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## **Caste and Masculinity: The Complexity of Gender Dynamics among Different Communities in Tamil Karisal Literature**

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### **Abstract**

The conceptualisation of masculinity in the traditional sense has been viewed as a complex mix of attitudes, behaviours, and abilities (powers) possessed by diverse groups of individuals. It is supposed that neither these sets nor the individuals who compose them have remained consistent across time and among societies. In this paper, I will be exploring the varying degrees of masculinity that is exhibited by men of different communities portrayed in Tamil Karisal literature. Gender relations are also defined along the lines of Caste and status. 'Karisal' meaning 'black soil' encompasses the arid regions of Southern Tamil Nadu and Karisal literature depicts the lives of the people living in such regions. Traditional traits of masculinity such as being valiant, dominant, and knowledgeable is more expected from the upper caste men whereas such traits are not encouraged among men belonging to the marginalised sections of the rural Karisal landscape. This paper will also look at how gender relations exist between the men and women of both dominant and lower castes in the Karisal region. It can also be noted how virtues associated with femineity such as chastity, subordination and obedience are expected from upper caste women who do not cross household boundaries but Dalit women, out of economic necessities, are made to work as agricultural labourers in the fields and are prone to being harassed by men of all castes. For this study, the texts for analysis are short stories from *Along with the Sun* (2020) compiled by Ki. Rajanarayanan and the novel *Koogai* (2015) written by Cho Dharman.

**Keywords:** Gender Dynamics, Caste, Masculinity, Karisal, Dalit.

### **Introduction**

Caste is an archaic feudal practice that has found its way to modernity. The Caste system, at present, has adopted itself to varying degrees where it directly or indirectly influences the interactions and relationships among people of different communities. Though being stated as a thing of the past in many urban centres in the country, decisions such as the places where people choose to live in, their culinary or dietary choices and even the broader decisions such as choosing life partners (mostly in arrange marriage contexts) are decided based on the direct or indirect influences of Caste. In modern India which is considered to be the world's largest democracy, the caste system has been used as an electoral magnet for amassing people as vote banks for political parties. There is a constant contestation among various castes to negotiate their place in the social hierarchy. This is done by voting leaders who represent their community interests to power. This system works to varying degrees at different states in the

country. At Tamil Nadu, where I will be basing this paper on, caste being utilised as a tool is political mobilisation started as back as the 1980s when the fallout of the emergency witnessed the many agrarian based landowning castes formed associations which served as show of power in numbers to lure the ruling Dravidian parties to take heed of their interests. One common shared feeling among such groups was that they felt that their traditional hold of power over the marginalised castes was dwindling as Dalits had been used as cheap labour to work on agricultural fields for centuries. Rise in literacy and education helped Dalits to escape the clutches of hereditary enslavement and avail better paying jobs in towns and cities thereby improving their socio-economic conditions. Many Dalits went abroad to work for better pay. This led to them building better homes at their villages and refusing to work for the meagre pay for hard labour at the lands of the dominant castes. And also, public facilities such as educational centres helped young people to interact outside the feudal confines of their villages and form intimate relationships with peers from other castes. This led to many people from dominant castes to fear the decline of their traditionally held power. The POSCO Act in the 1980s furthered this thought and therefore, these communities started to form caste-based associations and groups to showcase their power as a vote bank for political parties to pay attention to. Dalit communities soon after formed their own associations in 1990s and stood as a vote bank themselves to get the political backing to voice out against the injustices vended out against them.

Caste atrocities against Dalits have taken various forms such as inciting riots, economic boycott, destruction of property and violence against women. The latter is employed to taunt Dalit men's abilities to protect their womenfolk. The patriarchal nature of the caste system comes into the foray here. There are incidents throughout the country where Dalit men are discouraged to display elements of traditional masculinity. This might be as simple as sporting a moustache (which is considered to be a symbol of traditional Indian masculinity) or riding a horse to a wedding (which is done to welcome the new groom in Savarna weddings, riding a horse is considered to be a symbol of honour, martial and status). Many Dalits in different parts of the country are threatened if they try to follow these displays of traditional Indian masculinity. On the other hand, women are considered to be the emblems of family and caste honour. At present times, there exists the numerous occurring of the 'so-called' honour killings in different parts of the country. These killings are usually targeted at couples where the girl is of higher caste and the boy belongs to the Dalit community. There are also examples where the boy belongs to Savarna caste but of a lower standing in the hierarchical Caste order. These honour killings are conducted to protect the honour and pride of the family and caste. As women are considered to be the forebearers of such characteristics, they are asked to maintain the virtue as woman of high standing. Protecting women of the family is a role bestowed upon the men of the household.

