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BEYOND THE BARRIERS : A STUDY OF IMAYAM'S *BEAST OF BURDEN* AND
ARUMUGAM

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ABSTRACT

Language is the most preferred method of communication in our life. It is the tool we use not only to empower ourselves but also to direct our energy. Language has immense power and its impact depends on how we use it. Writers, who know that language has such power, use it to express their ideas and thoughts, whatever be their genre. The novels and other works of writer Iyayam exemplify the power and effect language could have on the readers as it has become the medium of his expression. Iyayam, whose original name is V. Annamalai, was born in 1964. A prominent Indian novelist in Tamil, Iyayam has received several awards for his writings, The present paper is an attempt to examine the language used by the Dalit people in the Tamil society as reflected in the works of Iyayam as he is using not his language but the language of his characters. He is not the narrator of the stories. Instead he lets one of his characters speak. The characters in *Beast of Burden* and *Arumugam* speak of their condition, sufferings and struggles and the pain they undergo comes out through their speech. Each Dalit writer has his/her own style of wielding the language through which their painful experiences are revealed. Their stories are based on real life.

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Iyayam, whose original name is V. Annamalai, was born in 1964. A prominent Indian novelist in Tamil, Iyayam is an English teacher at Virdhachalam, "I write each of my stories 12 to 14 times to get the exact structure right. Be it a novel or short story, they have their own rules" said Iyayam. He attended a thirty-day writers' workshop organized by the All Indian Catholic Universities Federation (AICUF). He has read all writings of Jayakanthan and Poomani and pamphlets and discussions on the ethnic crisis in Sri Lanka were a major

influence on him. He lets his ideology emerge from life and he portrays real-life situations in his works. He has a concern that Dalit writers are not addressing the greatness in Dalit life – a lifewhere language is alive, where there is no widowhood, and where there is happiness.

Imayam has received several awards for his writings, including the Agni Akshara Award (1994), The Tamil Nadu Progressive Writers Association Award (1994), Amutham Adigallakkiya Award (1998), and the SahityaAkademi Award in Tamil. Imayam's work is considered one of the classics of modern Tamil literature, especially in Dalit writing.

The present paper is an attempt to examine the language used by the Dalit people in the Tamil society as reflected in the works of Imayam as he is using not his language but the language of his characters. He is not the narrator of the stories. Instead he lets one of his characters speak. The characters in *Beast of Burden* and *Arumugam* speak of their condition, sufferings and struggles and the pain they undergo comes out through their speech. Each Dalit writer has his/her own style of wielding the language through which their painful experiences are revealed. Their stories are based on real life.

Imayam's stories have the third-person narrator. His novel *Arumugam* portrays the condition and plight of thousands of poor and helpless people living around the area of Auroville. The writer who is touched by the condition of the people lets such horrors come out through the mouth of the characters themselves. *Arumugam* who is obviously the narrator, is superior to the characters. The writer himself limits the use of direct exposition by the narrator and substitutes instead to the privilege of seeing into the minds of more than one character, based on the analysis of the language used by the upper class people to treat the poor, lower class people.

The language used by the Dalit writers is different from that of other writers as these writers use language of the people belonging to that community. Their works are very realistic as they bring out the existing and painful conditions of community. In spite of the level and spread of education and changes in the mindset of the people and the measures taken by the governmental system, the discrimination is not completely wiped out. It is still prevalent and the dailies and magazines bring reports of such events happening due to such discrimination.

Imayam in his novella *Pethavan: The Begetter* brings out the purpose of his writing.

The question *why* I produced these works is far more important than *how* I wrote them. I wrote them. I write because it makes me contemplate society and the human condition. Writing makes me ponder over social issues with care. I have certain questions and criticism about the society in which we live, against its psychology, against its social and cultural values, and about its system of justice. This is the substance of all my writings.

My intention is to raise questions. Raising questions and the quest for answers form the basis of writing; not providing all answers or conclusions or solutions. Giving shape to the questions and criticism that lie deep within the recesses of society's conscience and establishing it on the foundations of truth are the essence of my writings. The writer need not talk about, or defend, his writings.(xiv)

The language used by the upper caste or dominant community, and the Dalit aggressiveness are captured in Imayam's writings; it is not just a language, but it expresses their identity also. His writings stand as an example for expressing the traditional identity, and all the works are based on the lives of the Dalit people, and their experiences. The language reveals and develops in the course of the narration and helps as to how to read the Dalits as individuals, and within the context of the society.

