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Book Review

The Taming of Women
P. Sivakami
Penguin
Pages: 240 • Rs. 299

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An eccentric and intriguing ensemble of women

P. Sivakami's novel features several powerful, moving women. Their passions, their problems and their difficult choices reveal a rich tapestry of gender politics, writes Sharanya

SHARANYA 1st Dec 2012

In her poem "Woman", Dalit poet Hira Bansode envisions a short but profound dramatic monologue on the part of a river, addressed to her man the sea, where she laments: "All my life/I've been dissolving myself/and flowing towards you/for your sake/in the end it was I/who turned into the sea". In P. Sivakami's second novel *Anandhayi*, or *The Taming of Women*, the women of a village, entrenched in a flagrant web of patriarchy where matters like physical abuse and sexual coercion are briskly dealt with everyday, succeed in maintaining their tributaries (tumultuous as they are) despite all odds, and do not, like the narrator in Bansode's perturbing poem, dissolve into the oppressive oceanscape of masculinity that they are constantly confronted with.

The Taming of Women is a reckless, dizzying delight to the senses. Sensitively translated by Pritham K. Chakravarthy, it details the lives of several Dalit women in an unknown village in South India (clues in the vernacular vocabulary indicate Tamil Nadu) but primarily focuses on the lives of Anandhayi, her husband Periyannan, whose name translates formidably to "Big Brother", her mother-in-law and Anandhayi's six children. The novel begins with Anandhayi going into labour with her fifth child while Periyannan has just had sex with a prostitute upstairs in his room. Later, he brings home his fair-skinned mistress Lakshmi, a woman who is described as "saffron drowned in warm milk—or a rose petal", to live with his family. Sivakami—who is the first Tamil Dalit woman to write a novel—does not mince words, her women suffer and they do not hide it; throughout the novel, Periyannan raises his hand on his wife and mistress—and on occasion, even his daughter—without a second thought. The women fight back viciously, and even exploit him for their own sexual pleasures and deny him when they so desire it; Anandhayi is severely admonished by the midwife for forgetting the child "in her pleasure" and Lakshmi kicks Periyannan in his nether regions and raises a sickle on him when he tries to hit her.

The strength of the novel, however, lies not so much in attempting to reconcile these various seemingly conflicting aspects of empowerment—indeed, had the tender balance of fury and retort that is maintained throughout tilted slightly, this would not be an unjust conclusion to arrive at—but in portraying the women's struggles as inevitable and, consequently, powerful in the way they startle the men who take them for granted. The silent horrors of sexual harassment that occurs in daily life and its slithering invasion into the destruction of childhood innocence have been dealt with commendably. Consider the following episode, where Chinnasami, a local help, is asked to treat baby Dhanam, who has

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just wet herself. He sings her a lullaby and one is instantly comforted by his deft handling of a wailing child. Then:

"As one hand was busy circling the boil with the sap, the other was gradually moving up her thigh.

"Why did you take so long?" Anandhayi demanded when Chinnasami finally returned. Dhanam was fast asleep on his chest, her head tucked in his shoulder.

"See, I got the sobbing child to sleep," he whispered."

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These women kick, scream, steal, run away, kill and raise hell within their households, and they will do what it takes to assert their rights. This means Lakshmi eloping constantly and leaving in her wake a wildly irresponsible man and, in turn, a frustrated adopted-household but it also means Anandhayi protecting Lakshmi from Periyannan, and Dhanam having sex with a Christian boy in her own house to rebel against her parents. The quality of "fighting back" is not one that can be slotted casually under the loosely-used, misplaced brackets of "sisterhood" or "sexual education"; context demands that we understand each woman's struggle on its own terms. Sometimes they come to a head, at other times they move quietly past each other: this cannot be determined by ends, for struggles in womanhood—especially those that take place within marginalised caste-structures and access to minimal privilege—often imply that the means are the ends.

But *The Taming of Women* is not merely about flashing anger and protesting spirits, it is not a *treatise*; it is a blistering novel for its expert treatment of two other noteworthy aspects specific to it: first, the form of the novel itself, and second, the translation from Tamil. Each chapter can be read as a short story in itself; this is remarkable if only for the reason that the continuity of the narrative is never broken. Characters—quirky, dangerous, witty, all of them endearing and equally memorable, from Dingumalli, who "spoke two Tamils: one, the chaste Tamil and the other, Dingumalli Tamil" depending on how he was addressed, to the Devamani Pentecost, who delivered long sermons because "constant preaching and the ability to speak had lent her a skill to pray non-stop"—appear and disappear, always providing more glinting prisms of perspective.

Lastly, a word on the translation, which is exquisite for retaining the distinct character of non-Brahmanical Tamil without rendering it as an exotic subset of the latter: from the forms of address and the cuisine to the curses flung about and objects from everyday use, Chakravarthy makes stunning choices about what to translate and what to leave for the glossary at the end. The vernacular words are not italicised; a noteworthy choice for the translation builds them seamlessly into the narrative in a manner that constructs an uncompromising linguistic architecture that would make Maurice Blanchot proud for simulating what he terms in *The Laughter of the Gods* as "an eternal sparkle where, in the glitter of detour and return, the absence of the origin is dispersed." Alas privileged readers, you cannot make any more excuses for objectifying the "authentic". What a relief.

For *The Taming of Women*, and this particular translation of it, is, without exaggeration, that—an eternal sparkle. Sink your teeth into it, bask in its reflected glitter.



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