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Resistance Through Violence: Gender, Caste, and the Subversion of Power in Assassin by K. R. Meera

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Abstract

The present research paper is an examination of the caste, gender, and resistance in K. R. Meera's novel *Assassin*. It explores the reconfiguration of violence as a tool for subverting deep-rooted power hierarchies in society. The study investigates her acts of violence to destabilize hegemonic norms through a close reading of the journey of the protagonist. The protagonist is a Dalit woman who confronts the oppressive system of caste and patriarchy in the Indian social milieu. The frameworks of Dalit feminism and subaltern agency are used for the present study. The paper argues that her defiance can't be confined merely to rebellion. It symbolizes a strategic achievement of autonomy against systemic dehumanization prevalent in society. The violent resistance of the protagonist is seen through her dual identity as victim and avenger in the study. This identity as an avenger has a destructive force against traditional binaries of purity/pollution and victimhood/aggression. It exposes the paradoxes of power existing in caste-ridden societies. In the present study, it is shown that Meera's novel criticizes both upper-caste patriarchy and the limitations of passive resistance to solve the issue of caste and gender-based discrimination. The novel is a provocative commentary on the necessity of intersectional struggle, where violence is a fraught yet transformative tool for marginalized people to regain dignity and overturn the oppressive system which dehumanizes human beings.

Keywords: Caste Identity; Dalit Feminism; Gender Resistance; Subversion of Power; Systemic Oppression

1 Introduction

Assassin by K. R. Meera is a novel that throws light on the visceral realities of caste and gender-based violence. It is a provocative exploration of resistance through the perspective of a Dalit woman's defiance against systemic oppression prevalent in society. Satyapriya is a manual scavenger who is also the protagonist of the novel. She becomes a revolutionary and stands against upper-caste patriarchy and caste hegemony. She has the power to subvert traditional narratives of women's victimhood by using violence as a medium of achieving sovereignty. This paper examines the power of Meera's novel, which destabilizes dominant power structures by investigating the caste, gender, and resistance. The novel is analyzed within frameworks of Dalit feminism, postcolonial theory, and critical studies on violence.

The novel's thematic core aligns with Dr B. R. Ambedkar's assertion that caste is "not just a division of labour, but a division of labourers" (245). This is a hierarchy maintained through systemic dehumanization of the marginalized people. The journey of Satyapriya from subjugation to rebellion is mirrored in what Gopal Guru terms the "Dalit woman's double bind" (2548), where her identity as both Dalit and woman magnifies her marginalization in society. Her choice of violence is a rebellious act against caste-sanctioned "purity", and it is reflected in Frantz Fanon's theorization of violence as a

"cleansing force" for the colonized people (51). She purposefully opts for violence to destroy the caste-based oppression of the people.

Meera's novel completely changes the gendered notions of resistance in the male-dominated society. Satyapriya's rebellious move upsets the upper-caste ideal of the "chaste woman," which is critiqued by Sharmila Rege as a "tool to enforce caste endogamy" (89). Her violence functions as what Judith Butler calls a "performative contradiction" (Butler 179). She destabilizes the very norms that seek to silence her instinctive spirit. The novel's determined portrayal of the corporeal sufferings of Dalit women evokes Shailaja Paik's analysis of "Dalit women's bodies as sites of resistance" (112). It challenges the sanitized discourse of mainstream feminism and appeals to bring forth the sidelined history of the marginalized people.

The study frames the violence used by Satyapriya as both cathartic and politically strategic. Meera deals with Gayatri Spivak's question, "Can the subaltern speak?", suggesting that "speech may manifest through acts of rebellion or disruption" (28). This paper argues that the novel reconstructed and reformed the nature of resistance not as a request for inclusion but as a radical reclamation of power using violence. It also cross-examines the collective influence of caste and gender on the narratives of violence and liberation.

2 Caste, gender, and the subversion of power

In the novel titled *Assassin* by K. R. Meera, Amma asserted that Acchan's attacker must have been a woman. She says, "If a woman stabbed him so many times, there was surely something going on between them. She decided to finish off the business herself" (26). It overthrows patriarchal narratives that frame violence as a domain of males only. Instead, it centres on the freedom of females and the nature of gendered resistance. Amma not only upsets assumptions about who wields power against the exploitation but also underscores how women's acts of violence emerge from lived intersections of intimacy, betrayal, and systemic oppression by theorizing the identity of attacker as a woman engaged in a troubled relationship with Acchan. In this context, Sharmila Rege argues that "Dalit women's resistance is not merely about reacting to oppression but about redefining the terms of struggle through their lived experiences of caste and gender" (43). Amma refuses to devalue the attack to a random and normal act, and her resolute indication to "finish off the business herself" (44). It is reflected in Rege's insistence on resistance as a practice rooted in marginalized women's blood. The novel and the critical framework collaboratively work to reframe violence not as retaliation but as a deliberate use of power, where the actions of women are moulded by and push against the hierarchies of caste and patriarchy in the society.

