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Marginal Life and Strange Rituals in the Novel *Chedal*

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Abstract: This article studies Imayam's Tamil novel *Chedal*, which depicts a Dalit girl who is dedicated to the village goddess Selliyamman through the *pottukattuthal* ritual so that the village may prosper and receive rain. Through a close reading of the dedication ceremony, the village's collective decision, the girl's abandonment at puberty, and her later life as a *koothu* performer, the article argues that the ritual deprives a child of her family, freedom and dignity in the name of devotion. It reads the practice as a rural survival of the *devadasi* system and shows how caste power, poverty and fear of divine wrath sustain it. Imayam's unadorned realism, the article concludes, exposes the violence hidden within ritual and holds the reader morally accountable.

Keywords: Imayam, *Chedal*, marginalized lives, Dalit literature, devadasi system, ritual violence, Tamil realism, child rights

INTRODUCTION

Imayam is a writer known in Tamil literature for his realist writing. His style is to capture, with great precision, the lives of marginalized people amid the layers of caste, religion, culture and power. In this sense, *Chedal* is a work that, after *Kovervu Kazhuthaigal* (*Beasts of Burden*), questions the social conscience severely. Even today, rural worship practices retain the strange tendency of a community making a single human life the scapegoat in order to protect itself and fulfil its vows. In this novel, Imayam describes, without any ornamentation and like a slap in the reader's face, the violence inflicted on a girl's life in the name of "devotion." This article examines how, in the name of "ritual," the human rights of a tender child are taken away, with the ignorance, poverty and fear of divine wrath of marginalized people serving as its capital. In particular, it views this ritual as a form of the ancient *devadasi* system and explains how it obstructs the progress of marginalized people.

This concern with the margins has a theoretical background. Marginality, as A. Marx and Po. Velsamy argue, is not a class-based category: "'Margin' is not a definition based on class. What is important is that we see the marginalized as forces made subordinate by various elements such as class, caste, gender and institution" (30–31). The same volume adds that historians, following an elite tradition, have long neglected the millions who labour for society, and that people's history, especially subaltern history, needs to be written (Marx and Velsamy 58). *Chedal* may be read as a literary response to this need.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND THE NOVEL

Imayam (real name: V. Annamalai) is from Kazhuthur, Tittakudi taluk, Cuddalore district. His novel *Kovervu Kazhuthaigal*, published in 1994, created a great stir in the Tamil novel. In his works he records, without any gloss, the life of marginalized people, especially the power dynamics and cultural complexities that exist within oppressed communities. He received the Central Government's Sahitya Akademi Award in 2020 for the novel *Sellaatha Panam* (*Invalid Money*). His works are largely bound to geography and regional dialect. His distinctiveness lies in boldly laying bare religious rituals, caste structures, and the subtle violence women face within the family. He has received many international and state awards, including the Iyal Award and the Jayakanthan Award. His novel *Chedal* is regarded as a highly important literary document against the tendency to destroy human dignity in the name of rituals.

The novel is set in a Dalit settlement in northern Tamil Nadu. Poverty and caste oppression are present on one side, while the story revolves around the *chedal* ritual, a family-deity worship and vow-fulfilment ritual that exists among these very people. At the centre of the story are rituals in which a girl is selected, treated as a goddess, and made to serve for the welfare of the village and for rain.

The community in which the novel is set belongs to those named by the word *Dalit*, a term that, as Poovai Moorthy observes, has been in use for many years and "indicates the oppressed, the despised, the lowered, and so on" (9). Chedal's family is placed even lower within this group, since the *koothar* are regarded as inferior even among the Paraiyars.

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The Birth Story of Selliyamman

