

Marginalization and Gender Stereotypes in P. Sivakami's *The Grip of Change*

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P. Sivakami's *The Grip of Change* (1989) is the English Translation of Pazhaiyana Kazhithalum, the first full-length novel by P. Sivakami, an important Tamil writer and a member of the Indian Administrative Service. Sivakami is also a member of the Dalit Movement. The author gets success in narrating the authentic information in a terrifying way. In this novel, the writer portrays how dalit women are socially, economically and sexually exploited by the so called "upper caste Hindus" and not to overlook the abuse by their own men. The writer exposes the atrocities germinating from discrimination both gender and caste wise.

The present paper aims at analyzing the Double Marginalization of Dalit Women. The form and nature of marginality depends upon the degree of economic, social or cultural impoverishment. Marginality, based upon caste, creed, religion or race is a kind of disability or affliction and its root cause could be injustice or exploitation. The poor and unemployed Dalits are discriminated against and disabled by a society which is caste-ridden and hence is unconcerned about the problems of impairment. The paper also focuses on the marginalization and gender sensitization of Dalit women as reflected in the novel as the communities insult and ill-treat the women of lower castes because of their caste and because they are women in a patriarchal society.

MARGINALIZATION IN P. SIVAKAMI'S *THE GRIP OF CHANGE*

Writings of minorities and the other marginal voices have found a perfect platform in the literary scenario - be it feministic writing, queer theories, displaced writings of Diaspora or Dalit writings. Although Dalit movement started in mid nineteenth century for the uplift of the marginalized communities, the issues of Dalit women are still neglected not only by mainstream feminist literary movement but also by patriarchal Dalit movement. The plight of a Dalit becomes all the more pathetic when a Dalit is a woman. She has to face not only the caste discrimination but the gender inequalities and economic disparities too. A Dalit woman is thrice victimized – by caste-Hindu men, caste-Hindu women and Dalit men, simultaneously. This paper aims at foregrounding the oppression of a Dalit woman with reference to P. Sivakami's novel *The Grip of Change* (2006).

The word 'Dalit' comes from the Sanskrit root 'dal' which means broken, downtrodden, or oppressed. It symbolizes the oppressed, downtrodden and other exploited minorities. Dalits are socially oppressed, culturally neglected and economically exploited. This deplorable status has led them to paucity, exploitation, subjugation and dehumanization, culminating them into cultural silence. The situation becomes all the more poignant when a Dalit is a woman. Thus insurgence of Dalit feminism is the need of the hour and fortunately there are women writers like Bama Faustina, Urmila Pawar, Baby Kamble and P. Sivakami who have become a milestone in the arena of Dalit feminism by projecting Dalit women in their writings.

Palanimuthu Sivakami, a leading Indian novelist-cum-politician is the first Dalit woman to write a full length, semi-autobiographical Tamil novel *Pazhaiyana Kazhithalum* (1989), with which

she outshined the literary scenario and added a new magnum to Dalit Literature and Dalit Feminist literary tradition in Tamil. Sivakami is a celebrated Tamil writer and is also credited for being the first Dalit woman I.A.S. officer in Tamil Nadu. Publication of her first novel *Pazhainya Kazhithalum* carried her into glare of publicity and it attracted much larger audience when translated into English by Sivakami herself under the title *The Grip of Change* in 2006. *Anandayee* and *Kurukkuvettu* are her other most famous works. Besides she has been editing a monthly Dalit Literary magazine *Pudia Kodangi* since 1995. Sivakami also bagged the President Award in 1995 for her short film *Oodaha* (Through) which was selected by the National Panorama.

In *The Grip of Change*, Sivakami applies a self-critical and deconstructive technique and exposes the deplorable realities of Dalit patriarchy. Through the women character Thangam, the author portrays the plight and sufferings of the downtrodden. The sufferings of the untouchables are a never ending chain for several decades now. Power and economical background is the main source for hierarchical structures of caste. People who have power and position are placed at the centre of the society and they become dominant groups while the poor and the powerless are pushed to the marginalized. Sivakami's novels portray the rustic story of women who suffer at the hands of men who strongly believe in and stand for patriarchy. The conflicts and struggles are between tenacious women and tyrannical men in the contemporary society.