### **Caste based Masculinity and its Underlying Patriarchy**

By employing sexual violence at women from the oppressed communities, the Dominant caste men subvert the questions of traditional masculinity among Dalit men. Due to the economic dependence on the higher castes, Dalit men are not able to display the virilities of traditional masculinity in the public space. This eventually cumbers down into domestic abuse at home to which Dalit women are subject to. In this case, Dalit women are considered as 'doubly-marginalised', a term used to denote women belonging to the Afro-American community in the United States. In various parts of rural India, the traditional masculinity of wealthy landlords improves if they have sexual relations with Dalit women. Usually, these women are kept as mistresses or concubines who have no say in being exploited by the men due to poor socio-economic conditions their own families are in. In Karisal region of Tamil Nadu, literature from the place discussed how even married Dalit women are being sexually exploited by men of the dominant caste and the husbands are made to turn a blind eye to this because of the power

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that is wielded over them. One of the leading factors of the alleged traditional way of Indian masculinity can be attributed to the fact that many men from the dominant caste groups harbour thoughts about their community being exemplars of valour and courage in the past and that they have to uphold such customs. This thought is seen among the rural landowning communities across the country ranging from Rajputs and Jats in the north and Thevars in the South. Here, masculinity is defined as being aggressive and valiant. This is one of the primary reasons why men of their communities employ violence against Dalits if the established caste boundaries are crossed as this is meant as a direct hit on their masculinity.

In Karisal literature, we see numerous accounts of this contestation against traditional masculinity and how Dalits are being subjected to harassment and abuse in order to maintain the prevalent notion of traditional masculinity among the dominant caste men. In *Koogai* (2015), we see that sexual violence is inflicted on members of the Chakkiliyar community not just to undermine Dalit masculinity but also to subconsciously instil in them a deeper sense of servitude in the inner psyche. However, when the daughter of Shanmugam Pagadai is targeted by Muthaiya Pandian, a frequenter of violence and abuse against Dalits and women, Pagadai slays Muthaiya with a sickle. The consequence is that the Chakkiliyar community's huts are burned and sent away from the village. Unlike the Pallars and Paraiyars who are also expelled in the later part of the novel, the whereabouts of the Chakkiliyar community is not clearly mentioned after their exodus. In the novel *Gopallagramam* (2007) authored by Ki. Rajanarayanan, the narrative is about the Naicker community settled in the Karisal region. The main protagonist recalls the reason why his ancestors had to leave their homeland in present day Telangana. The reason is because they had to flee the Nizam's rule. The Nizam and his retinue were considered as outside invaders with strange customs and rituals. The great grandmother of the central character Akkaya recalls that the Turkic governor of their provinces had the habit of rounding up beautiful young women from noble families to induct them into his harem. Since the Kottaiyar family did not want their women's honour to be taken away by a foreigner, they fled their lands during the wedding night when one of their daughters were to be married to the Sultanate governor. During their journey from the Telugu land to the Tamil land, they were even saved by one of their patron deity goddesses who disguised them from the Nizam's raiders. Here, Ki. Ra explores the masculinity of the Kottaiyar family, based on how their sense of family honour is dependent upon protecting their women from the outsider's gaze. In the later part of the novel, the patriarch of the Kottaiyar Naicker community is made in charge of collecting revenue taxes from his village sector by the British officer. They have a word with their community members about their British overlords. They enquire whether the white men have committed acts of dishonour against the womenfolk of the native land like former Sultanate overlords from whom they had to flee because of this reason. When it was revealed that white men have done no such things, they are then found content to accept them as their overlords and pay them taxes. Rajanarayanan successfully conveys the sense of belonging that all communities seem to have because of their shared customs, superstitions, and modes of worship. Many of them worship the same god, participate in the same festivals, and exchange good and bad luck. As they rely on the goddess Pottiyamma for even the smallest issues, their steadfast faith in her serves as a major motif throughout the book.