Acchan resolutely declares, "Even if I die, my memories are safe in this college... Who do you think caught, killed, and stuffed the mongoose family...? It was me" (42). It symbolizes the violent assertion of caste identity in a space designed to exclude him. The act of "stuffing" the mongoose, which is a metaphor for preserving his existence within an oppressive institution, is a reflection of the psychological sufferings of caste-based erasure and the desperate need to profess legitimacy. Anupama Rao argues that caste operates through "the small insult, the sudden withdrawal of friendship and intimacy," compelling Dalits and lower-caste people to bear the "burden of caste" while upper-caste people enjoy their privileges (265). Acchan's violent gesture of "destroying a marginalized creature to secure his place" is mirrored in the assertion of Rao that "caste hierarchy forces the oppressed to internalize and weaponize their trauma" as institutions like the college become the places where caste identity is both "recessed" by the privileged and weaponized against

the marginalized people. His act of stuffing the mongoose becomes a ridiculous assertion of power, a defiance against the systemic violence that renders his identity invisible unless it is performed through brutality.

Satyapriya's confrontation with systemic violence is rooted in her father's defiance of caste and gender norms. It culminates in her haunting realization: "The gunman's form began to take shape in my mind... Who was that cruel assassin? And why did he want to kill me?" (19). The spectral assassin epitomizes the violent retribution of a casteist patriarchy threatened by transgressions, which frames Satyapriya's struggle as both personal and political. This existential threat is mirrored in Meena Kandasamy's rallying cry in *A Dalit History*: "We will become the explosive stardust that you speak of, the stardust that will singe this oppressive system of caste… We have come here to end a system that has kept trying hard to put an end to us… to teach them an unforgettable lesson" (18). Kandasamy's metaphor of "explosive stardust" has reinterpreted violence as a transformative act of resistance, a force that dismantles oppression through its very defiance. Satyapriya's confrontation with the assassin is a symbol of systemic annihilation that parallels this resistance. Her refusal to be silenced or erased is a mirror to Dalit feminist assertion of their power through explosive rebellion against their exploitation. The narrative arc of *Assassin* aligns with Kandasamy's vision: systemic violence, when met with defiant resistance, becomes the catalyst for its own undoing, as marginalized voices regain their power through acts of radical and bold self-assertion.

In K. R. Meera's *Assassin*, Satyapriya's statement, "Money, and money alone, protects the woman who lives alone" (14), sheds light on the precariousness of women's sovereignty in a patriarchal system that uses economic dependency against women for their exploitation. Her critique is similar to Anupama Rao's analysis of how "caste-enforced dispossession perpetuates women's economic marginalization, and makes labour and surplus redistribution central to dismantling structural inequality" (Rao 14). Satyapriya's emphasis on financial self-reliance as a shield against gendered oppression reflects the lived reality of women confronting hierarchies of caste and class. Rao's analysis contextualizes this struggle and argues that systemic caste-based deprivation exacerbates the exclusion of women from economic agency, which renders them vulnerable to exploitation. Together, these perspectives reveal that the prevalence of patriarchal control is sustained not merely through gender norms but through material dispossession, which is a cycle that demands radical economic restructuring. Satyapriya's solitary defiance is rooted in financial independence and thus becomes a step towards resistance against both gendered and caste-based violence. It affirms Rao's claim that redistributive justice is indispensable to liberation.

In K. R. Meera's *Assassin*, Amma's response to her daughter's absence is marked by her refusal to grieve openly and her erasure of Chechi's belongings, "as though she never had such a daughter" (24–25), challenges conventional narratives of maternal sorrow, instead framing her stoicism as a tactic of survival within patriarchal restrictions. This act of emotional suppression is far from signalling passivity of women; it is similar to what scholar Valdovinos terms a "survivorship perspective," wherein women confront systemic violence through "assertive and logical" acts of resilience that reframe victimhood as a powerful act (Valdovinos 285). Amma has resisted the societal expectation of grief and asserts control over her narrative in a world that denies women autonomy by dismantling the remnants of Chechi's existence. Valdovinos' analysis is situated within broader discussions of gender violence. It highlights that such actions, though outwardly appearing harsh, exemplify a strategic reclaiming of power, which transforms survival into a deliberate rebellion (Valdovinos 285). The detachment of Amma thus becomes not an absence of feeling but a radical act of self-preserva-

tion, and redefines strength through the silent refusal to be submissive to patriarchal narratives of suffering.

