri's hallucinations. She is haunted by fears of old age, physiological degeneration and disease. When she goes to the washroom of the cinema hall, she is haunted by the image of a harrowing figure, whose vision she sees
reflected on the mirror. To her surprise, she discovers the image to be none other than herself. Her fear finds expression through the following lines:

“…when I brushed my hair in the bathroom in the Plaza cinema hall, I looked into the mirror. I saw a very old woman who resembled me, was exactly like me, in fact. The flesh of her face was hanging in the loose folds of old age. There were lines and wrinkles running criss-cross over her face…There were deep furrows, big scars, gaping wide, the skin utterly wizened…The eyes were sunken with shadows underneath, pouches and dark, pitted sockets. Oh god! Whose face is this? I turned around and looked. There was no one in the restroom except me. I looked again in the mirror. The same hoary image…Let me brush off this hallucination, let me drive the spectre away, I thought. Gathering myself together, I smiled into the mirror. Bravely, I flashed a broad smile. Ah! Under the bright glare of the tubelight above the mirror, there was a big, gaping mouth, with no teeth in it! An empty hole in a wizened old face with sunken cheeks. I swiftly turned around again to see who was behind me…Nobody. Then this spectre reflected in the mirror, is it me? Is it really me?…” (143-146)

Gayatri also suffers from depletion of spirits and feels “run down” (110) by the work pressure and also the “nagging pain” (110) in her legs and joints. She is assailed by the feeling of loneliness and unwantedness. When she overhears the conversation between her son, Arvind and his wife, Girija, about the ownership and the inheritance of the house, she feels that her children are waiting for her to die and the home which they had so lovingly built was going to be blown away by rough breeze. The following lines convey her sense of uprootedness:

“…we scraped and saved, putting away bits and pieces like nesting sparrows…And now, someone was shaking it down, toppling us out of our nest in a bid to obliterate us. From the nest that was our fragile dream evolved this solid
structure in stone, brick, cement. But this tiny little funk-hole of a house, after so many years, is about to blow away like an insubstantial breeze right through our rib-cage and vanish…The house. Does it really belong to us or do we forcibly try to forge a kinship with it? The younger generation is eagerly looking forward to the day when we will disappear. Faced with that Shankar and I have already, in a sense, become like two lost souls, a couple of ghosts wandering around the house…” (149)

The transition is also evident through Gayatri’s thoughtful psychological progression and maturity. Initially, we find her lamenting about her uprootedness, but a little later, she accepts it as a part of life. She brushes aside the negative feeling of victimization and adopts a more positive outlook towards life.

“…Inside this small cage, a little baby sparrow will soon arrive. Inside the mouse-trap, a tiny baby mouse. Let us make room for the child…let us make room for the younger generation as a whole and withdraw into a corner somewhere. There is no need to get so attracted to this flat just because we have documents proving that it is ours. Why should we, when we live like tenants within our own bodies for only a short period of time?…” (150)

OLD AGE AS A PHASE OF AUTHORITY, DOMINATION, RIGIDITY AND POWERLESSNESS

In some of the novels, old age is depicted as a phase of life in which there is an unwillingness to let go of authority and domination. The older women characters who typify this exhibit lack of receptivity and adaptability to the needs of the younger generation.
In Rajam Krishnan’s novella, “Lamps in the Whirlpool”, Mamiyar through a façade of powerlessness, and ritual purity, exercises her power and authority over the lives of her son and daughter-in-law and disrupts their domestic harmony.

In Sivasankari’s novel, “Bridges”, old age is characterised by continuous fault finding and negativity. Almost all the characters- be it Anandam, Mangalam, Vimala and Charu exhibit these traits. There is also a clash of generations in ideas.

In addition to being a difficult mother-in-law, Anandam is an equally critical grandmother. She keeps on finding faults with her granddaughter, Mythili.

“…’Don’t bite your nails. Don’t wear your hair in two plaits. It is disgusting. Don’t let your skirt trail to the ground. Hitch it up… If you try to go out after dark to see your friends, I will break your leg and use it for firewood. Turn off that wretched gramophone. Things are bad enough without that horrible noise. You are so feckless that you can’t sit in the puja room in the morning and say two or three prayers to the gods-but when it comes to talking’…” (30-31)

When Mythili expresses a desire to learn dancing, Anandam feels outraged and firmly objects to the idea.

“…‘You are going to let your daughter take dancing lessons, are you? Splendid. What do you propose to do afterwards? Send her to dance at weddings? Let her make money by rubbing chandanam on strangers?…This is not a family of actors and dancers. As long as I am alive, I will never permit such indecencies in this house.’…” (32)
Anandam also creates an uproar when she hears that her granddaughter's puberty rituals were not celebrated according to social customs. When her son confronts her on the futility of having such outdated values she gets enraged and resolves to set off to her daughter's house.

The conflict of values between the older and new generation is also represented through Mangalam’s character. She too is a fault finding grandmother. When her granddaughter, Padmini, comes back from school, she at once asks her to change her clothes and stay away from the kitchen for fear of pollution. Mangalam is unable to give up her old values and adapt to change. When she sees Padmini in the NCC uniform, she is appalled by the flouting of traditional gender norms and beliefs. “…Mangalam hit the ceiling when she saw the child in the NCC uniform. 'What is all this nonsense, wearing trousers like a man? A girl should be coy, modest, that is what makes her beautiful, instead of this hideous absurdity. And rushing out early in the morning, taking part in drills in the hot sun, you will shrink and shrivel and tan badly. Who would want to marry someone who looks like a featureless wooden doll?...you are growing up and pretty soon you will become a young woman. I am telling you, I won't allow this.'…” (240)

Even when Padmini is selected as one of the girl cadets for the Republic Day Parade, instead of appreciating her granddaughter, Mangalam feels enraged.

“…‘You want to go to Delhi? I'll flog you with the broomstick!’…” (241)

Mangalam is unable to understand her grandchildren's needs and often picks up a quarrel with them for nothing. She reprimands her grandson, Kumar, for deliberately letting his dog near her with the intention of biting her. She also keeps on lamenting about her lack of status in the house. The conflicts and
bitterness in both these women seem to emerge on account of their realisation about their powerlessness, dependence, loss of authority and widowed status.

Vimala, who is Charu’s aunt, and helps her in taking care of her daughter Aparna, is on a “constant collision course” (199) with Aparna. As Charu points out, “Not a day passed without a scene” (199). One gets an insight into Vimala’s meddangling and fault finding temperament through the following lines:

“… ‘Why do you talk for such a long time on the phone? What if someone wanted to call your mother urgently? Who are all these young men who come to see you every day? Such a grown-up girl. Why don’t you get up early at least on a Deepavali day, have a proper oil bath and wear new clothes…Jeans, jeans every day! Can’t you wear a sari once in a while! It is all your fault Charu, you are indulging her too much. No good will come of this.’…” (199)

When Aparna complains of a headache, Vimala at once blames her for staying out under the hot sun. As soon as Charu returns from office, Vimala is ready to pour out her ceaseless complaints against Aparna. Even when Aparna returns from her in-laws house, Vimala criticises her for not being accommodating. When Charu asks her to be quiet, she at once takes an offence and blames Charu for being too indulgent. However, despite the conflict of ideologies, Vimala is excessively fond of her granddaughter Aparna. She embodies the social rigidities and beliefs.

OLD AGE AS AN EMBODIMENT OF OPTIMISM AND HOPE

Old age is also typified as a stage characterised by optimism through the typification of strong women characters, who use their determination, optimism,
pragmatic wisdom and mental and emotional strength to overcome the barrier of old age.

In Rajam Krishnan’s novella, “Lamps in the Whirlpool”, Mataji is imbued with positive energy. She is an independent and clear headed individual who helps to resolve Girija’s enigma by guiding her to overcome the crisis situation.

In Lakshmi Kannan’s story, “Muniyakka”, although Muniyakka feels betrayed by her “useless sons” on whom she once had “implicit faith” and who refused to give her “a single, tepid bowl of broth” (108), yet she overcomes her negative feelings through her emotional strength, sense of detachment and financial independence.

In Ambai’s “Parasakti and Others in a Plastic Box”, old age is presented as a phase of constructive occupation, as is reflected through the character of Kumuda. She plans to learn English so that she can talk to her grandchildren, embroider “salwar-kameez sets” for her college going granddaughter, give “music lessons”, plan “her autobiography” (63), graft roses, and set out spinach plots. Domesticity and preoccupation with household chores kept Kumuda constructively occupied. With a wide variety of tasks in hand, there remained no scope for negativity or pessimism, for even after her husband’s death, she found out ways and means to occupy herself.

Nargis Khala in “A Movement, a Folder, some Tears”, was actively involved in social issues and movements. She has an optimistic zeal towards life. Nargis Khala does not let her wheelchair become an obstruction. She has the zest, vivacity, grit and determination to live life to the fullest. Old Age is also mirrored through the activist spirit of middle-aged women, like Charu and Selvi. Their lives are not simply circumscribed by their relational roles. Their identity lies in their
self-expansion, redefining the given and flouting their circumscribed existence. Even when they are separated from each other, they cling on to something as their life’s anchor. Charu moves abroad for further research, Selvi waits with an optimistic fervour for the day when their office would open.

“…‘We’ll wait. Until such a time, we’ll take up other kinds of work; little drops falling into the great ocean….’” (200)

The embodiment of old age is thus very vast and varied. From futility to hope, hankering in the past to positive reconstruction for the future, resistance to change to modern adaptability, the novels have presented a series of characters.

**REPRESENTATIONS OF SEXUALITY**

In this section, an attempt has been made to categorise sexuality under various heads. The categorisation has been made on the basis of the issues that have emerged from the short stories, novellas and novels. Sexuality as represented in the literary works is not just a physiological or an emotive need, but also a social construct. As a social construct, it encompasses sexual morality, ethics, bias and sexual transgressions. Sexuality emerges as a signifier of identity as it is mediated by a set of social attitudes and traits such as reinforcement of appropriate womanly behavior and social expectations. Through sexuality, we also get an insight into the patriarchal gaze at female sexuality. Adolescent Sexuality is depicted through highlighting desires, heterosexual attraction, sexual fantasies, curiosity and experimentation. Notions of sexuality embedded in marital rape, sexual violence and incest also find articulation. Sexual empowerment is manifested through the diverse coping strategies exhibited by women, the autonomy exercised by them and their freedom of expression, reflected through their sexual banter, the female gaze and their questioning of
the given norms. I would now like to individually discuss each of these issues in
the context of the books.

**SEXUALITY AS AN EMOTIVE AND PHYSIOLOGICAL NEED**

Sexuality emerges as a pleasurable emotion which is cherished by majority of
the characters. In addition to the physical passion, the emotional warmth and
comfort is also emphasized, which strengthens the bonds of intimacy amidst
several relationships-be it husband and wife or loving couples. It is characterised
by feelings of love, infatuation, sexual fantasies and desires, care, concern,
insecurity and sensitivity towards the feelings of significant others. The feminist
aspect of sexuality is mirrored through the female gaze that is, their perception of
masculinity, their personalised construction of sexual laws, passion and
conflicting emotions and frustrations.

Sexuality is also reflected through the inward desire of the characters to look
good. Appearance consciousness is not only manifested by the adolescent
characters like Gowri and Rabia, but also by young adult women like Thangam
and Mythili. While Gowri and Rabia crave for appreciation from others,
Thangam’s confidence seems to be enhanced through the special care that she
bestowed upon her looks. Mythili, on the other hand, enhances her looks for her
husband’s sake.

