

Reverberations of Caste & Gender in Select Novels of Contemporary Literature

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Abstract: This paper attempts a comparative study of the novels *Pyre* by Perumal Murugan and *Sangati* by Bama in terms of Caste and Gender Oppression found in rural India. It aims at bringing out the nature of the two extreme ends of an Oppressive society.

Pyre is an insightful narrative to be analysed on the basis of inter- caste marriage and its brutalities in a casteist society. The reverberations of honour killings are echoed in a reverse perspective. Tragic realism is a tool used in analysing this novel. *Sangati* is a plural narrative focusing on the lives of women in the society and the harsh realities they endure both within their caste, and overarching hierarchical structure of the society. The concept of Double Oppression is highly vital in analysing this text.

This study helps to identify the power structure of a casteist society and the dynamics of realities that are mirrored in fictional narratives, thereby bringing out the similarities and differences found between them in detail. Both the texts can be identified as a form of Protest Literature, that addresses social issues and advocates for a change in the society.

Bama's *Sangati* presents a collective narrative that centers on the double oppression faced by the lower-caste women both within and outside their society. As Indian sociologist, Sharmila Rege quotes in her book,

Writing on Faustina Bama's testimonio, Pandian argues that dalit life narratives violated genre boundaries by depleting the "I" - an outcome of bourgeois individualism- and by displacing it with the collectivity of the dalit community (Pandian 1998). Dalit life narratives are testimonios acts testifying or bearing witness legally or religiously. (Rege 24)

Sangati is a collective narrative that subverts the emphasis on "I" and prioritizes the collective experience of the dalit community. On a superficial level it appears that the lower caste struggles are generalized to include both men and women. However, Bama's novel gives a nuanced analysis of how caste oppression and gender discrimination constitute two distinct levels of oppression that the *pariah* (oppressed community) women encounter daily. The novel culminates in a powerful call to action, compelling readers to confront and challenge the entrenched misconceptions and systemic gender-based oppression pervasive in society.

Perumal Murugan's *Pyre* presents an eccentric narrative that highlights how a woman from a different caste or class is treated in another community. Although Murugan doesn't explicitly mention the castes of central characters Kumaresan and Saroja, the young couple in the novel, the narrative suggests that Kumaresan belongs to a vulnerable background, belonging to Kaanakadu village, where residents live near graveyards, marking the societal margins. Saroja, an innocent young woman, elopes with Kumaresan, driven by blind love and affection. She comes from a semi-urban area, having experienced modest luxuries like radio, rice meals, and glimpses of city life in her daily routine.

Both novels explore two interconnected levels of oppression, one is gender-based violence and another is caste discrimination. The female characters face gendered violence, while the narratives also expose the tensions and conflicts arising from caste discrimination, highlighting the complex intersections between patriarchy and caste hierarchy.

In her novel *Sangati*, Bama writes in the preface, "Dalit women, oppressed and ruled by patriarchy, government, caste, and religion, must break free from societal strictures to survive" (Bama vii). This highlights the necessity of resistance against patriarchal, caste-based, and religious strictures, for the dalit women's survival in the society.

It is observed in the novel *Pyre* that the psychological time of the central character Saroja plays a vital role in taking forward the narrative. There is more tension on Saroja's part with every

passing minute in the village “Kanakaadu”. She is unaware of even the Goddess Kooli’s physical features and imagines a picture of a female God with her tongue protruding outside. Saroja fears even to praise Kooli due to the image on her mind. This is a vital technique that Perumal Murugan uses in order to foreshadow the traumatic experiences that she is yet to witness by her mother-in-law Marayi. Often in dalit fiction women empowerment is portrayed from the perspective of women supporting the fellow women of their society whether they belong to the upper caste or the lower caste. Whereas in this novel *Pyre* it is the woman (Marayi- mother-in-law) who tries to suppress another woman (Saroja - daughter-in-law) who enters the family. Marayi is unhappy that her son had bought a fair skinned girl, who supposedly belonged to the Upper caste. Marayi’s intolerance towards Saroja is a depiction of gendered violence that is exercised from women to women.

This similarity is found in *Sangati* as well. Though there are examples of women empowerment and unity in the novel *Sangati*, there are instances of women who are demeaning the fellow women in the society. Women who pull out other women with insinuating remarks. This shows that the position of women in the pariah community is always secondary.

