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Reimagining 'Home': Spatial Politics, Female Agency and Casteed Boundaries in Tamil Women's Narratives

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Abstract: Domestic spaces are seen as mundane and apolitical, but they are sites of constant activity which either emerge from or contribute to political or social structures. Often domestic spaces are associated with femininity, passivity and nostalgia but rarely with power, politics, and economy. This research examines Bama's *Sangati: Events* (2005) and Salma's *The Hour Past Midnight* (2009) to redefine domesticity as politically charged sites rather than passive and apolitical. Domestic spaces (threshold, courtyard, bedroom, kitchen and neighbourhood streets) are dynamic and non-binary where power is imposed and contested daily.

Keywords: Domestic space, Caste, Intersectionality, Resistance, Gender.

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Domestic spaces occupy ambivalent position in social and cultural imagination. It is often understood as a pace of intimacy, emotional security and belonging, yet it can also be sites of surveillance, confinement and unequal labour. The differentiation and divisions of domestic spaces expose the political and social hierarchies that operate within everyday life. Decisions on who may enter a room, cross a threshold, move freely within domestic spaces are not merely private arrangements, they are connected to broader systems of gender, caste and class.

Women's experiences of domestic spaces are not monolithic. While both upper caste and lower caste women are subjected to control within social and domestic spaces, the rationale and discourse behind such restrictions differ largely. For upper caste women, the spatial denial is justified through ideals of purity and respectability. Dalit and other marginalized women are labelled as unworthy and polluted to access a space. The same domestic spaces are a marker of elevated status for some and a site of humiliation for some.

The architecture of Tamil homes itself reflects hierarchies. The Mutram(courtyard), a ritual space with a Tulsi plant, is often seen only in upper-caste houses which is typically absent in Dalit households, exemplifying spatial denial on the basis of caste and economic affordability. In another aspect, its absence removes certain restrictions connected with the space; it frees Dalit women from the restrictive purity codes that regulate the movement of upper-caste women within Mutram, such as the denial of entry during menstruation. Similarly, spatial distinction between Mun Vaasal (front entrance) and Pin Vaasal (back entrance) enforces gendered and caste segregation.

Spatial theorists such as Henri Lefebvre and Doreen Massey conceptualize space as a socially and politically produced entity, where power operates through spatial organisation and surveillance (Foucault). Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* gives a phenomenological understanding of domestic interiors as sites of intimacy, emotion and imagination. Bachelard poeticizes the domestic spaces as sites of memory, warmth and security. This research politicizes what he poeticizes by looking at the political potential of micro domestic spaces. This study challenges Bachelard's "home" concept, arguing home is not a universal space of protection and respectability. However, Bachelard's idea of home as a container of "compressed time" is valuable in considering how domestic spaces encapsulate compressed histories of caste, patriarchy and resistance.

Most existing research focuses on female experience and mobility through social and public spaces such as workplaces, politics, rural to urban and transnational migrations. However, there is a significant gap in examining female mobility and lived experience within the Tamil households, and in understanding how these spaces are constructed to create, sustain and reproduce structures of power, caste and patriarchy. Tamil Nadu, known for its deep social and political ideologies ranging from Dravidian rationalism to caste-based conservatism reflects these tensions even in domestic spaces. Yet, this dimension is scarcely captured in previous research. This research addresses the gap by looking at how women create a feminist counterspace in the very site of their oppression through covert resistance and resilience. While previous scholarship (Datta; Scott; de Certeau) emphasizes everyday resistance, this study will further examine how architectural geography of Tamil homes embed resistance within. The spatial distribution of Tamil domestic architecture contributes to differentiated gender and caste-based experiences.

Similar to Western feminism overlooking at non-white female experience (Datta), the domestic spatial experiences of women are overlooked in theoretical discourse. Domestic spaces are often seen only as sites of oppression but never as sites of nuanced resistance, which has the potential to rupture long instilled patriarchal and caste structures. Often women empowerment is associated with individualistic, consumerist and western ideals, overlooking kin based and domestic forms of women's agency (Datta).

