



# **SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND THE EXTREME EXPLOITATION OF DALIT WOMEN'S LABOR: A CRITICAL STUDY OF SIVAKAMI'S NOVEL—"PAZHAYANA KAZHITHALUM"**

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## **Abstract:**

Sexual violence and sexual access are sensitive topics that play a vital role in maintaining the caste system. Women from lower castes, due to their disadvantaged social and economic positions, often find it exceedingly difficult to evade assaults from men belonging to more powerful castes. In this context, caste is perceived almost as a natural element in the understanding of chastity. However, it is also essential to consider another important factor that frequently goes unnoticed: the relationship between a low caste man and an upper caste woman. The novel emphasizes that the caste system not only legitimizes the subjugation and exploitation of lower castes by those in higher positions, but also perpetuates the oppression and violence faced by women in general. Women are situated at the lowest tier of the caste, class, and gender hierarchy, consistently suffering from exploitation, discrimination, and physical violence. Sivakami, through the character Thangam, has highlighted the issue of sexual violence against Dalit women, which represents a significant aspect of caste hegemony.

**Keywords:** Subjugation, Exploitation, oppression, violence, gender Hierarchy

## **Introduction:**

Indian society has long been shaped by the caste system, which determines social hierarchy and power relations. Within this structure, Dalits occupy the lowest position and face continuous discrimination and exploitation. Dalit women suffer the most because they are oppressed not only by caste but also by patriarchy and poverty. Their labour is exploited and their bodies become sites where caste dominance is

Sivakami's novel *Pazhayana Kazhithalum* vividly portrays these realities through the experiences of Thangam, a Dalit widow who becomes a victim of sexual violence and social humiliation. The novel highlights how caste privilege enables upper-caste men to exploit Dalit women without fear of accountability. At the same time, it exposes how patriarchal attitudes within Dalit communities themselves contribute to the continued subjugation of women.

The narrative demonstrates that sexual violence is not merely an individual act but a social mechanism used to maintain caste hierarchy. Dalit women are denied agency and treated as objects of labour and sexual gratification. Through Thangam's story, Sivakami critically examines the intersection of caste, gender, and power.

### **Sexual Violence as a Tool of Caste Domination:**

Thangam's character illustrates the vulnerability of Dalit women in a caste-based society. After the death of her husband, she loses economic security and is denied her rightful inheritance by her brothers-in-law. Forced to work as a labourer in the fields of the upper-caste landlord Paranjothi Udayaar, she becomes dependent on him for survival. This dependence makes her an easy target for sexual exploitation.

Udayaar takes advantage of Thangam's helplessness and repeatedly assaults her. When she attempts to explain her situation, she reveals that she initially resisted but was unable to escape because he was the landowner who provided her livelihood. Her submission reflects the harsh reality faced by many Dalit women whose economic dependence leaves them powerless against upper-caste authority.

The reaction of society further exposes the injustice of caste patriarchy. When Udayaar's wife discovers the relationship, she sends her relatives to brutally assault Thangam. Instead of condemning the man responsible, the community blames the woman. Thangam is beaten, insulted, and publicly shamed, illustrating how the victim becomes the target of social punishment while the perpetrator escapes accountability.

This situation reflects a broader social pattern where sexual violence against Dalit women is normalized. Their bodies are treated as accessible to upper-caste men, and such acts are often justified or ignored by society. Through this episode, Sivakami demonstrates how caste privilege protects perpetrators while silencing victims.

### **Thangam's Vulnerability and Sexual Exploitation:**

Thangam's suffering begins with economic dispossession. After her husband's death, her in-laws deny her rightful inheritance, forcing her into wage labor under the upper-caste landlord Paranjothi Udayaar. Her sexual exploitation by Udayaar is not a matter of consent but a consequence of structural inequality. Her

own words reflect helpless submission rather than agency, illustrating how caste and class vulnerability enable sexual violence.

When Udayaar's wife discovers the relationship, Thangam is brutally beaten, demonstrating how women themselves participate in enforcing caste and patriarchal norms. Instead of receiving justice, Thangam is shamed, isolated, and blamed by her community.

### **From Sexual Violence to Caste Politics:**

When Thangam seeks Kaathamuthu's help, he reframes her case of sexual exploitation into a caste issue. He dictates a false complaint that shifts the focus from rape to caste-based insult. This transformation is crucial: it reveals that caste carries greater political weight than gender violence. Kaathamuthu uses caste discourse strategically, not to secure justice for Thangam, but to consolidate his own authority. His actions expose how even within oppressed communities; women's suffering can be instrumentalized for larger political gains.

### **Patriarchy within the Marginalized: Kaathamuthu's Exploitation:**

Kaathamuthu's exploitation of Thangam reveals the persistence of patriarchy within marginalized communities. After extracting compensation from Udayaar, he deceives Thangam and eventually sexually exploits her, making her his mistress. This demonstrates that Dalit women face double oppression—from upper-caste dominance and intra-caste patriarchy. Kaathamuthu's justification of his actions reflects deeply internalized gender bias.