The protagonist of the novel is Thangam, a poor Dalit widow who suffers not only for being a Dalit but for being a woman, an OTHER too. Ironically she is victimized even by her own Dalit community also. She faces triple marginalization economic oppression, gender subordination and caste discrimination. Clutched in the jaws of patriarchy, she is abused, raped and beaten frequently. Dalit women in India are alienated on the basis of their caste. Rape and molestation are unleashed as weapons against the dalit women to crush their identity. This novel focuses on incidents in the lives of downtrodden to show how the dalit women are doubly marginalized both as a woman and as a dalit.

In the *Grip of Chang*, Sivakami is critical of the atrocities perpetuated by humans on one another irrespective of caste. A Dalit man could be a fiercer victimizer of the female body and soul than the upper caste man, if he is given the powers. Kathamuthu is a Dalit leader who having gained political powers in the wake of socio-political changes and the Dalit movements across the country, is financially and socially more privileged than the other members of his community. He takes on an upper caste widow as second wife thus negating the norms of caste hierarchy where an upper caste woman is not allowed to marry a low caste man.

Kathamuthu fights for the rights of the widowed Thangam who had been initially raped by her landlord Udayar who then regularly demands sexual favours from her in return for small gifts. A destitute and helpless widow, she soon succumbs to him. When she is beaten to almost death-like situation, by Udayar's wife's brothers, she appears at Kathamuthu's doorsteps for protection and justice. Her battered body frames the opening scene. She is a young widow and therefore a 'surplus' woman, she is harassed by her brothers-in-law. When she refuses to submit to them, her sexploitation by her caste Hindu landlord and then the assault on her by caste Hindu men takes place. Even her struggle for land is linked to her body and fertility. Since she doesn't have children, her brothers-in-law refuse her a share in the family land.

Kathamuthu too takes advantage of her by appropriating her money and her body which is a greater betrayal of Thangam who respects him as an elder brother. Infact when Thangam comes

to Kathamuthu for help, he doesn't feel bad for her but the fact that she went for an upper caste man. "It's because you chose that upper caste fellow, that four men could come and righteously beat you up. Don't you like our chaps" (7). He shamelessly asks her. She soon joins Kathamuthu's polygamous household. The same body, through which she was oppressed and subjugated, now becomes her gain in Kathamuthu's household where it gives her ascendancy in his house and gives her dominance over his wives.

Thangam's battered body becomes the stage for all subsequent action, sparking community unrest, caste riots and shifts in family relationships. When an old crone's carelessness sets the village huts ablaze, Dalit leaders blame it on the caste Hindus. The disaster becomes their economic and political gain. Therefore the novel depicts how casteism is as endemic to the Dalit community as Dalits are perpetrators of caste violence. This indicates the manner in which the woman or the female body becomes central to the drawing of boundaries within and between communities.

In the novel, the character Kathamuthu is an example of the tyrannical and charismatic male character who tries to bring everyone under control. The novel for the most part portrays the discrimination between men and women in the small village especially the sexual violation against Dalit women which has been seen as something natural and spontaneous. The Dalit girls are not allowed to attend schools after attaining puberty; the young women are subjected to sexual assaults by much older husbands, or sexually harassed or raped by fathers-in-law or brothers-in-law if they are widowed; they are subjected to regular beating by alcoholic husbands, and are burdened with heavy loads of work at home and also in the fields apart from nurturing their numerous children. The ignorant Dalits do not recognize the importance of educating women. Thangam was seduced by an upper caste Udayar and she was beaten on the street by his brother and brother-in-law. She had been insulted and had been dragged on the road. She was cursed and ill-treated for a mistake she hadn't committed. Her sister-in-law, Valliammai indeed took pleasure in abusing her, "They beat her up. Good! Why did they leave her alive? That whore thinks too much of herself. She thinks that she's very beautiful. That's why she went after that Udayar. When she loses her shape, he'll throw her out, and she'll be in a state worse than a dog's" (28). Kathamuthu is portrayed as a domineering Dalit, usurping the rights of others. Only a selfless person can lead a community and can lift it up, whereas Kathamuthu proved himself to be a self-made leader disregarding the needs of his own people. His character elucidates the selfish nature of the Dalit leader. Such leaders prove themselves to be hypocrites and exploit their kith and kin. In the author's notes to *The Grip of Change*, the author remarks:

It wasn't simply that the upper castes exploit the lower castes. A lower caste leader might exploit his own people. It is not only upper caste men who prey upon lower caste women. Men like Kathamuthu are perfectly capable of taking advantage of vulnerable women. The overall picture presented by the novel is that rich or poor, upper caste or lower caste, the seeds of corruption exist at all levels. (149)

Even Kathamuthu's wives don't care about his high handedness. They in fact are very critical about him and snub him when the need arises. Kathamuthu's second wife is an upper caste widow who cannot marry again in her caste so she marries a low caste. Thangam too is a widow who marries Kathamuthu. Set against these tales of hardship are other stories of everyday happenings, of women working together, of bathing and swimming, preparing and eating food, of festivals and marriage, of celebrating and singing.