### Redefining Masculinity through Dalit Literature

Dalit masculinity is being redefined by a number of Dalit writers and filmmakers over the past decade. There have also been a certain amount of films that are set in the Karisal region. Films such as *Parutheveeran* (2008), *Veyil* (2006), *Poo* (2008), *Asuran* (2019) and *Karnan* (2021) are a few examples. *Asuran* (2019) is a film that was adapted from the novel *Heat* (2015) written by Karisal writer Poomani. The film is depicted as a revenge drama where Sivasaami

(played by Dhanush) and his Chidambaram go into hiding in the hot, dry jungles in the Karisal region after Chidambaram murders Vadakuraan, a wealthy upper caste landlord. Vadakuraan had initially killed Chidambaram's elder brother over a water dispute between their farm lands. The novel is set during the 1980s when there was a stark rise in caste violence and related incidents. The violence are reported to have climaxed into full blown riots between communities. This is mainly because Tamil Nadu began to urbanise and many Dalit communities who had to initially rely on dominant castes in the villages for food and meagre income, moved to nearby towns for better pay and opportunities. So, many people still in the villages refused to take up the labour work at dominant caste households and lands. They also showed hesitancy in carrying out jobs such as beating Parai drums for funerals and engaging in manual scavenging as these jobs were considered to be polluting as per Hindu law. The absence of dependency on the dominant castes for food and income made the oppressed communities to assert themselves during times of abuse. The undermining of orthodox masculinity among Dalit men was contested when Dalits began to fight back for their rights. However, it must be noted that there exists a crisis of hyper masculine related identity among some of the Dalit men. This leads them to foray into self-destructive habits such as alcoholism, drug abuse and domestic violence. This situation could be similar to that of many exploited ethnic minorities across the world. In the United States and Europe, we could see people belonging to Afro American, Latinos, Vietnamese and Romani Gypsies being subjected to physical and sexual exploitation, cheap labour, extensive unemployment and are also more prone to be profiled as potential criminals which eventually leads to higher rate of incarceration. This in turn accelerates to domestic issues within the said groups such as ghettoization of the targeted communities where crime and drug abuse run rampant. Women of such communities face more abuse than that of the other communities in better socio-economic conditions. They are what scholars consider as being 'doubly marginalised' as they face the male gaze of both the oppressor and their own male counterparts. In India, as efforts are made to publicly downplay Dalit men as being exhibitors of traditional masculinity, these Dalit men as a consequence of being publicly humiliated are thereby more prone to divert their anger towards their female counterparts therefore resulting in higher rate of domestic abuse among the Dalits in particular.

### **Traditional Femininity as an Outlier of Women Exploitation**

In Karisal literature, apart from the expectation among dominant caste men to exhibit traits of traditional masculinity, their women are expected to showcase orthodox femininity. In Indian terms, 'desi'<sup>1</sup> have described this as 'Sanskaari'<sup>2</sup> behaviour. Such women are seldom allowed to venture out and if in case there are, they must be accompanied by a male guardian. Traits of orthodox femininity include submissiveness, modesty, being sensitive or emotional and most importantly, being dependant on their way men in terms of important decisions such as marriage, finance and work. In Karisal literature, it could be noted that women of the dominant castes unlike their male counterparts, do not play a huge role as aggressors. They are not seen partaking in violence or overtly aggressive actions against the Dalits. This might partly be due to the fact that they<sup>3</sup> themselves are mostly confined to the premises of their house unlike Dalit

<sup>1</sup> The word 'desi', according to Urban dictionary, is derived from Sanskrit and denotes the meaning "one from our country". Usually refers to people from India, Pakistan, & Bangladesh. The word has recently come into a bit of controversy as per the article <https://scroll.in/global/975071/is-the-term-desi-offensive-some-south-asian-americans-think-so> which states that it primarily refers to the cultural attributes of the largely north Indian upper caste elite and is not much inclusive in nature to that of the minorities in terms of Caste

<sup>2</sup> 'Sanskaari', in Hindi literally refers to a person who is well-mannered, well-cultured, well-behaved, knowledgeable and well-spoken. However, it could also refers to a person (mainly women) who does not challenge the norms and traditions of the Indian status quo vis-à-vis patriarchy.

