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Crisis and Consciousness: Reimagining Social Unity in *Thanneer Thanneer*

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Abstract

Tamil Nadu, a southern state of India, is shaped by a rich yet complex cultural landscape where caste, religion, and gender continue to influence everyday life. These aspects are not just markers of identity but are deeply embedded in the social system, often dictating access to resources, opportunities, and recognition. Although the state has witnessed social progress and increasing calls for equality, true acceptance remains a work in progress. The hierarchical structures, rooted in centuries-old traditions, continue to affect the way people perceive and treat one another. While many express support for the ideals of equality and inclusiveness, there is often a gap between public discourse and personal belief, which at times results in social unrest and conflict. These divisions begin early in life, shaping everything from one's food and clothing to education, career paths, and social interactions. In such a context, nature presents a quiet contrast, it does not differentiate between people based on caste, religion, or gender. Nature, in its essence, offers a more egalitarian perspective that challenges the constructed inequalities of society. Komal Swaminathan's *Thanneer Thanneer* captures this contrast poignantly. Set in a Tamil Nadu village, the play explores how a community already burdened by systemic divisions is forced to confront a natural crisis that disregards social hierarchies. Through this lens, the paper examines how the play critiques deeply rooted discrimination and suggests that, in the face of nature's impartiality, there lies an opportunity for unity and collective resilience.

Keywords: caste, water, inequality, discrimination, impartiality

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Crisis and Consciousness: Reimagining Social Unity in *Thanneer Thanneer*

Tamil Nadu, a vibrant state in southern India, is renowned for its diverse cultural landscape. It is home to numerous religions, sub-religions, castes, and communities, each distinguished by its own unique customs, traditions, and social norms. These cultural markers play a significant role in shaping the identities of individuals, influencing not only their personal beliefs and values but also practical aspects of daily life, such as food habits, education, and career choices. However, the norms that govern each community often include certain practices while excluding others, resulting in a social fabric that is both varied and deeply stratified.

The Tamil Christian Dalit writer Bama offers a compelling insight into this system of entrenched inequality. "I lamented inwardly that there was no place that was free of caste." (Bama 25). Drawing from her own experiences of discrimination and marginalisation, she exposes how caste remains deeply interwoven into the everyday lives and structures of Tamil society. Alongside caste and religious identity, gender also plays a profound role in defining social expectations. Women, in particular, face systemic barriers that limit their opportunities and restrict their participation in spaces traditionally dominated by men. Although society may outwardly proclaim ideals of equality and inclusion, the reality often tells a different story, one where centuries-old hierarchies continue to assert their presence with little resistance.

Despite the strength and resilience of this rigid social system, there are forces that can challenge and, at times, even transcend it. Nature stands as one such powerful force. Unlike human-constructed divisions, nature operates beyond man-made hierarchies. In Komal Swaminathan's celebrated play *Thanneer Thanneer*, water, a fundamental necessity for life, emerges as a unifying element that cuts across barriers of caste, religion, and gender. This paper examines how the urgent need for water dissolves social boundaries, compelling individuals to come together in solidarity and offering a rare glimpse of hope in a society otherwise tightly bound by tradition and inequality.

Komal Swaminathan, an influential Tamil playwright and film director, crafted this play, which was later translated into English by S. Shanker, to shed light on the ways political power structures exploit rural communities, particularly through the control of essential resources like water. The narrative centres on the village of Athipatti, where the residents, driven by a shared sense of injustice, come together in a determined struggle to secure a water connection for their community. Despite their collective efforts and unwavering spirit, the villagers ultimately fail to achieve their goal. Yet, their resistance is not without profound consequences: Sevanthi, a young woman from the village, makes the painful decision to leave her husband, while Vellaisamy, a travelling outsider who supports their cause, may have sacrificed his life in the process. Through this poignant portrayal, Swaminathan captures the resilience of rural people and the personal costs that often accompany their fight against systemic oppression.