All the Dalit novels express the reflection of writers. Writer Imayam's point is that a testimony narrative like it is not merely a testimony of a private life. It must be treated as a 'point of conflation between text and life, a textual testimony which can penetrate into us like an actual life. In the short story "Expectations of a Young Girl"

There were nearly five hundred to six hundred houses in the village; at least three hundred of them were quite rich; Only Chettiar's house in the entire village had a toilet. Kokila was wondering why was it that no woman thought of this problem and continued to squat in the open area. She asked her

mother why can't she build a toilet, but her mother cited their poor financial condition and continued to chat with another squatter friend Poongavanam, and chasing pigs! . . . they had to go with a stick in hand, chasing pigs, squatting in the open air and relieving themselves. Kokila decided that if she married, she would marry a city man who could provide a separate toilet for her!

This brings out the flight of the people who, like others, should have the right to experience and enjoy life in all its essence and dignity.

The prevailing oppressive system refuses to see or acknowledge the extent of socially – constructed atrocities. There are no 'outside' (non – Dalit) witness to these events because the social structures disallow such a witnessing. There are no inside witnesses either because, unfortunately, the social structure and acts of literature annihilate the Dalit's history by refusing their right to bear witness to the atrocity. Therefore, it is only through the writing or performance that the Dalits can reconstitute the inside witness. One must acknowledge here the language of the other and response to the memory, to those who are no longer here (former victims, the history of caste atrocity in India), those who are not yet here (the future generation). In the novel *Beast of Burden* the writer tell about the condition of the Dalit people who are living under the control of the upper class people. They express their feelings through muttering song;

Savuri was muttering to himself one of Periyaan's most frequently repeated songs:

Eight feet come towards you
Two feet lie stretched out
Within the pot comes a fire
Along come the family and kinsfolk
The drum comes with its heavy beat
A thousand, thousand follow on
Many come with stricken hearts
Wearing garlands of silence. (243)

The Dalit who has been refused the right to self -representation has begun to speak. In the act of speaking or writing they take on the role of witness. The writing allows the Dalit to re-assess his life. Writer Imayam states that those days of suffering are now a source of 'solace'. He is a connoisseur of Dalit narrative and feels that, Dalit literature should not be viewed as a mere story of the individual's tragedy. Instead it should be the story of the Dalit struggle and its relationship with authority. It produces a political reaction. It is provocative and unpalatable to the champions of oppressive caste and class system. It should bring about chaos into the hierarchical relationship between the dominant and the dominated. It is singular in concept but plural in practice.

Imayam's *Beast of Burden* represents the struggle of a community, making a critique of the religious life and the poor condition in the village and he describes the dreadful division and oppression. He is very much against calling the particular type of literature as Dalit literature. "Today, if a person from Coimbatore writes a novel or short story, it becomes Kongu region literature. If the same person writes from Nagercoil or Kovilpatti, it becomes Nanjil literature and Karisal region literature respectively. But if I write from Cuddalore, it will be branded as Dalit writing".

Imayam's *Beast of Burden* presents in a very a neat manner the division that exists between the caste Hindus and the untouchables. The parayar settlement in five streets was next to the pallar settlement and next to the cemetery. The low caste people are ghettoized. As they are the walking carrion, they live close to the place of the dead. When they go to shell the groundnuts for the Naickers, they do the work in the cowshed. When the Naicker ladies give the leftover food to the parayar ladies, they would stand far away and throw it into the vessels kept on the ground.

The Dalit people constitute a large segment of the population, and they have been forced to mobilize themselves in order to fight for their rights and justice in postcolonial India. Dalit human rights emerge in a national context but, they write about their own life explicitly referring to the atrocities that were committed on them in India; it also develops a notion of the human subject that can be serviceable within multiple

contexts of suffering. Indeed, the narrative tradition of recognizing the outcast human in India offers strong parallels with other such humans the world over. In its representation of suffering humans, Dalit writing generates abject type for possible appropriation by a global literary field for human rights. They invoke objectification - deliberately echoing objectification to signal social processes of economic and political oppression – modes of atrocity and injustice but also the representational process.

Imayam in his novel *Arumugam* presents the people who are living around Pondicherry Auroville and their sufferings. It is in the recognition of the Dalit and the other that is the bearing witness to another Dalit that the protagonists of the Dalit narrative discover their own humanity. The primary witness proposes a programme for the community, nation, or even humanity. This is the ethics of primary witnessing to the survivors duty to remember. Imayam writes in a formal style reporting the happenings and incidents with a complete lack of inhibition as he uses the colloquial conversational styles of the protagonists both in their reference to their work and in their exchange of banter between themselves.