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women who are required to venture out of their houses and work. The reason could be cited as more economical than social. On the other hand, they are partakers of discrimination within the domestic sphere as we see Masanam being subjected to discrimination in the short story 'Credibility Established' from *Along with the Sun* (2020) written by Ki. Rajanarayanan. In the story, Masanam is frequently physically assaulted by his higher caste employer who is addressed as Periya Modalali (Big boss). He is being assaulted just because Periya modalali wants to show him place. This is done despite Masanam being a hard worker who toils hard in the house of modalali as a domestic servant. Modalali's wife addressed as Modalaliamma (lady boss), once serves water to him. Masanam stoops low to drink the water as she pours it from the top standing. According to the modalali though, he states that the Masanam should consider himself privileged as only a few from his caste are actually allowed to enter the house of a dominant caste family. And the reason for him constantly beating him is that if left unbeaten or unchecked, Masanam will soon grow lazy. It must be noted that Masanam is only permitted to access certain sections of the house and most of that are outdoors and not necessarily inside the house. The cattle shed where he sleeps in and takes care of the livestock: the storeroom nearby and the balcony near the entrance of the house is all where is permitted. Now, coming back to dominant caste women being expected to become paragons of virtue and Indian modesty, their male counterparts usually go about in their assumption as Dalit women as 'being available' (to be sexually exploited) as they seem more assertive in nature and venture out their homes. In their eyes, they are not seen as symbols of femineity to be cherished and protected but as tools for human pleasure.

In *Koogai* (2015) written by notable Karisal writer Cho Dharman, we could observe that Peichi, a Dalit woman who is widowed just a few years after her marriage, is often exposed to the gazes of men from all the communities with lecherous objectives. She is portrayed as being of strong character as she wards off those men with her sharp-witted words. She even provides refuge for Appusubban and Chinnaguru who were fleeing the police for killing the henchmen of Sethura Pandian, an upper caste landlord who exploited the Dalits. Eventually when Appusubban wins the case and provides an opportunity to his caste folk to migrate to the town of Kovilpatti where Peichi lives so that they could get better job opportunities than the village where they are paid meagre sums for the hard labour in the fields. Peichi is seen taking initiatives for the relocation of the villages. She is also seen addressing to the grievances of the people in the newly formed Pallar (Dalit) colony in the town of Kovilpatti and participates in protests by the labour unions against the wage reduction by the factory bosses. Peichi, in many ways could be viewed as an attempt to redefine femineity though Dalit lens. She exhibits characteristics which would be considered outrageous by the orthodoxy. She is seen to be more assertive, protective, and fierce. The author moulds the character by involving aspects of the occurring Dalit feminism. Unlike mainstream feminism which primarily focuses just on a woman's right to marry and attain equality in all aspects, Dalit feminism adds the agenda of tackling more issues such as poverty and social discrimination on the basis of caste.

Regarding the view of orthodox femineity by Lisa Ling, an American analyst, she states that Women are indoctrinated to be inherently vulnerable and to always search for a saviour on a white horse. Women's responsibilities were traditionally determined by males and included being weak and reliant. It is clear that men appropriated the hero role, reinforcing the belief that women are secure only when men are there. Society expects women to play the role of the helpless "damsel in distress," for whom males are the only saviours. A woman's rights are perpetually violated by patriarchal culture. In this perspective, men represent the dominant figure, while women represent the docile figure of his domination. And this becomes the root cause of patriarchy, the system of male-dominated authority that permeates society and the home. Women have always been seen as "the other," and males have held all the reins of power. A strongly patriarchal culture means that women have been denied access to the same resources

