

# Men, Masculinity and Nature in Rural Caste Society: Exploring Dynamics in Tamil Nadu

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## Abstract

This paper investigates the relationship between men, masculinity, and nature in a rural caste-based society, with a particular focus on Tamil Nadu. Masculinity, a socially constructed concept, varies across cultures and historical periods. Men, masculinity and nature relation is primarily looked from the perspective of Ecofeminism, which critiques the interconnected oppression of women and nature within patriarchal systems. On the other hand, ecomasculinity specifically examines how traditional ideals of masculinity influence men's attitudes and behaviours towards the environment. Employing the Ecomasculinity lens, this paper intends to explore the subtleties of the relationship between men, masculinity, and nature in a caste-based society in Tamil Nadu. The study employs textual analysis. The text considered is *Heat* by Poomani, translated into English by N. Kalyana Raman. The analysis will closely examine landscape representation, ecological elements, masculinity and the portrayal of caste in the novel. The caste system is considered vital in the study, as it influences the characters' relationship with the land and their perceptions of nature. Overall, the paper aims to comprehensively understand the complex relationship between masculinity and nature, considering the intersectionality and plurality of masculinities in different social and cultural contexts. By exploring the relationship between men, masculinity, and nature in the caste-based society of Tamil Nadu, the study brings out the impact of social structures on the environment and how men relate to it in the said context.

**Keywords:** Eco-masculinity, Topography and Identity, Construction of Masculinity, Masculinities, Hegemonic masculinity, Ecogender

## 1. Introduction

Masculinity is defined as “characteristics that are traditionally thought to be typical of or suitable for men” (Cambridge University Press, n.d). It is a driving force behind how men behave. The context of masculinity changes with time, place and culture. It is a powerful and influential aspect of identity, though it does not encompass the entirety of an individual's sense of self. Further, Men and nature relation is primarily looked at from the perspective of ‘Ecofeminism’ (d'Eaubonne, 2022), which places nature and women in the same domain concerning the experience of exploitation. It traditionally associates men with machines, civilization, and patriarchy, which is seen as oppressive and harmful to the natural world, contrasting women, who are equated with nature in terms of the experience of exploitation (Miles, 2018).

Ecofeminism's view has been considered essentialistic (Leach, 2007) and has spurred debates among scholars. Greta Gaard, in her work *Ecofeminism Revisited: Rejecting Essentialism and Re-Placing Species in a Material Feminist Environmentalism*, challenges these essentialist notions within ecofeminism. She advocates for a more intricate and material feminist approach that considers the intersections of gender, species and the environment (2011). On the other hand, ‘Ecomasculinity emerged as a reaction to Ecofeminism and the lack of studies in the area of masculinity and nature’ (Birkedal, 2022, p. 15).

Though Ecofeminism and Ecomasculinity explore the intersection of gender and environment, both differ in focus and perspective. Ecofeminism broadly examines the interconnectedness of gender, patriarchy, environmental exploitation and associates masculine traits with attitudes leading to environmental harm. Whereas, Ecomasculinity narrows its focus on the specific influence of masculinity on environmental perspectives without necessarily critiquing patriarchy as central to the issue.

In the case of masculinity and nature interaction, Ecomasculinity is primarily explored in the context of the West and tribal society. Considering the plurality of masculinities and intersections, this paper attempts to study the relation in a rural caste-based society of Tamil Nadu, India. Caste is “a form of stratification in which an individual's social position is fixed at birth and cannot be changed” (Oxford University Press, 2009). The Ideals of masculinity is influenced by the interplay of gender with caste. Further, it is considered crucial that “masculinity needs to be understood in relation to the particular gender relations, as well as various dynamics of the social structure that it exists within and in constant interaction to, such as race, class, religion and caste” (Singh, 2017, p. 109). Considering the said factors, this

paper argues that men of caste-based society exercise a disengaged relationship with nature. Further, Aggressive attitudes are associated with dominant caste men sustaining the caste system and other forms of masculinities and the land. On the contrary Dalit masculinity and the 'Kaadu'(Forest) are associated and marginalized. Although Masculinity is traditionally associated with men, people of all genders can embody and express masculinity in various ways (Halberstam, 2019). While acknowledging that the expressions of masculinity can be embraced by individuals of all genders, this paper directs its focus towards male subjects.

