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Periyar's Philosophy of Language and the Politics of Respect: A Critical Assessment

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Abstract:
This paper provides a comprehensive assessment of E.V. Ramasamy Periyar's philosophy of language and its intersections with politics, self-respect, and social reform. Periyar's radical linguistic and cultural politics redefined Tamil identity and resisted northern cultural and linguistic hegemony. Drawing on literary theory—particularly Dalit literature theory and feminist theory—this article explores how Periyar's rationalism, non-dualism, and critique of Brahmanism influenced Tamil Renaissance thought, constructed a unique linguistic politics, and laid the foundation for socio-political emancipation.

Keywords: Periyar, philosophy of language, Dravidianism, Tamil Renaissance, Dalit literature theory, feminist theory, self-respect movement

Introduction

Periyar E.V. Ramasamy (1879–1973) was one of the most influential thinkers and social reformers of twentieth-century India. His interventions into questions of language, self-respect, rationalism, and anti-caste ideology created the intellectual architecture of the Dravidian movement. Periyar viewed language not merely as a communicative device, but as a site of ideological struggle. His resistance to Hindi and Sanskrit imposition, coupled with his elevation of Tamil as a language of the oppressed, marked a significant rupture in India's cultural politics.

At the heart of Periyar's project was the radical claim that social reform must begin with linguistic reform. This paper critically examines how Periyar's philosophy of language intersected with his rationalist and anti-Brahminical politics. Through the lens of literary theory, especially Dalit and feminist perspectives, it argues that Periyar's work represented a cultural revolution in both thought and discourse.

Language and Rationalism: The Linguistic Politics of Liberation

Periyar recognized that language is inherently political. He viewed Sanskrit and Hindi not as mere languages but as hegemonic tools used to institutionalize caste hierarchy. Sanskrit, in particular, was not neutral—it was the language of Brahminical scripture, employed to encode divine justification for inequality. By contrast, Periyar saw Tamil as the language of the people, yet even Tamil, he argued, was contaminated by Sanskritic elitism.

Periyar's idea of linguistic purification did not involve aligning Tamil with its ancient, mythologized past. Rather, it meant expelling Brahminical elements and recentering everyday speech, shaped by the lived realities of non-Brahmin communities. His opposition to Hindi imposition during the Anti-Hindi Agitations (1937–40) was not just about language—it was a fight for epistemological autonomy and cultural self-determination.

The slogan **"Kadavul Kall"** (God is a lie) was both a linguistic provocation and a rationalist declaration. Periyar argued that the divine was a linguistic construct, invented to sanctify the caste order. For him, deconstructing religious language was essential to dismantling caste. He fused anti-theism with linguistic reform, believing that language saturated with religious metaphors had to be reclaimed and rationalized.

In this light, Periyar anticipated later poststructuralist critiques that view language as constitutive of power and subjectivity. His emphasis on vernacular Tamil over Sanskritic registers aligns with Dalit literary theory's emphasis on reclaiming subaltern idioms. His linguistic activism—spanning script reform, speech, and publishing—was an act of epistemic disobedience and cultural re-inscription.

Literary Theory and Periyar's Philosophy

Periyar's interventions anticipated many concerns of contemporary Dalit literature. Dalit literary theory insists on centering the voices of the oppressed, challenging upper-caste aesthetic values, and dismantling the epistemological legitimacy of Sanskritic canons. Periyar, likewise, rejected the "canon" in favor of pamphlets, street-corner speeches, and vernacular writing. His language was deliberately direct, accessible, and antagonistic to sacred norms.

Kancha Ilaiah and other Dalit thinkers argue that Brahminical language affirms caste through euphemism and ritual. Periyar's rejection of euphemism in favor of direct political speech ("Kadavul Kall," "Vellivizha," etc.) resonates with Dalit literary techniques of disruption and affirmation through negation.

Periyar's feminism was grounded in empirical observation, social activism, and political rationalism. He campaigned against child marriage and caste-based gender subjugation, presenting statistical data to argue for legal reform, leading to the passage of the Sharada Act (1929). He foregrounded women's education, autonomy in marriage, and equal property rights—not as peripheral issues, but as central to dismantling Brahminical patriarchy.

Feminist literary theory, particularly intersectional and deconstructionist approaches, help us understand Periyar's critiques of religious texts and rituals that sustain patriarchy. His campaign against the *Manusmriti*, which he publicly burned, echoes feminist critiques of religious patriarchy as a discursive and institutional structure of domination.

Us and Them: Periyar's Social Dictionary

One of Periyar's most subversive acts was to redefine the idea of "respect". In traditional caste society, respect was conferred based on hierarchical markers: birth, name, religious status, gender, and adherence to ritual purity. Periyar rejected this vertical notion of dignity, which demanded submission, servitude, and silence from the lower castes and women. Instead, he articulated respect as self-assertion—a radical act of claiming equal moral worth and social standing regardless of caste or gender.

This ideological move finds echoes in Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic power, where naming, titles, and honorifics are tools of domination. Periyar's refusal to use caste indicators in his name and his call for others to do the same was a direct challenge to the symbolic capital that upper castes wielded through nomenclature. In Bourdieu's terms, Periyar's self-de-naming was a refusal of the "symbolic violence" that caste society perpetuated through seemingly innocuous linguistic conventions.

Periyar's politics was deeply aware of semiotics—the meaning embedded in gestures, rituals, and social performance. His encouragement of inter-caste dining, inter-caste marriage, and the rejection of caste-based surnames were not just moral choices but semiotic disruptions. These acts challenged the ritual codes of purity and pollution that governed everyday social behavior in caste society.

