



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 13. Issue 2. 2026 (April-June)

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

Gender Stereotyping in Imayam's *Pethavan*

Pavithra S

Assistant Professor of English, SRM Arts and Science College, Kattankulathur - 603203
Email: pavithrasakthivel0896@gmail.com

[doi: 10.33329/ijelr.13.2.6](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.13.2.6)



Article information

Article Received:28/03/2026
Article Accepted:18/04/2026
Published online:23/04/2026

Abstract

Imayam's *Pethavan* is a powerful narrative that exposes the intersection of caste and gender oppression. The text demonstrates how caste functions as a tool to subjugate individuals, particularly women, within rigid social hierarchies. This study employs a radical feminist framework to examine how deeply rooted patriarchal structures operate through caste-based social norms. By analysing the characters and their lived experiences, the paper highlights how patriarchal authority regulates even the most intimate human relationships. Ultimately, the novella reveals how honour, caste identity, and social surveillance combine to sustain systemic oppression and silence resistance.

This study employs a radical feminist lens to analyze the ways in which patriarchal power operates within caste-based social systems. It investigates how control is exercised not only through explicit acts of violence but also through less visible processes such as internalized subordination, fear, and social conditioning. The experiences of the characters highlight the emotional and psychological strain created by these overlapping structures, where individual wishes are often sacrificed in order to uphold collective notions of honor. The novella further emphasizes the role of the community in maintaining conformity, where any departure from accepted norms leads to punishment, exclusion, or even violence.

In addition, *Pethavan* brings attention to the silencing of resistance, illustrating how individuals, particularly women are denied opportunities to express dissent. By portraying the lived realities of marginalized groups, the text questions the acceptance of caste and gender inequalities as normal. It ultimately urges a critical reassessment of the social values and institutional frameworks that perpetuate such oppression. This paper contends that Imayam's work stands as a strong critique of deeply rooted hierarchies, offering valuable insights into the complex interplay of power, identity, and resistance in contemporary society.

Key words: Radical Feminism, Caste, Patriarchy.

The culture of India is deeply rooted in traditional society and long-standing norms that shape people's identities and social relationships. Both identity and social relations influence the society and construct views on gender and caste. These have historically determined an individual's position, privileges, and limitations in the society. This construction has led to disparities among the people of India. This custom has been followed for over five hundred years. As result of this, there are a widespread social inequalities, suppression, and dominance of one group over another in the name of caste. Each group of people has the urge to declare themselves as being superior. Women are the subjects of ill-treatment and subjugation. There is a strong social structure which is used against the women community. Caste functions as a mechanism used to control and subjugate individual. This tool decides the fate of a person in terms of how a man or a woman is treated. Women experience double jeopardy in terms of caste and gender.

Specifically, the persistent oppression and subjugation of women in the Indian society are not merely social and cultural issues but manifestations of patriarchal power that seek control over women's bodies, sexuality, and labor. Iyayam, a famous Tamil writer, wrote many short stories and novella. His works have been translated into many languages. Gita Subramaniyan has translated one of novellas of Iyayam's *Pethavan* into English. *Pethavan* is Tamil word which means 'Begetter' (father of children).

Pethavan, becomes a powerful literary work that examines the intersection of both caste and gender oppression. This novella portrays how patriarchal ideology operates within families structured by caste hierarchies, exposing the structural domination that transcends social boundaries. *Pethavan* vividly points out the struggles faced by women in two different ways, firstly by caste, and then by gender. Men enjoy the privilege of being the primary agents and beneficiaries of patriarchal authority. Through this narrative, Iyayam reveals the fundamental system of domination embedded in the Indian society, where caste idolization and patriarchal control come together to sustain inequality forever. Thus, the novella not only critiques the cruelty of caste-based discrimination but also highlights how women's oppression is intrinsically woven into hierarchies. It reflects the wide radical feminist perspective on patriarchy and the power of men.

Pethavan(The Begetter)

Plot Overview

The novella *Pethavan* unfolds in the village of Ulunthurpet near Villupuram District and is centered in Pazhani, the father ("begetter") of Bhakkiyam. The novella captures a single tragic day in the lives of the Bhakkiyam and Pazhani. The village panchayat of the dominant caste accuses Bhakkiyam of falling in love with Periyasami, a Dalit Sub-Inspector. The affair between a woman from a dominant caste and a man from a Dalit background is seen as a serious threat to the village's so-called "honour".