## 2. Literature Review and Knowledge Gap

R.W Connell defines masculinity as “a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality, and culture” (Connell, 2020, p. 71). The concept of masculinity is complex and multifaceted, varying significantly across different societies and cultures. It is shaped by cultural norms, social expectations, historical context, and individual experiences. As a result, masculine discourses, ideals, and hegemonies constantly evolve and are shaped by changing societal and cultural attitudes toward gender and sexuality.

One key concept in understanding masculinity is 'Hegemonic masculinity', proposed by Connell (2020). The concept of hegemonic masculinity seeks to shed light on the mechanisms by which men sustain their dominant position in society and justify subjugation of women and other marginalized male identities. It also highlights the existence of multiple forms of masculinities.

To the concept of hegemonic masculinity, Richard Twine gives an Ecofeministic lens and argues that the hegemonic ideals of masculinity are primarily built on the notion of dominating and subjugating nature (Twine, 2021). Considering Masculinity in relation to nature, a landmark work is *Eco Man – New Perspectives on Masculinity and Nature*, in which, Mark Allister draws attention to the lack of studies concerning the relationship between masculinity and nature. The primary objective of this anthology is to establish a connection between the academic disciplines of ecocriticism and men's studies (Anderson, 2006, p.237). Allister observes that the notion of 'Masculinity' is reduced to the Patriarchal code, and 'Nature' is reduced to 'Wilderness.' Concerning the complexities of the relations between masculinity and nature, he finds the combination of Ecocriticism and men's studies necessary as the idea of the 'social construction of masculinity' excludes 'Nature.' He notes that “Gender studies in ecocriticism have been dominated by attention to feminism; men's studies have been blind in seeing nature.” (Allister, 2004, p. 8-9).

Further, 'Ecomasculinity', 'Ecological masculinism' and 'Ecoman' are associated with men, masculinity and nature relations. Firstly, the term Ecomasculinity was coined by Shepherd Bliss in his seminal paper *Revisoning Masculinity: A Report on the Growing Men's Movement* (1987) to highlight the intersection between ecology and masculinities, offering alternative perspectives to malestream norms entrenched in practices like mining, which can oppress both women and men.

Secondly, the concept of 'Eco men' is associated with tribal men (Chakraborty, 2019). Furthermore, the masculinity and nature relationship in tribal society is viewed through an ecofeminist lens. The article *Green Indigeneity: Forest Gynocracies and Dalit Eco-masculinities* presents an ecofeminist analysis of specific works by Mahasweta Devi. The analysis explores the dichotomy between state society and tribal society, highlighting the phallogocentric nature of the former and characterizing the latter as a 'gynocentric ecological kinship structure'. (Bose, 2018)

Thirdly, 'Ecological masculinism' (Pule, 2013) is a framework that seeks to redefine masculinity through caring and nurturing relationships with nature rather than dominant and exploitative relationships often associated with traditional masculinity. This framework envisions a more ecologically sustainable and socially just masculinity. It "is proposed as an alternative to Industrial/ Breadwinner Hegemonies and Ecomodern reforms" (Hultman & Pule, 2019). In the thesis, *A Declaration of Caring: Towards Ecological Masculinism*, Pule puts forth that the 'ethics of caring' should replace the 'ethics of daring,' which is a prevailing feature of masculinity capable of harming the environment. It believes that men have an infinite capacity to care, which has been superseded by ego-driven superiority and hegemonic social arrangements. In societies that traditionally associates caring and nurturing attitudes with femininity, ecological masculinism emerges as a challenge to these established norms. However, Pule's framework has been criticized by Greta Gaard as it “does not consider the strong influences of race, class, sexuality, and culture in constructing masculinities” (Gaard, 2014).