This research fills the gap by showcasing domestic spaces (kitchen, threshold, courtyard, entrances and bedrooms) as micro political terrains where emotional labour, everyday practices and silence initiates women' survival, agency and identity. Everyday resistance and resilience are the pivotal tools used by women in domestic spaces to attain agency and identity (Scott; Foucault; Datta).

Close reading and textual analysis examine the language, imagery, symbolism and narrative structure of the Tamil Women narratives to show how oppression and resistance go hand in hand in domestic spaces. Comparative Literary Analysis shows how Tamil female writers articulate the experience of upper caste and Dalit women within the same domestic spaces. Though the spatial restrictions are the same, the mode of enforcement and the impact suffered by the women differ according to their caste and class. Hence, shows how the female characters of various castes narrate the same domestic spatiality and the restrictions differently.

Intersectional Feminist Analysis will enhance the comparative analysis by highlighting Kimberlé Crenshaw's point that "All inequality is not created equal." This methodology exposes how gender, caste and class play pivotal roles in shaping domestic experiences. It challenges the notion of treating women's experiences of domestic spatiality as homogeneous.

Feminist Geography Method shows how domestic spaces are turned into gendered and caste-marked terrains. Combining it with Comparative Spatial Analysis will further open the discussion for how the experiences of upper caste and Dalit women are similar as well as distinguished under the same domestic spaces. Applying these methods will help the research to reveal how domestic spaces act simultaneously as a tool of social control and a medium of resistance. Drawing from James C. Scott's *Weapons of the Weak* (1985), concepts like "Infrapolitics" and "Hidden Transcripts" help in analysing how gradual building up of resistance shown by women in domestic spaces through day-to-day languages, jokes, folklores, proverbs, etc accumulate power and eventually affect the social and political structures. It exemplifies that resistance need not necessarily be overt actions. Further, micro domestic spaces (kitchen, bedroom, threshold, etc) that are often linked with silence, and secrecy act as sites of private Infrapolitics.

Complementing Scott's concepts, Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980) differentiates between "Strategies" and "Tactics". The women in the domestic spaces use Tactics to show their disapproval and resistance, making micro domestic spaces as sites of tactical reappropriation. In *Sangati*, Bama represents everyday resistance through collective practices such as jokes, ridicule, storytelling, sharp speech and laughter. Such practices allowed women to comment on the inequalities, their work lives and their community.

The capacity of women's resistance is visible in the character of Maikkanni. She is a young girl who performs domestic tasks, carries small children, collects firewood. She undertakes responsibilities that are beyond her age. However, she laughs and chatters through her burdensome work. She did not allow the exploitation to define het identity. Instead Maikkanni portrayed herself through her appearance, jokes and chatter. It shows that her identity exceeds the social and economic expectations assigned on her. "*Thaatha, look at me, I've combed my hair right back and put flowers in it. Don't I look like Jayalalitha?*" (Bama 76). Songs, humour, mockery are inbuilt in *Sangati*, that they occupy a major part of women's resistance against the social and political oppression they face every day. "*They sang all the time at work, too*" (Bama 78). For instance, women sing while working, use verses to tease one another.

They use songs and proverbs to tease men, relieving the tension of oppression. Sharing songs and jokes shifts their individual suffering into a collective experience. Through these seemingly ordinary practices, Bama portrays humour and oral expression not merely as forms of entertainment but as means through which Dalit women negotiate oppression, articulate dissent, and maintain a shared sense of agency. "*They always tease each other through their songs*" (Bama 78). A more overt instance of resistance occurs in the village panchayat scene concerning Mariamma and Manikam. The scene takes place in a communal space rather than a domestic space, making it harder for women to voice out. However, women gathered in the panchayat continued to voice out through whispers and mockery. The male authorities attempt to determine Mariamma's guilt, pressured her to seek forgiveness, while women who know the circumstances question the accusation.

