

UNDER THE WEIGHT OF SERVICE: CASTE, LABOUR, AND
VICTIMISATION IN IMAYAM'S *BEASTS OF BURDEN***R. SUDHA**

PhD Research Scholar in English, Thanthai Periyar
Government Arts & Science College (Affiliated to
Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli),
Trichy – 620023, Tamil Nadu, India.

Dr. K. S. DHANAM

Associate Professor & Research Advisor in English,
Thanthai Periyar Government Arts & Science College
(Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli),
Trichy – 620023, Tamil Nadu, India.

Dr. S. SHANMUGASUNDARAM

Associate Professor & Research Advisor in English, Thanthai Periyar Government Arts & Science College
(Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli), Trichy – 620023, Tamil Nadu, India.

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the victimisation of marginalised people in Imayam's *Beasts of Burden*, with special attention to Arokkyam, Savuri, Mary, Peter, Sahayam, and other members of the washer community. The novel presents a world in which caste, labour, poverty, gender, and ritual duty together decide the social value of a family. Arokkyam's family serves the village in birth, death, festival, washing, harvest, and domestic routines. Yet this service never becomes a source of dignity. It becomes the ground on which others command, insult, threaten, and exploit them. The study reads the novel as a strong portrayal of caste-based dependence and inter-Dalit hierarchy. It also examines the sexual vulnerability of women, the hunger-driven nature of service, the humiliation attached to ritual payments, and the slow collapse of hereditary occupation. Imayam does not present victimisation only as open violence. He shows it in daily speech, withheld grain, public abuse, unpaid labour, insults from children, and the denial of movement. Arokkyam's life records both suffering and self-respect. She is forced to live under others, but she speaks, questions, remembers, and refuses to accept humiliation silently. Through her, the novel gives a powerful picture of marginal lives caught between survival and dignity.

KEYWORDS: Imayam, *Beasts of Burden*, caste, labour, victimisation, Dalit community, washerwoman, marginalisation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Imayam, born on 10 March 1964 in Vriddhachalam in Cuddalore district, Tamil Nadu, is an important Tamil novelist, short-story writer, essayist, critic, and teacher. His works have received serious critical attention for their close portrayal of rural Tamil society. *Beasts of Burden* was first written in Tamil as Koveru Kazhuthaigal in 1994 and was translated into English by Lakshmi Holmström in 2001. The novel begins with Arokkyam's wish to visit the church of Saint Anthony at Melnariappanur. This simple act opens a wider account of caste, labour, religious faith, poverty, and social dependence. Arokkyam and her husband Savuri are Dalit Catholic launderers. They live in a village colony with their daughter Mary and two sons, Josep and Peter. Josep is married to Sahayam. The family serves the Dalit streets in many ways. They wash clothes, assist during birth and death rituals, work during harvest, collect evening food, and accept fixed portions of grain, cooked rice, old clothes, and other small payments. Their service is necessary for village life. At the same time, their status remains low even among other Dalits. They are needed, but they are not respected. They work inside the social system, but they are kept outside its dignity. The title *Beasts of Burden* is significant because it suggests a life reduced to carrying the weight

of others. The human beings in the novel are treated like animals, not because they lack feeling or thought, but because others refuse to recognise their full humanity. Arokkyam's family carries clothes, ritual vessels, grief, abuse, hunger, and social shame. They also carry memory. Imayam's narrative gives importance to that memory and lets the reader see how ordinary village arrangements can become instruments of control.

