

**Marxist and Foucauldian Perspectives on Power in Iyayam's
*Beasts of Burden and A Woman Burnt***

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Abstract

This paper is an exploration of how power, oppression, caste, and gender function in Iyayam's novels *Beasts of Burden* and *A Woman Burnt* through the combined perspectives of Karl Marx and Michel Foucault. It argues that the main reason for exploitation in Iyayam's works is not economic inequality alone but the disruption in social norms, caste hierarchy, and internalized oppression. Using Marxist theory, the paper explains how poverty, labor exploitation, and caste-based economic systems shape the lives of marginalized Dalit communities. Through Foucauldian theory, it further shows how power operates invisibly through family, culture, religion, and societal expectations, making oppressed individuals accept suffering as natural. Overall, the paper highlights the realistic portrayal of both the material and psychological dimensions of oppression in Indian society.

Keywords: Marxist Literary, Subaltern Studies, Class Conflict Caste and Class, Social Realism Oppression and Resistance, Marginalized Voices, Political Ideology in Literature

Iyayam holds a unique place in modern Tamil literature for his honest portrayal of caste oppression, gender violence, and economic exploitation. His novels, *Beasts of Burden* and *A Woman Burnt*, translated into English by Lakshmi Holmström and Padma Narayanan, highlight the real experiences of marginalized communities in rural Tamil

Nadu. These stories are grounded in material conditions, making them suitable for a Marxist reading. However, looking at them only through traditional Marxism leaves out some aspects of power, especially those related to culture, discipline, and internalized oppression. This paper uses a combined Marxist and Foucauldian approach to examine how power functions in Imayam's work. While Marx's idea of base and superstructure explains the economic roots of exploitation, Michel Foucault's concepts of power, discipline, and discourse reveal the subtle ways domination is maintained. Moreover, this paper argues that Imayam's writings show how caste and gender oppression operate not just through economic control but also through ideological conditioning and social norms.

Karl Marx believes that society is fundamentally shaped by its economic base, which includes the forces and relations of production. This base then shapes the superstructure, made up of institutions like law, religion, culture, morality, and ideology (Marx and Engels 20). Literature, which is part of the superstructure, both reflects and reinforces the material conditions of its time. In caste-driven Indian society, economic relationships are tightly linked to social hierarchy. Land ownership, labor relations, and caste identity work together to maintain dominance. Raymond Williams points out that culture does not just reflect society; it actively helps maintain social order (Williams 33). Thus, literary works like Imayam's novels become important for exploring how ideology operates in daily life. However, Marxist theory alone doesn't completely explain how people come to accept their oppression. Michel Foucault addresses this gap by shifting the focus from economic determinism to the smaller dynamics of power.

Michel Foucault redefines power as decentralized and widespread instead of centralized and coercive. In *Discipline and Punish*, he argues that power works through surveillance, normalization, and discipline rather than through force (Foucault 194). According to Foucault, power creates knowledge, shapes individual identities, and regulates behavior through everyday actions. Unlike Marx, Foucault does not see power as solely rooted in class relations. Instead, he observes that it operates through institutions like family, religion, education, and social customs. Individuals take in social norms and regulate themselves, making domination seem normal and unavoidable. This approach is particularly helpful in analyzing Imayam's characters, who rarely protest openly against oppression. Their silence, endurance, and resignation are not signs of weakness but reflect deeply ingrained power structures.

Beasts of Burden offers a stark look at Dalit women whose lives center around hard labor and survival. The title itself compares people to animals, highlighting their dehumanized existence in an exploitative economic system. From a Marxist standpoint,

the novel emphasizes the alienation of labor, as the workers lack both land and control over their work. The agrarian economy in the novel represents the economic base, where landowners control production while Dalit laborers remain trapped in poverty. The workers' dependence keeps exploitation going, illustrating Marx's belief that material conditions shape social relations (Marx and Engels 21).

At the same time, Foucauldian power works through training and normalization. The women accept suffering as a natural part of life, showing how oppression becomes internalized. Their bodies learn to bear pain, hunger, and humiliation without voicing discontent. As Foucault states, "the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body" (Foucault 136). The lack of open rebellion in *Beasts of Burden* does not indicate consent; it shows how successful ideological conditioning can be. Power works best when it is invisible, embedded within daily routines and traditions.

A Woman Burnt deepens the exploration of power by focusing on gender oppression in a caste-based society. The novel illustrates how a woman's body becomes a site for social control. Her economic reliance makes her vulnerable to violence from both family and society. From a Marxist view, the woman's oppression stems from economic deprivation. Her lack of financial independence strengthens patriarchal control, demonstrating how the economic base supports gender inequality. Marriage, morality, and honor serve as ideological tools that justify this domination.

Foucault's ideas help clarify this oppression further. The woman internalizes social expectations and disciplines herself in line with patriarchal values. Surveillance occurs informally through family members and community structures, ensuring conformity without direct force. As Foucault says, power "produces reality" by influencing how individuals view themselves and their roles (Foucault 194). The woman's tragic fate reflects systemic violence rather than individual failure. Her silence represents the effectiveness of disciplinary power, which quashes resistance by making oppression seem natural and unavoidable.

Imayam's stories show how Marxist and Foucauldian ideas intersect in the Indian cultural context. The economic base, characterized by caste-driven labor and poverty, creates conditions for exploitation. At the same time, Foucauldian power maintains this exploitation through ideology, discipline, and normalization. Caste acts as both an economic and cultural system, supporting Marx's view of material determinism while also backing Foucault's focus on discourse and social control. Characters in Imayam's works often do not express resistance because power functions through consent, fear, and habit rather than direct violence.

Imayam's realistic portrayal reveals not only structural inequality but also the psychological aspects of oppression. His characters represent what Gramsci calls "hegemony," where dominance is maintained through cultural acceptance instead of force. This paper has shown that Imayam's *Beasts of Burden* and *A Woman Burnt* can be effectively understood through a combined Marxist and Foucauldian lens. The economic foundation of caste-driven labor supports an ideological superstructure that normalizes inequality, while Foucauldian strategies of discipline and surveillance ensure the internal acceptance of oppression.

Imayam's fiction illustrates how power operates on both material and psychological levels, shaping bodies, identities, and social relationships. By depicting lives trapped within rigid social structures, he reveals the deep roots of exploitation in Indian society. His works extend Marxist literary criticism by addressing the complexities of caste, gender, and everyday power, providing a critical look at social injustice.

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