Furthermore, the survey *Masculinities and Environment* highlights the need for more studies on masculinities and environment relationships, stating that “environment-related efforts have also been hindered by stereotyping of men and by lack of attention to gendered conditions, identities and expectations associated with diverse masculinities” (Paulson and Boose, 2019). While the discussions of Ecomasculinity, and Ecological Masculinism, and Ecoman have primarily focused on the Western scenario and tribal societies, this study aims to situate men and their engagement with nature, considering the dynamics of the rural caste-based society in the context of Tamil Nadu.

### 2.1 Methodology

To delve deeper into the intricacies of these issues, this study employs the method of textual analysis. Specifically, the paper analyses the novel *Heat* by Poomani, which provides insights into how masculinity is constructed and perceived within the context of Tamil Nadu's rural caste society. By choosing textual analysis as the methodological approach, this study aims to dissect the text *Heat* to uncover the subtleties, themes, and representations related to masculinity and its relationship with nature within the narrative. This method provides a structured framework for uncovering the nuances of masculinity and nature within the context of a rural caste society.

### 3. Discussion

#### 3.1 Overview of *Heat*

*Heat*, penned by the Sahitya Academy award-winning Tamil writer, Poomani, and translated from Tamil to English by N Kalyan Raman, a Chennai-based writer, and translator, was published by Juggernaut in 2019. *Vekkai*, the Tamil original of *Heat*, was published in 1982. Also, it is adapted into the film 'Asuran,' directed by Vetrimaran.

The title of the novel holds multifaceted meanings. Firstly, it signifies the sun-scorched land. Secondly, it encapsulates the rage and anger prevailing in the male characters. The narrative delves into the psyche of a 15-year-old Dalit boy Chidambaram, who after killing the upper-caste landlord 'Vadakkuraan,' seeks refuge in hills and forests with his father. This act of retribution unfolds as a response to Vadakkuraan's murder of Chidambaram's brother in a land dispute, solidifying his assertion of masculinity.

Primarily focusing on land disputes and violence, the novel unravels the system of inequality concerning caste, economy, and power. In the context of *Heat*, land symbolizes not only the quality of life but also the embodiment of power. It is the source of livelihood for the Dalit people, as exemplified by Paramasivam's family, whose sustenance hinges on their modest land. Besides, the character 'Muthaiah,' a Dalit, loses his land and is forced to live a life of a thief, despite being a 'good' man. His characterization implies the context where land serves as a livelihood for Dalits. Contrarily, it is a power source for the upper caste. Vadakkuraan, an upper-caste figure, holds a vast land area. He is 'an embodiment of class as well as caste oppression' (Lochana, 2014, p. 52). He is economically sufficient to bribe the police and the law. The novel meticulously depicts how uneven land distribution and power imbalances impact the lives and livelihoods of characters from disparate caste backgrounds.

In essence, *Heat*, intricately weaves together caste and land disputes, interwoven with economic forces that determine ownership and possession. Also, it gives a Dalit perspective toward the commercialized law system and land distribution. Simultaneously, it vividly portrays the mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century terrain through the eyes of Chidambaram, interrogating the nature, lifestyle and diverse engagements of individuals with the landscape.

#### 3.2 Masculinity and Nature

##### 3.2.1 Representation of Masculinity

Numerous manifestations of masculinity exist: Men can be masculine in various ways depending on their racial or ethnic background, age, social class, and sexual orientation. It is also true that some types of manhood are more revered than others. Given the plurality of masculinities, hegemonic masculinity presents exemplars and exalted ideals of the ideal man. These Hegemonic forms guarantees the domination of one form the masculinity, where the "association between men and power is made to seem natural". (Slevin & Linneman, 2010)

In the case of *Heat*, the role of caste and class further complicates and hegemonizes ideas of masculinity. Additionally, 'value,' particularly financial value, plays a pivotal role. The natural landscape is commodified and assigned value. Further, the Court and Police are also tagged with value. Paramasivam articulates the Dalits' struggle against the corrupt people in law and order, asserting, "If our enemy gives them (Police) money, they'll come running like hound dogs. So many atrocities take place in our courts. The law is what the rich people lay down" (Poomani, 2019, p.38). These lines bring out the Dalits' struggle against the upper caste and the corruption in legal and police system. On another layer, the economic concept of owning land intertwines with the masculine idea of territory and ownership, forming a base for disputes and violence, escalating to the level of killing.