2. CASTE SERVICE AND THE DENIAL OF MOVEMENT

The novel begins with Arokkyam's desire to go to Saint Anthony's church. Her wish is deeply personal, but even that small journey needs the permission of village elders. This shows the nature of her dependence. Arokkyam's family cannot move freely because the village claims their labour at all times. Ramasaami and Chadayan oppose her request in harsh words:

What need is there for you to go to the church at an ordinary time like this?' 'And who's to wash our clothes meanwhile?' 'If anything happens in the village, good or bad, who's to deal with it?' 'Are there four vannaans in the village or what? Thieving rogues!' 'Exactly what I say.' 'If you push off with your entire family on some sudden whim, who will put up with it?' The way you are carrying on just isn't right. There's nothing else for it but for us to bring another vannaan here instead of you.' 'We don't need all this showing off. (26-27)

This passage clearly presents service as control. The elders do not ask whether Arokkyam has a need of her own. They ask who will wash, who will attend village events, and who will take care of duties in their absence. Their language changes a religious visit into disobedience. The threat to bring another washerman reveals the economic trap in which Arokkyam's family lives. Their work is hereditary, yet it gives no security. Their absence, even for worship, becomes a fault. The family's position is contradictory. They serve the village in important rituals, but they are never allowed to forget their lower status. Their social value depends on usefulness, not on humanity. Imayam uses this situation to show that victimisation is not limited to direct violence. It also works through the right to command another person's time, movement, and body.

3. GENDER, SEXUAL THREAT, AND THE FEMALE BODY

Mary's experience shows how caste and gender combine in the life of a young woman. As Arokkyam's daughter, she inherits the burden of washing, collecting clothes, and moving through village streets. But her female body makes this work dangerous. When she complains to Arokkyam, her words reveal both shame and fear: Don't you even care about me?' 'What's the matter, now?' 'Why don't you just hand me over to some fellow?' 'Why, di?' 'I don't know why my body is like this.' 'What's the matter with it now?' 'It's all because of this rollingpin body 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. (29-28)

Mary's phrase "rollingpin body" carries the pain of being seen only as a body. She knows that men desire her, insult her, and still look down upon her as low-born. Her caste status does not protect her from male desire. Instead, it makes her more vulnerable because men believe that they can approach her without fear of punishment. Arokkyam understands this danger. Her anger becomes helplessness because she has no social power to defend her daughter against men like Chadayan. Arokkyam's advice to Mary is not a solution. It is a lesson in survival. She says:

Even older men with white moustaches make suggestive remarks to me in our town. I can't stand any of the men here. They make me so angry. They are always staring at my lower belly.' 'Where are you going to find a town with no men?' 'We have to get away somewhere, to a place that's a bit better than this, that's all. We have to live out our lives somehow.' 'But wherever we go, we'll still be beneath someone else. They'll always treat us like that because we do the lowest duties to the lowest communities. (30)

This conversation gives the emotional truth of the novel. Mary dreams of a place “a bit better than this,” but Arokkyam knows that caste follows them. The lowest work fixes their identity in the eyes of others. The mother’s warning is bitter, but it comes from experience. Her words show how the desire for escape is blocked by social structure. Arokkyam’s hard counsel continues when she tells Mary: If we lose heart, then that’s it; we’re finished. So make your heart as hard as a stone. (10) This statement does not celebrate suffering. It reveals the emotional discipline forced upon marginalised women. To become hard is not a natural choice. It is a method of survival in a place where grief can weaken the body and invite further injury.

4. CHILDHOOD, FOOD, AND THE INHERITANCE OF HUMILIATION

Victimisation in the novel reaches even children. Peter’s experience with the village boys shows how caste insult enters play. During a childish game with mud, the boys reserve a portion for the crow, the dog, and the washerman’s boy. Peter’s protest leads to a fight. That night, he questions his mother:

Amma, why do we have to call at houses for our evening meal? Why can’t we cook at home every day?’ ‘Why, da?’ ‘Why don’t you cook at home, like everyone else?’ ‘Til twist your arms and legs for you, son of a donkey!’ ‘All the boys torment me, calling out “raachoru, raachoru”.’ ‘What shame is there in that, let them say what they like.’ ‘They keep on calling me “the vannaan lad” and shoving me away.’ ‘Even if I come to collect the washing, I won’t come to fetch food.’ ‘Just come here, I’ll twist off your leg and thrust it into the fire, idiot!’ (31-32)

