

MIGHT HARNESSSED FROM VENGEANCE: CRIMINOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE MOVIE SAANI KAAAYIDHAM FROM A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

¹Reenu Roy, ²Dr. R. Jeya Sundara Raj

¹PhD Scholar (22111274012008), PG and Research Department of English, St John's College, Palayamkottai, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli.

Email: reenuroy12b@gmail.com

²Research Supervisor and Associate Professor (Retd), PG and Research Department of English, St John's College, Palayamkottai, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli.

Email: rajjeysundar@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Saani Kayidham is a 2022 Tamil -language crime action film which pivots around the life of Ponni, a hardworking police constable who seeks vengeance for the injustice she and her family face only due to the reason of belonging to a lower caste. The film was directed by Arun Matheswaran and actress Keerthi Suresh plays the role of Ponni. Ponni and her family always faces the atrocities of the people belonging to the upper caste community. Ponni always turns a blind eye towards all the misconducts of these high caste people until she gets sexually assaulted by them for a fight they had with her husband Maari, in the name of conducting elections. After that incident to avoid any kind of further trouble these men ruthlessly set fire to Ponni's house when her husband Maari and her daughter Dhana are sleeping inside the house. The movie is analysed from the perspective of feminist criminology, a school of study which developed in the late 1960s.

Keywords: Feminist Criminology, Caste Discrimination, Revenge, Sexual Abuse, Justice.

Feminist theory addresses the pervasive gender inequality that exists globally, focusing on the discrimination women face in terms of their social roles, interests, responsibilities, and more. Originating in 18th century Europe, feminism has been at the forefront of movements advocating for women's rights across the world. These movements have fought for various rights such as the right to vote, receive equal pay, own property, access education, and more. Feminists have also campaigned for access to contraception, legal abortions, and protections against sexual assault, harassment, and domestic violence. American sociologist and criminologist Claire M. Renzetti addresses this question in her work *Feminist Criminology*, exploring how gender influences individuals' experiences within crime and the criminal justice system, "Gender may be defined as the socially constructed expectations or norms prescribing female and male attitude and behaviour that are usually organized dichotomously as femininity and masculinity, respectively, and that are reproduced and transmitted through socialization" (7).

The emergence of Feminist Criminology gained prominence in the late 1960s as an offshoot of second-wave feminism. This school of thought is established with the primary goal of addressing and eliminating discrimination against women within the field of

criminology. Feminist criminology primarily centres on women offenders and victims, encompassing all women involved in the criminal justice system. Despite the scepticism expressed by pioneers of the Feminist School of Criminology, such as Francis Heidensohn, regarding the scope of this new area of study, it has continued to grow and make significant contributions to understanding gender dynamics within crime and justice systems. Heidensohn was critical about the way criminological theorising had developed in the late 1960s and early 1970s, “criminology, mainstream and tributary, has almost nothing to say of interest or importance about women” (Heidensohn 111).

The film begins with a lady yelling for help. She is begging to be pardoned for the sins she had committed and swearing upon her children that she has no part in the occurrence of some issues. After that we are introduced to Ponni, who seems to be torturing that lady and is now entrusting her brother with a list written on a piece of paper. Her brother then visits the lady and asks Ponni why she has not stabbed her to death. Ponni explains that she has to be burnt to death. She gets the kerosene can from the van and burns the lady to death. Then both of them leave the place in their matador blue coloured van. The fire of vengeance is clearly visible in the eyes of Ponni. She seems to be ruthless.

The plot of the movie is divided into four parts. First part is titled The land and its people. It mainly reflects upon the discrimination faced by people belonging to the lower caste community. This part begins with a group of men sitting in front of a factory and fighting over some property issues. A man named Anbu comes out of a toilet nearby and asks Mani, the owner of the factory to arrange someone to clean the toilet as it is dirty. Mani asks Anbu to assign that task to the politicians working inside. Actually, Mani uses the term politicians sarcastically to address two lower caste men working there, who were planning to contest the elections. One among them is a young man named Maari who is motivating an old man to contest elections as he is sure about the fact that most of the people in their caste will vote for him. Anbu hears this and insults the old man by asking him to go and wash the toilet. Maari gets furious and picks up a fight with Anbu. Other people get involved and throws him out of the factory calling him a mongrel who lives on the crumbs they are providing him. Anbu warns him that he doesn't have to show the arrogance because he is the husband of a policewoman. Maari again hits Anbu for involving his wife into this.

