

Geographies of Control: Land as Feminist Territory and the Architecture of Caste Surveillance in Imayam's *Pethavan: The Begetter* (2015)

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Abstract

Despite significant advancements in science and technology, society continues to be confronted with deep-rooted social inequalities such as caste discrimination, gender oppression, class hierarchies, village surveillance, control, and systemic marginalization. These realities are powerfully portrayed by the eminent Tamil writer Imayam, who emerges as an authentic voice in contemporary literature through his commitment to social realism. This article examines Imayam's Pethavan: The Begetter, translated into English by Gita Subramanian, from ecofeminist and subaltern perspectives. The text foregrounds social realism by presenting land as a contested feminist space, exposing caste surveillance, and portraying resistance as a mode of survival. Through his unflinching depiction of lived experiences and real characters, Imayam gives narrative dignity to the marginalized. Pethavan thus becomes a powerful articulation of subaltern resistance. This article argues that Imayam's authentic narration creates a literary space that restores marginalized voices and reaffirms literature's role as a medium of social critique and ethical engagement.

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Introduction

Even though our society has reached great heights in modern science and technology, in recent years, social injustice continues to persist in numerous forms, such as patriarchy, the caste ladder, and general insignificance. These oppressions deeply affect the lives of the underprivileged, often rendering their suffering invisible within dominant social and literary discourses. The literary works of Imayam mediate in this silence by highlighting the harsh realities of marginalized communities through a framework of social realism. His narratives do not merely depict suffering; they critically examine the mechanisms of power that sustain caste shadowing, male supremacy, and economic management.

An important aspect of Imayam's writing is its feminist perception, which foregrounds the experiences of women who endure layered forms of oppression both inside the family and outside. In his works, he highlights women as active victims but flexible figures who receive survival through struggle, patience, and willpower. By highlighting their struggles, Imayam challenges patriarchal norms and exposes the gendered dimensions of caste-based violence. His representation of caste operates as a form of social analysis. Caste in his narratives functions as a persistent system that monitors, regulates, and restricts the lives of the underprivileged. He reveals how caste shadowing infiltrates everyday life, molding identity, mobility, and social relationships through reasonable classification and genuine discussions. By giving voice to the voiceless, Imayam renders their lived experiences authentic and visible within literary discourse. His works thus function as sites of symbolic resurrection, where suppressed identities are reclaimed, humanized, and restored with dignity.

Annamalai is a prominent contemporary Tamil writer known for his realistic portrayal of marginalized lives, particularly focusing on caste, class, and rural society, often drawing from his experiences. His pen name is Imayam, an Indian Tamil-language novelist from Chennai, Tamil Nadu. He has seven novels, seven short story collections, and a novella to his credit. Closely associated with the Dravidian Movement and its politics, he is considered one of the leading writers from South India. He is the recipient of the honorary Sahitya Akademi Award for his novel *Selladha Panam* in 2020. He is also the first Tamil writer to receive the Kuvempu Rashtriya Puraskar National Award in 2022 for bringing new sensibilities to Tamil literature through his writings. Noting the writer's proclivity to Dravidian ideals, the Tamil Nadu chief minister M.K. Stalin called him "an ideologue donned in black and red." He lauded Imayam, calling him a "proactive writer" in the Dravidian movement. Imayam's works are celebrated for their unflinching realism, depicting the intricacies of modern life, particularly the harsh realities faced by the oppressed, with a focus on caste and class dynamics in rural Tamil Nadu. Imayam

views writing as a political activity, aiming to document society and challenge existing power structures, including caste, rather than for mere amusement. While his work addresses Dalit experiences, he rejects being confined to the “Dalit writer” label, preferring to be known as a Tamil writer, emphasizing broader human experiences.

Imayam’s works, like *Koveru Kaluthaigal* (Beasts of Burden), considered a classic, sparked debates on Dalit identity and oppression. *Pethavan* (The Begetter), a 2012 novella exploring father-daughter relationships and caste struggles, is noted for its stark portrayal. The three novels, *Koveru Kazhuaigal* in 1994, *Arumugam* in the year 1999, and *Chedal* in 2006; the four short-story collections, *Manbaram* in 2004, *Video Mariamman* in 2008, *Kolai Chaeval* in 2013, and *Savu Soru* in 2014; and one novella, *Pethavan: The Begetter*, in the year 2012, are his literary accomplishments to date.