Although the primary aim of the play is to critique political activities, its sub-plot thoughtfully explores the issue of caste, revealing how tenuous caste divisions become when fundamental human needs are denied. "To ask a man for his wife is not a sin here. But to ask for water is a great sin" (Swaminathan 4). The village of Athipatti suffers from an acute water scarcity, a crisis so severe that it drives many villagers to abandon their homes and seek survival in the cities, often reduced to begging on the streets. Despite making repeated and earnest appeals to the authorities for a water connection, their requests went unanswered, forcing those who remained to walk long distances each day to collect water from a distant canal. In the midst of this desperation, a traveller named Vellaisamy enters the scene. Having earlier taken justice into his own hands by killing the landlords who had relentlessly harassed his family, Vellaisamy dedicates himself to assisting the villagers. He agrees to fetch water for the entire

village, on the condition that they provide him with a cart and a buffalo to ease the labour. As election season approaches, political parties descend upon Athipatti, attempting to secure votes by invoking caste affiliations. "Then it seems no one needs us if there's no money to be made here. Naickers are needed only to cast their votes." (Swaminathan 32). Yet, the villagers, now deeply aware that caste loyalty does little to alleviate their real suffering, choose solidarity over division. In a rare and powerful act of collective resistance, they boycott the elections completely, refusing to cast even a single vote, a move that ultimately contributes to the defeat of the political party that had sought to manipulate them.

The character of Sevanthi plays a pivotal role in initiating the rebellion that ultimately becomes the foundation for the villagers' unity. At a time when the community is engulfed in confusion and hesitation, unsure of how to respond to their worsening situation, Sevanthi emerges as a decisive leader. Her ability to act with conviction provides the villagers with much-needed clarity and confidence in their collective actions. It is Sevanthi who first chooses to offer water to Vellaisamy, a gesture of acceptance that paves the way for the rest of the community to embrace his support. Her courage reaches an even more powerful height when she publicly discards her *thali*, a symbolic act of defiance against the social and political structures that have long oppressed them. "It is because of this *thali* that he has come here so arrogantly. (*She takes off the thali.*) Take this back" (Swaminathan 66). This bold move inspires the villagers to stand firmly against the authorities, marking a significant turning point in their resistance. Through her actions, Sevanthi demonstrates how individual bravery, especially that of a woman in a traditionally patriarchal society, can spark broader social transformation and reshape the course of a community's future.

Water, one of the most fundamental human necessities, becomes the true catalyst for rebellion in this context, a force that not only highlights systemic neglect but also unites people across deep-seated divisions of caste and gender, which often dominate social narratives in Tamil Nadu. Over time, the villagers' frustration and helplessness gradually intensified, building into a collective desperation that could no longer be contained. Their initial efforts to seek help were met with indifference; the symbolic cart was ignored by political leaders, and the subsequent canal project was abruptly abandoned by the government. These dismissals did not merely delay relief; they ignited a sense of betrayal and deepened the community's resolve. What began as isolated concerns eventually transformed into a shared struggle, compelling people to rise above social boundaries and take a stand against institutional apathy. Ultimately, it was the pressing need for water that empowered them to come together, confront authority, and demand the dignity and rights they had long been denied.

To sum up everything stated so far, in *Thanneer Thanneer*, Komal Swaminathan crafts a poignant narrative that not only critiques the failures of political systems but also captures the lived realities of rural communities facing systemic neglect. At the heart of this work lies a fundamental human need, water, which, in its absence, reveals the deep fractures within society, while also serving as a powerful catalyst for collective resistance. "We don't have a government here. We are the government." (Swaminathan 61). What begins as a desperate attempt for survival gradually evolves into a broader social awakening, wherein longstanding divisions of caste, class, and gender are temporarily suspended in the face of a common crisis. Swaminathan's portrayal of the village of Athipatti becomes emblematic of countless rural communities in India whose voices remain unheard and whose basic rights continue to be denied.

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