that males have had. Therefore, women are subjected to bias and exploitation in the home and in society at large. And gradually women came to see the need of achieving parity with men in legal and social standing. That kind of thinking sparked the emergence of feminist movements. Dalit feminism in India could be considered as being inspired by the Third Wave of Feminism in the west which put forth the issues faced by Afro-American women who felt that mainstream feminism focused too much on the women belonging to the ruling upper-class women who are primarily white. Much similar to the situation in the west, pioneers of Dalit feminism felt that mainstream feminism hardly represented their issues as both women and Dalits but only focused on the issues of women from a largely upper caste urban based background. There existed a lack of relatability with a number of issues that bourgeoisie women felt the need to address.

### **Reconstruction of Gender Relations through Sankritization**

As M.N. Srinivas (1962) states, a few communities listed as Backward Castes (BC) or Most Backward Castes (MBC) are undergoing 'Sankritization', a process where they begin exhibiting the characteristic functions of the upper castes in order to climb up the social hierarchy of the caste order. One major aspect that the Caste aspiring for a higher position in the Caste ladder emulate is to practice strict endogamy when it come to the marriage of their women. They vehemently oppose marriage unions between anyone of their kinsmen (mostly women) and a person belonging to any Caste or community that they consider as beneath them in the social hierarchy of Caste. This leads to numerous cases of (dis)honour killing in India which is mainly executed by the Castes who demand for the upliftment of their Caste in the political stage. In Tamil Nadu, there are witnesses of this being practised among the Thevars, Vanniyars and Gounders. All these communities belong to either BC or MBC caste lists. It can also be noted that these communities own most of the agricultural land in the regions they inhabit. Therefore, they tend to exhibit Caste based pride much similar to the Rajputs, Thakurs and Jats in North India and Kammas and Reddis from the Deccan. Srinivas further discusses that Brahminic vegetarianism is also part of Sanskritization but this is followed more among the Jat, Rajput and Bania communities in the northern part of India. Beef-eating is outright illegal in most regions of North India, though it is found acceptable in parts of South India but with a taboo still associated with eating beef as a marker of a lower caste cuisine or a predominantly Muslim food. In Karisal literature too, we find beef-eating a contestation between two Dalit castes known as the Pallars and Paraiyars. In the novel *Koogai* (2015), the Paraiyars who had recently converted to Christianity, want to eat beef to celebrate Easter. This causes a minor tiff with the Pallars who consider Cow as a sacred animal according to the dominant principle belief of Vedic Hinduism. There is also a occupational reason behind this as Paraiyars primarily focus on leather work whereas the Pallars were agricultural laborers in the farms of the dominant castes. The Paraiyars skin dead cattle and also consume its flesh. This was a hereditary occupancy for them even before the conversion of religion.

The state of Tamil Nadu has three Dalit communities namely Pallars, Paraiyars and Arundhadhiyars. Novels and short stories in Karisal literature attest to that fact that there exists a hierarchal system even among these former untouchable castes. The reasons could be cited along the lines of ritual pollution in terms of their hereditary occupation in line with the Brahminical tenets of purity. The Karisal novel *Koogai* (2015) and *And Then* (2018) explore these factors. The hierarchal ladder places Pallars and Paraiyars on top depending on their wealth, political power, numerical superiority and in rural regions, their favour with the dominant castes. However, Arundhadhiyars are always placed at the bottom of the ladder due to the fact that they were allotted the occupation of sanitary work. They are made to engage in work such as manual scavenging even at present times as the State government of Tamil Nadu primarily employs Arundhadhiyars as sewage cleaners and garbage collectors. These tasks are considered as the most polluting according to Vedic Hindu dictums. Gunasekaran (2021) states