After that we are introduced to Dhana, questioning Ponni who returns from duty why she doesn't like Sanghya who meets her secretly after school and disappears once Ponni arrives. Ponni doesn't give her any reply. Maari reaches home drunk and explains to Ponni what had happened at the factory. He tells that his job is lost which worries Ponni a lot. She compels him to get back to work even if he has to apologize to the factory owners. She reminds him that they are having a girl child growing up. This throws light into the life of women belonging to lower castes. Even though, Ponni is a police woman, she is afraid to ask her husband to fight back or file a complaint against those people who torture them on the basis of caste. Feminist criminologists, such as Steve Crabtree and Faith Nsubuga, have brought attention to the fact that women in many third world countries do not feel safe. They argue that women in these nations are often hesitant to seek help from the justice system due to concerns about the punitive treatment of men from marginalized communities. As a result,

women from these marginalized groups may be reluctant to engage with the legal system for fear that their male counterparts will face harsh consequences even if they are provided with the facility to have access to “therapeutic” programmes after these punishments (Goodmark 47; Ptacek 78).

Maari apologizes to the people who had insulted him the previous day. Anbu asks him to clean the toilet first after which they will decide whether to take him back for work or not. Anbu explains that people like Maari with lot of self respect don't have any jobs in the factory. He asks Maari to go and start his own business. Mani advises Maari to send his good-looking wife to him for which he is even ready to give away two or three rice mills to him. Mani also tells that there is no caste difference in that business and Maari can live like a king. Mani's comments infuriate Maari and he races towards him. When others stop him from hitting Mani, he spits on his face. Mani is insulted in front of his people, as a man belonging to lower caste spits on his face. Mani decides to take revenge. Mani calls for a police officer named Deva, who turns out to be Ponni's superior. Deva calls Ponni to the station in the context of settling a dispute. It is actually Mani's plan. Anbu and his men brutally beats her up and sexually assaults her one after the other. Before and after the assault each man beats her. Sanghaya and Dhanam waits for Ponni to come and pick her. But when Ponni gets late Sanghya gets worried and takes Dhanam to her house where Maari is sleeping after getting drunk. Sanghya drops Dhanam at her house and puts her to sleep beside her father. When Sangya waits outside the house waiting for Ponni to return Mani and his people reach there to burn down Maari's house. They beat him up till he falls unconscious and burn the house with Maari and Dhanam sleeping inside. Both of them are burnt to death. When Sangya regains his consciousness, he couldn't do anything other than watch the house burning to ashes. He yells for help but to no use.

Sharmila Rege, in her work *Dalit Women Talk Differently: A Critique of 'Difference' and Towards a Dalit Feminist Standpoint Position* states, “An analysis of the practices of violence against women by caste would reveal that while the incidence of dowry deaths and violent controls and regulations on the mobility and sexuality by the family are frequent among the dominant upper castes-Dalit women are more likely to face the collective and public threat of rape, sexual assault and physical violence at the work place and in public” (78). She holds the view that women face intersecting forms of discrimination based on gender, caste, tribe, and rurality, which create complex systems of oppression. Among these, Dalit women are particularly vulnerable to various forms of exploitation, including sexual exploitation by not only upper caste men but also men from their own Dalit community. As a result, Dalit women experience multiple layers of marginalization based on caste, class, and gender. It is essential to recognize Dalit women as a distinct social group with unique challenges that cannot be subsumed under broader categories of women.

In the next part titled as Ponni, the Curse and the Society we are introduced to a woman yelling and cursing another woman who appears to be Ponni's mother standing in front of Sangya's house. Ponni is thus revealed as Sangya's step sister from his father's relationship with another woman. Sangya's mother curses Ponni and her mother that she and her family will be burnt to ashes and also they will turn to dust. Presently, Ponni is sitting in

front of her house burnt to ashes. Ponni believes that everything has happened because of his mother's curse. At the court Ponni is waiting for the hearing of her case on the four men who have surrendered at the police station after molesting her and burning her house. Even at the court those men abuse her with their filthy gazes. Their advocate Rani arranges for them to escape from the court by bribing the policemen. Ponni loses her patience and attacks inspector Deva for helping them escape. Sangya is watching everything from a distance. Sanghya visits Ponni and shares his griefs with her. He recollects how his only son gets killed for the theft of a mango mainly because they belong to the lower caste. His wife who went to question that is also killed and thrown to a well. Even the law doesn't provide him justice all because of his caste. Ponni decides to take revenge for destroying her life, dreams, home and hope. Ponni wants those people who has destroyed her life to suffer the same pain that her husband and child suffered when they have been burnt to death. She wants to stab them to death and burn their skin. She is determined to see the same pain and fear in their eyes. Sangya also takes her side and helps her find their hiding place. They start with advocate Rani who is shown to be tortured at the beginning of the movie from whom they collect the details of those four men and burns her.