Pethavan: The Begetter is a critically acclaimed 2012 Tamil novella written by Imayam, which unflinchingly depicts the brutal realities of caste-based violence, honor killings, and the rigid social hierarchies in rural Tamil Nadu. It was first published in Tamil in September 2012 in *Uyirmai*. Later, it was translated into English as *Pethavan: The Begetter* by Gita Subramanian and published by Oxford University Press in 2015.

Gita Subramanian is a notable translator from Tamil to English. She is mainly recognized for her work on contemporary Tamil literature, including the novels by Imayam and Perumal Murugan. She has translated many works like *The Land and the Shadows* by Perumal Murugan, *Pethavan: The Begetter* by Imayam, *Ummath: A Novel of Community and Conflict* by Sharmila Seyyid, *The Saga of the Cactus Land* by Vairamuthu, and *The Death of a Sarus Crane* by Ambai. She received the Nalli Thisai Ettum award for best translator in 2010. Her work often focuses on portraying the complexities of social tensions within rural and urban life.

Imayam was inspired to write this story after hearing from a friend about a man who sent his daughter away with a Dalit man. The thought of the social consequences and the pressure the father faced haunted him, leading to the creation of the novella. The novella is set in a rural, caste-conscious village near Villupuram, Tamil Nadu. The story follows Pazhani, a father from a dominant, non-Dalit community, who is pressured by his community’s panchayat (village council) to murder his daughter, Bhakkiyam. Bhakkiyam commits the “sin” of falling in love with a Dalit sub-inspector named Periyasami. The themes include honor killing, caste purity, the plight of the *Pethavan*, structural and cultural violence, the patriarchal binary, ecofeminism, and more. The novella strongly questions the role of caste, power, gender inequality, and the arrogant behavior of the community toward marginalized people.

Literature Review

An article published by S. S. Kavitha in the *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research (JETIR)* titled “Emasculating Caste: Honour Killings as

Portrayed in *Pethavan* (The Begetter)” focuses on the harsh realities of the caste system and the dominant power of the village over the marginalized. She highlights the fact that honor killing is considered as punishment to the one who violates the system. She also focuses on the portrayal of woman as a preserver of genes, making a pure caste society.

In the article titled “The Subversion of Patriarchal Roles,” Rajkumar depicts the twist that happened in the novel. The village expects the death of Bakkiyam, but unexpectedly her father, Pazhani, dies. Pazhani wants his daughter to live, so thinking of her future, he becomes a victim to the violent societal order. An article published by Indira Gandhi and Prathiba Lakshmi in 2025 focuses on the complexities of caste. They highlight the use of raw and spoken Tamil to bring out the real feelings of humans and understand the arrogant nature of society. A review titled “Intersectionality of Gender and Caste” highlights the patriarchal society and their dominance over the woman’s body. Resisting the rules of the society projects a woman as a threat to the land. The society considers her an impure one.

With the notion of land as a female territory, this article makes an attempt to learn *Pethavan: The Begetter*. The land as a female territory refers to the space that nourishes, redefines, rebuilds, protects, encourages, and ensures the well-being and rights of the woman and the marginalized voices. But it is completely opposite in the novel *Pethavan*; the whole land is reflected as a patriarchal society. The brutal mechanism that the villagers followed to punish the one who breaks the caste system is unbearable.

Analysis and Discussion

The land in *Pethavan* depicts the place of buried people who violate the rules and order of the village, especially in the name of caste. Falling in love with other caste people, inter-caste marriages are considered a curse brought upon the village. The ones who violate this social order are put to death so that they can save their land. The sufferings of the individual are not recognized by the community, as they only need honor, pride, and power over their caste and land. In the patriarchal society, the dominance of the male power resists the woman’s ability to undergo a change and lead an independent lifestyle. Rather, they should depend on the male character in her family to meet all their needs. The woman was not even given the power to choose her own lifestyle. It is brought to light that the decision taken by the male should be accepted by the woman at any cost.

