
**An Intersectional Voice of Consciousness: Gender and Culture in Imayam's
*Beast of Burden***

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Abstract: The growing literary consciousness among writers on experiencing and observing intersections of gender and cultural disparities is evident in their attempts to address the spectrum of focal societal issues that are prevalent in that context in any society. The issues of an individual or a community that faces intersectional issues can be analysed to promote equality and put an end to societal disparities in the present scenario. This paper explores the issues of gender and cultural disparities that are applicable in the novel *Beast of Burden*. It highlights the fact that these subjects are relevant even today, namely the continuance of caste hierarchy and its detrimental impact on the lives of marginalised individuals, even in the era of globalisation. The writer aptly characterises this marginalised society as cancerous, as it advocates the inhumane treatment meted out to a Vannaan family in one of the South Indian villages. Throughout the novel, he raises profound questions regarding the moral principles of mercy, kindness, and compassion, which appear to have been absent from this society. Through his inconclusive end, the writer effectively stimulates the conscience of each reader, prompting them to recognise the continued barbarism within the society. In conclusion, it offers a comprehensive exploration of the character Arokyyam, whose intersectional consciousness of disparities strikes a balance between gender and culture, as depicted in the novel. By dissecting her experiences, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the problems of the individual in society, which should strive for social justice and equality.

Keywords: Caste Discrimination, Subaltern Struggle, Identity Crisis, Hegemony.

Introduction: The literary contributions of Imayam centre on the challenges faced by marginalised individuals within society as a result of deeply ingrained societal norms rooted in long-standing traditional practices. These can be analysed using a theoretical framework of 'Intersectionality' to find ways to understand and determine these pertinent issues. Through her Intersectionality's paradigmatic ideas, Collins stated that it can be employed to solve "social problems within a given local, regional, national, or global context that requires intersectional analyses" (Collins 44). Imayam's works vouch for it, and the narratives produced by the individual in question are reflective of societal influences rather than being personally authored. He claims his inquiries and critiques about the societal framework in which one resides, highlighting its malevolent aspects, such as the oppression faced by marginalised groups, the psychological implications, the social and cultural values, as well as the presence of an unjust system and moral deficiency. The individual in question played a pivotal role in formulating inquiries and critiques that emerged within society. By delving into the depths of societal consciousness and grounding it in the principles of veracity, his written works encapsulate its fundamental essence. This study explores the voice of the character Arokkyam, whose consciousness experiences the intersections of gender and cultural disparities in the novel *Beast of Burden*. It highlights the fact that these issues are relevant even today, namely the continuance of caste hierarchy and its detrimental impact on the lives of marginalised individuals, even in the era of globalisation. The writer characterises this marginalised society as cancerous, as it advocates the inhumane treatment through different factors meted out to a Vannaan family in one of the South Indian villages. Throughout the novel, he raises profound questions regarding the moral principles of mercy, kindness, and compassion, which appear to have been absent from this society. Through his conclusion in the novel, the writer effectively stimulates the consciences of each reader, prompting them to recognise the continued barbarism within society. The following section presents a review of the literature of this study.

Review of Literature: This section deals with the work already done in the related area of Imayam's *Beast of Burden* and its intersectional consciousness of discrimination based on gender and culture, with a special focus on Imayam's *Beast of Burden*. In their research article, R. Jayakumar and T. Deivasigamani explored the suffering and misery of oppressed people in Imayam's *Beasts of Burden*. They remarked that his main and other characters pertained to class tensions, class distinction, and social eviction. It emphasized how upper-class communities victimised disadvantaged individuals and their physical, expressive, and economic hardships. Their complications were regarded as low among Dalits, who are victimized and exploited by the upper castes and within their community, which is the issue in the work, *Beasts of Burden*. It further illustrated how the downtrodden were just capitulating, relinquishing, and enslaved by dominating classes, and it pictured the marginalised woman, Arokkyam, and her life experiences.