### **Manipulation and Patriarchal Power within Dalit Communities:**

Although Kaathamuthu initially appears to be a protector of the oppressed, the novel gradually reveals his manipulative nature. He is respected in the village for his ability to resolve conflicts and defend the interests of the Dalit community. However, his actions show that he often prioritizes personal gain over justice.

When Thangam seeks his help, Kaathamuthu questions her character instead of offering immediate support. His interrogation reflects the patriarchal tendency to blame women for sexual violence. He asks why she did not choose a man from her own caste, implying that she is responsible for the consequences of her relationship with an upper-caste man.

Later, Kaathamuthu files a complaint with the police, but he deliberately transforms the issue of sexual exploitation into a caste dispute. By framing the incident as an act of caste discrimination rather than sexual violence, he shifts attention away from Thangam's suffering. His strategy highlights the harsh reality that caste politics often overshadow the specific struggles of women.

Ultimately, Kaathamuthu arranges a settlement with Udayaar through a village panchayat. Instead of ensuring justice for Thangam, he negotiates financial compensation from the landlord. The money intended for Thangam eventually ends up in his hands, exposing his selfish motives.

The exploitation does not end there. Kaathamuthu later seduces Thangam and keeps her as his mistress, demonstrating that even men within the oppressed community can participate in the subjugation of women. This episode reveals that Dalit women face patriarchal oppression not only from upper-caste men but also from men within their own caste.

### **Labour Exploitation and Economic Dependency:**

In addition to sexual violence, the novel highlights the extreme exploitation of Dalit women's labour. Thangam's economic vulnerability forces her to work in the fields of upper-caste landlords under harsh conditions. The dependence on these employers creates a power imbalance that allows exploitation to continue unchecked.

The upper-caste landowners treat Dalit labourers as disposable workers whose lives have little value. When tensions arise between the castes, the landlords threaten to deny them work, knowing that starvation will force them into submission. Such tactics reveal how economic control becomes another instrument of caste domination.

The novel also illustrates the lack of unity among lower-caste communities. Different sub-castes remain divided, which weakens their collective resistance against exploitation. Upper-caste groups often manipulate these divisions to maintain their authority and prevent any unified challenge to their power.

Through these portrayals, Sivakami emphasizes that the exploitation of Dalit women is closely connected to economic inequality. Their labour is undervalued, and their survival depends on those who exploit them.

### **Social Attitudes and Internalized Oppression:**

Another disturbing aspect portrayed in the novel is the internalization of patriarchal and caste-based values by society, including women themselves. Instead of sympathizing with Thangam, many women in her community condemn her for bringing disgrace to their caste.

They argue that she should have remained obedient to her brothers-in-law and avoided any relationship with an upper-caste man. Such attitudes reveal how deeply patriarchal ideology has influenced social thinking. Women are expected to maintain chastity and honor, while men's actions are rarely questioned.

The humiliation faced by Thangam demonstrates the psychological impact of caste and gender discrimination. She becomes isolated and helpless, unable to seek justice or support from the community.

## **Internal Divisions within Dalit Communities:**

Sivakami highlights the fragmentation within Dalit communities, divided into sub-castes such as Paraiyar, Pallan, and others. These divisions prevent collective resistance and weaken their struggle against oppression. In contrast, upper castes remain united when confronting Dalits. This lack of unity allows dominant groups to manipulate and exploit marginalized communities more effectively.

## **Dalit Feminism and the Question of Agency:**

Thangam's character embodies the concept of intersectionality, where caste, class, and gender converge to produce layered oppression. Her inability to seek justice reflects systemic silencing. As scholars like Anupama Rao argue, Dalit women's bodies are often treated as sites of caste assertion, where violence is normalized and rendered invisible. The novel exposes how society blames the victim while protecting the perpetrator, reinforcing gender inequality within caste structures.

## **Symbolism and Social Transformation:**

Sivakami uses powerful imagery to depict change. The metaphor of the banyan tree represents collective unity and strength, contrasting with earlier fragmentation. Similarly, the imagery of blooming and withering flowers signifies generational transition—old values fading as new ideas take root. Kaathamuthu's decline symbolizes the collapse of outdated leadership models.

## **Education and the Emergence of Social Awareness:**

Despite its bleak portrayal of oppression, the novel also suggests the possibility of social change. Sivakami introduces younger characters such as Gowri, Rajendran, and Chandran, who represent a new generation with greater awareness and critical thinking.

Gowri, Kaathamuthu's daughter, is particularly significant. She questions her father's actions and refuses to accept the patriarchal norms that govern her society. Unlike many women in the village, she values education and independence. Eventually she becomes a lecturer, symbolizing empowerment through knowledge.

Education becomes a crucial factor in challenging caste and gender inequality. The younger generation begins to recognize the injustices faced by Dalits and women, and they aspire to create a more equitable society. This transformation suggests that social progress is possible when individuals question oppressive traditions.