The tension in the novel *Pyre* erupts with the wedding of Kumaresan and Saroja, a union that challenges caste boundaries. Kumaresan’s family reacts violently to his marriage, despite having daughters themselves who could have been potential brides, his maternal uncles reject the idea of their daughters marrying Kumaresan, and further object to his union with Saroja, a woman from a different caste. This opposition heightens when Kumaresan and Saroja attend a relative’s puberty function, where they are met with physical violence and public humiliation. This bitterness mirrors Kumaresan’s maternal grandfather’s reaction during their visit to their ancestral home. Throughout the novel, Kumaresan’s family and community exert rigid control over marriage choices, culminating in a tragic climax that threatens Saroja's life in an honour killing.

In the novel *Sangati*, a young woman Esaki's love affair with a Vannan caste member ends in tragedy, as she is killed while pregnant, highlighting the rigid caste boundaries that prohibit marriages below one’s caste threshold. The gruesome detail of her pregnancy underscores the brutality of caste violence. In *Sangati*, caste significantly impacts Mariammal’s life, illustrating its destructive power. Mariammal being a powerless female is firstly molested by an upper caste man, later when she tries to resist him, Mariammal is being framed for being immoral and having an

affair with a young boy. Mariammal being the elder daughter taking care of her motherless siblings is thrashed by her drunkard father after this incident is taken to the panchayat. Through the character of Mariammal, Bama highlights the societal injustice where women are often blamed and suffer for the mistakes made by men. The above mentioned instances are repeatedly found at various instances in different forms to different individuals. As Sylvia et al, states “Repetition means an accumulation of harm in high-frequency victims, who are disproportionately women.” (38). The Lower-caste women encounter this gender based violence repeatedly that takes a psychological turn upon them in the long run. They often express frustration and resentment towards their husbands in quarrels, hinting at the distress they experience in their sexual relationships. Weddings in upper-caste families are lavish affairs, with catered meals and elaborate jewelry, whereas lower-caste weddings burden women with extensive preparations and domestic work while the men enjoy having a restful day. In lower-caste families, bride price is practiced, whereas upper-caste weddings involve dowry. Even in mourning, gender roles persist. It is the women who lament and cry dirges, while men maintain distance. Either a wedding or a funeral is the woman who is being burdened, whereas men most of the time earn and spend it on alcohol.

In *Pyre*, Saroja faces objectification and sexual predation, highlighting the hypocrisy of Kumaresan’s community. Despite rejecting Kumaresan’s marriage, the men of his caste persistently pursue Saroja, making suggestive comments and attempting to satisfy their sexual desires. This is exemplified when Podhaaru compares her to a cow, “‘You look like a porter,’ Saroja said, looking for a distraction and trying to shake away the memory of Podhaaru’s hook-like gaze. He had called her a cow, and he had stared at her just as though he was examining the animal at the country fair.” (Murugan 13). The community’s obsession with Saroja’s body raises questions about the notion of “purity” they claim to protect. Paradoxically, their desire to kill Saroja to maintain caste purity is preceded by attempts to exploit her sexually, making their own bodies “impure”. This contradiction exposes the patriarchal motivations behind their actions, revealing that their concern lies not with preserving purity, but asserting control over women’s bodies.

In the pariah community, patriarchal norms prevail, permitting men to pursue extramarital relationships with impunity. Following a wife’s death, men are free to pursue mistresses without social repercussions. Within marriages, men’s infidelity is often tolerated, while women are

expected to remain silent. Men may sporadically visit their wives, primarily seeking financial support and sexual gratification. Furthermore, polygyny is practiced among lower-caste men, who may take second wives without facing significant social censure. If this is being questioned by a woman then she is faced with thrashing and verbal abuses by her faithless husband, which represents the fragile position a pariah woman occupies in the society.

