

Flames of Despair: The Politics of Self-Immolation in Iyayam's *A Woman Burnt*

M. Nithya^{1*}, Dr. C. Anita²

^{1*}Research Scholar, Department of English Thiruvalluvar University

²Assistant Professor, Department of English Thiruvalluvar University

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ARTICLE INFO ABSTRACT

This paper explores the plight of Revathi in Iyayam's *A Woman Burnt*, tracing her journey from hope to despair, culminating in the tragic act of self-immolation. The narrative set by Iyayam is entrusted with the second person, that is Revathi's mother. The narrator is not the protagonist but her own mother through which the entire novel is told. The protagonist is on her death bed, completely burnt and the entire narrative revolves around her past and present. Revathi, an engineering graduate who marries Ravi, an autorickshaw driver, against her family's wishes, endures relentless control, violence, and societal neglect that strips her of dignity and dreams. The study examines how patriarchal structures, familial complicity, and cultural expectations perpetuate cycles of abuse, leaving women like Revathi with limited choices. Her self-immolation is analyzed as both a personal act of despair and a powerful rejection of systemic oppression, drawing on insights from Simone de Beauvoir, Adrienne Rich, and Judith Herman. Iyayam's novel serves as a poignant critique of gendered violence and societal complicity, urging a reexamination of the norms that enable such tragedies.

Keywords: Gendered violence, self-immolation, patriarchal oppression, societal norms, resistance.

Introduction

Iyayam, originally named Annamalai, is a contemporary Tamil writer renowned for his unflinching portrayal of caste, gender, and social inequalities. His works often delve into the intricacies of marginalized lives, shedding light on issues frequently lack representation in mainstream discourse. Awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2020 for his contributions to Tamil literature, Iyayam's oeuvre includes celebrated novels like *Beast of Burden* (*Koveru Kazhuthaigal*), *Arumugam*, and *A Woman Burnt* (*Selladha Panam*). His writings, characterized by stark realism and a deep commitment to social justice, has earned him a place among the seminal voices in contemporary Tamil literature.

Iyayam's *A Woman Burnt* is a distressing exploration of gender oppression, domestic violence, and the devastating act of self-immolation. Through Revathi's life, the novel unveils the crushing weight of patriarchy, where familial expectations, societal silence, and personal struggles culminate to destroy a young woman's dreams. Revathi's tragic end, while deeply personal, emerges as a powerful commentary on systemic injustice, compelling readers to confront the structures that perpetuate such despair.

The Dreams That Turned to Ashes

Revathi, an engineering graduate, begins her life with Ravi, an autorickshaw driver, with huge dreams of building a promising future. Despite her family's disapproval, she marries him out of love and was completely convinced that their life together would be fulfilling. However, her aspirations are shattered soon after the wedding. Amaravathi, her mother, recounts how Ravi's controlling nature surfaced immediately: "The very next day after the marriage, he told her she couldn't go out. That she couldn't talk to her neighbors. That she couldn't step out onto the street." (69) This early restriction signals the transformation of Revathi's marriage into a space of confinement, reflecting the patriarchal structures that demand submission from women in the name of tradition. In her text *The Second Sex* Simone de Beauvoir observes that: "Marriage is not a love relationship but an institutionalized structure that demands a woman's subordination" (283). Revathi's education, which should have been a tool for her empowerment, holds no value in Ravi's world. He views her ambitions with suspicion and disdain, reducing her existence to the narrow confines of domesticity.

Over time, Ravi's control tightens, leaving Revathi isolated from her family and community. Amaravathi recalls how Ravi's possessiveness and insecurity consumed her daughter's life: "If she went missing for fifteen minutes, he would immediately take his auto and come stand outside the house." (70) This obsessive surveillance robbed Revathi of even the smallest freedom, forcing her into a life of constant fear. Her mother says: "If she stood outside, she was gone. If she stood in the street, gone. If she went to a shop, gone. He would beat her up badly. He was suspicious twenty-four hours a day, that scoundrel" (70). No matter what Revathi did whether standing outside the house, walking down the street, or going to a shop she was always at risk of being punished physically. The repetition of 'gone' emphasizes how she was constantly under threat which is a rough translation for 'being alone' and how every simple act of independence was met with suspicion and violence. It was not just about controlling her movements; it was about breaking her spirit, keeping her in a constant state of fear.