The next part is titled as Pulp Paper. It is on a paper that the whereabouts of those men are noted down. They begin with Anbu and find his hiding place. He is drunk and follows him to deserted place where Ponni smashes his face with a rock. Then they tie him up on a bed where he continues to verbally abuse her. He asks Ponni whether she enjoyed when he has assaulted her. They attack him brutally. They stab him ruthlessly on his foot with which he stabs Ponni while he assaults her. After torturing him continuously, they pour acid over his genital organs.

In the next part titled Many Ordinary People, Perumal, one of the men in the gang is murdered by his own brother Giri due to some family feuds. Ponni is frustrated by the fact that he gets killed before she catches him. Next part titled Metador Murders begins with Ponni and Sanghya locating Vasu and burning the boat in which he is hiding. When he jumps into water Sangya catches him and brings him to the van. Ponni beats him up in the van. Giri, who helps these men to escape comes to know that Ponni and her brother has arrived there and before they reach, she burns Vasu with acid. When Giri and his team tries to catch them, Ponni drives the van towards them and they get crushed beneath the van. Next, they locate Mani who is hiding in a theatre. Inspector Deva arrives there to visit Mani. Mani boasts that he is not afraid of Ponni because she is just a woman. He wants to choke her to death. Sangya goes into the theatre and attacks Vasu's men. By this time Ponni goes inside the theatre and shoot Deva who tries to shoot her. Mani runs for his life but Ponni catches him and beats him up. She cuts off his arms with which he punches her face when he assaults her. Then she cuts his throat. Sanghya is severely injured in the fight. Ponni takes him to the van and tries to get out of that place. Giri's men reach near them and making some excuse Sangya sends Ponni away from the van. When the other men come closer to the van Sangya lits up the gas cylinder in the van which burns the other men along with him. He saves Ponni by sacrificing his life.

Ruth Manorama, a feminist critic affirms, “Today, Dalit women, who constitute the major working force, are thrice alienated and oppressed on the basis of class, caste and gender” (450-51). Gopal Guru underlines the complex reality of Dalit women in his work *Dalit Women Talk Differently*. According to Guru, understanding the plight of Dalit women requires moving beyond a homogenized view of gender that encompasses all women in India, including Dalit women. He highlights the contradictions between high caste and Dalit women, which manifest in subtle forms of caste discrimination by upper caste upper class women against Dalit women in urban areas, as well as the slander of Dalit women in rural areas. Guru emphasizes that issues such as sexual assaults cannot be simplistically explained solely in terms of class, criminality, or as a manifestation of male violence. Instead, he calls for a more nuanced understanding that takes into account the intersecting factors of caste, gender, and power dynamics at play in the victimization of Dalit women. As he states, “The caste factor also has to be taken into account which makes sexual violence against Dalit or tribal women much more severe in terms of intensity and magnitude” (49). P. Bandhu, another critic highlights in his work *Dalit Women’s Cry for Liberation: My Rights Are Rising like the Sun, will you Deny this Sunrise?* that, “Dalit’s or lower/ exploited class. They are in the worst position compared with non-Dalit castes, also Dalit men, in terms of wages, employment, occupation, assets, education, health, social mobility and political participation” (56). Their social status is not similar to the women belonging to non-Dalit castes as they are treated as socially inferior even by the latter.

In the movie *Saani Kaayidham*, Ponni represents all the lower caste women who are ill treated in most rural parts of the country even today. Ponni adopts the path of violence when justice is denied to her by the legal system despite the availability of enough proofs that guaranteed her success in the case. The plight of marginalized women like Ponni, who are sexually assaulted and exploited by the upper caste men is well pictured in the movie.

Note: This research work is supported by the fund received from the University Grants Commission for Junior Research Fellowship under the Savitribai Jyotirao Phule Single Girl Child scholarship scheme.

WORKS CITED

- Saani Kayidham. Directed by Arun Matheswaran, performances by Keerthi Suresh, Screen Scene Media Entertainment, 2022.
- Goodmark, L. *Journal of Crime and Justice Education*, New York: New York University Press, 2012.
- Ptacek, J. *Restorative Justice and Violence against Women*, New York: New York University Press, 2010.
- Heidensohn, F. *Women and Crime*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996.

Rege, Sharmila. “Dalit Women Talk Differently: A Critique of ‘Difference’ and Towards a Dalit Feminist Standpoint Position”, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 23(44), Oct.31–Nov.6, 1998.

Bandhu, P. “Dalit Women’s Cry for Liberation: My Rights Are Rising like the Sun, will you Deny this Sunrise?”, in Rao (ed.), Caste and Gender, New Delhi: Kali For Women, 2003.

Guru, Gopal. “Dalit Women Talk Differently”, Economic and Political Weekly, Oct. 14–21, 1995.

Manorama, Ruth , Dalit Women: The Downtrodden Among the Downtrodden, New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2008.

Renzetti, Claire. Feminist criminology. London: Routledge, 2013.