

SEXPLOITATION OF DALIT WOMEN IN THARMAN'S *KOOKAI* (T)

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“Lord, these people neither allow us to live nor die and that’s our plight” (*Kookai* 51).

Tharman’s award-winning Tamil novel *Kookai* reads like an autobiographical narrative. It brings out glaringly before the reader the atrocities committed by the caste Hindus against the Dalit women and of course men too in and around the town called Kovilpatti in South India not in the distant past. The novel describes the various physical and emotional tortures of the Dalit women confined in impromptu huts in utterly backward villages. These women suffer multiple forms of discrimination, which includes segregation, low-esteem, round the clock servitude and also as sex-objects.

Of the hundred and odd million Dalit women living in this country, nearly three-fourths live in villages and city slums. The majority of Dalit women are poverty-stricken; they solely rely on daily wages for their existence; they are landless people with a couple of cattle at the most as their possessions. Sexploitation has been in place for many centuries in this part of the country. Born and brought up in the same vicinity, Tharman has had the first hand experience of the harrowing experience of the Dalit women.

Dalit women of all ages have to undergo untold hardships. The male in the novel seek the Dalit women mostly for sex-ship that means seeking a relationship based purely on sex. In Tharman’s novel *Kookai*, the Dalit woman Karuppi, wife of Shanmugam has to offer her body to the high caste thug Muthaiya Pandian. When her husband shows up, she tells him, “Husband, dear, we’ll go to another village, for this kind of existence is the existence of a street dog; it’d be better to pull out our tongue and die” (*Kookai* 28; translation mine¹). Her husband wants her to whisper low; otherwise the high caste people beat her to death. With a sigh her husband says, “What to do, all the women in the Pallakudi, Parakudi and the Chakkiliyakudi² have been screwed by those caste Hindu men; the time is favourable to them and so they make merry with our women” (28). In the year just gone by, when the illicit-arrack trader Chenthur Pandi slept with Kuruvammal, a Dalit, her brother Sudalai walked in unknowingly and reprimanded the intruder; Kuruvammal’s brother was beaten to death in the broad day light when everybody was watching. The dead body of Sudalai was left on the roadside, because nobody dared to bury the

body, until the high caste people permitted them to remove the stinking body. The Dalits had to fall prostrate before them and beg for permission to remove it to the secluded Dalit cremation ground. When Kuruvammal and her husband shifted their residence to another village out of fear, they were brought back after three months alleging that they stole brass vessels; they were tied to a tree on the roadside and beaten blue and black. As has been pointed out by Omprakash Valmiki, “Dalit life is excruciatingly painful, charred by experiences” (01). The reader is promptly reminded of the Canadian Native Mohawk poet Pauline Johnson denouncing the gross unfairness of the white people, who initially robbed the Indians of their identity, then accuse them unjustly as thieves when they attempt to make a living. It may be remembered that there is a close connection between the Indians (First Generation People) in Canada and the Dalits in India. Their plights are the same. In Pauline Johnson’s poem, “The Cattle-Thief”, the Indian woman stands closer to her father’s body and accuses the white,

Stand back, stand back, you white skins, touch that dad man to your shame;
You have stolen my father’s spirit, but his body I only claim.
You have killed him, but you shall not dare touch him now he’s dead.
You have cursed, and called him a Cattle Thief, though you robbed him first of
bread—
Robbed him and robbed my people—look there, at that shrunken face,
Starved with a hollow hunger, we owe to you and your race (14-15).

The caste system in India was firmly established very early in Indian human history. Like a fossil, it has been quite solidly in place and is difficult to root out. Dalits do not get any kind of respect in society. As a result of it, in India, Dalit rural women have to undergo unimaginable sufferings in engaging their day-to-day activities. They have to carry out their diverse productive and reproductive roles within their families and communities within a lot of constraints like poor rural infrastructure and lack of access to healthy foods, hospitals and clean drinking water to name a few. They have the highest poverty levels, and are landless. They depend largely on the wealthy higher caste for employment, wages and loans. Their attempts to get minimum resources are often met with violence. Due to the intersection of caste, class and gender, Dalit women are often subjected to direct and structural violence. Such issues push them to perpetual poverty and also undermine their dignity. The high caste people who live around at the cost of the Dalits brainwash them that they are inferior, that their life style, their language, their religions, the deities that they worship, their values and even the food that they eat are not so good.