In P. Sivakami’s novel, *The grip of change*, sexuality is mirrored through
Gowri’s and Thangam’s appearance consciousness and their desire to look
attractive. Gowri always made it a point to dress up well for school by applying
kohl in her eyes and wearing flowers in her hair. It is also mirrored through the
care that she took to enhance her looks. Before her cousin, Chandran’s
marriage, she bought all the necessary things in order to look good.
Thangam was also influenced by Gowri’s manner of dressing up and imitated her. Gowri’s mannerisms kindled a spark in her to look good.

“…she began to imitate Gowri, changing her hairstyle and taking care of her appearance. After all, she was still young, and could make herself attractive. The women of the house noticed the changes in her…” (88)

In Salma’s novel, “The Hour Past Midnight”, Rabia’s appearance consciousness is reflected through her admiration of her cousin, Wahida’s beauty. She too longs to be like her.

“…How lovely her Akka looked!...She wasn’t half as fair-skinned as Wahida...Rabia would measure Wahida’s long hair with her small hands and then check her own, despairingly. ‘Che, why can’t I be as pretty as you, Akka! Look how big my nose is. And even Ahmad teases me sometimes for being so dark!’…” (52)

Rabia’s appearance consciousness is exhibited through self admiration.

“...She washed her face very well, with soap. When she saw her reflection in the mirror, it looked bright...When she powdered her face, it struck her that she too was pretty. She looked again and again at herself...she was pleased with the way she looked…” (52-53)

In Sivasankari’s novel, “Bridges”, sexuality is mirrored through Mythili’s appearance consciousness and her desire to dress well according to her husband’s liking. She wore printed voile saris, fancy brassieres, nail polish and used the exotic soaps and perfumes bought for her by her husband.
As a physiological need, sexuality is portrayed as a medium for the fulfillment of desires. In P. Sivakami’s novel, *The grip of change*, Reddiar’s wife, Santha establishes sexual intimacy with a lower caste servant to satiate her sexual appetite.

In Salma’s novel, *The Hour Past Midnight*, sexuality as an emotive need is mirrored through Rabia substituting the wooden doll for Ahmad. She poured all her emotions and affection on to the doll. The emotive aspect of sexuality is exhibited through Firdaus’ desire to establish physical intimacy with her next door neighbour, Siva. Her sexual yearning, coupled with fear and passion is reflected in the following lines:

“…She wondered how that evening could so awaken all the womanly impulses that lay frozen within her…Seen in the bright electric light, the fineness of his body, clad only in a banian and lungi, filled her with such desire that it frightened her…” (80)

Firdaus’ repressed sexuality gets awakened with Siva’s accidental touching of her fingers when he comes to hand over his house keys to be given to his wife. Her repressed sexual passion emerges in an unbridled form and she decides to brush aside all the compunctions related to honour, modesty or appropriateness to find solace and pleasure in Siva’s arms.

In Sivasankari’s novel, *Deception*, the emotive aspect of sexuality is depicted in the intimate relationship between Durga and Giridhar. Even after the birth of their first child, his love for Durga does not diminish. When she asks him if he is going to sleep next to the child, Giridhar says he would sleep next to her. The intimacy and love makes Durga happy.
In Vaasanthi’s novella, “Birthright”, sexuality appears as a physiological need. The emotional aspect of sexuality is reflected in Manohari’s sexual desire for Doctor Shivakumar.

“…my body was in shameless need of his maleness…craving for him to hold my hand a little longer…” (36)

Sexual passion and yearning is also shown in Shanbagam yielding to Perumaal’s lust. Despite her awareness that Perumaal was making use of her, Shanbagam went to him as being a single woman she found it difficult to control her sexual desires. As she confesses before Mano: “…This body of mine is shameless, akka. It wants to…what can I do?…” (119)

In Lakshmi Kannan’s novel, “Going Home”, sexuality is shown as a loving and caring relationship shared by Gayatri and Shankar. Their relationship is characterised by emotional and physical warmth. Gayatri’s bodily fatigue is driven away by Shankar’s soothing touch.

It can be seen from the above illustrations that the emotive and physiological aspects of sexuality are mirrored not only through the warm relationships shared by married couples, but also through the desires, yearnings of widowed, divorced and single women like Sherifa, Firdaus and Manohari, who grapple hard to negate the desires of their body.

**SEXUALITY FROM THE LENS OF THE FEMALE GAZE**

This section gives an insight into the female perception of a male body. It incorporates in its fold feminine desire and admiration of a man’s maleness.
In Ambai’s novella, “Unpublished Manuscript”, Thirumagal’s sexual attraction for Muthukumaran is reflected in the following lines:

“…she discovered how a woman might look at a man. He was soaked to the skin. His veshti and shirt clung to his body. Through the wet white shirt, his dark shoulders seemed to rise and fall with the folds of the cloth. His dripping arms hung down from his short sleeves. Raindrops, like a scatter of beads, on his hands. He leaned against the wall, his veshti tucked up, and she saw his dark legs, sturdy with much walking…strong, rough legs. The toenails not evenly cut, some of them misshapen. His feet were splayed out like a fan. Cracked heels. Why do they say that all male gods have lotus feet? Who wants lotus feet? Do they bear the marks of walking, running, stumbling, falling, playing? The smears of grime and mud? Muthukumaran’s feet were firmly bound to the earth, shaped by its movements. Feet that had stories to tell. In contrast, his fingers were soft….A thrill coursed through Thirumagal…” (54-55)

Muthukumaran’s accidental touching created an “indescribable sensation” in her, she felt as if “her legs were giving away!…” (54)

Even in the long story, “Forest”, Ambai has portrayed the female perception of a male’s body. Chenthiru’s attraction for Tirumalai is expressed in the following lines:

“…A very tall figure. Dark skinned. The darkness of his pupils seemed to shine against the whites of his eyes. A moustache which very slightly hid his mouth. A finely-sculpted body. His buttocks were modest, and didn’t protrude or swell out. The back of his trousers did not bulge in an unseemly way, but fell somewhat loosely, with a fold. It was her opinion that a man’s bottom should be tightly muscled and well-knit…” (156)
In Ambai’s long story, “Wings: I”, sexuality is mirrored through Chaya’s fantasies and personalised construction of the notions of male sexuality and incorporation of certain laws about male physiology.

“…there should be a law preventing men from bloating out to such an extent that they are all belly and hanging flesh…men who had hairless, slippery chests should never marry, men who had chewed so many betel leaves that their teeth were like pieces of crushed tin, should never kiss…Men who have no kind feelings should be made to have vasectomies and forcibly prevented from having children…” (30-31)

The personalised construction of sexuality also conveys Chaya’s aversion for her husband, Bhaskaran. She is coerced to yield to his bodily desires owing to her duty as a wife. (This has already been discussed in great detail in the section on Gender conflicts, dilemmas and personal struggles.)

“…‘She after all, was a Hindu woman, and woman of her sort were supposed to dedicate themselves to their husbands, even if they turned out to be lepers.’…” (36)

Chaya perceives sexual intercourse as a medium for the fulfillment of emotional and physiological desires. The following lines give expression of her personalised construction:

“…I want to be with a man who can make me feel that there is a silent beauty in sleeping together, in enjoying one’s body as one enjoys a painting…” (54)
ADOLESCENT SEXUALITY

Adolescent sexuality is vivified through heterosexual attraction, infatuation, sexual fantasies, media influence and sexual curiosity.

In P. Sivakami’s “The grip of change”, one gets a picture of adolescent love and infatuation through Sargunam’s attraction towards her maternal cousin, Rasendran. She was always filled with an intense desire to catch a glimpse of him and fabricated some excuse or the other for the same. She makes all possible efforts to attract her lover’s attention through the tinkling sound of her anklet bells which produced the desired effect on Rasendran and “raised waves of pleasure in his heart” (71). When he approached her, she felt “ecstatic” and was “shocked by the sudden nearness” that she was “unable to look at him directly” (72).

In Ambai’s short story, “Fifteen”, Katyayani is deeply influenced by the portrayal of romance and love in cinema. Her expertise in imitating the romantic scenes from the Tamil movie is reflected through the following lines:

“… ‘He looks at her like this. She pouts her lips like this. He throws her a rose. She catches it with both her hands just above her chest, like this…He suddenly comes up to her and touches her waist, just here. Then she leans back on him’…” (169)

The emotive aspect of sexuality is also mirrored through Chellam’s infatuation for her tuition teacher’s son, Kalivaradan. The following lines give expression to the intensity of their love and emotions:
“...When she arrived for her lessons, he would begin coughing every now and then. Eventually she too would be overcome by a coughing fit. It would immediately disappear, though, as soon as Radha Teacher went inside to fetch a glass of water...One day, he took her rose-embroidered handkerchief which was lying on the desk, touched it to his lips, and then pressed it against his heart. Chellam was quite choked when she saw the intensity of his love…” (165)

One gets an insight into adolescent sexuality through their manner of exploration and experimentation. The adolescent girls like Rabia, Madina, Chellam, Champakam and Katyayani learn about sexuality through peer discussions, personal observation of married couples or collective exploration by consulting various books and pornographic magazines. Rabia and Sabari also indulge in sexual experimentation with their boyfriends and discover that sex is something pleasurable and enjoyable rather than sinful and ugly.

In Salma’s novel, “The Hour Past Midnight”, sexual curiosity is presented as the exploration of one’s body parts. Rabia tries to explore the mystique of sexuality by exploring her own body.

“...She looked at the rise of the blouse revealing her breasts and gently touched and stroked them. A thrill of excitement spread all over her body…” (154)

The experimentation is also done through the mother father game that she plays with Ahmad. He gives her the wooden doll and asks her to imagine it as their baby. While playing, he exhorts her to give the baby milk from her breast during the course of which he starts sucking Rabia’s breast. “Touched by a kind of shock, her body began to tremble as she gathered him in her arms, holding him tightly, as if eager and anxious to learn something…” (156).
The exploration of sexuality is also evident through Rabia and Madina’s peer discussions. They collectively try to explore the mysteries of sexuality. Madina tries to explain to her friend as to what her brother and sister-in-law did “behind locked doors” (328). Their collective exploration is also exhibited through their gathering information from pornographic magazines. Although this exploration induces a feeling of guilt in Rabia, yet it becomes a transformative experience for her, as unlike her cousin, Wahida, she is not frightened by the notion of nakedness. It also results in her partial understanding of the “difference” (362) between Ahmad and Madina’s touch.

In Ambai’s short stories, “Once again” and “Fifteen”, adolescent sexuality is mirrored through sexual experimentation, enjoyment of exploration of one’s body, peer discussion and consultation. In “Once again”, sexual experimentation is implicit in the conversation between Sabari and Lokidas. They are exploring each other’s bodies through sexual intimacy.

“…It’s like silk
What is, Loku?
Your body. Didn’t you know?…
I didn’t. It’s only after you said that, I can actually see myself…
Don’t men have hair on their chests?…
I didn’t know a man’s body could be so beautiful…” (118-119)

In “Fifteen”, sexual curiosity is reflected through the adolescent girls exploration by consulting various books and also through the observation of the newly married couple in the house. Chellam, Chapakam and Katyayani go to the circulating library to get information about the phrase “losing…manhood” (170).
“...The books had strange titles to different chapters, all about love games and positions. The girls did not find the details of what they were actually looking for, but they thought they understood that married men and women indulged in ‘love-play’ twenty-four hours of the day...” (170).

One of the girls even observes her newly married uncle kissing her aunt and makes her own speculations, which she discusses with her friends.

“... ‘when you get married...You’ll get at least a hundred kisses a day.’...She had worked out the time taken per kiss...If each kiss took five minutes, then if they were together for eight hours per day-leaving out mama’s office hours-it worked out as a hundred...” (170-171)

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF SEXUALITY

Here, the emphasis is on the differential code of conduct prescribed for men and women. Social expectations are evident in sexual blame being shouldered by women irrespective of whether they have transgressed the norms or not, reinforcement of appropriate womanly behavior and socialisation processes which encourage sexual suppression and repression. The social construction of sexuality is also vivified through the celebration of puberty and pregnancy rituals according a special status to womanhood and motherhood.