According to the myth, from the four drops spilled from the pot of nectar when the ocean of milk was churned, Mudevi, Lakshmi and Parvati were born, with Selliyamman as the fourth and Thara as the fifth. At the request of the Lord, Selliyamman refuses to marry Vali and Sugriva. Her refusal is because she will not marry two men. Angered, Selliyamman left the world of the gods, came to earth, and is believed to have sat under the *vanni* tree at the village boundary and tormented the people. The novel describes her cruelty thus: "She devoured raw corpses with milk, and burnt corpses like *murukku*" (p. 2). Since her anger did not subside even though the three gods humbled themselves greatly, the three began to take a solemn oath: "From this day onward, you will have a distinction that no other female deity has. We will appoint a separate attendant for you. She too will remain a virgin like you until the time of her death. No man's smell will touch her body. She will listen to everything you say without fail" (p. 3). Thus, it is said, they made Selliyamman settle in that very place, and the novel records the sacred account in which Ramalinga Iyer tells the village elder Natarajapillai that three-by-three villages (i.e., groups of villages) have observed this ritual every year without fail. It is noteworthy that this ritual is decided upon in a slum area full of poverty and caste oppression. *Pottukattuthal* (tying the *pottu*, the dedication) is the practice in which a woman is left at the temple of Selliyamman to do work, sing lullabies and dance. The story takes place in the South Arcot district of northern Tamil Nadu (particularly the Cuddalore–Virudhachalam region), on the belief that if the *pottu* is tied, rain will fall.

The Village Decides Together

Chedal is the eighth daughter of Gopal and Poovarumbu, born into the *koothadi* (street-performer) community. The upper-caste people, through their power, decide that she is the one who must have the *pottu* tied for the good of the village. The village elder Natarajapillai tries to make Gopal consent to the ritual, saying: "The deity will never die. Your daughter will never lose her *thali* (marriage thread). Only if the deity dies would the *thali* be cut. Your daughter will remain an ever-auspicious married woman until her death" (p. 1). Not stopping there, he threatens in a tone of authority: "We brought one of your ancestors and settled him in this village for exactly this. You know the old story, don't you? People of many villages have gathered and made a decision; it must not be defied. If you defy it, we will have to bring a girl from outside and tie the *pottu* on her. And if you defy even that, it will be as if your elder sister Rajambal were tied up and beaten with tamarind switches" (p. 2). Having no choice, and lacking the courage to oppose the upper classes, he agrees. Accordingly, she has the *pottu* tied for the Selliyamman temple and the temples of the thirty surrounding villages while she is still a child. That she has the *pottu* tied in childhood, when she should be running, playing and receiving her parents' affection, is the height of cruelty.

The decision is not merely religious; it is cultural. Bhakthavatsala Bharathi defines culture as "the complete whole that includes knowledge, belief, art, moral codes, law, custom" and the other abilities and habits a person learns as a member of society (qtd. in Sivasubramanian, *Panpaattu* 6). Seen in this light, the dedication of Chedal is a custom that society hands down and enforces. A. Sivasubramanian identifies three kinds of domination in Indian society: political, economic and cultural. Of these, he notes, cultural domination is firmly rooted in a society deeply marked by caste differences, and we know far less about the cultural domination and oppression imposed on the majority than about those who held political power (*Adithala* 29). The village's collective decision to dedicate a Dalit girl is a clear instance of such cultural domination.

Tying the Pottu

The girl Chedal is subjected to the ritual without knowing why she must suffer this pain. With Ramalinga Iyer walking ahead, the others carry Chedal to the Selliyamman temple. Because Paraiyars (Dalits) must not enter the temple of the caste street, they stop her at the entrance and smear *kumkum* on her forehead. The crowd and noise around her make her sweat and gasp for breath. Within moments of her braid being undone and her hair being shaved, she begins to cry in fear. She cannot even wipe her eyes with the back of her hand. The neck pain, and the pain from the knife at her neck, together exhaust her. She cannot even lift her head to look. From what others say, she half understands what is happening to her. She watches with longing as boys of her own age run and play joyfully. Afterwards they seat her on a wooden block under a banyan tree, pour pot after pot of water mixed with turmeric and neem leaves, and smear sandalwood paste on her shaven head. Only when, in a half-faint state, a new cloth is tied on her and a garland put around her neck, does she see her mother. She throws down the lump of jaggery given to stop her crying, and weeps loudly. No one pays attention.

As she stares in terror, they smear sacred ash on her forehead, take a thread from the garland on Selliyamman's neck, twist it into a small cord, and string a gold *pottu* on it. They hand it to Karunthattam Lakshmi, a woman of about fifty who had her *pottu* tied by the Parur zamindar, and ask her to tie it on Chedal's neck. Even after the *pottu* is tied, because she belongs to the *koothar* community, regarded as low even among the Paraiyars, she is not permitted to enter the temple.

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Through this, the author exposes the act of taking away individual freedom, carried out openly by the whole village in God's name, and the caste oppression behind it.