As the Dalit narrator moves from a narration of their heroic survival towards a voicing or advocacy of the suffering of another, they also seek to build a common platform with sympathy for others by making a demand on his readers. The vanna and vannaati of *Beast of Burden* reflect the Dalit culture as they make constant references to their life in their conversation. Imayam's novels abound in the descriptions of the cultural practices, folklore and local proverbs. The conversational style of *Beast of Burden* is full of proverbs, sayings and analogies as the protagonists are emphasizing a life of hardships and troubles with a few rewards,

'If you chase a dog, it is not only the dog whose legs will hurt.'

'Even though the rain falls from the heavens, the water has to flow along the earth.'

'In a house where there is nothing, what does it matter, who rules?'

'He hoped to belch after feasting, but his stomach will only rumble from fasting.'(v)

Imayam's novels *Beast of Burden* and *Arumugam* reflect through the formal reference to their life. The books have mourning song and laments (oppari) - the cultural heritage of the Dalit people and a necessary part of their life which reflect their painful experiences though they are being rapidly lost in the changing times. In the novel *Beast of Burden* the character Arokkyam's frustration and sorrow that Sahayam her husband, or her daughter –in-law, wish not to have anything to do with the traditional role of vannaatti. The novel ends with a cycle of oppari songs, with its own poetic system based on punning, playing on symbols of various life styles of the Dalit people in the society like marriage and death, and with internal as well as initial rhymes, and the following oppari sung by Savuri at the time of a death in his village clearly depicts their condition:

With money, elelo, the bow is bent

(chorus) The bow is bent

Amma, this man is of Karna'svamsam

(chorus) Of his vamsam

With cash, elelo, the bow is bent

The bow is bent

Amma, this man is of Duryodhana'svamsam

Of his vamsam

With coins, elelo, the bow is bent

The bow is bent

Amma, this man is of the Pandavas'vamsam

Of their vamsam

Good money, elelo, he must give us
 He must give us
 All his bad deeds will come to an end
 Elelo. . . (31-32)

In the novel *Arumugam* the writer brings out different aspects through the conversion character. He explains that life is not same for all individuals in a society especially for Dalit the relationship between them and the upper class people, their way of life with the rules and regulations of Arrovilla, the ethics, the morals, the conventions, the beliefs, and traditions of life in the society. The characters, who are confined to a limited way of leading their life are not great thinkers or rebels but people who belong to the lower class. Imayam criticizes the Indian dominant narrative forms and their language by exposing the duplicity of dominant discourses within the society generating a different history. Through their writings, the dalit writers reflect the narrative recovery of emotional life, pointing out the fault lines, conflicts, and repression within dominant historical narratives. Imayam's narratives in the same way reveal that, even decades after political independence, social justice is still a dream for the Dalit. In the novel *Arumugam* the woman character Chinnapponnu says about her life:

"How can I live without you, my thangam? I've become an orphan. Ah, she's left me, and her story has ended . . .

*A King was he crowned;
 a mansion he lorded over,
 Ruled the land did he;
 With health and wealth showered,
 For years he held sway;
 Of long life, no dearth,
 But disappear he did,
 Under six feet of earth,"(165-166)*

Dalit writing invites readers to map a comparative history of the trauma, inasmuch as it embodies 'the effect' that will affect the geographical and political barriers. There is a considerable risk in its calling for such a history because oppression is not the same in either form or impact across the world. Dalit writing is to make an attempt to comprehend all the greatness as well as all the shame associated with human life in the society by the upper class people. They try to express their concern over the human beings losing against nature and all the emptiness surrounding life. Ashis Nandy proposes a system in which territories and expressions of the suffering of the Dalit can be linked that can be productively applied to demonstrate how a comparative history of trauma can be developed. Nandy, arguing a case for treating the Third World's suffering as representative of global suffering, writes about the sloganeering of its well-wishers in the following manner,

. . . suffering everywhere in the world and in all past times; second, by internalizing or owing up to the outside forces of oppressed and, then, coping with them as inner vectors; and third by recognizing the oppressed or marginalized selves of the First and Second Worlds as civilizational allies in the battle against institutionalized suffering.(441)

Sivakami, the Dalit Woman writer said in an interview "I have elsewhere explored the centrality of such a 'translation' or folklorisation of human-rights discourses as central to the subaltern's empowerment and cultural citizenship" (2011). Rather than producing texts that can be readily classified as social novels or women's fiction, writer Imayam's works have destabilized the genre. Imayam's novels took aim at the empowerment of the subaltern as they offer criticism of the society. In his novel *Beasts of Burden* the villagers and their beliefs and customs are brought out vividly by him. He describes how the people gather for their worship:

They all stood about in a circle, their hands together in worship, waiting expectantly with fear and devotion, for the words that the goddess would say.