Two murders unfold in the narrative: Chidambaram's brother killed by Vadakkuraan and Vadakkuraan murdered by Chidambaram. The former is an expression of pride, an act driven by dominant and control attitude exercised by an upper caste person. The latter is a revenge act and can be perceived as a response to the context that Paramasivam's family is underprivileged to access justice through legal means. Though Paramasivam planned to kill Vadakkuraan, Chidambaram outstripped him. This is evident, when Paramasivam says "I waited for so long to kill him. You beat me to it" (Poomani, 2019, p. 12). In both the murder, violence as a trait of masculinity cuts across caste lines, having a complex interplay of masculinity, pride, and revenge.

Also, the aftermath of the murders is shaped by economic condition. Vadakkuraan faces no legal repercussions, highlighting the corruption in law and order. Contrarily the process of legal action is subverted in the aftermath of Vadakkuraan's murder. Police are in constant search of Paramasivam and Chidambaram. Moreover, they hid in the forest while Vadakkuraan could live everyday life in the village after killing Chidambaram's brother. The lack of legal actions against Paramasivam's son's murder and the corruption in law and order worsened the condition of Chidambaram's family. The family is disadvantaged considering the caste, power and economy. Ultimately, it ended with the event of a fifteen year old boy committing a murder, for which he is asserted as a brave boy. The following line shows the distinction between men who have economic support and the condition of the one who lacks it:

That murderer is leading a comfortable life. The police haven't laid a finger on him. They haven't even filed a case for show.

'Didn't Vadakkuraan do the same?'

'But they are chasing our arse for killing him, aren't they?'

'We've been fighting this injustice forever, maapillai' (Poomani, 2019, 117).

In Brief, Money is claimed to be a parameter deciding power and authority. This leaves economically backward and lower caste people-

here, Paramasivam disabled. Seeking revenge by violence is left as an option and is accepted by his family and relatives. Vadakkuraan's death is an outcome of this process. It is believed to be a sign of masculinity, evident in the reception of Chidambaram's act of killing Vadakkuraan by their relatives. Paramasivam finds his masculinity and fatherhood offended as his son killed Vadakkuraan instead of him. His hurt masculinity is noted in conversations between him and his son. He says "I haven't become that worthless, son" (Poomani, 2019, p. 13), "I am a coward, son." Have I become a useless old man? Look at the way he talks" (Poomani, 2019, p. 19). Though Paramasivam and the villagers taking pride in Chidambaram's action, there is a sense of shame for Paramasivam as he let his son to become a killer in his presence. This sentiment is shared by 'Mama' and the other village men, exemplified when Chidambaram's uncle articulates their collective shame: "We are just a useless bunch... You are not even fifteen yet, but you've made us look like wimps. Now your father won't even look people in the eye; he slinks away with his head down." (Poomani, 2019, p. 6). It shows that valour to protect the family are cited as a characteristic of Dalit masculinity.

Caste, Land ownership, and Wealth are the organizing principles of society and masculinity in the novel's setting. Poomani, through *Heat*, brings out the relationship between violence, economy, and masculinity. In brief, the violence represented in the novel is the outcome of a complex and variable combination of both economy and masculinity.

### 3.2.2 Topography in *Heat*

The novel is set in rural landscape of South Tamil Nadu. The location alternates between human dwellings and forest areas. Paramasivam's family lives near the forest area. It is the proximate space, which is their immediate and familiar environment. The forest is devoid of social, cultural, and economic setting. In the case of the novel, the forest cover is familiar to Dalit men. Chidambaram and Paramasivam utilizes this space to escape human society. The narrative frequently pauses to contemplate flora and fauna through the eyes of Chidambaram. The representation of nature, however, is not limited to the hills. It includes references from the entire setting of the novel.