In P. Sivakami’s novel, “The grip of change”, when Thangam confesses to being beaten by Udayar’s relatives on grounds of suspicion, Kathamuthu does not believe her. Thangam’s confession of rape by Udayar induces him to question her character. While Kathamuthu himself kept an upper caste woman as his second wife, Thangam is being criticized for staying as an upper caste man’s kept woman. The differential sexual norms governing men and women are
highlighted through this. While it is natural for upper caste men to have illicit sexual relationships with lower caste women, it is deemed morally incorrect that Thangam has not chosen a man of her caste. She is made to feel guilty for it.

The differential sexual norms are also reflected through the adjustments that women have to make. Despite belonging to an upper caste, Nagamani settles down with Kathamuthu, who is from a lower caste. After her husband’s death, she faces solitude and loneliness and becomes willing to make the necessary adjustments in Kathamuthu’s house.

In Bama’s novel, “Sangati Events”, the differential sexual norms are mirrored through Mariamma’s trial. She is summoned before the entire congregation and blamed for behaving in an indecent manner with Manikkam, for no fault of hers. That the brunt of the sexual transgressions is to be borne by women is reinforced through the following line:

“… ‘Whatever a man does, in the end the blame falls on the woman.’…” (26)

Not only does Mariamma have to face public humiliation, she is also made to ask for forgiveness by prostrating herself before others. Manikkam on the other hand is not asked to do any such thing.

“…Nobody asked Manikkam to prostrate himself. After this, Mariamma was asked to pay a fine of Rs 200, and Manikkam a fine of Rs 100. The naattammai finished the proceedings by saying, ‘It is you female chicks who ought to be humble and modest. A man may do a hundred things and still get away with it. You girls should consider what you are left with, in your bellies.’…” (26)
Sexual expectations and norms are also mirrored through the culture of silence and shame. When Mariamma confesses to her friends about the landlord’s attempt to molest her, they ask her to keep quiet, lest she gets labelled as a “whore” (20). This incident not only reveals the vulnerability of a lower caste woman, but also her learned helplessness to maintain a coerced and deliberate silence.

In Salma’s novel, “The Hour Past Midnight”, the differential sexual norms are juxtaposed through women’s confinement and men’s freedom and mobility. While women were confined within the walls of tradition and were expected to suppress their desires, men had unlimited freedom to have sexual relations with several women. When Zohra raises the issue of Sikander’s sexual licentiousness before her husband, he legitimises it by brushing it aside. He tells Zohra that being a man it is difficult for Sikander to control his desire. Men’s desires were legitimised and considered natural as opposed to women’s desires, which he believed should be curbed.

Men had the liberty to violate all sexual norms, whereas women had to pay a heavier price for it. Maimoon’s painful abortion and Firdaus’ death by poisoning aptly conveyed this. The socio-sexual bias against women is also reflected through Amina’s anxiety to get rid of Maimoon’s unwanted child.

“…Her sister must be rid of the burden in her womb; that was all. What if it became common knowledge that she was pregnant?...This was the only thing to do, given that the girl was in no position to bear and bring up a baby…” (42)

In Vaasanthi’s novella, “Birthright”, the differential sexual norms for men and women get mirrored through Perumaal’s attitude. Although he is responsible for Shanbagam’s pregnancy, yet when she dies of septic abortion, he absolves
himself of all the responsibilities. When Shanbagam’s brother is about to strike him for having driven her to this state, Perumaal tarnishes her reputation. This once again reinforces the fact that the onus of sexual blame and responsibility has to be borne always by the woman.

All the case illustrations discussed reveal the socio-sexual bias, in addition to the gender bias. Women’s actions and conduct were closely scrutinised by the male members of the society. Thus, one evinces a patriarchal gaze at women's sexuality.

**SEXUALITY AND SOCIAL EXPECTATIONS**

This section not only mirrors the socio-sexual bias against women, but also vivifies women’s internalization of the patriarchal values and norms, so much so that the older women tried to curb younger women’s sexuality through repressive socialisation practices. We also evince male sexual bias against independent, educated and intelligent women.

In Salma’s novel, “The Hour Past Midnight”, sexuality mirrors social expectations and reinforcement of appropriate behavior amongst women. It was considered mandatory for girls to dress properly. Rabia’s mother reprimands her for not putting on the half-sari.

“…‘Your chest is showing…There’ll be any number of people in a house of bereavement. Are you going to stand in front of all of them, looking so disgraceful? Your uncle will scold…A girl must be modest’…” (5)

The social expectations are also reflected through the restrictions imposed upon girls and women. It is considered highly inappropriate for women to appear
before men who are strangers. Zohra and Rahima were even forbidden to appear before their prospective son-in-law.

Sexual suppression was also an integral part of the socialisation process of Muslim girls and women. It was considered a sin if women gazed at their own body parts even while bathing. Acknowledgement of one’s sexuality was a taboo. Rabia suppresses her desire to look at her breasts owing for fear of developing guilt.

“…Suddenly she wanted to bend down and look at her own breasts. She wanted to know whether they had grown big enough to be hidden under a davani? She felt shy, though. Deep within her, there was some kind of shame and repulsion which stopped her from looking at her own body with her own eyes. Even when she had her bath, she had never looked at herself entirely naked. Her mother had told her that she would surely go to hell if she bathed without any clothes. She had also told her that if she gazed at her own genitals, or at any one else’s, her face would darken. So how could she ever gaze at her own body?…” (153-154)

In Lakshmi Kannan’s short story, “A Fever”, Girija is brought up in a restrictive environment. Her parents forcefully curb her dancing, saying that it as an indecent form of art. She is socialised to underplay her physical beauty like the other women in her family.

“…Girija sensed a certain resentment to sensuous representations in the very culture of her caste. She then learnt to underplay her own physical beauty. Like the rest of the women in the family, she trained herself expertly to let personal beauty slide down in the priorities. She camouflaged it, eliminating the solid truth
of her own appearance as an irrelevant point and all but apologised for it. She conformed to the dyed-in-the-wool Brahmin values…” (98)

In Lakshmi Kannan’s long story, “Simone de Beauvoir and The Manes”, “Shell”, “India Gate and other stories”, there is a representation of male control and promiscuity over independent and well qualified women.

In “Shell”, Doctor Nandini faces sexual harassment from her senior, Dr. Sambamurthy, and several male colleagues, who believed than an intelligent woman like her should not be tied to one man alone. Nandini’s assertion of “individual values” (32) and her claims of loyalty towards her husband are brushed aside by Dr. Sambamurthy as “anachronistic” (33).

“…Nandini had nearly lost her balance in the first encounter, many years ago. The man had been so arbitrary: “Women like you are ineligible for all the usual conventions like chastity, purity, virtue and all the clichéd crap. You are beyond all that banality.”…he had continued ruthlessly, “How do you presume that you belong to just one man, in your case the husband? That’s so brutally unimaginative!... when you can bring happiness into the lives of other, equally deserving men?…” (37)

In Sivasankari’s novel, “Bridges”, the social construction of sexuality is seen in the celebration of pubertal rituals and the celebration of motherhood. Sivakamu’s pregnancy rituals provide an insight into what is done. The pregnant woman is blessed by her mother and the other neighbourhood women who made a special trip to see her, bringing with them appropriate gifts and “some special delicacy” (96). Pregnancy exalts the status of woman in society.
Across novels it is seen that women were vulnerable to sexual exploitation, violence and abuse irrespective of their caste, class and social status. While the Dalit women were more vulnerable to the acts of sexual violence, rape and molestation by the upper caste men, the upper middle class Brahmin and Muslim women faced varied forms of exploitation such as forceful intercourse, marital rape, incest, verbal abuse and sexual harassment at the work place.

In P. Sivakami’s novel, “The grip of change”, the author narrates her personal experience of sexual molestation at the hands of her friend’s cousin who tries to take advantage of her in an inebriated condition.

“…Valina’s cousin volunteered to clean up the mess. As he wiped off the vomit on her clothes, although she was feeling faint, she was conscious of the extra pressure applied on her breasts. He loosened her clothes under the pretext of rearranging them. She grasped his hands and prayed to him, ‘You’re like a brother to me.’…” (150)

In the “Author’s Notes”, there are several instances of sexual abuse and revenge meted out to some of the lower caste women. The author’s younger sister was exploited sexually by a man who tried to “grab” (171) her when she went to show him the way to the field. Another woman, who “smacked the slow-witted Gnanakoothan while helping him with maths” (172), found that her half sari was stolen by him when she went into the pond to have her bath. There was another woman, Kuldip, who when she refused to bestow sexual favours on her superior, was being “leered at” (174) by him.

“…whenever he saw her, “Super rhythm…super rhythm!…” (174)
Bama’s novel, “Sangati Events”, highlights the vulnerability of the lower caste women to sexual crimes such as exploitation, molestation and rape. These women are sexually exploited by the upper caste landlords. Mariamma manages to escape from the clutches of the landlord who tries to pull her inside the shed. Vellaiyamma warns her granddaughter to be cautious while crossing the fields or the plantation areas.

“…‘Women should never come on their own to these parts. If upper-caste fellows clap eyes on you, you’re finished. They’ll drag you off and rape you, that’s for sure. If you go on a little further, there will be escaped criminals lurking in the plantations. They keep themselves well hidden. You must never let them see you either.’…” (8)

In Salma’s novel, “The Hour Past Midnight”, acts of sexual violence and incest are discussed. A negative image of sexuality emerges through the sexual violence meted upon Wahida’s body by her husband. Wahida is treated in an insensitive manner by her husband. We get an insight into her physical torment through the following lines:

“…She was troubled by a terrible pain below her waist and belly. She had never expected he would behave to her in such a casually violent way…He had treated her as if she were an object; he had acted as if he only had a job or work to finish…” (314)

Sikander’s incestuous behavior towards Rabia also reflects sexual abuse. He forcefully tries to pull Rabia towards him, in spite of the latter’s resistance and discomfort. He takes pleasure in the discomfort caused to his young sister-in-law.
“…taking her by the hand, drawing her to him and giving her a close hug. Feeling terribly shy, trying to free herself, she stuttered, ‘Let me go… Rabia struggled to free herself.’…” (308)

On another occasion, when Rabia brings tea for Sikander, he takes advantage of her aloneness and forcefully pulls her towards him.

Wahida’s father-in-law, Sayyed intrudes upon her privacy through his incestuous talks, thereby making her feel embarrassed. Wahida’s father-in-law always pestered her by asking uncomfortable questions: “… ‘I hear that you are in the wrong time of the month?’ Wahida was shocked that he could ask such an intimate question without any shame, as if he were asking her if she had a headache!…” (308). Sayyed is also curious to know about Wahida’s sexual relationship with Sikander and he advises her to be accommodating. Her subjection to verbal torture is reflected through the following lines:

“…Sayyed gazed at her. She could feel his eyes going all the way through her from her head to her feet, and tried- but failed- to shrink even more into herself. His eyes groping at every part of her body, he said, ‘Sabia told me, you have a stomach ache. Did it hurt a lot, then?’ The impotence and the salacious eagerness reflected in his voice and expression threw her into complete confusion. She was speechless with shock. There was an open look of voyeuristic pleasure playing on his old face… ‘Don’t worry! At first it will hurt a lot, definitely. Besides, you are very young. He’s not like that, he’s a rough fellow, and a big man. So it must have been difficult for you. But say you grit your teeth, it will come out all right soon…‘Take my case. I’m past it now; I can’t do anything. Even if I want to, I can’t. But your husband isn’t like that. He’s in his prime. So it’s you who must give in and go along with him. Say you take to bed complaining it hurts. It will be hard on him, won’t it, poor fellow! Here he is, just married.’…”
was still in shock; unable to escape from the dreadful situation in which she was trapped…” (376)

In addition to his verbal abuse, Wahida has to even endure her father-in-law’s inappropriate touch. She is unable to raise a cry of protest against Sayyed’s lewd behavior when he touches her bottom on the pretext of complementing her. Wahida’s shame and humiliation is conveyed through the following lines.