In their paper, G. Naveen Kumar and K. Ravichandran attempted to raise the conditions of the downtrodden and how they had struggled to acquire their basic necessities throughout their life from the upper caste. Similarly, they remarked how the writer used

modernization as a tool to destroy their livelihood drastically. According to M. Charmaigne Owenita and V. Francis, Dalit literature deals with the literature of the downtrodden people, illustrating their distress, miseries, dissatisfactions, losses, embarrassments, depressions, and oppressions. It furthermore represented their lively culture, desires, and significance. This paper examined how Dalits were depicted in society and the individualism crisis faced by the Dalit populace in Tamil society as contemplated in *Arumugam* and *Beasts of Burden*.

In their paper, Brindha, Ramya, and Ragupathi focused on the manifestation of artistic shades of Dalits in Imayam's *Beasts of Burden*. It also briefed the language, customs, rituals, and conventions of Dalits that exemplify the source the Dalits cling to. Dalits' lives unveiled the spectrum of cultural depletion and unity. They stated that the writer's usage of language and narration were magnificent in portraying the ethnicity of Dalits and their prosperous cultural lifestyles. Although several studies have indicated that the novel has been analysed differently, no attention has been given to analysing the novel for its intersectional consciousness of discrimination based on gender and culture with a special focus on Imayam's *Beast of Burden*. The following section analyses the novel to decipher the voice of an individual who experiences intersectional consciousness of culture and gender with a special reference to Imayam's *Beast of Burden*.

Analysis: His primary emphasis is on the notions of gender inequalities and cultural disparities among the subaltern social strata. In his work, the representation of the Arokkiyam family, consisting of the diligent woman Arokkyam, the protagonist, her husband Savuri, their sons Peter and Josep, their daughter Mary, and their daughter-in-law Sahayam, belongs to the Dalit Christian Vannaan (washerman) community. They have dedicated themselves to serving the untouchable community, which comprises approximately three hundred households. The writer comments through the voice of Arokkyam in the earlier days that “a vannaan’s life is a prince’s life” (BOB 294). Their service involves collecting tidy clothes from the doorsteps of these households daily. The entire family diligently engages in the tasks of washing, drying, and delivering the clothes back to the respective households in the evening. Unfortunately, instead of receiving reasonable wages for their labour, they are only provided with unused food as a means of sustenance. Every night, even the younger children of Arokkyam are required to help their parents wash clothes and ask for raachoru (collecting the leftover foods from the dominant community). Peter, son of Arokkyam, says to her: “Amma, why do we have to call at houses for our evening meal? Why can’t we cook at home every day? Why da? Till I twist your arms and legs for you, son of donkey! All the boys torment me, calling out ‘raachoru, raachoru.’ They keep on calling me ‘vannaan lad’ and shoving me away” (BOB 33). Arokkyam, on hearing this, scolded him for his remarks.

In some families, negative responses are occasionally provided without any accompanying offer. The novel exposes the nocturnal conversation of a washerwoman, who resorted to pleading for grains in the vicinity of Imayam’s residence. The Arokkiyam family is characterised by a strong work ethic, with a notable absence of holidays or periods of respite. In addition, they engage in agricultural labour throughout the harvest season among

many homes on a rotational basis. This labour includes physical tasks such as reaping, threshing, winnowing, and hauling. However, it is essential to note that these individuals get compensation in the form of paltry quantities of measured grains, rather than monetary earnings. When she is finished winnowing, Chadayan hands her two murams of Varagu, which she fiercely rejects. Arokkyam protests through her mouth, but Chadayan shuts her off with some incisive comments: “Put your mouth shut, you brash woman... ‘Are you trying to lecture me about justice, you racially mixed mongrel?’ ‘Ei, you donkey of a washerwoman.’” (BOB 66). As a consequence, all of her rage transforms into anxiety, and whenever she expresses the condition of problems she faces, the members of the upper class who are vicious enough to ignore her criticisms. “Hereafter it is to be two murams worth. If you like it, you can winnow for us: otherwise, you don’t have to come next year. Saami, we are humble people. There is no place here for a female who talks about justice and the law” (BOB 67). When she yells, rather than receiving justice, she is disciplined with stringent restrictions. This happens whenever she gets angry. The fact that she speaks out against those in higher castes within her society causes her to endure such terrible hardships.