Bakkiyam, as the central character in the novel, resembles the character of breaking the social order, caste system, and overweening pride of the village. She serves as a catalyst to be an independent woman who can choose her life not considering others. As a result, the whole village turns against her. The village is not a communal place of living; rather, it projects as a place of destruction, gender violence, punishment, and surveillance. Instead of protecting or supporting

Bakkiyam, it plans to bury her body in the land, thinking of it as an honor killing. The village panchayat only focuses on saving the honor of the village, not her life.

Periyasami, a sub-inspector from a Dalit community, loves Bakkiyam, who belongs to an upper caste, which serves as a main issue in the society. Though he belongs to a lower caste, he holds a good position, which is not seen by the villagers. Often Bakkiyam and Periyasami meet each other and get beaten by the villagers. Apart from that, the villagers even caused suffering to the households and destroyed the cattle. "We've beaten up that fellow four times at the Viruthachalam bus stop. We made it look like an accident when we set fire to his house twice. In the dead of night, we freed the goats and the cows tethered in his house" (4).

The village is a place filled with threats. The villagers tried hard to change Bakkiyam; when every soft form of action failed, they arrogantly turned against her, beating her brutally, bruising her, and about to pour polidol into her mouth. They even planned for her funeral. "We will take care of everything required for the cremation. Sugar, kerosene, dried leaves, logs-we will get everything ready tonight" (13).

Bakkiyam's struggles against the patriarchal society expose the strength and power a woman possesses to live her own life. The violent behavior of the villagers towards Bakkiyam shows more fear than strength. The real meaning is they fear for a woman. All their soft ways of action were in vain. To keep their name and power, the only weapon they can use is harsh treatments. It is clear that, when a woman doesn't obey the orders imposed by a man, out of fear and to make the woman follow his rule, he turns his actions into hard and rigid ones.

The theme of caste surveillance in *Pethavan* is a significant factor that shapes society and exerts control over colonial hierarchies, extraction, and discipline. Caste surveillance refers to the system of controlling, observing, and judging people based on their caste, especially targeting the marginalized people. In the article titled "Caste Systems: How they Develop and their Effect in Modern India," Kaushambhi Gupta says that:

Caste is a form of social stratification characterized by the aid of endogamy, hereditary transmission of a way of life that often includes an occupation, reputation in a hierarchy, customary social interaction, and exclusion. Despite the fact that caste systems exist in numerous regions, its paradigmatic ethnographic instance is the division of Indian society into inflexible social companies, with roots in India's historic records and persisting until these days; it's occasionally used as an analogical foundation for the study of caste-like social divisions current outside India. (1-2)

The village in the novella depicts the power of caste by watching everyone's life, especially the marginalized people like lower-caste people and women. In the novel, Bakkiyam is under surveillance by the villagers in the name of caste. They continually watch her. She has been constantly observed, noticed, and judged.

Because of the caste and her resistance to accepting the order of the land, they are targeting her choices and imposing violence as an unspoken weapon to kill her.

The continuous surveillance, gossip, and brutal actions show that the caste is not an identity; rather, it is a regime of power. The surveillance leads to the unexpected happenings and even to the level of killing a person. Bakkiyam is scrutinized as a source of victims and must remain within the caste boundaries. It is brought to light that the dominant or upper caste rules the lower, suppressed, and marginalized society, imposing weaker judgements, controlling them, and putting them into the walls of caste imprisonment. The panchayat in the village serves as an authority of colonial power extraction and enforces disciplined life without violating any social orders of the village. Everyone is under surveillance of the village. Yet, it is Bakkiyam who disturbs the law and dissolves all the rules imposed on her.

As a marginalized character, Bakkiyam is not targeted for caste or gender. Rather, she violates the colonial powers and status. Her body allows patriarchal rule upon her. But she refused to surrender herself to the voices of the village. The surveillance is dualism. The life in the land is occupied with pure/impure, male/female, obedience/deviance, and honor/shame. These binaries are not descriptive but prescriptive. Bakkiyam disturbs these binaries. The village considers a woman a person of honor, pride, subordination, and obedience. But proving it as a wrong belief, Bakkiyam's refusal to fit into either category made her feel out of place in the village.