Ravi's obsessive suspicion, which lasted 'twenty-four hours a day,' made Revathi feel like she could not breathe without provoking his wrath. His actions were not just about restricting her physically they were about trapping her emotionally and mentally. This suffocating level of control meant that Revathi's world grew smaller and smaller, and her hope for freedom faded.

The situation worsens when Revathi becomes pregnant. Instead of celebrating this new chapter, Ravi uses it as an excuse for his violence behavior. Amaravathi remembers that, "As soon as she conceived, he beat her up asking who was going to pay the medical bills" (69). Such incidents highlight the intersection of financial strain and physical abuse, where the burden is unfairly placed on women.

Amaravathi's role as a mother becomes a complex mix of support and helplessness. She takes her daughter to the hospital, offers her money in secret, and provides temporary refuge. However, she too is constrained by societal expectations. "Our saar didn't talk to her. Even when she came to our house with her child, she stayed for ten days before we sent her back . . .," (69).

Control Over Her Body and Choices

Imayam poignantly depicts how Ravi's act of dominance extends to Revathi's physical being. During her pregnancy, his violence escalates, with her body becoming a target of his frustration and anger. Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* emphasizes that "domestic violence is often rooted in a desire to control the victim's body and its functions" (92). Ravi's treatment of Revathi during these vulnerable times represents this dynamic, turning moments of potential joy into periods of intensified suffering.

Despite enduring relentless abuse, Revathi rarely protests. Amaravathi explains her silent suffering thus: "She would never answer back. Wouldn't fight. Wouldn't say a bad word" (70). Her silence, far from passive acceptance, is a reflection of societal conditioning that glorifies women's endurance and stigmatizes defiance. Her refusal to retaliate highlights the emotional and cultural pressure placed on women to maintain peace, even at great personal cost.

Self-Immolation as a Response to Injustice

Revathi's self-immolation is the culmination of years of suffering, despair, and neglect. Early One morning, Amaravathi and Natesan receive the devastating news that their daughter has set herself on fire. Rushing to JIPMER hospital, they find her fighting for her life, her body bearing the physical scars of years of abuse.

While deeply tragic, Revathi's act of self-immolation is also profoundly symbolic. when Beauvoir's says that "acts of self-destruction can, in extreme circumstances, be acts of resistance" (232) provides a lens through which to understand her decision. Her death is a refusal to remain trapped within the structures that confined her, forcing society to reckon with the failures that led her to such a desperate choice. Adrienne Rich's words in *Of Woman Born* resonate deeply here: "Women's rage and despair are not personal weaknesses; they are signs of political oppression" (34). Revathi's decision too seems to be one such act of opposition. Revathi's flames, while consuming, shed light on the broader injustices that women face, urging readers to confront the systems that normalize such violence.

Imayam pens Revathi's story to critique the systemic forces that perpetuate domestic violence and silence women. Her self-immolation, though rooted in personal despair, becomes a political act a rejection of the societal norms that failed to protect her. Revathi's story compels readers to reflect on their complicity in sustaining these norms, whether through silence, inaction, or acceptance of cultural traditions. Her death is a call to dismantle the systems that prioritize control and compliance over compassion and justice.

Conclusion:

A Woman Burnt is not just a story of one woman's suffering but is a powerful critique of the structures that perpetuate oppression. Imayam's unflinching portrayal of Revathi's life and death challenges readers to confront the cultural, familial, and institutional forces that normalize violence and restrict women's lives. Revathi's flames, though devastating, illuminate the path toward change. They remind us of the urgent need to create a society where dreams are nurtured, not crushed, and love and respect replace control and violence. Imayam's *A Woman Burnt* stands as both an unrelenting critique of patriarchal injustice and a rallying cry for a more equitable future and thus fetching him the most coveted award for creating a 'voice'.

The suicide attempt could be seen as an attempt to write resistance in her very body, but with a lot of unresolved questions. Suicide here itself becomes an expression of her refusal to compromise with the violence encountered in the silenced life that she lives in her husband's place. Self-immolation is the way she chooses to spell out her resistance. Yet a lot of questions are left unresolved towards the end of the novel as she leaves her last lawful records that however pronounces her suicide as only an accident therefore leaving her husband unpunished by law so as to save her children from being orphaned.

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