Arokkiyam refrained from providing schooling to their children, while the villagers, who benefited from their diligent labour, displayed indifference towards their well-being. Furthermore, the locals imposed restrictions on their mobility, preventing them from visiting relatives or attending church services outside the hamlet. They endured a life characterised by the institution of slavery. They derived no satisfaction or enjoyment from their existence. The provision of high-quality food is limited to certain occasions such as puberty rites, marriage ceremonies, and other celebratory events.

The family of Arokkyam undertook the task of gathering all tidy garments that were used before, during, and after the event, and fulfilling their laundering responsibilities without monetary compensation, but rather in exchange for sustenance and grains only. In addition, they engage in service at burial ceremonies, where they carry out their caste-specific traditional rites and customs. As a means of sustenance, they gather meagre offerings of rice. This is shown by the fact that when Arokkyam and her husband came to the house to execute the rituals connected with the passing of Ramasaami's mother, they were only given a very small quantity of grains to consume. Ramasaami offended her in public: “Flog her! Scavenging bitch, I’ll pull your teeth out!” ‘Has it come to this?’ Several others in the crowd began to shout along with Ramasaami. They leapt about. Mottayyan shouted continually, without even seeming to draw breath” (BOB 182). The central issue explored by Imayam in this novel pertains to the challenges faced by a Mahadalit family at the hands of the Dalit society, who have a somewhat higher social status compared to the Dalit dhobi community. The juxtaposition of the subaltern and the elite subaltern, as well as the social maladies encountered by both marginalised groups, is a topic of academic inquiry.

In the narrative, Arokkyam and her family diligently serve their masters while maintaining their dignity, despite enduring the traumatic experience of her daughter Mary’s sexual assault. Mary is treated extremely poorly by Chadayan, who is also a local elder. He

comments about her figure, which gives the impression that he is aware that she had a difficult labour and delivery. She could communicate all her sufferings only through her tears. “It’s all because of this rolling-pin body of mine that I get into fights with all these people. They want to take a nip at me, not even caring that I am low-born. Times had changed to such an extent that these fellows were tormenting low-caste girls. First, she was angry. Then her anger changed into tears” (BOB 6). Because Mary was a member of the Dalit caste, she was unable to take either a defensive or an attacking attitude. Her tears served as an outlet for all of the pain that she was experiencing. They choose not to express their grievances or seek retribution. The only need for their sustenance is nourishment. They do not assert or request compensation for their substantial efforts, for which they were not remunerated monetarily. Under the pretext of casteism, those belonging to the dominant caste exploit and get satisfaction from the labour provided by individuals belonging to the subaltern caste, who are often silenced and do not assert their rights to fair compensation, resulting in their deprivation of pay. Arokkyam’s altruistic actions encompass various forms of medical assistance, such as providing curative treatment to a malnourished infant, attending to the delivery of an underage woman, and skillfully severing and respectfully burying the umbilical cord. The writer effectively portrays Arokkyam as an uneducated nurse who possesses a remarkable level of empathy and practical expertise. In one instance:

“Minakshi and Susila were holding down Chitra’s arms and legs, one on either side. Gently and smoothly, Arokkyam drew out the baby, a girl child. The umbilical cord was tight about its neck. Chitra lay back on the straw bed, in a faint. Arokkyam carried away the straw that was soaked through and through with blood and urine, and threw it all away in the thorny jungle which no one entered” (BOB 282/283).