Peter is hurt because food itself becomes a sign of caste. The evening meal collected from houses is not only a meal. It is a daily public reminder that the family depends on leftovers. The insult “raachoru” attacks their hunger and their occupation. Arokkyam’s harsh reply shows her fear. If Peter refuses the old practice, the family’s survival is at risk. She cannot comfort him in a soft way because hunger leaves no room for pride. Even young children in the village learn to repeat caste names and insults. Arokkyam remembers that even little children call her “vannaati woman!” Her reply is outwardly calm: “vannaati woman! (32)” Arokkyam smile and ask: “What’s the news? (32)” She thinks to herself that they are a humble community. “What’s the use of getting angry? (32)” This response is not acceptance in a simple sense. It is a trained way of avoiding conflict. Anger has no safe outlet when the person who insults also controls work and food. Arokkyam knows the insult, but she keeps moving because the household must eat. Imayam makes this everyday swallowing of anger one of the strongest signs of victimisation.

5. RITUAL DUTY AND HUMILIATION

Arokkyam and Savuri are needed most during moments of birth, death, festival, and ritual. Yet these moments often intensify humiliation. When Ramasaami’s mother Ramaayi dies, Ramasaami calls Savuri in the middle of the night. His words carry authority rather than grief: “Ei, Savuri...Savuri. Arokkyam, Arokkyam. Savuri! Hanh! (46)” “Wake up, da, useless fool (46)” Savuri has no option but to respond. Death in a dominant household becomes work for the washer family. The ritual requires them, but the language used for them is abusive. Their labour is treated as duty, not service. Their time, sleep, and body are claimed as if they belong to the village. The same cruelty appears when rice is distributed during Ramaayi’s ritual. Arokkyam hopes to receive plain rice for once. This hope is modest, but even that hope is denied by Kullammaal’s small-handed measurement. Arokkyam asks: “We people fill our bellies only by depending on you, saami.’ ‘So who can do anything about that? (59)” This exchange shows hunger as social power. Arokkyam’s statement admits dependence, but it also points to injustice. Kullammaal’s answer refuses responsibility. The dominant household enjoys the right to receive service without feeling accountable to the people who serve them. Arokkyam’s thought reveals how deep the desire for a proper meal is: “Rice on its own, unmixed with other grains! How long was it since they had feasted on that! (59)” The longing for plain rice becomes one of the novel’s most moving signs of poverty. It shows that exploitation is not abstract. It enters the stomach. It decides what the family eats, how much they eat,

and when they dare to ask. At the end of the funeral ritual, the public distribution of coins repeats the same pattern. Mottayyan calls Savuri with open contempt: "Come on, de, vannaan (69)" Savuri and Arokkyam bow and receive their portion. When Arokkyam sees that the payment is too little, she speaks: What is this, saami, it won't even come to two rupees, it seems.' "That's quite enough. Off you go, ma,' laughed Chadayan. These are the funeral rites in a big house, saami. We wouldn't beg you if you didn't have enough. We are people who spend our lives under your shelter, saami.' 'Have you gone that far? Shut your trap, you donkey admonished Mottayyan. (70) The phrase "under your shelter" is painful because it presents dependence as shelter. Arokkyam uses respectful language, but the answer she receives is animalising. The insult "donkey" connects with the title of the novel and the condition of the family. They carry burdens, and others speak to them as if they are beasts.