Chedal's Family Leaves the Village

At first Chedal resists. Again and again she runs toward home to remain a member of the family. The village appoints an old woman to guard her. Chedal cannot accept that the temple and the house beside it are her new family. Meanwhile, her parents, unable to make a living, leave for Kandy without telling her. The old woman Chinnamma, appointed to look after Chedal, dies within a few days. Chedal lives alone. Gradually she realizes who she is and what her duties are. She begins to understand that she is different from others, and that there are many differences between other children's lives and hers. Without a family, she realizes that the moral rules that bind her are entirely social.

Chedal Comes of Age

According to the belief that menstruating women must not go to the temple, on the day of heavy rain when Chedal comes of age, she suffers with no place even to sit apart. The villagers, who had secured even their goats, cows and hens, gave no shelter to Chedal, who is possessed by the deity. The whole village abandons her. In this state, she leaves her native village and the temple. Society does not regard individuals. The village had earlier promised to take responsibility for her life. That is not happening now. The breaking of the pact between her and the village hurts Chedal. Chedal remains one who keeps this faith-based pact to the very end. But the village and the caste break it.

A *koothadi* named Ponnan, a distant relative, takes Chedal, who has left the village, along with him and makes her a skilled *koothu* performer. One day, when the man who was to play the female role does not come, Chedal performs on the pleading of Ponnan's troupe. When "Ponnan Set" becomes "Chedal Set," both income and trouble come together. Men who see her beauty and dance look at her with ill intent. She grieves: "I have no anger at anyone. I blame no one. All of it is the sin and fate of what I did in a past birth. Karna did not listen to Salliyan; that was his fate, and he died on the battlefield. Even when they sacrificed Aravan, they first got him married to a virgin before the sacrifice. Nothing is left for me. Even if a thousand men come forward to give me children, will one come who will live with me?" Yet she does not lose her chastity and lives out her life to the end as a stage *koothu* performer. The novel starkly reveals the tragedy of a woman's life being ruined by the strange rituals of society.

CONCLUSION

In Imayam's usual style, the story is told in realistic language without any ornamentation. *Chedal* is a work that shakes readers and a voice against the regressive rituals prevailing in society. The novel starkly strips bare the physical and mental pain a girl suffers so that the village may prosper and rain may fall. Chedal's body is made to belong not to her but to the village and to caste. Imayam criticizes the social outlook that sees her not as a human being but as a goddess or a sacrificial victim. Set within a Dalit settlement, the story records the beliefs, quarrels and poverty among those people. On the thin line between devotion and superstition, the novel presses readers' consciences to ask how a tender child's pain disappears. Those who see rituals as symbols of their power and prestige regard Chedal not as a human being but only as an instrument for the ritual. *Chedal* is no ordinary story; it is a stone thrown at a society's blind faith. Other writers would approach such rituals with "artistry" or "devotional ecstasy." But Imayam shows the ritual's repulsiveness, its smell of blood, and its power exactly as they are. This is what makes the novel an outstanding work of realism. Ma. Ramalingam's remark helps explain the nature of this realism: the novelist creates "a real world infused with imagination"; if actual life is written exactly as it is, it becomes like history, and if imagination ignores practice, it turns into a fabricated tale (17). Imayam keeps to this middle path, so that the experience of a fictional girl carries the weight of documented social fact.

Leaders such as Muthulakshmi Reddy fought for the abolition of the *devadasi* system and brought in laws. Yet rural rituals like *Chedal* still lie hidden under the name of "belief," beyond the eye of the law. Through this novel, Imayam raises a moral question against such rituals. *Chedal* is not merely the story of one girl; it is testimony to some of the rotten pages of our society. The similarity between the *devadasi* system and the Chedal ritual is that both make a woman a goddess but refuse to see her as a human being. Imayam's novel does not let readers read merely for enjoyment; it makes them look at society with a sense of guilt. In the landscape of Tamil literature, *Chedal* is a highly important socio-political document. Imayam conveys the need to abolish such strange rituals without offering any sermon, through the readers' own conscience.

Glossary

Devadasi: a woman dedicated to a temple deity; the system was legally abolished in the twentieth century
Koothadi / Koothu: street-performer community / traditional Tamil folk theatre

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Kumkum: red powder applied on the forehead
Paraiyar: a Dalit community of Tamil Nadu
Pottu / Pottukattuthal: the dedication emblem / the ritual of dedicating a girl to a temple
Thali: the marriage thread worn by married women
Vanni: a tree (Prosopis spicigera) often found at village boundaries

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