To preserve the pride of their community, the panchayat orders Pazhani to kill his daughter by poisoning her. In case he fails to do so, they threaten to burn his fields and house and to publicly assault Bhakkiyam. Bound by fear and shame, Pazhani asks for time to carry out the punishment. That night, unable to harm his own daughter, he helps Bhakkiyam escape secretly by sending her away from the village. The next morning, Pazhani is found dead – he has taken his own life, choosing death over killing his child.

Through this heartbreaking act, Iyayam reveals how caste, patriarchy, and social control destroy human values and lives eventually. The novella does not end with resolution or hope but leaves readers with the weight of Pazhani's death and Bhakkiyam's uncertain future.

Radical Feminism and Bhakkiyam's Defiance

Radical feminism focuses on a women-centered approach. It gives importance to women's experiences and interests. The theory questions the traditional gender roles in both private relationships and public policies aiming to widen opportunities for women. Radical feminists argue that women's control over their own sexuality is being threatened by patriarchal order. Women's defiance destabilizes the structures of social construction like caste and parochial society.

While radical feminism originates in Western contexts, its central concern with patriarchy as a system of power remains relevant to the text, particularly in its depiction of women's subordination and the control exercised over their choices. In the context of Tamil society, this oppression is further reinforced by caste structures; however, the focus of this study remains on how patriarchy operates to regulate and discipline women. By foregrounding male authority and the systemic subjugation of women, the paper analyses the text through a radical feminist lens without extending into a full Dalit feminist framework.

Abolishing Patriarchy and Social Structures through the Female Characters

Bhakkiyam, the central character, becomes a convict after having transcended the boundary of caste. Women from dominant communities are conditioned from birth to preserve caste and religious pride. They are revered as 'Goddess' if they adhere to cultural norms. However, they are condemned if they deviate from social expectations.

Bhakkiyam's relationship may initially be perceived as a personal or romantic choice; however, the narrative transforms this act into one of defiance through the community's response. The violent enforcement of caste norms reveals how individual choices are regulated within rigid social structures. In this sense, Bhakkiyam's act evolves from a private decision into a form of resistance that disrupts caste endogamy. Her defiance, though not explicitly articulated as political, becomes significant in exposing the mechanisms through which caste and patriarchy intersect. This study employs radical feminism as its primary theoretical framework to examine structures of gender oppression and male dominance in *Pethavan*.

In this novella, Bhakkiyam has challenged the century-old patriarchal control over women's bodies and choices, Bhakkiyam's right to choose her partner became a political act. The villagers' hatred towards her reveals society's fear of women's freedom. By all means, they try to uphold the pride of the caste by abusing her physically and mentally. "Even if he leaves her alone, she won't be. As they say, even if darkness dies, thieving hands will not stay still; she goes after him like an animal in heat" (27). These lines reflect how women's choices are denied and how society portrays them as a source of shame for the entire community whenever they act against tradition. Bhakkiyam lived in a time when women were restricted from choosing their partners on their own. Words like "shameless," "low," and "impure" are used as weapons to question Bhakkiyam's womanhood and virginity. The men of the village took the liberty to abuse women verbally, considering it an act of discipline to keep them in order.

"We left her almost dead; we tried chopping off her hair... but even with all that, her lust had no end" (17). These lines expose how male dominion extends its limits and turns into collective violence, sanctioned by the caste panchayat. It is not an act of individual cruelty but cruelty inflicted by a system enforcing female submission. It reveals how patriarchal power is structural, not personal. Through the lens of radical feminism, Bhakkiyam challenges traditional gender roles and crosses the caste restrictions that confine her identity and freedom.

Bhakkiyam's trust was shattered, and she was humiliated by the physical and emotional attacks of the panchayat. She desired to marry a man from a lower caste, opposing her father's decision. Unable to bear the pressure, her father committed suicide. As Keerthana(2022), mentions in her article, "The

structure of the violence not only destroys human body but also leaves its marks on the souls” (Keerthana 203).

Bhakkiyam experienced unbearable and indescribable sorrow but did not submit to the rules of the panchayat. Her act of disobedience shook the very foundation of the patriarchal system. This novella not only explores gender oppression but also shows how caste oppression intersects with it, revealing the deep roots of inequality in the society.