Despite hushed many times by the male members of the gathering, Kaliamma recalls the events surrounding the collection of firewood and questions the landlord's version of the happenings. Other women continue to discuss the injustice among themselves. "*It was the mudalaali who tried to rape her. She was scared out of her wits, refused him, and ran away.*" (Bama 24).Though the men interrupt and demand that they remain silent, they did not surrender completely and give up their understanding of the event. The panchayat episode shows that women are excluded from meaningful participation, but their continued discussion of the event formed a significant form of resistance, because it refuses to let the official account erase what the women know. Such acts did not immediately overturn the male authority, but it did not make the women give up their knowledge and their interpretation of the injustice. " *They say he's a man: if he sees mud he'll step into it; if he sees water, he'll wash himself. It's over justice for men and quite another for women*" (Bama 25). Reading through James C. Scott's concept of everyday resistance, these episodes show how marginalised people express dissent and resistance through ordinary daily practices. Bama thus, represents storytelling, critical observation, whispers, songs and collective speech as practices through which Dalit women interpret and negotiate the structures governing their lives.

The Hour Past Midnight exemplifies how the architecture of the "home" keeps women confined, hidden and voiceless. The male authority of the family keeps in check the mobility of the women. Even within domestic spaces, conventionally associated with women, their freedom remains restricted. Their everyday activities including eating and sitting are subject to scrutiny and discipline by male members of the family. *"Her uncle watched her intently. 'Here, stop it, will you? Is that rice you are mixing, or is it cement? Hasn't the Holy Prophet told us to mix the rice properly, only in one corner of the plate first of all, and to eat it slowly, little by little? Should you plough your food about, like this?' His voice was gentle and stern at the same time. Rabia was deeply ashamed. 'Very well, Periattha', she said shyly, bending over her plate and placing a handful in her mouth."* (Salma 34). The description of Zohra standing half hidden next to the pillar foregrounds the spatial conventions through which women's presence in operated through the expectations of modesty and respectability. Her position behind the pillar instead of an entirely exposed space shows how visibility is socially negotiated.

The pillar functions as a spatial marker of concealment.*"'Here I am, Macchaan.' Zohra came towards them, her sari pulled right over her head. She stood half-hidden next to a pillar."* (Salma 34).Salma offers a different representation of domestic space through Firdaus's attempt to create opportunities for looking at Siva. The kitchen is located in a separate block on one side of the paved courtyard, while the main house stands on the other. Movement between the kitchen and the main house require crossing the courtyard. Initially, Firdaus felt the arrangement inconvenient but once she developed interest in Siva, the same arrangement became conducive for her.

The courtyard is part of the domestic arrangement through which Firdaus performs her household tasks. The shift in the meaning of courtyard is central to the novel's representation of everyday resistance. The space which defines strictly household tasks for Firdaus, became a space where directs her attention beyond those assigned tasks. In a restricted household, women's mobility is constrained. In that case, the courtyard acts as an opportunity for Firdaus to enjoy her desire towards Siva. She crosses the courtyard more than her chores require. Her mother questions why Firdaus cannot collect all ingredients in a single trip.

The movement seen as inefficient labour to her mother, offers an opportunity for Firdaus to experience a degree of personal choice under the roof of restriction. "*Ever since she saw Siva, her mind was in a flutter. Now she crossed the courtyard frequently, just to catch a glimpse of him in the opposite house, through the open tin gate."* (Salma 67).The courtyard has not been physically transformed, nor has Firdaus openly challenged the authority governing her movement. Instead, she appropriates an existing domestic routine for a purpose that exceeds its expected function. Michel de Certeau's distinction between strategies and tactics helps process this episode. Firdaus's repeated crossing of the courtyard makes temporary use of opportunities that her routine provides. She cannot openly disclose the purpose of her actions, consequently, her agency depends on timing, concealment, and the ability to make one intention appear to be another. Though not magnificent, her tactics create a space of autonomy within the domestic environment where her desires are not freely expressed.

Taken together, the texts suggest that everyday resistance is a situated practice rather than a universal activity. *Sangati* showcases that women's conversation and collective resistance challenge the gender and caste-based authority which determine whose experiences are heard and believed. The instances demonstrate that domestic spaces are not merely private settings in which gendered and caste-based oppressions are reproduced; they are also sites where women negotiate, challenge and occasionally subvert the structures governing them. Through kitchens, courtyards, thresholds, routines, songs, storytelling, mockery, jokes, the texts reveal how women find possibilities pf agency with spaces shaped by unequal power relations. By foregrounding these ordinary practices, the texts challenge the notion that domestic spaces are politically insignificant. It establishes home as a contested terrain where oppression is reproduced, negotiated and resisted.

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