Additionally, the writer highlights the arduous efforts of a dhobi woman who tirelessly serves others without any personal gain, solely to secure sustenance for survival. As an individual without literacy skills and belonging to the dhobi community, Arokkyam and her family have experienced exploitation at the hands of dominant lords when they turn to the new launderers cropped up in their village. This is apparent when Arokkyam comments:

“One family had served this town; a vannaan family. Couldn’t they understand that it was only by depending on the townsfolk that the vannaan and his family lit their kitchen fires? That it was through their generosity that they filled their bellies? How could they have the heart to betray the low-caste vannaan who lived by trusting them, who served them to the very end? Truly, people had changed” (BOB 134).

Arokkyam begins to curse the new tailors and launderers that have sprung up in the hamlet, and as a result of this, the earnings become steadily low. She says: “There is a tailor who has come and set up shop. And it’s over two months now that another vannaan has come here and started up a laundry business” (BOB 139). She thinks that the traditional vannaan community has started losing their identity among the villagers with the introduction of

launderers. Here, Imayam conveys that the village's modernization makes the Vannaan caste suffer additionally and also fight indirectly against modern technology to save their identity in the village.

They have been subjected to burdensome tasks without any prospect of relief or the ability to voice their grievances, instead relying on pleading for sustenance at the doorsteps of their masters. The daughter-in-law of Arokkyam expressed her aversion to the practice of visiting many households to solicit food, after the completion of her laundry duties involving soiled garments. Despite having completed just up to the ninth grade, which was considered the greatest level of education in her family, Sahayam chose not to participate in the nighttime collection of food at doorsteps due to her strong sense of self-respect, and she publicly declined the opportunity. Also, she wants to wind up this business and urge everyone to move to Chinnasalem for better opportunities. Sahayam says: "Why don't we just finish with this business once and for all? Why can't we keep a shop like my brother does? Then what if we should take off to Chinnasalem?" (BOB 37). In contrast to the opinions held by other family members, she has chosen to reside in her parental residence with her spouse, Joseph, therefore severing ties with the family. These analyses show how gender and culture intersect and influence the character Arokkyam in the novel. The character's identity issues are shaped by multiple factors in her society, with culture and gender as the focal point.

Conclusion: To conclude, this paper explored the issues of gender and cultural disparities through the intersectionality framework that is experienced by the character of Arokkyam, who struggles between emotional sensitivity and cultural and gender consciousness, which are depicted in the novel. The writer characterised this marginalised society as cancerous, as it advocates the inhumane treatment meted out to a Vannaan family in one of the South Indian villages. Throughout the novel, he raises profound questions regarding the moral principles of mercy, kindness, and compassion, which appear to have been absent from this society. Through his inconclusive end, the writer effectively stimulates the conscience of each reader, prompting them to recognise the continued barbarism within the society. The important German philosopher quotes that "if a man is a slave, his own will is responsible for his slavery, just as it is its will which is responsible if a people is subjugated. Hence the wrong of slavery lies at the door not simply of enslavers or conquerors but of the conquered themselves" (Bulhan 106). Along the same lines as this concept, the people that Imayam decided to highlight in this novel put a tremendous deal of confinement on themselves, while the society around them passively accepts the imprisonment that the other castes place on them and refuses to free themselves from it. The author articulates the essential significance of the marginalised communities solely relying on the dominant agency for their survival, and there is a shift in the thinking of the new generations to overcome this setup to liberate themselves from the caste hierarchies. Arokkyam is a Dalit mother who strives for the survival of her family while keeping all of her fears and shouts to herself. In *Beast of Burden*, the shrieks of Dalit women in a community inhabited by washermen may be heard loud and clear. As long as they live in civilizations that maintain patriarchy, the women who are a part

of the Dalit minority cannot reach their full potential and hence cannot express their entire potential. Her laments and anxieties were unnoticed by all around her.

According to the researchers, this study can be used as a theoretical study tool by students. Using Arokkyam's intersectional experiences of disparities between culture and gender and how they help students who could learn about her mental framework of intersectionality, which is not just a theory; it occurs in the real world as well. For future researchers, this study could serve as a literature review. The results of this study may also contribute to a better understanding of the intersectional voice of an individual. Moreover, teachers could use this research or even the novel as a teaching tool.

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