From a radical feminist lens, *Pethavan* reveals how patriarchal power operates through deeply rooted social institutions that dictate even the most intimate human relationships. The father emerges as a tragic figure caught within this system, where masculine authority is shaped and enforced by caste honour, family structures, and communal expectations. Though he embodies the role of a patriarchal enforcer, he is not emotionally detached; his love for his daughter creates a painful tension between personal affection and social obedience. The narrative thus exposes a disturbing paradox – while men are positioned as agents of patriarchal control, they are also bound by the very institutions they uphold. In this conflict, the father’s humanity clashes with institutionalized masculinity, showing how patriarchal systems compel individuals to act against their own emotional truths in the name of honour and social order.

One of the most disturbing truths in *Pethavan* is how women themselves – mothers, neighbours, relatives – perpetuate misogyny. Bhakkiyam’s mother, Samiyammal, joins the call for her daughter’s death, saying, “Bring me a bottle of Polidol. I will turn her into ashes without anyone seeing what happened.” This is not simple cruelty; it reflects how women internalize patriarchal values for survival. Imayam shows that gender inequality is not only imposed by men but sustained by women conditioned to fear of freedom.

Patriarchal power operates through institutions such as family, culture, and religion, which control women’s choices and sexuality. As Kate Millett states, “the imposition of male rule through institutions: patriarchal religion, the proprietary family, marriage, ‘the home,’ masculine-oriented culture, and a pervasive doctrine of male superiority” (Millett 366).

Women are constantly judged and reduced to commodities, regardless of their caste position, and continue to suffer under the dominance of patriarchal structures controlled by men. Across different stages of life – as grandmothers, mothers, daughters, cousins, and sisters – women are either active participants or silent witnesses to honour-based violence.

Similarly, women experience discrimination and constant scrutiny irrespective of their social status. As noted in Kavitha’s study on honor killings in *Pethavan*, women are often subjected to judgement and control within patriarchal society. Kavitha observes, “Women face constant scrutiny in all aspects of their lives” (Kavitha142). This observation highlights how patriarchal structures continue to restrict women’s freedom and reinforce social control over their choices (Kavitha 137).

By morning, the village learns that Pazhani of the Vandikkaran House has taken his life by consuming poison and is found lifeless in the fields, with only a dog circling the body in grief. The scene captures not just death but the crushing weight of social abandonment. Pazhani’s suicide reflects the unbearable burden of caste honour, as he is unable to confront the shame imposed by the community or endure the humiliation awaiting his family. In this sense, his act reads as an escape – not from life alone, but from the relentless moral policing of the village. Yet even in death, he remains bound to patriarchal logic, where a man’s worth is inseparable from honour and social standing. Bhakkiyam, however, represents a quiet but meaningful divergence. By stepping beyond the rigid expectations that define her world, she moves toward a space outside patriarchal control. While Pazhani’s end marks the destructive force of honour-bound masculinity, Bhakkiyam’s survival gestures toward resilience and the possibility of renewal beyond oppressive social codes.

Conclusion

Viewed through a radical feminist lens, *Pethavan* dismantles the comforting myth of the family as a space of protection and instead reveals it as a structure shaped by control and surveillance. The narrative shows how ideas of honour and caste quietly govern intimate lives, placing women under constant scrutiny while binding men to roles they cannot escape. The father's final act emerges from this suffocating framework, where affection is overridden by the fear of social judgment. Rather than presenting violence as an isolated tragedy, the novella exposes the deeper logic that normalizes such acts within everyday life. At the same time, the emotional unease running through the story unsettles the authority of patriarchy, suggesting that these systems endure not because they are natural, but because they remain unquestioned. By bringing this tension to the surface, *Pethavan* invites readers to rethink the cultural values that sustain gendered violence and to imagine the possibility of lives shaped beyond the limits of honour and control.

Pethavan ultimately calls for a critical reassessment of patriarchal structures by revealing their dependence on caste-based ideologies. The narrative challenges the notion of honor as tied to caste purity and exposes how women both internalize and reproduce patriarchal values. At the same time, it highlights the paradox wherein individuals become both victims and agents of oppression. Through its tragic unfolding, the novella compels readers to confront the normalized violence embedded within social practices, thereby advocating for an intersectional understanding of gender and caste oppression.

References

- Imayam. (2015). *Pethavan: The begetter* (G. Subramaniam, Trans.). Oxford University Press.
- Kavitha, S. S. (2019). Emasculating caste: Honour killings as portrayed in *Pethavan (The begetter)*. *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research*, 6(4), 137-145.
- Keerthana, K. (2022). An overview of *Pethavan (The begetter)* as a Dalit literature. *International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities*, 10(1), 202-204.
- Koedt, A., Levine, E., & Rapone, A. (1973). *Radical feminism*. Quadrangle Books.