In the present research, the poisoned well is a symbol of caste-based violence targeting Acchan's family. It reflects the systemic oppression faced by marginalized communities. The description of the well's water as "sour" and stinking, with Acchan's realization that "Someone had poisoned our well" (Meera 65), highlights the insidious nature of caste sabotage, which seeks to destabilize lives through the covert dehumanization of the people. This act of violence is similar to Sally Engle Merry's analysis in *Gender Violence: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, where she identifies "caste-based discrimination and violence" as a globally recognized form of gendered oppression (Merry 127). The novel's immediate context has emphasized caste and its relationship with gender. It is evident in Merry's opinion: caste violence disproportionately targets women, who have to suffer compounded hierarchies of power in society. Therefore, the poisoned well moves beyond its literal meaning to represent a structural violence that international feminist discourse places within the field of gendered harm. It illustrates how caste-based acts, whether it is overt or covert, work as tools of systemic subjugation that reinforce both social and gendered hierarchies in society.

Inspector Shetty's sardonic remark in K. R. Meera's *Assassin*, "People are talking only of those who died because of demonetization... many who lived because of it – like you!" (Meera 70), exposes the systemic violence inherent in state power, where policies like demonetization disproportionately harm marginalized groups while it is proven a privilege for elites. This duality is reflected in E.P. Thompson's critique, as cited by Palmer, that law functions not as a neutral arbiter but as a coercive "field of force" that "disciplined labor while legitimizing capitalist authority by masking systemic violence behind legal formalism" (Palmer 24). Shetty's accusation underscores how state-sanctioned economic measures, framed as legal and necessary, obscure their violent repercussions on vulnerable populations, redirecting attention to the beneficiaries of such policies. By exposing the lived disparities behind demonetization, Meera's narrative mirrors Thompson's argument: "the law's veneer of neutrality conceals its role in perpetuating class hierarchies, where legalized violence sustains capitalist dominance (49). In this statement, Shetty's words crystallize the tension between state power's legitimizing rhetoric and its material brutality that reveals how legal formalism, as Palmer notes, operates as a "tool of systemic oppression" (49).

In K. R. Meera's *Assassin*, Satyapriya's haunting interrogation of the violence targeting her, "If two of the four [murder attempts] were directed at me... then which ones were they? Why did he want me dead?" (17), shows her struggle to reconcile personal trauma with the cyclical, caste-driven brutality rooted in the history of her family. Her gendered weakness as a Dalit woman cannot be separated from the mechanisms of the system of oppression that Singh identifies, wherein "violence as punishment against Dalit women is primarily about control to remind Dalits of being outcaste and to terrorize Dalit communities so that they would not dare cross their place of servitude" (110). Satyapriya questions, "Why did he want me dead?". This question is mirrored in Singh's analysis: the attempts on her life are not merely personal vendettas but acts of retribution designed to enforce caste hierarchies. The upper-caste perpetrators weaponize violence to reinscribe her family's "untouchable" status by targeting her body. It ensures compliance through generations. This cyclical terror, as per suggested in the fraught introspection of Satyapriya, transcends a person's acts of harm and becomes a tool for the generations to suppress Dalit resistance and sustain the oppressive caste order in society. Her quest for answers has exposed the violence of caste and gender, where systemic power is maintained through the corporeal punishment of marginalized women in the society.

3 Conclusion

In this way, *Assassin* by K. R. Meera interrogates the issues caused by the caste, gender, and power, and redefines and reframes violence as a language of resistance against oppression prevalent in society. The novel disrupts the narratives of patriarchy by centering on the power of women. Amma's theorization of female guilt in the murder of Acchan is an attempt to destroy gendered norms and frame violence as a retort to intimate betrayal and erasure. She patiently removed the memory of her daughter, alongside the pursuit of financial sovereignty for Satyapriya. It highlights that survival tactics like emotional suppression and economic self-reliance become a medium of revolt in a world that uses dependency as a tool of exploitation. Caste oppression emerges as structural and psychological violence: Acchan's grotesque preservation of the mongoose is a mirror to the trauma of caste-based erasure, while the poisoned well is a symbol of covert sabotage targeting marginalized bodies of women. The novel bluntly criticizes state complicity, as policies like demonetization worsen systemic inequities in society, as it privileges elites while punishing the vulnerable people. Satyapriya's haunting confrontation with the spectral assassin is the representation of the cyclical terror of caste-patriarchy, where violence against Dalit women enforces their subjugation. Yet, her defiance like Amma's resilience is a signal toward transformative resistance, which reframes rebellion as "explosive stardust" that destabilizes oppressive systems deep-rooted in society. Ultimately, *Assassin* portrays resistance in a diversified manner, simultaneously corporeal, emotional, and sometimes economic in nature. Meera has precisely illustrated how survival itself becomes revolutionary, and its challenge to dehumanizing hierarchies to regain power. The novel throws light on the principle that liberation lies not in sanitized protest but in the raw and contested form of power, where marginalized voices break the silence to redefine and reassert their humanity.

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