The village panchayat claims authority to punish the marginalized for violating the rules through the lens of surveillance. This control over the people is termed as a culture. Bakkiyam's character reveals the harsh realities of surveillance: it gives not safety but punishment, not unity but agreement. The novel portrays how the patriarchal territory and caste surveillance serve as a dual reinforcement. The novel *Pethavan* stands as a damning reflection of a society that confuses order with caste purity and patriarchal dominance. In the article titled "Surveillance and Punishment in the Village: Reflections on Iyayam's *Pethavan*," Karthick says:

Measures are used to cow down Bhakkiyam, too. Her hair is cut short, and on one occasion, young men of her village surround her and expose themselves, taunting her. Her family watches this with shame and horror, blaming Bhakkiyam for bringing this upon them. Iyayam brilliantly captures the immanent cruelty and violence of the village in very casual instances and statements. For instance, a young woman with her infant on her hips advises Bakkiyam's parents to force-feed her insecticide and lock her up in a room, depriving her of water, so that death will be quick. Iyayam does not exaggerate horror. He shows the village and the village mentality as it is; that is horrifying in itself. (par. 9)

Pethavan can be analyzed through the lens of 'Resistance through Survival,' where individuals survive by fighting against the powerful forces. The individual

holds on to the power in the form of defiance. They will endure all the sufferings and overcome the struggles. The character Bakkiyam undergoes a tough situation where she has to accept the realities for survival.

Appa, I will obey whatever you say. I will marry whoever you tell me to. I swear on our family deity. I swear on Amma. I swear on my little sister. Wear on you. I swear on my grandmother. I only want you, Appa! Bhakkiyam howled, like someone grieving over a dead child or someone crying over a lost husband. (28)

Imayam ties together the themes of ecofeminism, social realism, and subaltern endurance by portraying a village life where nature, woman, and subaltern man are bound as resisting characters. The character Periyasami never appears physically in the novel. Yet, he serves as a silent voice of resistance through survival. He is kept under complete surveillance. He belongs to a Dalit community.

On the other hand, the novel explores the theme of ecofeminism. Ecofeminism highlights the relationship between women and nature. It combines feminism and political ecology. In the article titled "Ecofeminism: Exploitation of Women and Nature," Dr. Tansneem Anjum says that:

Ecofeminists believe that male-dominated culture thrives on sexism, racism, class exploitation, and environmental destruction. Exploitation of women and nature is severely protested by the eco-feminist world over. Ecofeminism calls upon women and men to reconceptualize the world in non-hierarchical ways. In this, the feminist movement and the environmental movement are seen to work together, based on the assumption that they both stand for egalitarian, non-hierarchical systems. Indeed, the liberation of women and of nature is seen as intimately linked. (846)

In the novel, ecofeminism not only covers the environmental aspects like land and labor, but also it focuses on the land, which is feminized, occupied, and filled with the women's bodies that are brutally violated. Periyasami experiences a sense of the burden and resistance of living and reflects on a life of exploitation of resources and suppression from the dominant class.

Imayam uses Social Realism as a tool to strengthen the novel *Pethavan*. Social realism deals with the life of working-class, poor people, focusing on their societal problems like poverty, injustice, inequality, and violent behavior. "Tomorrow by this time the village will know whether I slept with just one man or with many. I will chop her to pieces" (3). The life in the village seems to be a disgusting one. The harsh reality of the societal norms that the villagers indulge in is unbearable. Pazhani's daughter Bakkiyam fell in love with a sub-inspector, Periyasami, who belongs to a lower caste. Though he has studied well and worked hard, the society has seen him as a menace.

My, my! Such frenzied desire! In that case, that fellow should be brought here; the two tied up together and then killed! He is a policeman. That's the problem. That's why the story has been going on for three years. 'A senior police

official?’ ‘A sub-inspector.’ What does it matter who he is? If he is a policeman, does he think he should have a higher-caste girl? His paadai too should be prepared. (6)

Periyasami is not absent; rather, his voice is suppressed into a silenced one due to the hierarchal order in the society. The dominating power rules over him and doesn't allow him to work. The whole village surveillance has both the characters Bhakkiyam and Periyasami constantly monitoring their ways. They beat them often. It was when she was in her B.Sc. final that someone from the village had seen her with Periyasami in a movie theater and told Pazhani. During the eight days that she went for the examinations, at least a hundred people made it their business to tell Pazhani, We saw your daughter with a son of Vavuthan of our village. (18)