Besides sexploitation, the novel under study also brings out some of the age-old caste-based practices before the reader. The prominent Dalit man Cheeni Kilavan in the novel is an all-knowing old man. In the village where he lives, no Dalit would dare to walk with their foot-ware on; they would take them in their hands and walk without making any noise; if somebody walks with foot-ware on, he may be a high caste Hindu like Kaliappa Reddy. Quite often, “he would visit Kuruvan’s wife Kuruvammal for sex; Kuruvan, helpless would sleep in the sheep stable babbling meaningless things with tears over flowing.” (47). Kuruvan, a victim, of violence, suffering, addictions and deprivation would be down with the burden of failure and wholly unable to break the chains of the communalized oppression. The high caste people directly disseminate the message-- assimilate and accept or get lost. Their feelings of bitterness and frustration would never take them anywhere.

In some Dalit communities, it is not uncommon that the bride is cruelly raped first by some high caste male before she is hugged by her lawful husband. In the novel in reference, the male Zamin of the locality is a plunderer of the female bodies, especially the Dalit women.

Kauppi and Shanmugham Pagadai have been looking for a suitable boy in a distant village for their daughter, Vellaiammal. Muthiya Pandian, a high caste sex-marauder and the Zamin Security Guard stops them and advises them to give off their daughter to a local boy; he himself would find a suitable boy for her. Vellaiammal's parents are tongue-tied; they cannot deny this offer. That's calamitous. Muthiya Pandian, in a day or two, arranged a mentally deranged lame-footed stammering-voiced boy by name Mathukkan for Vellaiammal. He is a coolly in the household of the Zamindar; his job is collecting cow-dung and disposes it in a pit. Vellaiammal's pleas and protests do not touch the high caste thug Muthaiya Pandian. The thug even fixes the wedding date. When the parents of the bridegroom want to see the boy in person, he is found begging with a begging-bowl at Madurai Mattuthavani bus station. The parents of the bride hold firmly the feet of Muthiya Pandian and beg him to cancel the wedding. The wedding day dawns; Vellaiammal lies on the cot with a shrunken face; she lies like a plucked out sapling; she hasn't had any sleep. When the women of the Chakkiliya community raise a *kulavai*³, Madhukkan ties the thali on Vellaiammal's neck. When the guests disappear one by one, Muthaiya Pandian goes in to seduce the bride; on seeing him, Mathukkan runs away in fear; Karuppi the mother of the bride offers herself to Muthaiya Pandian and begs him to leave the bride and have her instead. Muthaiya Pandian is bent upon putting himself upon the bride; Madhukkan is not to be seen in the nearby vicinity. He runs away scared like a sacrificial lamb with the wedding garland; the father of Vellaiammal kills Muthaiya Pandian and pulls the lifeless body of Muthiya Pandian inside the house and in the next breath he carries his daughter outside. Within an hour the news spreads far and wide and all the Chakkiliya huts are torched by Muthaiya Pandian's cronies. Having lost everything, "the Chakkiliya people move away from that god-forsaken place to another locality, like the streaming ants under the leadership of Shanmugham." (71). As Yashwant Manohar's sarcastic poem, "An Ultimatum" shows,

I feel a foreigner among the people

Bearing the burden of such a bastard life (quoted in Nina Caldeira 82).

It is a heinous crime, according to a higher caste, for a Dalit to fall in love with a higher caste woman; if it is known, the result would be calamitous. It invariably ends in honour-killing. The Dalit Cheeni's only son is Govindan; he is no more now; in a flash back, Cheeni nostalgically recollects what happened to his son years ago; he had an affair with the high caste Muthaiya Pandian's elder daughter Ramalakshmi. Muthaiya Pandian saw them sleeping together one day; the next day both the lovers were brutally murdered; they became victims to honour-killing. The news was twisted and spread as "Kattupillayar Koil Mohini weaned them away with her siren call to a lonely spot and beat them to death" (77). It was widely believed.