'Ah ha...ha...haha...'
 'Speak to us, mother, Mahamaayi.'
 'What is your complaint?'
 'Rain... Rain... we need rain...'
 'In eight days, counting from today, the river will overflow its bank.'
 'That is what we pray for, mother.'
 'Kali... Kali... Mahamaayi.'(187)

These writers produce novels that are readily assimilable under the category of women's or social novels for example, if they move only from subjugation to celebration. They argue about the risk of retaining the same oppressive structures, social as well as narrative. This unique feature in Imayam offers a whole new paradigm of postcolonial resistance literature for it resists ghettoisation under the 'authentic subaltern, tag' as is evident from his view against the name 'dalit literature.'

As a child grows up the learning the language of the parents, the individual creates a language of the self, which interacts with and draws upon the language of the tribe, community and finally the language of history itself. All characters in Imayam's works express their life through proverbs, mourning songs etc. The song, sung by the woman character Arokkyam in the novel *Beasts of Burden* describes their way of life in following manner:

The blue-necked pigeon builds its nest for him
 The peacock descends and call out for him
 The little dove will build her nest for him
 The young peacock will call out to him
 The money he gave the Dasi
 Would build a golden palace
 The money he gave the koothi
 Would raise a whole gopuram.
 'However close husband and wife are, is it possible for them to die together? Are we born together, after all? . . .
 O Jesus, O God
 Saint Anthony has no eyes
 Saint Anthony is died
 Saint Anthony is a corpe. He has been dead a long time.
 My one desire and dream has gone, burnt out like charcoal
 You've disappeared like someone we dreamed about.
 Now there is no laughter left in me.
 Coriander, jasmine, alli
 Should flower upon the climbing vine
 There were no flowers in the pond
 For they flowered in your intestines.
 And you left us, wrapped in your shroud.(313)

Imayam offers multiple voices within the ravings of the abused woman in order to foreground the Dalit condition in the novel *Arumugam*. Arumugam's anguished voice narrating his trouble is the personal one. The reference to their local god, who will, he believes, avenge his humiliation, is the mythic voice. The historical voice is subsumed into these two when Arumugam expresses the poor Dalit's inability to be recognized as humans with dignity in the society. Their voices and the three contexts thus set out are, the personal, the historical-social and mythical.

It is worthwhile to make a note of similar things reflected in Bama. In Bama's novel *Sangati*, while the narrator discusses marriage and its prospects with other older women, her mother says to her:

Haven't you heard the words the priest speaks at the time of the *thali*-tying? . . . He says 'What God puts together, let no man put asunder' . . . The nuns say that the promise we make to the priest is as good as the promise we make to God . . . We have to live our lives according to the promise we made to God, in front of four, five people.(94)

The voice of scriptural and patriarchal authority speaks through the mother character in the novel *Beast of Burden*. The mother character Arokkyamlaments about their life in the society. The mother here is simply the medium of articulation minus subjective agency. She frames her identity and existence within this voice of scriptural and social authority.

Everything good in my life has gone
 My strength has left me
 I have no possessions left
 Everything has vanished away like smoke, like
 Magic
 I had no complaints
 I lacked for nothing
 I was like a tamarind tree
 Like a queen
 Like a prince
 I was as well off as a vellachi
 I was as proud as the Maniyakkaaran's daughter
 Now I'm only a shit- stained stone
 What if the vannan disappears in the shit pond?
 Who cares if he is washed away by the river?
 I followed like a shadow
 I placed my feet in the footprints of the townsfolk
 Now you have blinded me, God
 Why did you create me as the downtrodden of the
 Downtrodden, Saint Anthony?
 I did not fear life
 I did not fear death
 I did not even fear the grave
 But now I am frightened of the people
 Now I have no one to ask after me
 There is no one to exchange a word with me
 There is no shade where I can shelter
 I have passed every hour of every day as if I were
 Walking through fire
 I was secure in the belief that where there are
 Sheep, there must be a shepherd
 Who is there today to belch after feasting
 We all belch with fasting
 As if we are yawning
 How can one who is fasting shut her eyes at night?(284)

Thus language in the hands of the writer has become powerful weapon. The characters portrayed in the novels are based on real characters as the experiences faced by them. When the voice of the writers and their characters reach the desired and required distance and readership, their voice will definitely be heard. The resistance that will follow will prove to be a resistance that will bring along with it the desired effect. Removing each and every stumbling block which stands as a barrier in the way of attaining equality and dignity, though a

Himalayan task, is a task that has already been started. Each and every attempt made by writers towards attaining that goal will become a beacon of light showing others the path and a milestone in their journey towards equality and dignity.

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