

Dalit Women in Threefold Structural Discrimination: Exploring through Sivakami's 'The Grip of Change'

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1. Introduction

The Dalits are looked down upon as 'less-human' and subjected to all kinds of inhuman practices. Gangadhar Pantawane, the Dalit Journal editor, has remarked that "Dalit is not a caste. He is a man exploited by the social and economic traditions of their country." (Omvadt 25). But he talks only about the 'men' of Dalit community, and conveniently ignores women. The Dalit discourse in the realm of academia focuses its attention primarily on the experiences and sufferings of Dalit men and not of women. The voice of Dalit women is seldom heard in the literary world.

This observable traditional fact has been broken by an Indian Administrative service (IAS) officer Sivakami, who is the first Dalit women novelist. Mostly violence against Dalit women is used as a means of punishment and demonstration of power by the dominant castes towards both the woman herself and her community. Pazhaiyana Kazhithalum was the first Dalit novel in Tamil, translated by the novelist (Sivakami) herself with the name *The Grip of Change*. This paper focuses the minor character – Thangam who is a childless widow and besieged at many different stages of life. Thangam means 'gold' and here, in this novel, she is misused. She is related to the misdeeds and lust of the people as gold can be related to the longing of people.

Gowri – who is a narrator of the part of the novel and becomes a protest also against the other patriarchal forces, i.e., her father – Kathamuthu – a Dalit leader, and some other Upper Caste Hindus. Gowri and even the novelist – P. Sivakami focuses on the major events and incidents in the lives of the Dalit and the women are portrayed with that true and vivid picture of victimized society. They are doubly marginalized as they remain silent victims of even the Dalit men.

Through Thangam, the novelist gives a thorough picture of Dalit women's silence and their being victimized by the Upper Caste Hindus as well as they are sexually exploited by their own caste men equally.

The majority of the description part in the novel focuses on the incident which takes place with Thangam and her body. Her body bears acknowledgment to the difficulties faced by Dalit women. Her tortured body does the opening of the novel. She is a widow and so she becomes a 'surplus' woman when she is harassed by her brothers-in-law when she refuses to submit to them; she is sexually exploited by her Hindu landlord – Udayar and the assault on her by Caste Hindu men owing to the sexual and social misconduct, and so on.

The novel 'The Grip of Change' becomes more complicated and critical just because of this reason. When Sivakami wrote this novel, she was just twenty-six. In Author's Notes she talks about the mature perspective of life. So the

questions raised by her are answered just by her. She portrays Gowri as a victim of her mother's experiences or we can say that she has that courage to move on from the Victimhood of her mother! As a daughter, she is completely against the theory of her father's politics and mentality to misuse women in every possible way. She thinks that even women should have the right to live according to their own thoughts and they should get their own freedom. She can think like that because she is educated and mature person to understand the need of a common woman in a normal life. This paper aims at foregrounding the oppression of a Dalit woman at three levels - gender, caste and class with reference to P. Sivakami's novel *The Grip of Change* (2006).

The novel "*The Grip of Change*" does not only reveal her life and time and also influence the plight of an exploited Dalit woman by the social and economic traditions of their country; it records the effect 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. She says "When we talk of women's empowerment, we give priority to those who live below the poverty line — malnourished and poor women. Even in that respect, Dalit women are the worst affected." Kathamuthu, a Dalit patriarch, he allows his daughter Gowri to study and this is happened only by the knowledge provided by education that she is able to realize the exploitation of women in a patriarchal set-up. She protests against her early marriage because she is educated — "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 brutal treatment of her father inflicted upon Thangam. When Kathamuthu rapes Thangam she strongly shouts, — "Dogs! Dogs in this house! Shameless as dogs (93)! Meena Kandasamy, in her article — "And One Shall Live in Two ...", gives an insightful review of *The Grip of Change*. She calls Sivakami's daring attempt of self-examination as an archetype of realist criticism. Though the novel is fictitious but still the characters and incidents are realistic enough to articulate the reality of modern society.

Dalit women are to be found at the absolute bottom of the social hierarchy as they face systemic and structural discrimination threefold: as Dalits, as poor, and as women. The caste system declares Dalit women to be intrinsically impure, 'untouchable', which approves social exclusion and exploitation. In class terms, the vast majority of Dalit women are poor; many are landless wage laborers and lack access to resources. As a result of this Dalit women are subjected to inhumane living conditions and human rights violations; discrimination and violence systematically deny them opportunities, choices and freedoms in all spheres of life. This undermines not only their dignity and self-respect, but also their

rights to equality and development. The nature of violence against Dalit women is accompanied by equally systemic patterns of impunity for the perpetrators.

The experiences of Dalit women exhibit clear evidence on widespread exploitation, violence and indecent, inhumane treatment. Their life stories give a detailed account of physical and verbal abuse, forced labour and slavery, sexual violence, including rape, which conveys perceptivity into how their social

position makes them conquerable to these human rights violations. Dalit women are especially targeted for the devadasi and jogini systems of forced prostitution. Numerous other religious practices and specific social customs subject Dalit women in particular to discrimination. And the climax in the novel lies in Thangam earning a place in Kathamuthu's house. 'Sivakami's strength lies in the fact that she does not seek to convince. She merely moves on'.

Works Cited

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