“…Wahida turned around with a shock when someone touched her bottom lightly, Sayyed stood behind her, grinning and saying softly, ‘This sari suits you very well.’…Wahida’s entire body shrank with shame and humiliation. She felt a sense of burning where he touched her, as if she were on fire. For an instant she glared at him, her eyes giving out sparks of rage…Wahida swallowed the anger which she could not reveal. She didn't know what else to do, how to protest against his behavior…” (410)

Sexual abuse also gets reflected in the inappropriate behavior of the junior Hazrat in the mosque towards the girl students. On the pretext of disciplining them, he pinches their thighs, while he hit the boys with a cane. Rabia attended his classes and was repulsed by his behavior. Her helplessness is revealed through the following lines:

“…Nobody liked the junior Hazrat, Rabia and Madina, least of all. When they chanted from the Koran, if they mispronounced a single word, he pinched their thighs. It was not just to punish them, Rabia felt, that he touched their thighs. He only hit the boys with the cane in his hands. As for the girls, he pinched their thighs. Even to look at him filled her with shame and repulsion. To make things worse, he often invited her to sit next to him…Often he would stroke her cheek or
pinch it. At such times, Rabia wanted to cry. She would say to Madina, ‘I can’t bear to learn chanting from this fellow’…” (13)

In Vaasanthi’s novella, “Birthright”, the exploitation is mirrored through the plight of the young widow, Akila, who faces the threat of sexual harassment from her brothers-in-law.

“…All day long I am a servant. At night they say I must go to any of the brothers who calls me…” (58)

Lakshmi Kannan’s novella, “Glass Walls”, portrays sexual exploitation in the form of verbal abuse and innuendoes. Mythili has to endure the double meaning talks of her husband’s business associate, Natarajan.

“…Whenever Natarajan talked to Mythili, he would not only lower his voice by a few decibels, he would also talk with a double edge in his words. Tiny, menacing hints and innuendoes played on the surface of his words with a subdued cunning. Mythili was beside herself with shock at some of his insinuations…” (90) Natarajan is not in the least dissuaded by Mythili’s retaliation, instead he openly reveals his sexual intentions before her:

“…how can you talk like this to me? You must remember my age. I’m well past my prime…
Natarajan:…whoever wants a young baby sparrow?…Do you take me for a fool?…What I look for is mature company, matured to perfection like a good, old wine of quality. That takes on a fine, polished taste and has a consummate fullness…Don’t worry Gunaseelan is a dear friend of mine. And Mythili will return to Mythila, the birth place of Sita, with all her dignity and self respect intact…
Mythili feels her cheeks burning. Natarajan smiled at her, suave and self-assured, his arrogance as quiet as it was restrained…” (41-42)

In Lakshmi Kannan’s novel, “Going Home”, the exploitation shows up in the career compromises that women had to make in order to get promotions or increments. Gayatri herself was pestered by her boss, Mr. Sarin, who was always on the look out to take her out. She comments on his predatory attitude of using all women sexually.

“…The Vice-President would easily be ten to fifteen years older than I. Even then he is tempted to…There are plenty of women in the office who would vie with each other to keep him happy on his own terms, impelled by the greed to advance themselves…Saturday will eventually come. Just as Sarin had predicted, I will give him the slip, pleading a ‘lame excuse’. As always, Sarin will give me a sarcastic smile. And soon enough, he will fix up another woman for Saturday. Over dinner, he would chew the woman like the flesh of a chicken, munch, masticate and ingest her. Suck her in like the spicy juice inside the bones, wolf her down before she is finally used as a table napkin to wipe the stain off his hands, then crushed and thrown away. Disposable. A shamefully predatory attitude that prevails in the country today, a jungle law that induces people to prey upon and appropriate one another…” (112)

In “Bridges”, sexual violence is shown through Suresh’s violent treatment of Charu. Suresh was always on the lookout for an opportunity to kiss Charu, despite her repeated protests, whenever they were alone. When he takes her out for the first time before marriage, he parks his car at a desolate spot and kisses her with a “brutal passion” (53). Charu’s subjection to sexual torture after her marriage is reflected through the following lines:
“...She had thought that Suresh’s violent love-making and insatiable desire to subject her to sex, morning, noon and night, were merely because they were newly married, and the novelty had not yet worn off for him. She had been dead wrong...He did not give her a minute even to savour the beauty of the Dal Lake and the luscious scenery all around, but bundled her off to the bedroom in their houseboat immediately on arrival. During the ten days they spent there, he made constant and incessant love to her, until she lost count. Her initial naïve astonishment quickly changed into irritation and disgust…” (57-58)

Charu’s emotions and feelings are completely negated by Suresh who is only blinded by his sexual frenzy. Even when “she pleaded illness or tiredness he had a way with her” and had a “maniac look in his eyes...when they were making love...” (58). His sadistic pleasure is evident in crushing the burning hot cigarette on her breast and subjecting her to new forms of torture, such as exploring her nakedness in a perverted manner. A negative image of sexuality emerges through Charu’s bodily torture. Her sexual relationship with her husband was devoid of warmth and comfort.

That girls and women across all classes and caste were vulnerable to sexual exploitation everywhere— be it in the home, at school, in their work places, including the fields, has been vividly conveyed through the citation of a number of instances.

MANIFESTATIONS OF SEXUAL EMPOWERMENT: AUTONOMY, EXPRESSION AND COPING

This section vivifies the empowered aspects of sexuality manifested mainly as autonomy and freedom by the women characters.
Sexual Autonomy and Freedom is exhibited through the reproductive freedom and sexual choices made by many of the protagonists. Some of the women exhibit sexual autonomy by voicing out their repressed emotions and feelings in the form of sexual banter.

In Salma’s novel, “The Hour Past Midnight”, reproductive freedom is visible in Rahima’s decision to go in for sterilization on the doctor’s advice, without informing her husband.

“…When she agreed to a sterilization many years ago, on her doctor’s advice, she had not asked Kader about it first. After it was done, he had refused to speak to her for sometime saying she had gone against the Shariat. Rahima had tried hard not to make an issue of it. She knew perfectly well that Kader would never, at any time, have allowed a sterilization. He was incapable of taking a single step that was contrary to the Shariat. As for her, when her doctor declared that it would not be safe for her to have another baby, she had quietly agreed to the operation with the support and aid of her father. She could not think what else to do…” (71)

Sexual freedom as banter is seen in the behavior of Mumtaz and Nafiza, who take extreme pleasure in cracking crude jokes targeting others and sometimes each other as well. In their presence, even the other women feel encouraged to express their thoughts openly.

Nafiza and Mumtaz make Wahida the target of their remarks when they hear about her impending marriage with Sikander. Mumtaz who is always eager to catch the town’s gossip asks Zohra about Rahima’s resistance to this marriage. When she tells her that they had been postponing this marriage only because Wahida is quite young, Nafiza makes Wahida the butt of her jokes.
“...’ Just because she is young, “it doesn’t mean she doesn’t know how to lie down... ‘Listen, Wahida, if you have any doubts about anything, don’t hesitate to ask us, we’ll teach you everything. Mumtaz even has a cassette; if you ask her nicely, she’ll show you. The bridegroom will see to what’s left.’... Wahida’s fair complexion blushed blood-red as she rose to her feet in haste and fled from there....” (87-88)

“Mumtaz: ‘Why do we have to give Wahida any lessons? As if her husband doesn’t know anything! All these years as a bachelor, he’s been busy learning it all. What are you going to teach her that he doesn’t know?’...” (279-280)

They also intrude into another person’s private space through their bantering. Mumtaz teases Zohra about Mariyai’s extramarital relationship with her husband. Sexual banter was also a medium for venting out their hostility against others. Nafiza and Mumtaz derived “mean pleasure” (266) from such a banter. They even make fun of the old man, Abdulla, who fancied remarrying young and beautiful girls from poor families. When Nafiza heard about his decision to marry the fourth time, she was surprised at his sexual virility and wonders if he actually has the stamina to sexually satiate younger girls.

These women continued their incessant chatter whenever they got the time and opportunity. Even at somebody’s mourning ceremony, they carried on with their lively talks. One of the women present there advised Mumtaz that she must take “an energy boosting injection” (197) since her husband is going to be back soon. Nafiza also advised Mumtaz to get pregnant soon, to avoid being sexually pestered by her husband every day. These banter sessions proved to be a source of joy and happiness for the women.
In Zohra’s words, both Nafiza and Mumtaz were “irrepressible…Saithaans” (197). The banter and light repartee was a means for these women to get away from their mundane world of domesticity and also provided an outlet from their repressed existence.

In Vaasanthi’s novella, “Birthright”, sexual autonomy is reflected in Manohari’s control over her emotions and desires. She disentangles herself from her bodily desires by sending Shiva out of her room when the latter comes to take advantage of her sexually. Her firmness of resolve is reflected through the following lines:

“…I sprang awake, as though branded with a hot iron, shook off his arm and jumped down… I told him sternly… “Go away, Shiva. I cannot allow you in here. You cannot do anything against my consent, sorry. If you don’t leave the room I shall go and sleep somewhere else.”…” (126)

She wonders that it was foolish on his part to have imagined that she would come to bed the moment he called her. Manohari disapproves of his conduct and feels that he had tried to take “advantage” (127) of her at the time when she was emotionally weak, after Shanbagam’s death and that he had failed to respect her “feelings of propriety” (127). Although, she condones him for having “exercised his right over the woman he was marrying” in the “grip of romantic passion” (128), yet she does not give herself to him.

Sexual autonomy in “Wings: I” and “Wings: II” is seen in Chaya’s covert desire to flout traditional wifely norms and move ahead in an infidel relationship. She desires to be with a man who does not perceive sexual intercourse as mechanical, but one who is able to satiate her emotionally as well as physically.
“…When it happened mechanically, she actually hated the act of union… I want to be with a man who can make me feel that there is a silent beauty in sleeping together…O, I have thought of it now! What is going to happen? Is the whole country going to burn up?…” (54-55)

A significant aspect of sexuality is how women cope with their desires. There are varied manifestations which are seen.

In Vaasanthi’s novella, “Birthright”, Raasamma’s widowed mother coped with her sexual desires by placing photographs of the popular Tamil cinema star everywhere in her room: “…MGR worship acted as an outlet for the sexual frustrations of poor women in Tamil Nadu…” (32)

Raasamma, on the other hand coped with her desires by watching television and smearing holy ash.

“…Just as her mother had coped with her frustration with the aid of pictures of MGR, this woman smeared holy ash on her forehead, seated herself before the TV, saying, “This is in my fate, akka.”…” (42)

Mano, coped with her sexual frustrations by immersing herself in work. She goes on to take inspiration from great saints and poets who through their renunciation had achieved larger goals in life.

“…On sleepless nights, when my body burned with the need for his embrace, I tried to make peace with it, telling myself, “There’s no other way for me!…Our epics and legends say that a woman who wants to achieve anything at all must renounce not only sexual desire, but every sign of femaleness. And so women poet-saints like the great Auvaiyaar and Karaikkal Ammaiyaar renounced the full
glory of their youth, not wishing to be distracted from their spiritual goals. Kannagi plucked out her breast and flung it at the doomed city of Madurai, burning it to ashes. Andaal threatened to pluck out hers if her divine lover delayed their union. Funny how, without going to any such lengths, Raasamma and I had taken on the ochre of renunciation. Our outlets for the sacrificial impulse were different, that was all. The TV screen for her, the scan screen for me…” (49)

Thus, one evinces women’s open articulation of sexuality both through their autonomy and positive coping. The varied representations of sexuality reflected through the works mirror it not only as a physiological and emotive need, but also as one shaped by social constructs.