Apart from the violence, commercialization, and land-related disputes, the novel works partly like a travelogue as it gives an ecological tour of the terrain. It enlists the flora and fauna of the region. The Babul tree, senna plant, cactus, vulture, mice, cobra, sorghum crop, palm tree, tamarind tree, Portia tree, cotton, sweet potato, and pigs are notable region-specific ecological entities. It is an account of the author's own experience in the terrain of South Tamil Nadu. In the afterword, Poomani says "I remember my teenage years vividly each time I return to my novel 'Heat.'" (Poomani, 2019, p. 237) Further, he mentions that he has blended his "boyhood experience of grazing goats and cattle, hunting, playing, and wandering across hills, graveyards, temples, and tanks with the incidents happening around the murder committed by Chidambaram". (Poomani, 2019, p. 237)

Further, a Caste-based society is marked by the dualism of 'naaTu' and 'kaaTu.' 'naaTu' represents the dwelling space, and 'kaaTu' represents the wilderness (Selvamony, 2012). This dualism is evident in the novel. For instance, the village, the inhabited human dwelling space represents 'naaTu', while the uninhabited expanses, encompassing hills and forests, can be considered as 'kaaTu'. Further, " 'kaaTu' or wilderness is the site of the malignant supernatural forces, and it can only be home for the outcasts, beasts, and criminals" (Selvamony, 2012). Similarly, in the novel, Paramasivam, a Dalit, and his family resides on the outskirts, near the hilly region. Besides, the forest becomes the hiding place for Chidambaram after killing Vadakkuraan.

### 3.2.3 Masculinity in the Topographic Frame

C Lakshmanan in *Dalit Masculinities in Social Science Research* observes that Tamil masculinity is built on Valour to protect a family, hard-working, knowledgeable, courageous, sexually potent, and honest (Lakshmanan, 2004). In the case of the novel, masculinity is diverse and has the intersections of caste, economy and landscape.

The forest in the novel is a Dalit masculine space. The engagement of men in the natural space varies from that of Dalit women. The Dalit women characters in this novel are confined to the domestic space. To escape from the police, Chidambaram and Paramasivam are left in the forest wilderness. At the same time, 'Aththa' and 'Aththai' are confined to their houses under the protection of 'Chinnaiya'. Eventually, the forest space is attributed to Dalit men and masculinity.

On the other level, Dalit Masculine identity is built on the activities of men in the wilderness, which widely include Hunting, Honey extraction, Pastoral, and Surviving in the hard terrain. For instance, Chidambaram and his 'Annan' are experts in the extraction of honey (Poomani, 2019, p. 69). Here, Dalit masculinity is related to the mastery of skills and activities in the natural environment.

Apart from the men-nature relationship, the power relation among men varies with the terrain space in *Vekkai*. Masculine tension can be often noted between the father and son in several cases. For instance, as mentioned earlier, Paramasivam and several Village people feel less masculine as Chidambaram, a young lad, killed Vadakkuraan rather than them. Paramasivam says, "I waited for so long to kill him. You beat me in it... I am a coward, son" (Poomani, 2019, p. 12). On the contrary, Paramasivam's skills, and understanding of the challenging terrain gain prominence in the forest space. His ability supersedes Chidambaram's ability. He can walk for a long time without food or water, which Chidambaram cannot. He picks the opportunity to tease back his son by saying, "...My feet have wandered all over, son. You are a kid born yesterday". (Poomani, 2019, p. 26)

Traditionally, age is considered a parameter in determining the state of one's masculinity. Ageing, an inevitable process, comes with disadvantages like reduced stamina, diminishing friend circles, and health issues. This aspect varies with different cultures as in some cultures aged people, especially men are treated with reverence. However, it also has a positive aspect; as Murray Drummond states,

"Ageing men have a wealth of expertise, knowledge, and life experiences to pass on to future generations" (Drummond, 2007). Here, the topography plays a crucial role in deciding the power order of men in the different backdrops. Vadakkuran is powerful in the plain space. The power he exercises is based on caste and the possession of a vast landscape, the ecological entity. On the other hand, Chidambaram is celebrated as a brave fellow for killing Vadakkuran, as it is perceived as an attribute of masculinity among the village people. Whereas, Paramasivam's masculinity is in crisis with letting his son seek revenge, as he failed to protect and seek revenge for his family. He perceives himself as an aged person, who failed to kill Vadakkuran, which is an act of ideal father.