Filing false cases against the Dalits is very common in villages where the Zamin would be a high caste ruthless man. When the Dalit men would be framed in some false cases, the police, in connivance with the Zamin, would especially harass the women folk of the hiding Dalit men. Dalit women invariably face verbal, physical and sexual violence in the public and private domain. Just as Ammu has to undergo unspeakable humiliation in the Ayemenem Police station in Arundhati Roy's **The God of Small Things**, the Dalit women have to face utter humiliation in the hands of the police. This includes being verbally and physically attacked for any number of reasons in public. In Roy's novel, when Ammu wanted to see her subaltern lover Velutha in the lock-up and also to give a statement exonerating him, Inspector Thomas Mathew flew into a temper. Leering at Ammu's breasts, he said, "The Kottayam police didn't take statements from 'veshyas'⁴ or their illegitimate children" (08). He didn't stop with this. He harassed her further by tapping her breasts with his baton. In Tharman's text, seeing that the

Pallans do not come forward to work in the paddy fields of the Zamin, the Zamin enticed the police to file a false case against two Dalits; the village was torched; young men were rounded off by the police, whose palms were greased well by the Zamin. The police were after the Dalit Appuchuppan and his son Ayyanar. Smelling that the father and the son had been hiding in their hut,

The police broke open the hut of Appuchuppan and pulled off the sari of Appuchuppan's wife; she was struggling to cover her nakedness like Draupadi; one head constable and three policemen were removing the garments of the woman; she was weeping; she was supplicating; she was crying aloud; she fell prostrate at the feet of the Head Constable; just as Lord Krishna came to the rescue of Draupadi, Appuchuppan stood before them with hand grenades and saved his wife's utter humiliation (102).

The widowed Dalit has to face untold hardships in the hands of sex-marauders. The Dalit Paechi in the novel in reference became a second wife to Kalithaever; he was sentenced to death in connection with a murder; Paechi was living singly with her daughter Mariammal. Unlike the majority Dalit women, Paechi in the text is a bold woman; she is an exception. Walking with a heavy load of cut-grass, Paechi was accosted by a cart man with a horse drawn carriage; Paechi was asked to deliver the cargo in the house of the cart man. The cart man tempted her with money and wanted her to share bed with him. Paechi threatened her with a scythe saying, "This is not only for cutting grass, but also for pulling out your eyeballs; be careful!" (152).

It is a common belief that the Dalit woman without a male cohort is easily available as a bed partner to any moneyed male. That Paechi is different is already evident; in another incident, the novel shows how Paechi tackles an advancing male:

Thottakaranaiker: Hi, Paechi, returning after cutting the grass?

Paechi: Yes, Sir, You're right. I'll go to the market to sell it after resting a few minutes.

Thottakaranaiker: Why do you suffer like a street dog just for 20 rupees? Come and work in my farm; will I not give you 20 rupees every day?

Paechi: I'm rather weak; I cannot work like the others.

Thottakaranaiker: Who asked you to work? You just be there as one of the workers.

Paechi: The wages I get that way may not bring blessings to me!

Thottakaranaiker: There are a few ripe coconuts in the farm fallen from the trees; go and take them.

Paechi: Why do we need coconuts? I made gravy some four days ago. A red chilly alone will do for me and my daughter to drink porridge.

Thottakaranaiker: Your daughter Maari is not seen today. Where is she now?

Paechi: She is gone out to collect the surplus *Kanchi*⁵ water from the nearby huts for the pigs.

Thottakaranaiker: Come with me, Paechi; I'll pluck pumpkins for you.

Paechi: Throw your pumpkin away. Register some of your farm property on my name!

Thottakaranaiker: When did I say no? I'm always ready to do that. I'm waiting for your green signal. (*Thottakaranaiker is sexually ignited*).

Thottakaranaiker came that night to Paechi's hut and waited for Paechi. Maari was deep asleep. Paechi came out with a sharp scythe. She held the hair of the Naiker tightly and threatened to

slash his throat. Terrified, Thottakaranaiker took to his heels (153-154). (*Dramatized version is mine*).

Even the Temple Priest is not an exception to this kind of harassment to Paechi. He is obsessed with Peachi's sensational body curves. He wants to sleep with her. As long as her husband Kalithevan was alive, nobody would turn towards her direction with the sex motive. But now when that man is gone, every Tom, Dick and Harry is excited to have a go with her. Paechi is walking in front of the Kakkachiamman Koil and the priest of that temple is walking from the opposite direction. The dialogue is given here in a dramatized version:

Priest: Hullo, is it, Paechi?