Both embodiment and sexuality are visible in the lived experiences of the characters based on their belief systems and the social and cultural milieu that they inhabit. The manifestations and forms of representation, as have already been discussed are indeed vast and varied.

CASTE AND COMMUNAL CONTOURS

In many of the novels, caste and community are seen to be important influences in the development of identity among girls and women. Women are seen to be discriminated against on grounds of caste, class and gender. It therefore becomes important to study and analyse these dimensions and particularly, the experiences of Dalit and Muslim women.

HOW MUSLIM WOMEN’S IDENTITY UNFOLDS

Although my study includes only one novel by a Tamil Muslim woman writer, yet an analysis of it shows that girls and women through the socialisation process,
that they experience, tend to develop a religious identity. In fact, almost all of Salma’s women characters belong to a small town and are tied down by the socio-religious trappings of purdah, which leads them to underplay and repress their sexual emotions.

Apart from Salma’s women who are brought up in a conventional and traditional setting, we also get a diverse perspective through Ambai’s long story, “A Movement, a Folder, some Tears”, whose central character, Sakina is also a Muslim woman. Sakina does not have to face obstacles related to personal freedom and individual choices like Rabia, Firdaus, Wahida and Madina as she is brought up in a more liberal environment. However, we find her struggling with larger social issues like overcoming the barrier of a stigmatised identity and striving for a unified collective identity. In Ambai’s long story, the communal conflicts exhibited through the staunch fanatic feelings of some characters, which affect the lives of significant others also throw light upon communal identity. I would now like to focus on the individual works which deal with this.

In Salma’s novel, “The Hour Past Midnight”, one gets an insight into the world of Muslim women, who are trapped by traditions, conventions and religious prescriptions. The Muslim girls were married off at a very young age to elderly men. It was considered mandatory to get them married within the family in order that the kinship ties were not lost and the property remained within the family (as in the case of characters such as Wahida and Nafiza.)

In the same novel, women like Rabia and Wahida imbibe a strong sense of religious identity by evaluating their pleasurable deeds as sinful- liable to receive punishment. Rabia’s internalisation of religious values is reflected through her prescriptions to her friends advising them about various dos and don’ts. I would like to discuss several instances which illustrate this. When her friend, Ahmad
speaks disrespectfully about their religious teacher, Rabia admonishes him saying that wherever the Hazrat's cane hit them, those parts of the body were not subject to hell fire. Thus, a strong religious connotation is evident, whereby the purification of the body by means of corporeal punishment is justified.

“.... ‘Don't abuse the Hazrats like that, you'll go to hell. Don't you know that the hell-fire can never touch those parts of your body where the Hazrat's cane has fallen on you?’…” (13)

Later on, Rabia even reprimands Rafiq, Ahmad's brother, for lying down with his leg pointed in an upward direction. The appropriateness of one's posture also had a religious dimension.

“… ‘You shouldn't point to heaven with your feet should you? Because that's where Allah is. That's why’…” (95)

The fear about heaven and hell is deeply ingrained in Rabia's mind and is allied with the concept of sinful deeds. Therefore, when her close friend, Madina, steals the lime fruit from the tailor’s garden, she at once reminds her of what they have been learning in their madrasa. On her part, Rabia absolves herself of all responsibilities by refusing to take part in this sinful act of stealing. Madina starts feeling guilty about her action. Somewhere these feelings of guilt seem to stem from the strict upbringing that these girls have experienced in their homes and the religious education that they receive in the madrasa. The inner voice which haunts Madina clearly shows the impact of religion in her identity definition.

“…The Hazrat had told them a lot about it, in the madrasa. The malaks on the right shoulder would count up her good deeds, while the malaks on the left would record her bad deeds. Everything would be added up at Judgement Day. Allah
would send her to hell if the bad deeds were more and to heaven if the good deeds won. If she wanted to go to the highest heaven, the seventh one called Jamath-ul Firdaus, she would have to do very many good deeds. She felt deeply remorseful for having stolen the fruit, knowing all this…” (214)

Religious prescriptions are also seen to impact women's personal lives and deny them even small pleasures. For instance, women were forbidden to go to the cinema during the fasting month. Therefore, when Rabia transgresses this norm, she is punished by Zohra and made to feel guilty. Likewise, girls were denied the smallest pleasures. They were not allowed to sing cinema songs.

Further, it was mandatory for young Muslim girls and women to know their holy book by heart and also recite prayers from it regularly. The reinforcement of religiosity was an integral part of their socialisation process.

Sexual suppression was deemed not only as appropriate behavior, it was linked to religiosity. It was considered sinful for women to acknowledge their sexual and bodily desires or even to gather information about sexuality. When Rabia and Madina are secretly poring over pornographic material on the terrace, Rabia is smitten by feelings of guilt. The close association between sex and sin was guided by the religious contours that defined their upbringing.

“...she was beset by the fear that instead of reading the Koran or the Taghlim, or reciting the Yasin at Maghrib time, here she was committing a grave sin. She reminded herself that if Periattha were to come home suddenly and find she had gone elsewhere instead of saying her prayers, he would call her a saithaan and scold her. She thought of the Hadith that he had quoted the day before. According to it, it was the Devil who always tempted us; if we manage to escape him, we can be assured of a place in heaven where milk and honey will flow like
rivers, and where thousands of houri women would serve the men and make them happy…” (360).

Religious control bordering on oppression is evident in the denial of reproductive freedom to women like Saitthoon. Muslim women were forbidden the use of contraceptives, nor could they resort to sterilization. They thus had no other option but to go through incessant childbirths at the cost of their health. It was considered by men that children were a gift of Allah and that it was a sin to reject His gift. Saitthoon’s helplessness in this regard is revealed through the following lines:

“… ‘Why do I get pregnant? Well, what do you suggest I do? He says I shouldn’t use any kind of contraception. He says that would bring about Allah’s anger upon us. You tell me now, how many more children can my body bear? What strength do I possess? You can’t take hold of a pinch of flesh anywhere from my body. If I go to see the Doctoramma, she gives me a terrible scolding, saying I’m anaemic. With this one, it will have been seven children in ten years. What is the rest of my life going to be like? As for him, he quotes the Shariat and the Hadiths that children are our wealth and that it is a sin to prevent them. But who is it that bears the brunt of it all? Is it the man? Not at all; it’s the woman, of course’…” (202-203)

Religious identity is also seen to rest on differential social norms for men and women. For instance, it was mandatory for women to be more religious than men. The practice of religiosity demanded from them suppression of their desires and denial of pleasures, all of which were aimed to achieve the goal of ideal wifehood or womanhood and imbibe the traits of compliance, passivity and self-negation, which were believed to foster domestic harmony.
When Fatima died, her death was justified as an apt punishment for her sins. Fatima was abandoned by her husband and spent several years of her life without male companionship. She carved out her personal happiness by eloping with a Hindu man, who she loved dearly and set up her household with him in Madurai. Consequently, the Muslim community banished her mother, Nuramma and her son, Illiaz for her transgression. When Suleiman heard about her death by accident, he at once glorified Allah for having given her a fitting punishment.

“Suleiman: ‘Do you see how Allah has punished her?... Would He let her get away with it? He knows everything. Is there a secret that is hidden from Him? How mighty is He? See what came to her, and how quickly, the whore...He would give her what she deserved so soon. The Lord is great, isn’t He?’…” (432) Social exclusion, restrictions, confinement and denial: In all the Muslim households, girls who came of age were not allowed to appear before strangers, especially men. I would like to quote the following lines from the novel to substantiate my point:

“… ‘Since she [Wahida] first menstruated, Zohra had threatened her saying, ‘Never ever come before men who are other than our family. If you see their faces, or they see yours, your face will lose its light and go dark.’ Because of that she had never come within sight of men outside the family, nor had she looked at them. When visitors came to the house, they always pressed the bell. On the instant she heard it, she would take to her heels and hide inside her room. It was not in this house alone that this happened. In every house in the village, girls who came of age ran and hid in exactly the same way...She had attended the Muslim girls’ madrasa and always went about wearing purdah’…” (112)

Girls who came of age were denied mobility. They were not allowed to cross the threshold of their house even to exchange a book from the library. Therefore,
Wahida and Farida sought the help of their little sisters, Rabia and Madina to exchange their books for them. Despite spending a lot of time in the big town, where Rahima had sent her daughter, Wahida to her maternal grandfather’s house to receive education, she “stayed at home most of the time” (51). In Wahida’s words:

“…. ‘we are allowed out only to go to school. Otherwise; it is exactly the same there as here. We have to stay within the confines of the house. I’ve come of age, haven’t I? If I were a little girl like you, I could go about as I pleased’…” (51)

Matrimonial obligations versus Kinship Ties: The denial of voice and personal choice are evident in the selection of marriage partners. Many young Muslim girls were married off to elderly men. Wahida was married to Sikander, who was fifteen years older to her. When her father, Kader voiced out his wife’s objections to the age difference between them, his brother Karim firmly held that Wahida should be married within the family. The reasons for arranging such an alliance were that the kinship ties shouldn’t be lost and the property should remain within the family. Girls and women had no say in these matters. Kader thought that it was “unnecessary” (68) to ask his wife, Rahima’s consent in the matter of their daughter’s marriage as by seeking her opinion he would be giving “too much importance” to her and “her judgement. If he began to make the arrangements right away, she would come to realize her opinion did not count that much…” (68)

Communal Violence and Stigmatised Communal Identity: In Ambai’s long story, “A Movement, a Folder, some Tears”, one gets an insight into the violence meted out upon Sakina’s family. She bears the burden of being a Muslim and not only loses her mother in the riots, but also bears deep imprints of violence in her psyche. The communal riots arouse a feeling of distrust and
suspicion in the minds of the people and Sakina being a representative of the Muslim community, has to bear this hatred from significant others. Her longing for acceptance and her assertion of a unified and nationalistic identity is conveyed through this story.

Sakina’s physical injury and burns that she sustained around her neck during the communal riots appeared lesser than the psychological trauma that she underwent.

“… ‘They’re here. They’ve come. They are throwing torches dipped in oil into the house,’ she began to scream as she ran about. A whole month passed during which she screamed and wailed and shouted. After that, gradually she quietened down…” (180)

Sakina bore the imprint of a stigmatised identity. She belonged to the class of innocent Muslims who had nothing to do with the disruption of national harmony. She felt deeply wronged and refused to wipe out the deeply etched anger from her psyche. Sakina confesses to her psychiatrist that her anger was what she wished to use, to fight against the injustice meted out to innocent Muslims like her.

“… ‘there is anger in my heart…That is my support. My strength. My anchor. Have you been told to remove the anger from the minds and hearts of those who have been caught in these riots, Doctor? Don’t do it. I’m going to keep this anger knotted up in my dupatta. I’m not going to scatter it away. I shall go about, hereafter, wrapped in it. Listening to it. Learning from it. I need that anger to help make sure it never happens again.’…” (180)
Sakina is both a victim and representative of communal hatred. Her very presence instills suspicion, distrust and anger in the minds and hearts of those very people who had once been very close to her. Her alienation is due to her communal identity. What appalls her is the transmission of communal hatred in the young minds. Even Bua’s three year old grandson was taught to exhibit violent behaviour against the Muslims.

“...the aunt’s three-year-old grandson was playing with dolls. A small sword and shield...these were his favourite toys. He sliced off the doll’s arms and legs with his sword. He struck a blow even in that shiny place where the doll had no organ...