Surveillance has made Periyasami a fractured, self-suppressed person within the power system. He is the one who never accepts fully or escapes himself to them. He has been torn between the rules and punishment of the village. They can only observe his behavior, but they cannot colonize his interior life. The whole land is occupied by caste ownerships. Bakkiyam and Periyasami are against this. This parallel idea makes the ecofeminism claim that the patriarchal system relies on the binaries. Periyasami is tied intimately with his caste, yet he breaks the line by choosing his own way of living. On the other hand, Bakkiyam too is leaving all her status; she chooses her own lifestyle. This independent way of living results in contradiction amidst the society.

The subaltern condition in *Pethavan* is not voiceless, but the system refuses to recognize the voice of the marginalized people. Periyasami's inner voice makes his actions, silences, and defiance signify his resistance. Ecofeminism often centers women, but in *Pethavan* the patriarchal system stretches towards the marginalized men. As a man, Periyasami has power, but it remains fragile before the hierarchical power. Ecofeminism, in this bias, not merely focuses on the life of woman and nature but also on the degradation of life.

The novel *Pethavan* represents resistance not as an exposition but as a living, not as a fracture but as endurance. It is clear that resistance comes not only by fighting against it or raising the voices. Rather, it is a stubborn continuity of life by accepting all the struggles and enduring the sufferings. The novel *Pethavan* stands as a strong portrayal of social realism that shows the ecological and caste patriarchal and the endurance of the subaltern in the form of resistance when their voices are silenced.

Conclusion

Imayam presents a powerful and unsettling exposé of rural life where land, caste, and survival crisscross to produce a deeply unfair social reality in his novel. The novel does not merely depict poverty or marginalization as isolated experiences but exposes them as outcomes of a carefully sustained system in which land operates as a patriarchal territory, caste functions as a mechanism of surveillance, and resistance emerges not through an open way and not through

secret rebellion but through the quiet, enduring act of survival. Particularly the Dalit women, whose existence is shaped by forces far beyond individual choice or agency, get affected.

Pethavan's land is far from being a space for cultivation. Instead, it is a patriarchal territory controlled by dominant caste and male authority, determining who belongs, who labors, and who remains dispossessed. Ownership of land is synonymous with power, manliness, and social authenticity, while the lack of it relegates characters like Periyasami and his family to long-lasting weakness. Imayam demonstrates that land is not merely an economic resource but a symbolic structure through which patriarchy reproduces itself. Women and lower-caste individuals are allowed proximity to land only as laborers, never as rightful claimants. This exclusion strengthens hierarchies based on gender and caste, making land a place where people are always in charge.

The patriarchal nature of land ownership is especially evident in how women's labor is exploited yet rendered invisible. Women work on the land, sustain households dependent on agrarian cycles, and bear the physical consequences of agricultural labor, yet they remain excluded from ownership, decision-making, and inheritance. *Pethavan's* portrayal aligns with feminist and Dalit critics who contend that land serves as an instrument of structural violence, obstructing women's economic autonomy and perpetuating their reliance on male and caste authority. Thus, land in the novel becomes a space of omission, control, and silence rather than sustenance or security.

Caste in *Pethavan* extends beyond social identity to operate as a constant system of surveillance that regulates behavior, mobility, speech, and even thought. The village functions as a panoptic space where every action of Dalit characters is monitored and judged by dominant caste norms. There is no need for formal punishment; the threat of social exclusion, violence, or humiliation is sufficient to ensure fulfillment. Imayam captures how caste surveillance is internalized by the oppressed, compelling them to self-regulate their actions to survive. This surveillance permeates daily existence—affecting one's gait, speech, labor, or spatial presence—rendering caste oppression both external and psychological.

Unlike overt forms of power, caste surveillance in *Pethavan* is subtle yet persistent. It operates through gossip, collective memory, inherited stigma, and customary practices rather than explicit laws. This feature makes resistance particularly difficult, as domination appears naturalized and unavoidable. The village becomes a closed system where deviation is swiftly punished, reinforcing caste boundaries through fear and repetition. By depicting caste as an omnipresent gaze, Imayam exposes how oppression is sustained not only by physical force but also by social discipline and normalized inequality.

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