Paechi: Yes, Priest, you're right.

Priest: You seem to return late today?

Paechi: Yes, it's true. I had to wait for the food parcel.

Priest: You give me one parcel.

Paechi: Here it is. Get it.

Priest: I thought you would invite me to your house for a hearty meal.

Paechi: I've no objection. Come home and enjoy a hearty meal.

Priest: You are a Pallan woman; supposing I come there for a meal, who would perform the Puja before the deity?

Paechi: You get another man for the Puja ceremony.

Priest: What is the need for another man? I'll come back and do the Puja.

Paechi: Are you sure that you'd come back?

Priest: Where would I go? I'd come back.

Paechi: You won't come back!

Priest: What do you mean?

Paechi: You'd go to the cremation ground! Kalithevan's (her dead husband) sharp knife cries for your blood!

Priest: Mother, dear, I spoke just for fun; don't keep anything in your mind. (155).

Paechi had been under this kind of teasing and temptations and duress day in and day out. Raping a Dalit woman until she breathes her last is something quite common at that time in the Dalit-dominant province. It's very true even today. In the text under study, a Pallar shepherdess with big breasts had to be a victim to group sex and violent rape. It took place at Oomachikulam, a village under the control of the local Zamin. The sheep of Oomachi cried aloud on hearing the loud cry of Oomachi. The novel describes that scary event:

The Dalits of the Pallar hamlets felt restless when they did not see the Shepherdess Oomachi who used to walk behind her sheep with her big breasts dancing. The whole village looked for Oomachi everywhere, in pools and wells. Oomachi had been lying dead with her tongue dried after calling aloud for 'water'. Her entire gear like staff, bucket and footwear had been scattered around. How many men had quenched their sex-thirst is anybody's guess. Her body had been covered with blood caused by nail-scratches and there are also deep biting-marks on her breasts (230).

It is easy to preach with expressions like that the Dalits can bring about a change by rebuilding their lives just as Slash says in the final pages of Jeannette Armstrong's novel with the same title: "The only way that we can really regain control is for us to really change. It means that we're going to rebuild ourselves; rebuild our health, mentally, emotionally and spiritually"

(**Slash** 218). Tharman's text lays bare the stark realities of the positionality of the Dalit women in the backward villages of our nation. Even the custodians of the law and discipline simply ignore the cries of the Dalit women; they themselves commit all sorts of atrocities against the Dalit women that include naked parading, sexual assault and other forms of physical and verbal abuse. They also make ridiculous accusations against the Dalits. Dalit women are considered to be available sexually to any dominant caste man. Only very few Dalit women are able to withstand the male advances. The rural Dalit women's sexual and bodily integrity are generally threatened and violated, even from a very young age. Due to the caste hierarchy, dominant caste men have a perceived right over Dalit women's bodies. These go uninhibited despite the governmental legislations like the PCR Act 1955 (Protection of Civil Rights) and the Prevention of Atrocities Act 1989 against the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Dalit women also have to face social ostracism due to their inter-caste marriage. Their tons of sorrows are interred in their bones and they carry them unmistakably to their secluded cremation grounds in a government *purampokku*⁶ land. Paechi in the novel marrying an already married-Thevar man has to undergo unspeakable sufferings until Thevar's first son grows into a lad. When the men go into hiding due to some conflict with the dominant higher caste overlord, women have to bear the brunt that includes protecting their bodies and their female children from sexual assault. The Dalits' voices go muted and they have a long road ahead for true emancipation. Nevertheless, Tharman in his novel has made an earnest effort to break generations of silence by naming the oppressors and the process of oppression.

Notes

1. All the quotations from the text in reference **Kookai** have been translated by the author of this paper.
2. These are the major three divisions of the Dalit people in South India, especially in Tamilnadu.
3. *Kulavai* is a loud cheer made by women with their wide open mouths and the tongues whirling within the jaws in Indian villages celebrating a cheery event.
4. *Veshyas*, is an expression in Malayalam, which means a street brothel.
5. *Kanchi* is the surplus rice water sieved after boiling the rice.
6. *Purampokku* land is government land outside the village premises.

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