A striking parallel exists between the characters of Vellaiyamma Kizhavi in Bama's *Sangati* and Marayi in Perumal Murugan's *Pyre*. Both women exhibit remarkable resilience, having navigated life independently from a young age, without marital support. Despite facing immense hardships, they maintain unwavering self-control and agency. Notably, both characters share a common experience, they lost their virginity solely to their husbands, underscoring their adherence to societal norms. However, their husbands' absence profoundly affects them, leading to feelings of emotional desolation and existential crisis, as if they have become "corpses" without their partners. Widowhood is something that is glorified and accepted in the lower caste through these characters in these novels. As Simone de Beauvoir rightly states,

Sometimes the 'feminine world' is contrasted with the masculine universe, but we must insist again that women have never constituted a closed and independent society: they form an integral part of the group, which is governed by males and in which they have a subordinate place. (567)

The feminine world in which the female characters exist is ruled by men. Their world is governed by the rules and regulations imposed by men irrelevant of their class and caste disparities. Lower-caste women, particularly those from the Chakili and Pallar castes, face well defined societal norms. Unlike higher-caste women, they are not expected to wear white saris or relinquish jewelry after their husbands' deaths, as these symbols of marital status hold little significance for them. The thali (mangalsutra) also carries minimal importance. In contrast to Biblical dictates prohibiting remarriage for Pariah women while their first husbands are alive, Chakili and Pallar women can exercise the option of divorce and remarriage. However, Pariah women face severe restrictions. Priests reinforce patriarchal norms through frightening narratives, discouraging them from seeking divorce or separation. If a Pariah woman attempts to leave her husband, she risks

physical abuse and societal pressure to reconcile. Even Hindu women, who technically have access to divorce, face stigma and harassment as divorcees.

In both *Pyre* and *Sangati*, the lower-caste society is portrayed as a hardworking class, engaging in manual labor to meet their community's expectations. They strive to earn a living through demanding work, reflecting their resilience. Notably, *Pyre* presents a pre-capitalist setting, where Kumaresan works in a small soda shop with a relatively generous owner. Instances of care and support for Kumaresan, even when injured, highlight a subsistence economy prioritizing basic needs and community relationships over profit. This allows for a modest rate of survival through minimalistic jobs and earnings, contrasting with exploitative capitalist systems. The novels shed light on the struggles and dignity of lower-caste labor, challenging dominant narratives and amplifying marginalized voices.

In *Sangati* the capitalist society depicted in the novel, lower-caste workers are exploited and discarded when injured or no longer needed. They are viewed as mere tools or instruments for productivity, rather than human beings worthy of care and dignity. The casteist system prioritizes resource conservation over human well-being, leading to brutal suppression of lower-caste children who accidentally waste or consume raw materials during work. Instances of intentional poisoning through contaminated food have been recorded. Upper-caste individuals restrict lower-caste people from utilizing even basic resources, such as collecting cow dung from their cowsheds, highlighting the extreme social and economic disparities. The novel *Sangati* illustrates these dynamics through characters like Vellaiyamma Kizhavi, who is referred to as Kothachi (a slave), and Maikanni, who face violence and humiliation for trivial reasons, including misuse of factory materials and using washrooms. A stark gender-based wage disparity exists, with women receiving lower compensation than men for equivalent work. This underscores the devaluation of women's labor and perpetuates systemic oppression. Female bodies, particularly those of lower-caste women, are subjected to exploitation, torture, and disregard, reinforcing patriarchal and casteist power structures.

In *Pyre*, women express their emotional turmoil through various coping mechanisms. Marayi, Kumaresan's mother, is devastated by her son's inter-caste marriage to Saroja, and channels her grief into singing dirges (Oppari), lamenting her perceived failures in raising him. These mournful songs serve as an emotional release, conveying her deep sadness and

disappointment. Conversely, Saroja, struggling with physical and emotional weakness, frequently faints, overwhelmed by her circumstances. Both women find solace in tears, with crying becoming a shared coping mechanism to navigate life's challenges. Through Marayi's Oppari and Saroja's fragile resilience, the novel highlights the emotional labor and vulnerability of women in marginalized communities, underscoring the significance of expressive outlets for processing pain and hardship.

The novel *Sangati* highlights the disparate experiences of upper-caste and lower-caste women regarding supernatural possession. Lower-caste women, frequently exposed to isolated environments while collecting wood or working on landowners' fields, are more vulnerable to superstitions and possession by malevolent spirits called "Pei". In contrast, upper-caste women, confined within domestic spaces, are shielded from these experiences. However, they suffer from restrictive social norms, financial dependence, and emotional suppression. Upper-caste women's autonomy is severely curtailed, with limited freedom of movement and decision-making.