the plight of the Arundhadhiyars as positioned “being untouchables among untouchables”. This could be due to the fact that Brahminical tenets of purity and pollution of touch and task is followed even among the Dalits during their inactions with other former untouchable communities. Tamil Dalit writer Bama in her autobiography *Karukku* (1992) discusses how there existed a power struggle between Pallars and Paraiyars whereas the Chakkiliyars (Arundhadhiyars) were always pushed to the margins even in the Dalit villages due to their lack of awareness regarding education, sanitation, and political power. Due to them being positioned in the lowest rung of society prone to much discrimination and exploitation, it should be noted that women from that caste were sexually exploited more than that of the other Dalit communities. Perumal Murugan in his novel *One Part Woman* (2013) notes how women from the Arundhadhiyar community were traditionally employed as sex workers. Bama also notes in *Karukku* (1992) how there existed a prostitution street in her village where visitors at night would usually be men from the dominant caste who ironically practice untouchability towards them during the day. In the novel *Koogai* (2015), as discussed in an earlier passage of this paper, Karuppi and her husband Shanmugam Pagadai, who belonged to the Arundhadhiyar caste were exploited by Muthaiah Pandian, a dominant caste man who was employed as the guardian of the farms by the landlords. Muthaiah Pandian frequently sexually exploited Karuppi when at the same time he sends Shanmugam on the errand of getting him liquor. When Shanmugam goes to get liquor, his friends laugh jeeringly at his plight saying that similar to Shanmugam’s turn to get liquor that particular day, the previous day it had been the turn of another friend of his. Here, the term ‘getting liquor’ as been idiomised as being the turn of one individual’s wife to get sexually exploited by Muthaiah Pandian. Nelson (1968) states that Chakkiliyars<sup>4</sup> are known for having extraordinarily beautiful women. Because of this, they are categorised as Padmini ladies Baines (1912) further observes that the leather-workers are here, as in the north, notable for the beauty of their women and at those stage of Sakthi worship at which the presence of a live embodiment of the feminine force, is essential, a Sakkilian is invariably picked for the role. Landlords may have sexually exploited these beautiful ladies since “Zamindars and other affluent men are immensely fond of enticing them” (Nelson, 1968). This plays out differently when a dominant caste man attempts to seduce a woman from the Paraiyar community in *And Then* (2018). Here, rather than trying to forcefully use her as an object of his pleasure, he tries to seduce her. The attempt fails though as one of the elder from the Paraiyar community see him entering the Paraiyar settlement at night which is quite rare. The elder spot this other man and rebukes him as a man not fit for social standing. The other man, who is of the same age as the elder, feigns humiliation and goes back to his farm house in the dominant caste settlement. These sexploitation of Dalit women, apart from the reasons of fulfilling lustful desires of the human flesh, could also be viewed as attempts to undermine Dalit men of their traditional masculinity. Upper caste masculinity dictates the necessity to protect the women of their own castes in order to avoid getting ritually polluted if there exists a sexual relationship with a lower caste man. That is why, Castes that are attempting to climb up on the hierarchical order of the Caste system in order to gain socio-political fervour, begin practising strict endogamy within their caste groups. In Southern India, the caste group known as Nadars were considered as one of the formerly untouchable castes till the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, through colonial education, they were able to move up the ladder and attain considerable socio-political power through education and commerce in pre-independence era

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<sup>4</sup> The term ‘Chakkiliyar’ is used to derogatorily address people belonging to the Arundhadhiyar community. ‘Chakkili’ draws its origin from the Tamil word ‘Sangili’ which means ‘chains’. This would denote them as being bound up by chains during the early medieval period and enslaved. In order to get rid of the term with an oppressive past, the community have started addressing themselves as ‘Arundhadhiyars’ which refers to as being worshippers of the deity known as Arundhadhi. The new term, the recent decades, has achieved government recognition.

allotted the Backward Class status by Dr Ambedkar due to their development. At present, in order to maintain their status quo as a dominant political community in the southernmost parts of Tamil Nadu, it has been observed that they have adopted to forms of Sanskritization such as the disallowance of their women to marry outside their caste, particularly to other formerly untouchable communities such as the Pallars, Paraiyars and Arundhadhiyars who are listed as Schedule Castes. The historical novel *Agnadi* (2012) authored by Karisal writer Poomani records and discusses the steady rise of the Nadar community which occurred over the 19<sup>th</sup> century period.

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### Bio-note

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