The Dalits have darkness spread around them and also within them. To wear the new clothes of hope, advancement and aspiration, they have to get rid of the torn clothes such as submission, intra-dalit strife and illiteracy. Sivakami in the author's note says in *The Grip of Change*:

The lower castes are the have-nots, and the haves are the upper castes; the division is clear. They cannot avoid clashing with each other. As the lower castes are several and divided, they are not able to offer a tough fight to the upper castes. The lower castes should shatter their particular identities and identify themselves as one class. The Dalits form the last rung of the labour class. If the struggle is centred on the Dalits, class and caste equality will be attained. (180)

The Dalits have to renew themselves to become emancipated. Trust is the only ship that can land them ashore. Only by changing themselves, they can be an instrument of change. It is time that they ceased to survive as Dalits and started living as human beings growing within them the rose of hope. Most of the Dalit women get married out of compulsion and circumstance. They are forced by the manmade destiny to lead their life as prescribed to them. Oppression to a greater or lesser extent produces anger or hurt and oppression and injustice form an inevitable part of an untouchable's life, especially the Dalit woman, which has become a life of tolerance and sacrifice. The atrocities that are carried out on Thangam had greatly affected her psyche, completely changing her way of life and thoughts. Whenever Thangam remembered her life in Puliur, she wept. She equated the incident in the sugarcane field with the repulsive experience of stepping on shit while walking on a riverbank. She could not recover easily from the sorrows and troubles she had suffered. The shock of being dragged out by her hair in the middle of the night to be beaten up like an animal had affected her mind deeply. She would gasp awake at night at the slightest sound. "She hated the memory of Udayar's sexual use of her body. Once she used to plait her long hair, but she no longer bothered with that. She pinned it up without any care and covered her head with her sari" (87).

The novel *The Grip of Change* does not only voice the plight of an exploited Dalit woman, it records the waves of change that is present in the Dalit consciousness, thus providing a kind of cure for the ailments of the society through the character of Gowri. Kathamuthu, a Dalit patriarch allows her daughter Gowri to study and this is only by the awareness provided by education that she is able to realize the exploitation of women in a patriarchal set-up. Being educated she protests against her early marriage, "The sufferings that my mother underwent in her marriage! I don't want to be tortured like her by some man" (124). She openly condemns the inhuman treatment of her father inflicted upon Thangam. When Kathamuthu rapes Thangam she vehemently shouts, "Dogs! Dogs in this house! Shameless as dogs!" (93). Through the portrayal of Gowri in *The Grip of Change*, Sivakami has shown how in spite of all odds they rise up in their life having their own dreams. When all unite together and stand for their rights and make others understand that they too are human beings with their own dignity and rights to lead their life on earth, the realization of the dream of universal brotherhood will not be far away.

The Grip of Change is a subversive novel which overthrows Dalit patriarchy by portraying the fall of the patriarch Kathamuthu and the seeping in of socio-political changes and better tomorrows with the rise of the educated, democratic youth under the leadership of Chandran, Kathamuthu's nephew. Sivakami's solution for overcoming caste disparity is simple- inter-caste marriage which would lead to mixing of caste blood and there would be no pure caste after that. Education too could be instrumental in overcoming caste boundaries like in Gowri's case. "She blended among the many intelligent and attractive young women in the college and it pleased

her. Gowri felt that she had crossed over human-made boundaries her father, her caste and her village – and merged with the ocean of people. However, whenever she went back home for the holidays, caste revealed its murderous teeth like an invisible monster” (95).

Sivakami towards the end of the novel laments how even for a modern and educated Dalit woman, life still continues to be a struggle and caste a marker of identity in the society. In other words, caste and oppression of women go hand in hand. The women in the novel suffer because they are women, because they are poor, and because they are Dalits. Sivakami’s novels gleam with the spirit of hope and change and also try to accelerate the morale embedded deep inside the heart of the Dalits. It deals with the sorrows and sufferings, trials and tribulations, despair and degradation, poverty and powerlessness of the Dalits. It is a lofty image of the grief of Dalits especially the women who are devoid of the inevitable essentials such as human dignity, liberty, honour, justice, education and security.

Works Cited

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