Conversely, lower-caste women, who contribute financially, assert agency and question their husbands, leading to domestic conflicts. Economic empowerment enables them to challenge patriarchal norms. The text suggests that lower-caste women's experiences of fear, frustration, and mental exhaustion make them more susceptible to supernatural possession. This phenomenon serves as a coping mechanism, providing an outlet for their emotions.

In this patriarchal society, entertainment is largely reserved for men, while women face restrictions and societal norms limiting their access to leisure activities, such as cinema. Women's mobility and autonomy are curtailed due to pervasive fears of sexual violence, harassment, and molestation. Even mundane tasks like commuting to work or seeking entertainment become fraught with risk. This scenario is applicable in both the novels that are taken for study.

"Nevertheless, the twin pillars that sustain the caste system are firstly, subordination of women and secondly, its capacity to reinvent itself in changing social formations in the service of the powerful and the dominant." (Jaiswal 21). Jaiswal's quote is evident in the novel *Sangati* that highlights the exploitative nature of patriarchal society, where women bear the triple burden of, Physical labor: working in fields until full-term pregnancy, Domestic responsibilities: caring for children and husbands without support, Emotional labor: satisfying husbands' physical desires. Women's bodies are reduced to mere entities for reproduction and labor, disregarding their well-

being. The consequences include frequent childbearing leading to maternal mortality, malnutrition and lack of proper sanitation, forced sterilization without consent, early marriage and exploitation of teenage girls.

In *Pyre*, Jaiswal's insight highlights Saroja's silenced struggles within Kumaresan's village and household. Despite facing hardship, Saroja remains voiceless, relegated to a submissive role, with Kumaresan dominating the relationship. Her struggles are obscured by the love and affection she receives from Kumaresan, rendering her powerless. The couple's romantic connection leads to pregnancy, but ultimately, Saroja bears the disproportionate burden of suffering, fleeing for her life. This stark imbalance exposes the illusion of equality in their relationship, revealing the entrenched patriarchy. While love blinds Saroja to her voicelessness, the novel critiques the uneven distribution of power and consequences in marginalized relationships.

The loss of childhood of a woman could be analysed more in the novel *Sangati*. The Upper castes exhibit higher rates of female infanticide, reflecting a strong preference for male children. In contrast, lower castes demonstrate a unique cultural practice, Odd-numbered children are preferred to be female, Even-numbered children are preferred to be male. This distinction highlights Caste-specific attitudes toward gender and family planning & Intersectional dynamics influencing reproductive choices.

Even within the Pariah community, children attending school face ridicule. Girls are often withdrawn from education upon reaching puberty, they are encouraged to earn and save money. Gender disparities persist since childhood. The male children receive preferential treatment e.g., Paati (Grandmother) giving best fruits to boys. The female children are expected to care for families and siblings after their mother's death, this in turn affects the girls' health, suffers due to neglect and malnutrition e.g., Mariammal's anemia at the age of sixteen and not coming of age. Lower-caste girls bear familial burdens; they are expected to support families from a young age. Maikanni and Mariammal are standing examples of carrying the family burdens right from their childhood. There is an early onset of gender disparities and long term health effects on girl children.

Childhood socialization reinforces gender roles. Games that the children play replicate societal expectations, future attitudes and behaviors that are shaped by early experiences. These gender-based disparities emerge in infancy. For example, when boy babies cry their mothers are

held accountable. Whereas girl babies are neglected right from their infancy, they are ignored even when they are hungry and scream for milk. These gender disparities continue into childhood as well, the instances of boys claiming window seats pushing the girls aside perpetuate patriarchal norms and normalize violence against girls and women. The priority always falls on the male side.

Girl children face heightened vulnerability, they are denied a carefree childhood. Instead, they find joy in simple pleasures like dressing up in cast off clothes from upper-caste women, adorning their hair with garlands, singing songs while working in fields. These transient joys in their lives underscores the limited agency and autonomy they have as individuals.