5. INTER-DALIT HIERARCHY AND THE QUESTION OF JUSTICE

One of the novel's important features is its portrayal of oppression within the Dalit community. Imayam does not make the oppressed community appear free from hierarchy. Arokkyam and Savuri suffer not only at the hands of upper-caste landowners but also from people within the colony who occupy a slightly stronger position. This is clear in the threshing-floor incident involving Azhagan. Azhagan gives Savuri an old, split winnowing tray instead of allowing him to measure grain properly. When Savuri protests, Azhagan speaks sharply: "Scoop it with this, da.' 'I can't measure it with that, saami.' 'If you can't, then just go.' 'Why are you speaking so sharply, saami? Where can we go if we just leave you? (88)" Arokkyam tries to appeal to justice and dependence: "We are people who depend upon you, saami, to work and make a living (88)" Azhagan's reply exposes the contempt hidden beneath familiar village relations: "You shut up, you bold female.' 'Just ask a few of the other elders, like you, what is right.' 'Ei, donkey of a washerwoman, are you trying to tell me about justice, mongrel bitch?" (88) This episode is important because it breaks any simple division between oppressor and oppressed. Azhagan himself belongs to a marginal location in the caste order, yet he humiliates the washer family when he has the chance. The scene shows how caste hierarchy creates smaller hierarchies within itself. Those with a little power may use it against those placed lower. Arokkyam's question about justice is treated as arrogance because a washerwoman is not expected to speak about fairness.

Sahayam, Beauty, and the Fear of Public Gaze

Sahayam's arrival as Josep's wife brings another view of gendered vulnerability. People praise her beauty in a way that sounds playful, but their words also expose the public ownership of women's bodies: "De, Josep, you've caught yourself a fine one.' 'What does he lack? He's got a bride like a paappaati.' 'Where did you find her, Josep, with that skin like a glowing fire?' 'He's a lucky old fellow. (97)" The comments reduce Sahayam to appearance. Arokkyam feels both pride and anxiety. She later realises that beauty may bring trouble in a village where men stare, judge, and harass women who must enter their houses for washing. Sahayam refuses to collect clothes because she knows what men's looks mean:

Never, impossible. Every man from every house stares at me, wanting to know what's under my sari. Do you think I will go and take the clothes from these fellows' houses?' 'What can they do by staring at you?' 'If you haven't any shame or self-respect, must you think that another woman doesn't?' 'Don't shoot your mouth off so rudely. That's enough. I've told you now.' 'Did I come running to you?' At last, Mary shouted at both of them, 'Are you going to shut your mouths this instant, or aren't you?' (104)

This exchange has no easy villain inside the family. Arokkyam wants the work to continue because the household depends on it. Sahayam wants bodily dignity. Mary wants the quarrel to stop. Imayam gives each woman a reason, and this makes the scene realistic. Poverty forces women into conflict with each other even when the real source of their suffering lies outside the house.

6. MARY'S ASSAULT AND THE SILENCE AROUND SEXUAL VIOLENCE

The most painful episode connected with Mary occurs when she goes to collect clothes while Arokkyam is ill. Chadayan, a powerful Kothukkaaran, uses his position to trap her. Mary's plea is full of fear: "It's the vannaati, saami I'm a woman who will soon be married, saami. My whole family will be ruined, saami. I could become pregnant, saami. I'll kill myself, saami. I touch your feet, ayya. Think of me as the daughter of your own body, ayya. If you want, you can kill me, burn me to ashes. O Saint Anthony O God O Saint Anthony O Mother Mary (123) Mary's words reveal the full weight of social punishment. She fears assault, pregnancy, shame, and the ruin of her family. She does not believe that the village will protect her. Her first thought is that she will be blamed. This is the condition of many marginalised women in the novel. Their bodies are available to men with authority, but their voices are denied when they speak of violation. The religious cry at the end of Mary's plea is also important. She calls Saint Anthony, God, and Mother Mary because human justice is absent. Faith remains, but it does not immediately protect her from social power. Imayam's scene exposes the loneliness of a woman who must beg her oppressor by calling herself low, vulnerable, and almost already dead.