‘It’s a Muchlim. I’ve killed it…’
‘Sakina Mausi also is a Muslim’
Still smiling, he stuck his toy-sword into your stomach…
‘Jai Cheeram’, he said…” (182)

Characters like Nargis Khala and Sakina were continuously striving for acceptance, not only as Muslims, but as patriotic Indian citizens. As Nargis Khala lamented:

“... ‘Broad views about life have shrunk into religions, and we have been turned into their symbols. They regard us as empty symbols. Symbols of a religion, a nation.’…” (194)

Sakina is rejected by Nandini, her best friend’s daughter, whom she has brought up as her own child. Nandini asks her to stay away from her mother, lest things become complicated for them. The trauma of her alienation is conveyed through the following lines:
“… ‘Sakina Mausi…Keep away from Amma and me for a while. I hold a responsible position. I don’t wish to be caught up in any kind of trouble’…When she was a child, she thought of Sakina’s Ammi and Khala as her grandmothers… Nandini made her swallow a block of granite…” (196)

The lack of acceptance from significant others and also from the people of her own community creates an emotional turmoil in her. When Sakina goes to address a gathering of Muslim women at a meeting in a women’s college, she is not accepted as a “true Muslim” (192) by them. She faces an identity crisis and feels shattered with this rejection.

“…When Sakina began to speak, the burqa-clad women rose up in a wave. They moved in on Sakina, shouting, “You are not a true Muslim. You don’t know the Koran. You don’t say your prayers. You are an enemy of Muslim women.”…Sakina became distressed, unable to move any further back. Her voice broke as she said, “I really am a Muslim. I have read the Koran. I know my prayers. Let me speak”…She was shattered. “This is going to be a huge battle… It begins with someone else giving me an identity.”…” (192-193)

Sakina strove to gain acceptance not only as a true Muslim, but also as a true Indian citizen in order to shed the garb of her stigmatised identity. She shared with Selvi an incident, whereby in a refugee camp, a young Muslim woman along with her two children, was carrying a tri-colour flag to proclaim and assert her identity as an Indian citizen. Hers was a collective struggle representing all those innocent Muslims who were viewed as traitors.

“… ‘The tri-colour flag was stuck in between her fingers and she was walking along, extending it in front of her. Like a protective shield. As if she were proclaiming, I too am a citizen of this country…Why has it become so necessary
for just a few of us to have to do this? My Khala was a freedom fighter. My Maamu heads many charitable institutions in this city. My Ammi retired from an administrative post in a school. She died a blackened corpse. My father was a high-ranking official. Here am I, walking about with a snake-neck. That girl might have come from a similar family. Or she might have been one of India’s many, many poor women. I couldn’t bear to see her stumbling along with her children, her bag and her tri-colour flag’…‘The time has come when I have to establish that my Khala was this, my Ammi was that, and so on and on…’…She was devastated by the thought that the actions of her family-performed naturally and as a matter of course-had to be presented now as her credentials… ‘My heart feels so heavy as if I’ve swallowed many stones’…” (195-196)

Sakina was unable to endure her alienation and rejection by loved ones. Above all, she found it hard to bear the burden of her stigmatised identity. She was heavily pressed by the burden of these oppressive thoughts and her foot slipped from the terrace and she died.

Communal disharmony is also mirrored through the attitude of Charu’s family, who exhibit fanatic feelings against the Muslims. Charu rebels against her own family and finds it hard to understand the surge of hatred. Her emotional turmoil is conveyed through the following lines:

“…How did this lake of poison come about? ….Several little incidents appeared in a new light, suddenly. No one asking after Sakina for many days….A sticker on Bapu’s car mirror…. ‘Say with pride, I am a Hindu.’ My sticker on top of that one, ‘Say with pride, we are human beings.’ Ba’s comment when I bought a green sari, ‘Why did you go for this Muslim-green?’ No longer buying bread from Mohammed Kaka’s shop as we have done for years….Small incidents, whose violence was striking, when added together. Each and every one had been a
drop of poison. It felt as if the kerosene I smelt in Kumudben Bua’s hand had pervaded our house…I did not have the strength to live with this day after day…” (190-191).

Sakina’s conflicts are also voiced out through her azaan or the dawn song, which portrays a variety of issues right from common, unified identity, to bias against girls, women and their empowerment. Her assertion of a collective Indian identity is mirrored through the following lines:

“...There were some among us who had grown up learning the poems of the poet Bharati, Iqbal’s lyric....We learnt to sing Tagore’s songs, ‘Ekla Chalo’ and ‘Amar janmabhumi’, making no discrimination against any language...We used to apply these words to our own country, and weep. Of course, there were other labels amongst us- as Marathi, Kannadiga, Tamil, Telugu, Punjabi, Assamese, and so on. But for us who grew up in the years following Independence, the country as a whole was the important thing…” (198)

Although it is difficult to make a generalisation about Muslim girls and women from the study of few books, yet we find that they face many gender barriers which seem to have their genesis in religious beliefs and ideology. The most striking dimension is the compulsion to develop a strong religious identity and a relational sense of self, both of which are mediated by the process of socialisation. Any assertion of free will or individualism are resisted by the community and treated as transgressions.

**DALIT WOMEN’S IDENTITY**

One gets a picture of Dalit identity from the works of Dalit women writers like Bama and P. Sivakami. Their writings highlight the role of caste, gender and
social class in influencing the identity development process in girls and women. They also identify the forms of discrimination that women encounter as their lived realities. The themes that have been particularly articulated are notions of purity and pollution, caste discrimination and bias; issues related to survival, double burden on women; their dehumanisation and vulnerability to exploitation and violence. There are allusions to pride in being Dalit, which have also been expressed. A detailed discussion of each of these themes has been attempted in the paragraphs that follow.

In Ambai’s story, “Journey 3”, caste boundaries, which prevent upper caste women’s access to performing religious rituals, are highlighted. Amma, who is an upper caste woman, wishes to perform a puja to appease the deity of the lower castes. She entrusts this responsibility to her maid servant, Marudayi, since she believes that Marudayi has the appropriate caste background.

“…Amma undertook all the preparations for the offering, but would never go to that temple herself. Marudayi interceded on their behalf and worshipped Mariamman who prevented diseases like small-pox. ‘She is their deity, you see’…Amma herself went to the temple of Kannika Parameswari…” (138)

The clear cut caste boundaries are also reflected through the demarcation of separate place for lower caste persons in the temple, where the ritual sacrifice took place. “That side” (140), as it is referred to by the owner Amma, was a forbidden place for the upper castes. She warns Marudayi not to take her daughter, Mythili, to “that side” (140). The following lines clearly reveal the caste discrimination.

“… ‘Marudayi you won’t take the child that side, will you,’ emphasizing ‘that side’…Apparently the other child, Minakshi, was at liberty to go to that side…That
side was a place to be relished. A place that aroused fear and excitement. A place where roosters, their screams rising and falling, or sheep calling out ‘me-e-e-e’ as they were dragged along, were sacrificed, skinned in an instant, and cooked…” (140)

The concept of purity and pollution is also reflected in Bama’s novel, “Sangati Events”, wherein one of the lower caste girls gets beaten for drinking water from the upper caste landlord’s well. Similarly, in P. Sivakami’s novel, “The grip of change”, when Thangam gets violently beaten by Udayar’s relatives, Kathamuthu gives a caste based dimension to the entire issue. He asks her to report to the police that she was being beaten for passing through the upper caste territory.

Class boundaries are reflected through the physiological difference between the upper class and lower class. In Ambai’s long story, “Black horse square”, Abhilasha experiences a sense of alienation when she comes to meet her mother-in-law, who belongs to the working class.

“…What struck Abhilasha were those arms, firm as paddy pounders. The hands rose, dark as cobra hoods, taking her attention away from the eyes, the face, the white hair…She gazed at those arms. Not able to accept them easily, naturally, her eyes were drawn again and again towards the swelling dark green veins. She was aware of her own alienation…” (128)

In P. Sivakami’s novel, “The grip of change”, the caste bias is mirrored through the personal humiliation experienced by the author. In the “Author’s Notes”, she talks about her stigmatisation on account of her caste. She is humiliated by being called a “Scheduled Caste bitch” (140) by one of the students.
Caste discrimination is also reflected in her exclusion and separation from the other children, when she had gone to attend her friend’s pubertal ceremonies. Her sense of humiliation is expressed through the following lines:

“…The novelist was one of the five lower caste students who were separated from the others when food was served. She found it difficult to eat…” (142)

On another occasion, the author faced humiliation when her classmate’s mother refused to lend her a half-sari since she belonged to the lower caste. The teacher’s remark asking the author to change her faded and frayed half-sari was not only an attack on her caste, but also on her social class. The pain of her experience is highlighted in the following lines.

“…She wore a faded blue dhavani… It had a few holes. But she wore it neatly, hiding them within the folds. However, the headmistress possessed eagle eyes. ‘Don’t you have another dhavani? You are the school pupil leader! Borrow a dhavani from someone else.’…” (161)

This caste based humiliation built up anger in her and ultimately gave her a stigmatised sense of identity. As a consequence, “…She ranted at her mother, ‘Your husband has the money to drink and sleep around with women, but he can’t spare some for a dhavani? He has fathered a house full of children, why can’t he die instead of putting us to such shame? I can’t even borrow a piece of cloth because of my caste! I want to kill myself!’…” (162)

The novel highlights yet another form of caste discrimination. The school authorities took a decision that, “Lower caste students should not be given roles in school plays…” (163) due to their usage of abusive language. The genesis of this lay in a strong prejudice that they held.
In “The grip of change”, Thangam is violently thrashed by her landlord, Udayar’s relatives for having developed a sexual liaison with him. The punishment meted out to her is consequent upon her transgression of the caste boundaries (this has been discussed in detail in the section on Embodiment). She comes to seek refuge in Kathamuthu’s house. When Gowri sees her condition, she wonders if she too would be subject to a similar fate as a lower caste woman. The caste dilemma finds expression through the following lines:

“…She kept stealing glances at Thangam. ‘I belong to the same caste as that woman. How can I be sure that I won’t be beaten black and blue like her?...This is real, terror is sleeping on a mat in my house.’ She felt revulsion for the society where such things could happen…” (14)

Although Gowri is able to escape from her oppressive home environment which keeps on reminding her about her exclusion as a lower caste person, yet despite her education and intelligence, she is unable to transcend the caste barrier. The following lines substantiate Gowri’s inability to escape her caste identity.

“…She blended among the many intelligent and attractive young women in the college, and it pleased her. During floods, waters from the overflowing wells mingle with the waters of huge water bodies, transgressing their boundaries. Gowri felt that she had crossed human-made boundaries-her father, her caste and her village-and merged with the ocean of people. But when the rain stops, the floods recede and thorn bushes emerge. Whenever she went back home for the holidays, caste revealed its murderous teeth like an invincible monster...Gowri, like many other students, felt ashamed to collect the scholarship application form for the scheduled caste students from the administrative office of the college. When an announcement was made in class that the scholarship money had arrived and that the SC students should sign and collect it at the
administrative office, she left the classroom with a few other students, their bodies shrinking in humiliation…” (95)

Even in her college, she is subject to caste humiliation by one of the students. The student’s proud exhibition of superiority over Gowri by virtue of her caste causes pain and humiliation to the latter. The following conversation substantiates this.