In *Pyre* and *Sangati*, panchayats play a pivotal role in reflecting societal pressures on individuals, particularly in matters of law and social justice. In *Pyre*, Kumaresan's personal choice of marrying Saroja, a woman from a different caste, is scrutinized by the panchayat, highlighting the tension between individual autonomy and communal expectations. Kumaresan faces ridicule, questioning, and threats, with the panchayat ordering his family's social ostracism, prohibiting interactions with fellow villagers. This intensifies Marayi's resolve to expel Saroja from the household, ultimately sealing her brutal fate, an honour killing in an unknown land. The panchayat's interference underscores the dangerous convergence of patriarchal and caste-based power structures, perpetuating violence against women and marginalized communities.

In *Sangati* the words of lower-caste individuals are often disbelieved, particularly when it comes to women. Upper-caste men fabricate stories to protect their reputation, while lower-caste women's testimonies are disregarded. Even lower-caste headmen prioritize upper-caste perspectives, rushing to judgment without considering the woman's side. They ignore lower-caste women's accounts, accuse her of lying and silence women to avoid conflict between the upper caste and lower caste in order to maintain social order. By doing this the lower caste men protect their own interests such as safeguarding their jobs in landowners' fields. Women face exclusion from panchayat meetings on frivolous grounds as in "Disturbing discussions" with their presence & laughing or talking during proceedings. When women assert themselves, they're slandered, female empowerment is met with misogynistic labeling of women as "whore".

The village setup in both the novels imposes stringent norms on women, governing every aspect of their lives. They must speak softly, laugh quietly, and walk with bowed heads, suppressing their emotions and autonomy. Elderly women, despite their life experience, are denied

respect and dignity. Rules dictate their behavior, even in private moments, such as eating, where they must prioritize their husbands' needs over their own. Women are expected to conform to traditional expectations, relinquishing their individuality and agency, perpetuating a culture of oppression and silence. In *Pyre*, Saroja's experiences illustrate the pervasive moral policing of women's appearance and behaviour. Marayi criticises Saroja for wearing powder, flowers, and basic jewelry, accusing her of prioritizing vanity over household duties. This scrutiny reflects the societal expectation that women should focus on domestic responsibilities rather than personal adornment. Moreover, Marayi's disapproval demonstrates how women within the same societal structure often perpetuate patriarchal norms, policing each other's behavior and reinforcing gender roles. This intra-gender judgment underscores the internalized oppression that perpetuates women's subjugation, highlighting the need to challenge and dismantle these harmful social norms.

As Jakobsen says, "It is because of the belief that a man must either control the household or lose his man-role to the woman, and that such a role reversal is an ever-impending disaster, that beating seems necessary." (Jakobsen 550). The instances in *Sangati* where women are horrifically beaten to death by their husbands for not satisfying their sexual expectations, with men justifying this violence by claiming, "She's my wife; I can beat her or even kill her if I want." (Bama 10). This mindset perpetuates utter control over women's bodies. However, men shirk their responsibilities, leaving women solely responsible for feeding and caring for their children. Even when it comes to marrying off their daughters, men view it as a burden to be offloaded, seeking to "get rid" of them through forced marriages.

Furthermore, gender-based double standards are pronounced in lower-caste communities, where boys marrying outside the caste are accepted, but girls are not accepted. Women face violence for inter-caste relationships, even from their younger brothers. Alarmingly, nobody intervenes when boys beat their elder sisters, highlighting the entrenched patriarchy. This culture of entitlement and oppression must be addressed through awareness, education, and policy changes to protect women's rights and promote gender equality.

In *Pyre*, Kumaresan's inter-caste marriage to Saroja sparks unrelenting hostility. While Kumaresan navigates in his own village with ease, Saroja faces relentless struggle, grappling with internal turmoil and external animosity. Her distress deepens due to her family's indifference and

absence. Without Kumaresan's presence, she feels abandoned and helpless in Kanakaadu. Unlike the women in *Sangati*, who endure physical violence, Saroja suffers psychological torment, piercing gazes, cutting words, and suffocating fear. This highlights her precarious transition from a relatively secure environment to a treacherous one, where her safety and survival hang in the balance.

Thus the paper identifies the power structure of a casteist society and the dynamics of realities that are mirrored in fictional narratives, of *Pyre* by Perumal Murugan & *Sangati* by Bama.

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