7. FESTIVAL, CUSTOM, AND PUBLIC INSULT

The sacrificial ritual at the Mariamman temple offers another example of customary rights being denied to the washer family. During the drought, the village decides to sacrifice a pig and distribute the meat. Ramasaami orders: "Come on, you rascals. Get on with it. Hurry up and finish it (200)" He then says: "Divide up the carcass between all the clan groups and make sure that each family gets a piece of meat (200)" Arokkyam knows the customary due of the washer family and asks for the head and entrails. Her claim is based on tradition, but Chadayan and others treat it as insolence:

Saami, please understand me. But hasn't it always been the custom, whenever a goat or a pig is slaughtered, to give the head and the entrails to the vannaan?' 'This is not Deepavali, Pongal or the Eighteenth day,' Chadayan stared hard and spoke sharply. 'What does it matter when an animal is slaughtered? It isn't the custom in any town to auction the head and entrails.' 'You need to be whipped with my slippers. Bitch of a vannaati, how much disrespect must you carry in your heart that you dare to oppose me in public! Have you gone that far? You monster! You whore!' An unknown voice was heard saying, 'Talking back! How dare she, I ask you. (201)

The attack on Arokkyam is not only about meat. It is about speech. She is punished because she speaks in public, questions custom, and refuses to remain silent. The insults move quickly from caste to gender. She becomes "vannaati," "bitch," "monster," and "whore." The community does not answer her claim. It attacks her person. This is one of the ways power protects itself in the novel.

8. OLD AGE, CHANGE, AND THE COLLAPSE OF HEREDITARY WORK

The later part of the novel shows how social change affects Arokkyam and Savuri. The old system of hereditary service begins to decline. A regular tailor and a launderer with a box iron enter the village economy. Men start wearing shirts and trousers that require ironing. The washer family loses the small customary dues on which it depended. Arokkyam remembers the old saying: "A vannaan's life is a prince's life (294)" The saying now sounds bitter. Arokkyam and Savuri have given their whole lives to the village, but old age leaves them with very little. Their children see other possibilities. Josep moves towards a laundry business in town. Peter asks why they cannot work for daily wages. Savuri himself suggests leaving: "We'll go there in a month or two. What have we got here, after all? A couple of carrying vessels, four or five pots, storage jars. That's all. And a few poles from the fallen roof." (317) This small list of possessions shows the material result of a lifetime of service. The family has worked through birth, death, festival, washing, harvest, and household labour, but what remains is almost nothing. Arokkyam's lament becomes the emotional centre of the novel:

My blood has gone numb. There isn't any healthy blood in my body. My body will not move. No strength in it. What are we going to do at home, after all? Half the people in this town fell into my hands when they were born. Is there a single person in this town whose pollution I have not cleaned? Is there a woman who has not had trouble suckling her child? Is there a woman whose umbilical cord I have not cut and buried? It was I who answered the summons of each person in this town; I worked for them all. (320-321)

This passage gathers the whole meaning of Arokkyam's life. She has touched the most intimate parts of village existence. She has handled birth, pollution, milk, umbilical cords, clothing, death, and ritual dirt. Yet the village has not given her dignity. Her question is not only personal. It is historical. It asks what a community owes to those who have carried its burdens.

9. CONCLUSION

Beasts of Burden presents victimisation as a daily structure rather than a single event. Arokkyam and her family are not merely poor. They are trapped in a social order that turns service into dependence and dependence into humiliation. They wash clothes, attend rituals, collect food, serve during death, assist during harvest, and accept whatever the village gives. Their labour is necessary, but their personhood is repeatedly denied. The novel also shows that caste oppression cannot be separated from gender. Mary and Sahayam suffer because they are women who must move through male-dominated spaces to perform caste-bound labour. Their bodies are watched, judged, desired, and threatened. Arokkyam understands this danger because she has lived with it for many years. Her strength lies in endurance, speech, memory, and refusal. She may not defeat the social system, but she exposes its cruelty by naming what it has taken from her. Imayam's achievement lies in his careful attention to ordinary scenes. A journey to church, a funeral payment, a child's insult, a handful of rice, a winnowing tray, a public quarrel, and an old woman's lament all become evidence of a larger social truth. *Beasts of Burden* asks the reader to see those who are made invisible by service. It shows that the marginalised are not silent objects of pity. They think, question, remember, resist, and carry a long history of denied dignity.

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