“… ‘One day when a student belonging to a backward caste returned after getting the scholarship money, Gowri asked her, ‘How much did you get?’
‘For you, it is different,’ the girl replied.
‘Aren’t you from a Scheduled caste?’ Gowri enquired doubtfully.
‘Nonsense! I am a Vanniyakula Kshatriya.’
‘If you are not from a Scheduled caste, just say so! Why do you have to prefix a ‘nonsense’? Shall I repeat to others what you told me?’
Gowri attempted to argue with her. But the girl left the scene throwing a contemptuous look at Gowri.
The event disturbed Gowri and she wondered how and when she had turned quarrelsome. The girl’s lack of reply and implied ridicule pained her…” (95)

In Bama’s novel, “Sangati Events”, the caste discrimination becomes a potent indicator of gender discrimination as well. As had already been mentioned in the beginning, women were discriminated on the basis of class, caste and gender. “Sangati Events” reiterates this discrimination in the form of economic inequality. Women received lesser wages than men irrespective of putting in the same kind of labour. Also, Bama has pointed out the double burden imposed upon women, which further vivifies the bias and discrimination. They had to work not only in the fields, but also at home. The ceaseless and backbreaking
household chores, in addition to their work in the fields added to their burden. This was part of their struggle for survival.

**Caste in relation to Work and Personal Relationships:** A significant aspect of Dalit identity that has been depicted is the powerlessness that Dalit women experience on account of the caste conflicts between the upper and lower castes. In P. Sivakami’s *The grip of change*, the picture that is presented is of caste conflicts across communities. When the people from the Parayar caste stop certain upper caste men from entering into Thangam’s house, the incident assumes monstrous proportions and becomes an ego attack. As a form of retaliation, the upper caste men decide to hire the women of the Chakkiliyar community to work in their fields at higher wages, thereby threatening the prospect of survival of the Parayar women.

“…No one from the upper caste street came to hire people for work in their fields. Only the Chakkiliyar women set out, their hair oiled and neatly combed. The Parayar women of the cheri had not been called… The Parayar women, who were usually called for such work, had risen early and cooked food for the morning and afternoon. They had expected to be called to plant the seedlings. Disappointed and annoyed at the sight of the Chakkili women proceeding to work, they complained to the old man Pichappillai… ‘…Yesterday they told us to be ready for work and today they ignore us!’… ‘It seems they are hiring workers from other villages for six and seven rupees instead of three. If they can pay double the amount for people from neighbouring villages, why couldn’t they have paid us a rupee or fifty paise more?’…” (51-52)

The caste conflicts also affected personal relationships. Lalitha, an upper caste girl was in love with Elangovan, a lower caste boy. The caste conflicts in the
community affected their relationship as well and led to several differences arising.

**Struggle for Survival:** Sivakami also portrays the struggle for survival, which Dalit women face in order to meet their basic needs. They had to stand in a long queue to collect water for their homes. This often led to quarrels among them.

In Bama’s collection of short stories, “Harum-scarum saar and other stories”, the struggle for survival is reflected through the double burden which the Dalit girls and women had to shoulder. The lives of these women were spent entirely in meeting their physiological needs. In one of her stories, “Rich girl”, Kaliyamma had no other option but to leave her small child under the care of her elder daughter, Ramayi, who herself was very young. She couldn’t afford to let go of her wages and therefore had to burden her daughter with the responsibility of sibling care. Ramayi was socialised to be a mother even before she was a wife.

Even Arayi’s case in “Freedom”, was quite similar to that of Ramayi. At the tender age of ten she had to undertake the responsibility of bringing up her younger brothers and sisters. One gets an insight into her life of hard labour, through her life of daily struggle.

“…She had worked in many different places for forty years before coming to this place...in Ayya’s house, apart from food she was paid a hundred rupees per month...Even at this age, Arayi was forced to work hard every day. If she ever rested for some time, Amma would get angry…(82)...From dawn to dusk, Arayi and Subramani had to do some work or the other, but Amma was never satisfied however hard they worked…From the time she woke up in the morning till the
minute she went to bed, Amma’s voice rang out continuously in the house…” (84)

Ponnuthayi, in the story “Ponnuthayi”, not only had to work hard in the fields, but at home as well. The ceaseless household chores, in addition to the childcare responsibilities added to her burden.

“…with four children born one after the other, filling even one belly proved difficult. She tried to make both ends meet. She got a milch cow, looked after it, looked after her children, worked in the fields, worked at home and was completely exhausted at the end of all that…” (64)

Many Dalit women’s lives were marked by the deprivation of adequate food and sleep. This has already been discussed in the section on Relational Self and Domesticated Existence.

In Ambai’s long story, “Black horse square”, the struggle for survival is reflected through the plight of the field labourers for whom the preservation of their land takes preponderance over their physical health. The story through the citation of one incident points out how a seventeen year old girl’s reproductive health was neglected due to survival compulsions. The girl came with septic abortion. She was made to work in the fields during the advanced stage of her pregnancy. She worked with the baby’s swollen hand coming out of her.

“…the girl had been working in the fields with that tiny swollen hand hanging from her…(142)…It was swollen blue and green with poison and pus…” (141)

In “Sangati Events”, Bama highlights the women’s struggles through their lived realities and experiences. These experiences although illustrative of their
hardships, also exhibited their capacity and multi tasking abilities. Bama lends a positive dimension to their struggles by exalting the hard work put in by these women. The Dalit writer also exalts the women’s survival instincts through their positive coping abilities. The negative dimension of the struggle is mirrored through the Dalit women’s vulnerability to mental illness.

Bama very vividly highlights the double burden of the girls and women through the following lines.

“…Many of the girls wake up at cock-crow and work in the match factory all day, so they go to sleep immediately after their evening kanji, or even without drinking it. There aren’t so many boys who go to work at the factories from our streets. In the old days, the little girls could be seen carrying babies around, and caring for them. Now, because they are always at work, the streets are full of two or three-year-olds, staggering about by themselves, or crawling like crabs…When their mothers return from work, they are picked up and carried around for a little while. After that the women have their work cut out, they cannot care for their children. As for the fathers, it never seems to strike them to carry the children around. They go off immediately to the shops and other meeting places, returning only to eat and to go to sleep. It’s the women who have to struggle with childcare and everything else. Yet how many jobs they are able to do simultaneously, spinning about like tops! Even machines can’t do as much…” (78)

She has also presented the negative consequences of women’s struggles, which makes them vulnerable to stresses and strains. Their psychological vulnerability manifested through their proneness to mental illness is owing to the double burden and the mundane existence and routine that they lead. Pathima, the narrator, acts as a spokesperson of Bama’s beliefs and gives a detailed explanation for this vulnerability.
“…only women- and Dalit women in particular-become possessed. And when I examined the lives of our women, I understood the reason. From the moment they wake up, they set to work both in their homes and in the fields. At home they are pestered by their husbands and children; in the fields there is back-breaking work besides the harassment of the landlord. When they come home in the evening, there is no time even to draw breath. And once they have collected water and firewood, cooked a kanji and fed their hungry husband and children, even then they can’t go to bed in peace and sleep until dawn. Night after night they must give in to their husbands’ pleasure. Even if a woman’s body is wracked with pain, the husband is bothered only with his own satisfaction. Women are overwhelmed and crushed by their own disgust, boredom and exhaustion, because of all this. The stronger ones somehow manage to survive all this. The ones who don’t have the mental strength are totally oppressed; they succumb to mental ill-health and act as if they are possessed by peys. Our men don’t have the same problem. Even if they work really hard, they still have their freedom. …” (58-59)

**Positive Coping:** In “Sangati Events”, Bama celebrates the strength of womanhood by highlighting their enormous coping abilities. Despite the hard work and daily struggles, these women never lost their sense of cheerfulness and mirth. Their self-created songs provided a creative outlet and enabled them to cope with their fatigue, hardships, monotony and the boredom of their everyday existence.

“…Even though they left at dawn and hardly ever came back until after dark, they still went about laughing and making a noise for the greater part… The women always sang songs and laughed like this, while weeding, transplanting rice, cutting the crops at harvest time, or doing anything else. They always teased each other through their songs…” (76-77)
Even the Dalit women’s abusive behavior was a way of coping with their frustrations. Bama exalts the coping abilities and the survival instincts of these women through the following lines:

“…by shouting and fighting first thing at dawn and last thing at night, if need be, our women survive without going crazy. If we are to live at all, we have to shout and shriek to keep ourselves sane. Upper-caste women though, keep it all suppressed: they can neither chew nor swallow. They lose their nerve, and many of them become unstable or mentally ill… our women have an abundant will to survive however hard they might have to struggle for their last breath….we find ways of coping in the best way we can…” (68)

**Dehumanisation, Exploitation and Vulnerability to Violence:** Violence becomes an integral part of a Dalit woman’s existence. In Bama’s novel, “Sangati Events”, it has been shown that a certain girl was punished brutally by her brother and father for falling in love with a boy of another caste. Inter-caste marriages were strictly forbidden to girls. The narrator describes the plight and the violence suffered by this girl through the following lines:

“…you should have seen the torment they put her through! It was enough to make one feel that not even in one’s wildest dreams should one think of men from different castes. So much they made her suffer. That girl was beaten up in her house every day by her father and her brother. And there weren’t light slaps that she was given, either…” (106)

A gruesome picture of physical violence emerges from the following lines:

“…The younger brother hit her on the ear so severely that her earring was smashed to smithereens. Another time he pulled her so hard by the chain she
wore around her neck that it came apart in pieces that he threw away like bits of string…the ear on which he rained blows swelled up on all sides and was bruised black and blue…Her forehead was broken and bruised, and blood poured over her face. While she was cowering, unable to bear the pain, he pulled her by the hair so roughly that it came off in bunches. He kicked her in the ribs again and again until she couldn’t even breathe. Her father…. brought a piece of firewood and aimed four blows at her…” (106-107)

Dalit women also had to endure violence, domination and exploitation at the hands of their husbands. Their husbands exerted their strength, pride and authority on their women’s bodies by subjecting them to violent beating. Even in P. Sivakami’s novel, “The grip of change”, the physical violence meted out upon Thangam’s body by the upper caste men left deep emotional scars on her psyche.

“…She could not recover easily from the troubles she had suffered. The shock of being dragged out by her hair in the middle of the night to be beaten up like an animal had affected her mind deeply. She would gasp awake at night at the slightest sound…” (87)

In Bama’s collection of short stories, “Harum-scarum saar and other stories”, one gets a grim picture of women’s exploitation through stories such as “Half-sari” and “Freedom”. In “Half-sari” one evinces the dehumanised treatment meted out to Chellakkili. Chellakkili’s father is lured by the landlord’s false promise of his daughter’s education, in return for her small services at his (the landlord’s) daughter’s home. However, eleven year old Chellakkili had to endure ill treatment and violent beatings at the landlady’s house. The following lines give us an insight into her dehumanised treatment and her violent death:
“...She was brought here on the pretext that she could study but she was not sent to school at all. She was made to work non-stop. That ten or twelve-year old child had to do all the household work, cleaning, cooking and what not! The smallest mistake, and her two sons would pull up her skirt and spank her bottom...She wouldn’t let that child step out of the house...She ordered her to prepare the rice-batter by three and went into town. It was past four when the child finished. Seems she was hit on her neck with a log of wood. One blow which landed in the wrong place and the child was lying there, writhing and thrashing about...When she started frothing at the mouth they got scared and took her to the doctor, but she died on the way...” (78)

In “Freedom”, one evinces Arayi’s dehumanised treatment through deprivation of sleep and rest. She was made to work day and night. Arayi’s self-confession and the teacher’s remarks throw light on her exploitative treatment.

“...can I keep working and working like a young girl all the time? This Amma doesn’t let me rest for a single second, doesn’t let me go out anywhere... The teacher was filled with sympathy. “Poor thing, even at this age she runs scared, toiling so hard to keep her belly filled!”...” (87)

The women also had to endure exploitation at the hands of the upper caste landlords. The fate of the Dalit woman is summed up in the following lines by the narrator in “Sangati Events”.