However, he gains superiority in the wild space, which is the landscape devoid of cultural constructs. The representation of man and natural environment relation is intimate in the case of Paramasivam. The foot travel, which both undertake into the forest, requires the topographical knowledge. The familiarity of the landscape enables Paramasivam and Chidambaram to utilise the terrain as a space of escapism. It enabled them to escape from the cultural and societal setting along with Paramasivam's masculinity restored by the act of protecting his son. Whereas, the Police and the rest are disadvantaged by the lack of familiarity and knowledge of the landscape. Despite not in harmony with the environment, Paramasivam exercises an understanding of the landscape and its geography.

Though Dalit men in the novel travel close to nature, their engagement varies with that of a tinai society. Tinai society is marked by interrelatedness, where nature is treated like kith and kin. (Selvamony, 2012). The concept of home in tinai society includes human and non-human elements (Selvamony, 2008). He observes that "The human does not regard the mountain as any other object but dwells in it like its flora and fauna" (Selvamony, 2008, p.150). Further, humans, nature, and the sacred are viewed as an interconnected whole. Nirmal Selvamony's concept of the 'Ontic Continuum', (Selvamony 2012) underscores this interconnectedness, where the sacred, nature, and humans weren't separate entities but rather components of a single, organic being with relative autonomy (Selvamony 2012). Whereas, the dualism in the caste society makes forest a space of escape for Paramasivam and Chidambaram, where they seek refuge rather than being a part of it or exercising interconnectedness.

Further, "Body size and musculature play a significant role in the construction of a man's masculine identity" (Drummond, 2007). It plays a critical role in how men understand and practice masculinity. (Slevin & Linneman, 2010). In the novel, hard terrain shapes Paramasivam's physical ability. His outlook is hard and rugged. He retained the stamina despite the aging process. It challenges the cultural notion of the archetypal masculine body, which demands men's bodies to be muscular enough to represent strength. On the contrary, his body and appearance symbolize his experience in the hard terrain. Eventually, it shapes him into a vital being despite the ageing process. On the contrary, Chidambaram, celebrated for his brave deed in the cultural landscape, is portrayed as facing initial difficulties in acquiring the skills of the forest landscape. Even, Vadakkuran and his family, whose power is equipped with capital, could not find Paramasivam and his son in the forest. This shows that the Forest becomes the space that shelters experience and skill-based masculinity.

While Dalit men are associated with the forest space, the social space is dominated by dominant caste men like Vadakkuran. For the dominant caste people like Vadakkuran, the land is a symbol of power and prestige. Vadakkuran often holds vast stretches of land and uses it to exert control and influence over the Dalit people. The portrayal of Vadakkuran's relationship with the landscape reveals how dominant caste men's treatment of nature reflects their power dynamics and social identity. In Brief, Vadakkuran's masculinity, backed by his caste, class privilege is built on the ability to exercise control over others and land ownership.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Connell identifies that "change in gender relation involves not only personal relations, identities and intimate life but also large-scale institutions and the structural conditions of social life." (Connell, 2012, p.12), which highlights the role of structural and social conditions in shaping masculinity. This paper attempted to draw attention to the complex and multifaceted relationships between men and masculinity, nature, and societal power dynamics. In *Heat*, Poomani's depiction of the masculine identities of the upper-class and the Dalits highlights how ideas of masculinity are tied to social and political power dynamics. The society shows a dualism of landscape as society and forest. The societal space is dominated by upper-caste men and their masculinity is built on sustaining power and land ownership. Whereas, Dalit men are associated with the forest space. The ecological space functions as an escape space away from oppressive society. The mode of engagement of Dalit men with the landscape varies with the young and the old. While young men like Chidambaram and his brother engage in activities like honey extraction and pastoral rearing, old men like Paramasivam's mode of engagement with nature is built on familiarity and experience in the landscape. Briefly, upper-class men's masculinity is built on their ability to control others and land ownership. In contrast, Dalit men's masculinity is tied to their connection with their activity and survival skills in the natural environment. It reveals that masculinity is deeply intertwined with ideas of nature and societal power dynamics.

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