For example, communal dining was more than a call for unity—it was a symbolic dismantling of the idea that proximity to the Dalit body was defiling. Inter-caste marriage was not merely a romantic or social decision but a political declaration that caste boundaries were neither natural nor divine, but constructed and thus destructible. This aligns with Gramscian theory, where counter-hegemonic cultural acts become the terrain on which new subjectivities are forged.

The idea of "Us and Them" in Periyar's work was not just about demarcating identities—it was about creating solidarity among the oppressed while marking the hegemonic elite as the other. "We"—the Sudras, the Dalits, the women, the workers—are not the problem; we are the producers, the thinkers, the people. "They"—the Brahmins, the priesthood, the exploiters—are the ones who construct myths and enforce divisions to preserve their power.

This binary served to reverse the gaze. Instead of internalizing shame, the oppressed were invited to externalize blame—to see inequality not as fate or karma, but as design. In this reversal lies a potent decolonial impulse, echoing Frantz Fanon's call for the colonized to see the colonizer as the true pathology of the system.

Periyar's writings and speeches function as a living dictionary, a corpus of redefined terms such as "God," "Morality," "Marriage," "Caste," "Respect," "Patriotism," and even "India." He understood that true revolution cannot be accomplished without a revolution in thought—and thought is structured by language. Therefore, his interventions were not limited to policy or protest but extended to linguistic and epistemic domains.

Like Dalit literature that reclaims humiliating identities and transforms them into badges of resistance, Periyar's social dictionary disassembled the language of oppression and assembled a new grammar of emancipation. His use of plain, vernacular Tamil instead of Sanskritized formulations also ensured that his ideas reached the masses—especially those who had been denied access to elite discourse.

Periyar's Feminism and Dalit Advocacy: Intersectionality and the Politics of Negation

Periyar's political project was deeply intersectional. He understood that caste, gender, class, and religion were interwoven structures of domination. His activism for women and Dalits was not siloed but integrated into a holistic critique of Brahminical patriarchy.

Periyar's feminism did not emerge from abstract theorization, but from empirical observation and lived realities, especially concerning child marriage and the systematic subjugation of women. His decision to keep detailed records of widows and child brides was both a scientific and political act. In 1921 alone, he publicly reported that over 329,000 girls in India were widowed, some as young as ten, due to child marriage—a religiously sanctioned institution upheld by Hindu scriptures like the *Manusmriti*. By exposing such data, Periyar not only highlighted the cruelty of institutionalized patriarchy, but also showed how statistical visibility could be a tool for social reform.

His activism influenced legislative reforms like the Sharada Act (1929), which raised the age of marriage for girls and boys. This legislative success demonstrated how rationalist critique combined with grassroots activism could influence public policy—an approach that anticipates the data-driven advocacy strategies of modern feminist movements.

Periyar's rejection of scriptures and his attack on the religious foundations of patriarchy also aligns with feminist deconstructionist approaches that critique the theological and literary tropes used to justify women's subordination. His call for equal rights for women in marriage, education, property, and work was revolutionary, especially when juxtaposed with contemporaneous nationalist rhetoric that often sought to domesticate and idealize women as the bearers of tradition.

Periyar's commitment to Dalit upliftment was not confined to symbolic acts or surface-level inclusion. He identified caste as the root structure of socio-economic inequality, and viewed Brahminism as the ideological apparatus that sustained it. His advocacy for temple entry was not about gaining religious access per se, but about asserting political agency and spatial equality. He redefined temple entry as a symbolic rupture—an act of reclaiming spaces that were central to the production of caste hierarchy.

In this context, Periyar's politics of "No" (illai/இல்லை) becomes a powerful ideological move. His negation was not nihilistic; it was productive and performative. By saying "No" to gods, to scriptures, to Brahmins, to Sanskrit, and to caste, Periyar articulated a language of dissent that challenged the affirmative logics of the Vedic order. This aligns with Dalit literary theory, especially thinkers like Kancha Ilaiah, who argue that Brahminical language affirms hierarchy, while Dalit language disrupts and disowns it. Periyar's linguistic rebellion was thus a politics of refusal—a grammatical re-signification of everyday speech into revolutionary discourse.

He expanded the political grammar of Tamil by injecting it with rationalism, materialism, and negation, in contrast to Sanskritic affirmations of karma, hierarchy, and divine sanction. His slogans and speeches became part of a counter-discursive strategy, similar to Dalit autobiographical writing, which uses personal narrative and political rage to dismantle the structures of caste.

Periyar's approach prefigures what scholars like Kimberlé Crenshaw later theorized as intersectionality. He refused to treat gender as separable from caste or economic status. A woman's oppression was not just about patriarchy—it was about her location within the caste system, her access to education, and her economic dependency, all of which were structurally interconnected. This is why his feminist interventions were always situated within a larger anti-caste framework—he opposed not just Brahminical men, but Brahminical patriarchy as a system.

His vision of Dravidian society was one where gender and caste hierarchies would both be abolished through a culture of scientific individualism, rational education, and linguistic empowerment. He advocated for inter-caste marriages, divorce rights, and widow remarriage, seeing these not as moral issues, but as political acts of resistance.

Conclusion

Periyar's philosophy of language was fundamentally anti-hierarchical. His linguistic interventions sought to undo the epistemic violence embedded in Sanskritic and Brahminical discourse. Through rationalist critique, feminist activism, and Dalit advocacy, he constructed a new cultural vocabulary of resistance. By redefining key terms of social life, he rewrote the grammar of identity and dignity in modern Tamil politics.

Seen through the lens of literary theory, Periyar's work challenges us to rethink the role of language in shaping subjectivity, culture, and power. His self-respect movement was not only political rhetoric but a cultural revolution that transformed language into a weapon of social emancipation.

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