“...even if all women are slaves to men, our women really are the worst sufferers. It is not the same for women of other castes and communities. Our women cannot bear the torment of the upper-caste masters in the fields, and at home they cannot bear the violence of their husbands...” (65)
Dalit women’s helplessness to raise their voice against their upper-caste masters is steeped in their fear of provoking a caste riot.

The women are also silenced by their survival needs. Even though all the women present in the panchayat meeting are aware that Mariamma has been falsely slandered by the upper caste landlord, yet they remain quiet.

“… ‘The landowners get up to all sorts of evil in the fields. Can we bring them to justice, though? After all, we have to go crawling to them tomorrow and beg for work.’…” (25)

The women’s powerlessness on account of their caste is reflected by Vellaiyamma’s remarks. “…Even if a fellow assaults one of us, it’s difficult to stand up to him or make an enemy of him. Because in the end, we have to go to him for employment…” (105)

Dalit women are also coerced to endure sexual exploitation, lest they be subject to public humiliation and censure. They often had to bear the brunt of transgressions committed by others. When Paralokam’s breasts were squeezed by the landlord’s son on the pretext of helping her to lift the grass bundle, her grandmother advised her to keep quiet. As the grandmother points out:

“… “It’s my granddaughter who’ll be called a whore and punished. Whatever a man does, in the end the blame falls on the woman.”…” (26)

Pathima experiences anger at women’s devaluation and servile status. She feels that they have to endure oppression from all sides on account of their gender. Dalit women’s discrimination on account of their caste, class, gender and religion is revealed through the following lines:
“...The position of women is both painful and humiliating... In the fields they have to escape from upper-caste men’s molestations. At church they must lick the priest’s shoes and be his slaves while he threatens them with tales of God, Heaven and Hell. Even when they go to their own homes, before they have had a choice to cook some kanji or lie down and rest a little, they have to submit themselves to their husbands’ torment...” (35)

Another theme which finds articulation is the Dalit woman’s body being an easy conquest for upper caste men. In P. Sivakami’s novel, “The grip of change”, one evinces Thangam’s rape at the hands of her landlord. When Udayar sees Thangam working in his fields, he is blinded by feelings of lust. That the Dalit woman’s honour was of no importance is revealed by Udayar’s thoughts and feelings:

“...She was his servant. Besides, Thangam was no princess or minister’s daughter...she did not even have a husband. There would not be a soul to rescue her if he imposed himself on her. Moreover, she was only a lower caste labourer...” (32)

A Dalit woman’s vulnerability to sexual exploitation is not only on account of her caste, but also her single status. Thangam was left with no option but to yield to Udayar’s lust. Her helplessness and vulnerability is conveyed through the following lines:

“...Though she had spent her three years of widowhood untouched by a man, she hated succumbing to the loathsome old man’s lust. She sobbed with anger sitting in the field. Thereafter, he made it a routine to have sex with her and slake his lust whenever possible...She no longer resisted him. There was no choice. Udayar would give her twenty-five or thirty rupees each time...” (33-34)
Her powerlessness is also conveyed through her confession before Kathamuthu.

“…I didn’t want it. But Udayar took no notice of me. He raped me when I was working in his sugarcane field. I remained silent, after all, he is my paymaster…” (7)

Even in the “Author’s notes”, Sivakami talks about her aunt’s molestation at the hands of the landlord- “…‘That old Gounder tried to lock me in the cattle shed. I pushed him with all my strength and came out shouting “Old rascal!”…In those days Gounders got away with such cruelty.’…” (155)

Her exploitation is not only on account of her caste, but also gender. Thangam’s single status makes her an object of Kathamuthu’s lust. Although he acts as her savior and tries his level best to grant her justice, yet he does not shirk from taking advantage of her sexually, despite all her pleading.

Thangam’s plea for protection as a single woman is reflected through her desire to escape from the sexual advances made by her brothers-in-law. They also deny her a share in her husband’s land and try to exploit her sexually.

Another aspect that has been highlighted by Bama, is the fact that Dalit women’s powerlessness stems from their ignorance of voting rights. These women are tutored by their husbands in the voting process. Their ignorance and indifference is also exhibited through their stamping of either all the pictures, or the one which appealed to them the most. As Vellaiyamma and other women pointed out:

“…‘I went and stamped all the pictures there like a blind old bat… I stamped the picture of the man ploughing…it’s only because of the plough and bullock that
our stomachs are going to be filled. Without them our lives are nothing but dust.’…” (98-99)

Their survival needs leave them with no time and energy to ponder over larger issues. They voice out their collective indifference through the following lines:

“… ‘as if my vote alone is going to make such a difference! How does it actually matter, whether we even vote or not? Who’s going to change the writing on our foreheads? All that happens is that we lose a day’s work because of this voting business’…” (98)

Thus, the Dalit women were alienated on account of their caste and gender. Despite the hardships that these women had to face, Dalit writers like Bama and P. Sivakami exalt the courage, never say die spirit, multitasking abilities and positive coping of these women.

**AUTONOMY, EMPOWERMENT AND POSITIVE IMAGES OF DALIT WOMANHOOD**

Despite the double burden of field work, household chores and child care, Dalit women exhibit strong multi-tasking abilities and a strong sense of courage and fortitude as well.

For instance, Bama takes pride in her identity as a Dalit and extols the freedom and advantages which are solely enjoyed by Dalit women. Her characters act as spokespersons of her beliefs. They take pride in their freedom and financial independence, as compared to the upper caste women.
“...They [the upper caste women] themselves lead lives shut up inside their houses, eating, gossiping and doing their husbands’ bidding...God knows how they stay shut up within four walls, all twenty-four hours of the day...at least our women work hard and earn their own money, and have a few coins in their hands. They don't hold out their palms to their husbands for every little expense, like those others...” (66)

The women’s assertion of equal status with the men and their pride in multitasking is revealed through the following lines:

“...We work just as hard as they do. Why, you could even say we actually work harder. Ask them to do all that we do in a day- care for the children, look after the house, and do all the chores. They'll collapse after a single day of it... It is we who must uphold our rights. We must stand up for ourselves and declare that we too are human beings...” (66)

Dalit women’s pride in their identity is also revealed through their assertion of voice and demand for equality. They point out that while the upper caste women “submit” (67) to their husbands' authority and orders as they are financially dependent on them, there exist no such compulsions for Dalit women. Due to their financial autonomy, they enjoy equal rights at par with their men and therefore, they quarrel with them openly.

“...in our streets, men and women both go out and earn. Most of the men, though, never give their wages to their women. It is the woman who looks after everything in the house...why must she submit to being beaten and stamped upon for no rhyme or reason? That’s why she quarrels with him. If he shows his strength of muscle, she reveals the sharpness of her tongue...” (67)
The other aspect which leads them to revel in their identity is the pride that they take in their appearance. They feel that despite being dark, their children have sharp features as opposed to the upper caste children who only have a fair complexion.

“…‘even if our children are dark-skinned, their features are good and there’s a liveliness about them. Black is strongest and best, like a diamond…they might have light-skins…Their features are all crooked and all over the place, inside out and upside down. If they had our colour as well, not even a donkey would turn and look at them’…” (114)

Women also extol their gender fair customs. For instance, while the birth of a girl child is not celebrated in many communities, including the upper castes, in the Dalit community all children are equally accepted, irrespective of their gender.

“…‘In other streets they grieve if a girl is born, as if it’s a funeral or something. Because they have to give big dowries and bear all the cost when they get a girl married. They say a girl means expense and a boy means income. In some places…if a girl is born, the cruel parents will even kill the infant without any mercy or compassion’…‘At least we don’t have such customs…Whether it’s a boy or a girl, parents in our community accept the child and bring it up as best as they can. When they are grown up, both sexes go to work and earn a livelihood. So why should boys be valued more?’…” (115)

The claim of the Dalit community being free from gender bias and prejudices appears to be the author’s opinion, as we evince the double burden imposed upon girls and women and also the preferential treatment accorded to sons by Pathima’s grandmother, who offered her grandsons the best pieces of fruits, relegating the stones and seeds to the granddaughters.
Dalit identity is also extolled with respect to greater freedom of choice accorded to women to remarry. Dalit women of the Pallar and Chakkili community had the freedom to dissolve their marriage and remarry without fear or criticism. On the other hand, the upper caste women did not have the flexibility to remarry. It was mandatory for them to spend their entire life with their husbands out of their relational cum marital obligations and fear of ostracism. Dalit women also had the freedom to go to the burial ground.

The non-existence of customs, such as dowry amongst the Dalit community enables them to take pride in their identity. Unlike the upper castes, who bear the heavy financial burden for their daughter’s marriage, the Dalits manage with whatever they have. It is the groom’s family who has to pay the bride price (‘parisam’ (89)). As has been pointed out through the following lines:

“… In our streets, there is no snatching and grabbing in the name of dowry and such-like. People make do with whatever they have. Instead of the woman bringing dowry at the time of marriage, in our case, the man gives a parisam, a bride price…” (89)

This point has been substantiated a little later by one of the characters.

“… ‘We give the girls what we can afford-earrings and nose rings-and leave it at that. The groom’s family will see to all the wedding expenses. We don’t have to give any money. It’s the groom who gives a cash gift and takes her away and marries her’…” (112)

Bama exalts the identity of Dalit women by providing a justification for their loud, abusive quarrels and behaviour as well. Their bickerings are a medium through which they give vent to their frustrations and bitterness.
“…When they come home after an arduous day’s toil, there is only more and unending work. From all sides they have to deal with the pestering of children and the anger and unfair domination of their husbands. Their lives are unceasingly tedious. When they are so frustrated by all this, they are driven to venting their bitterness by quarrelling and shouting. When you examine the words they use in their quarrels, you will notice they are full of obscenities, very direct and ugly, often dealing with sexual relations. No matter what the quarrel is about, once they open their mouths, the same four-letter words will spill out…because they have neither pleasure nor fulfillment in their own sexual lives, they derive a sort of bitter comfort by using these terms of abuse which are actually names of their body parts…” (68)

Even in Ambai’s story, “Journey 3”, Marudayi does not feel the slightest compunction in using abusive language before the children. While watching the movie, she openly abuses the vamp: “…‘Look at the way the slut is showing her teeth. Her mouth is wide and her cunt is wide’…” (143)

The most important feature about their usage of abusive language is their internalisation of male authority, dominance and superiority, for when they are quarrelling with another women, they unhesitatingly address her as “my husband’s whore” (68). By doing so, “she gets some sort of satisfaction by suggesting that her husband has controlled that other woman… sexually…” (68). This kind of an address is also an acknowledgement of their “own helplessness” (68). As Bama has pointed out: “…it is the man’s maleness and power that takes precedence. A woman’s body, mind, feelings, words and deeds, and her entire life are all under his control and domination. And we too have accepted what they want us to believe—that this is actually the right way, that our happiness lies in being enslaved to men…” (68)
Thus, Caste identity encompasses in its fold the lived realities of women from the economically weaker sections of society. Their multiplicity of experiences gives a holistic dimension to issues related to identity development. Their nature of struggles is quite different from those of the upper caste women. The lower caste women not only have to grapple with issues related to the domestic front, but also have to struggle hard to cope with the survival and economic issues. Their sexual stakes are quite high in the work front. Childhood and girlhood as phases of life are conspicuous by their absence and the concept of motherhood as endless time spent with one’s children is a luxury.

Communal identity, on the other hand gives an insight into a set of traditions and religious practices which govern the life of women characters. The development of traits such as self-effacement and negation of individual desires is entirely guided by religious prescriptions. However, apart from the fanatic feelings reinforced by the communal and religious identity, is the assertion of a collective unified identity to overcome the stigma of communal identity. A larger humanitarian goal is asserted through this claim, which aims to break the fetters of communalism.