## Conclusion:

The critical study of Pazhayana Kazhithalum reveals that the novel is not merely a narrative about caste oppression, but a profound exploration of the intricate and often violent intersections between caste, gender, and class. Sivakami presents a layered critique of social structures by exposing how sexual violence and the exploitation of Dalit women's labour function as systematic tools for sustaining caste hierarchy and patriarchal control. Through the experiences of Thangam, the text underscores that Dalit women are positioned at the most vulnerable intersection of multiple forms of marginalization, where neither caste solidarity nor gender justice offers them complete protection.

One of the central insights that emerges from this study is that sexual violence in the novel is not incidental or individual, but structural and ideological. The assault of Thangam by Paranjothi Udayaar is emblematic of how upper-caste male power operates through control over the bodies of Dalit women. This control is normalized within the framework of caste ideology, where notions of purity and pollution paradoxically coexist with the sexual accessibility of "lower" caste women. The violence inflicted upon Thangam is not recognized as a crime by society; instead, it is either justified, trivialized, or redirected into a caste-based conflict. This reveals a deeply entrenched social logic in which the dignity and agency of Dalit women are systematically denied.

Equally significant is the novel's critique of patriarchy within the Dalit community itself. Kaathamuthu, who appears as a leader and protector of the oppressed, embodies the contradictions of subaltern masculinity. While he challenges upper-caste dominance and advocates for Dalit rights, he simultaneously reproduces patriarchal exploitation by manipulating and sexually exploiting Thangam. His actions demonstrate that resistance to caste oppression does not automatically translate into gender justice. In fact, the novel suggests that Dalit women often remain subordinated even within their own communities, as male authority continues to dictate their lives and bodies. Kaathamuthu's transformation of Thangam's sexual exploitation into a caste issue further highlights how women's suffering is instrumentalized for broader political gains, thereby erasing the specificity of gendered violence.

Another crucial dimension explored in the novel is the fragmentation within the Dalit community. Sivakami illustrates how divisions among sub-castes weaken collective resistance and make them more susceptible to exploitation by upper castes. The lack of unity not only undermines their struggle for social justice but also exacerbates the vulnerability of women like Thangam. The internalization of caste hierarchies among the oppressed themselves reflects the pervasive nature of caste ideology, which continues to shape identities and relationships at every level of society. This fragmentation ensures that the burden of oppression falls disproportionately on those already marginalized, particularly Dalit women.

The role of social institutions, such as the panchayat and the police, further reinforces the systemic nature

frameworks, often protecting the powerful and silencing the vulnerable. Thangam's case is manipulated, distorted, and ultimately resolved in a manner that benefits the men involved, leaving her with neither justice nor autonomy. The legal and social systems thus emerge as complicit in perpetuating violence, highlighting the need for structural transformation rather than superficial reform.

Despite its bleak portrayal of oppression, the novel also gestures toward the possibility of change through education and generational shift. Characters like Gowri represent a new consciousness that questions traditional norms and challenges both caste and gender hierarchies. Her refusal to accept the fate imposed on women of her community signifies a break from the past and an assertion of individual agency. Education, in this context, becomes a powerful tool for self-realization and resistance, enabling individuals to critically engage with and dismantle oppressive structures. The emergence of educated youth who advocate for dignity, equality, and self-respect indicates a gradual but significant transformation within the community.

Furthermore, the novel's use of metaphor, particularly in its concluding imagery of withering and blooming flowers, reinforces the inevitability of change. Sivakami suggests that while oppressive systems may appear deeply rooted, they are not immutable. The decline of figures like Kaathamuthu symbolizes the fading relevance of older modes of leadership that fail to address the complexities of gender justice. In contrast, the rise of new voices and values points to the emergence of a more inclusive and equitable social order. This transition, however, is neither immediate nor effortless; it requires sustained struggle, awareness, and collective action.

Importantly, the study highlights that the liberation of Dalit women cannot be achieved in isolation from broader social transformation. Gender justice is inextricably linked to the dismantling of caste hierarchy and economic exploitation. The novel makes it clear that any movement for social change must address the interconnected nature of oppression, recognizing that caste, class, and gender are mutually reinforcing systems. Dalit feminism, as reflected in Sivakami's narrative, calls for a holistic approach that centers the experiences and voices of Dalit women, challenging both external and internal structures of domination.

In conclusion, Pazhayana Kazhithalum serves as a powerful critique of the socio-cultural realities that sustain violence against Dalit women. Through its nuanced portrayal of characters and conflicts, the novel exposes the deep-rooted inequalities that continue to shape Indian society. It compels readers to confront uncomfortable truths about caste privilege, patriarchal authority, and the complicity of social institutions. At the same time, it offers a vision of hope grounded in education, awareness, and collective resistance.

The study ultimately affirms that the struggle for Dalit women's liberation is both urgent and complex. It requires not only the recognition of their oppression but also a commitment to transforming the structures that perpetuate it. Sivakami's work thus stands as an important contribution to Dalit feminist discourse,

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