

VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS: A STUDY OF P. SIVAKAMI'S *THE GRIP OF CHANGE*

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Abstract

*Literature is a reflection of emotions and when it expresses sorrows and pain, its voice resonates far and wide in the minds of the multitude. Dalit literature depicts the trials and tribulations of Dalits and the atrocities committed against them and at the same time it works to awaken their consciousness. The present research paper aims to critically analyze the representation of women characters in the narrative *The grip of Change* by Sivakami. Women characters in this work are worth analyzing in terms of their struggle, adversities, and patriarchal oppression both inside and outside of their community, as they confront triple exploitation due to their caste, class, and gender.*

This work depicts how they battle adversities inflicted on them and fight for their identities.

Dalit people, particularly Dalit women, are the worst sufferers in the caste-ridden society, where social rules oblige them to undergo the horrors of injustice, male dominance, humiliation, sexual assault, and gender discrimination. As a result of their own experience of being humiliated, Dalit women writers use their writings to raise their voices for justice and against exploitation. Dalit writers positioned their writings as literature of insurrection and resistance. These writers have begun to speak against discrimination and

exploitation leveled upon them; exploring the experience of their struggle, and using their writings as weapons to make space in mainstream literature. This narrative is aimed to get social justice by fighting against all sorts of oppression and exploitation.

Paper Identification



Introduction

Bharat Dalit feminist narrative questions mainstream Indian feminism in order to reclaim their space and break the hegemony of Dalit men writers who speak on the behalf of Dalit women.

This narrative is aimed to get social justice by fighting against all sorts of oppression and exploitation. In such a scenario, Dalit women writers like Bama Faustina, Urmila Pawar, P Sivakami, Baby Kamble, Meena Kandasany, and many more take pen in their hands, voicing and recording their experiences of humiliation and hurt, also defying centuries-old historical

marginalization and a tenacious refusal to be acknowledged as 'other'. Most Dalit women are filled with the spirit of resistance to patriarchal social practices. Their writings are pregnant with feminist fervor and initiate literature of resistance and create a visible space in Indian literary writing.

It has rightly been said by Kanchana Mahadevan in her article, "DALIT WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE", "Experience gives women the agency to theorize themselves and the worlds in which they live. Foregrounding experiences from the standpoint of women became necessary because as Simone de Beauvoir argues, women experience the world from their specific inhabitant habitant of femininity - a situation in which they are often made aware of their gendered subjectivity".

The Grip of Change is an English translation of Sivakami's first Tamil novel Pazhaiyana kazhithalam. She is an important Tamil Dalit writer and a member of the Indian Administrative Service.. P Sivakami in her novel portrays a realistic picture of the marginalized section of Indian society. 'I want to be an instrument of change' states Sivakami, whose works mainly focus on the plights and circumstances of the Dalit Women and the issues of the Dalit community. It delineates the searing saga of economic exploitation, political empowerment, caste discrimination, patriarchal operation, and the pathetic struggle of the protagonist against the entrenched callus of the status quo. The novel portrays the character of Thangam who faces triple marginalization- gender subordination, economic oppression, and caste discrimination, on the other hand, also records a surge of change in her Dalit consciousness.

This paper is an attempt to analyze the exploitation and suppression in the case of Thangam and her community, that is also a form of violence. She is beguiled by her own family and community members as she has no support. Thangam, a childless widow is misused by everybody who desires. She is treated as

public property that can be used by all. When Thangam's husband dies, she is left uncared for by her family members. For survival, she manages to work hard in the field of sugarcane owned by Udayar, an upper-class landlord. She is harassed and raped by the landlord. Being a poor Dalit woman, she is unable to expose this incident before others. Udayar, an upper-class landlord has good wealth, power, and political background. Therefore, she remains silent and bears the brunt of oppression. Udayar takes advantage of Thangam and uses her whenever he wants. When Udayar's brother sees Udayar and Thangam together, he conveys this news to Kamalam, Udayar's wife. This incident leads to a series of horrific events that shows how Thangam is brutally beaten up, pulled up by the hair, dragged out to the street accused of having an affair with Udayar. Gowri with great dismay states, "I belong to the same caste as that woman. how can I be sure that I won't beat black and blue like her? I have seen things like this happening in the cinema. this is real, terror is sleeping on a matt in my house".

Sivakami criticizes the inhumane treatment of Dalit women. She examines how Dalit women's voices are brutally stifled. Sivakami is not only just criticizing caste politics; she is also seeing how Dalit patriarchy manipulates Dalit women. The upper caste landowner, Paranjothi Udayar, rapes Thangam and is not punished. Udayar says that Thangam should be grateful for being touched by an upper-caste person. As his words follow, "Ungrateful whore, even if she was hurt by the hand adorned with gold! A Karachi could not have ever dreamt of being touched by a man like me!" The words clearly show the narrow-mindedness of the upper caste people who think only of their status or reputation in the society as their name gets spoiled but not the life of the affected woman. Udayar utters these words impulsively to degrade Thangam but does not show any concern for the incident that happened. He speaks all this to harm her self-esteem and make her vulnerable. He didn't pay any heed to her honor. Most

of the time, it happens that the lower caste people don't take any action against upper-class people as they work in their field. But Thangam takes the matter to court and files a complaint against Udayar.

The author discussed the issues of violence, women, and politics critically and very aptly. When the incident related to Thangam comes to light, Kathamuthu only focuses on the issue of caste, and this case is taken for granted by everyone in the village panchayat. The justice given to Thangam is unjustified as she deserves dignity, honor, and respect in society instead of ten thousand rupees as compensation. While describing her pathetic situation to Kathamuthu, she says; "Sami, those hooligans who beat me up, they should be jailed for at least a day and tortured. The pain is killing me". No one shows any concern for Thangam's psychological state after that particular incident. She was bearing all the burden on her shoulders. Every remembrance of her exploitation was breaking her spirit down but she remains stubborn to get justice for herself, she remembers it many times like:

Whenever she remembered her life in peculiar, 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 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.

P. Sivakami has shown how Thangam, a Dalit woman, becomes the victim of the patriarchal society and how she went through all the problems to defend her honor in this novel.

P. Sivakami shows Thangam, a subaltern Dalit woman confronts problems everywhere. Women have always been facing violence in the form of physical, emotional, permanent psychological damage and religious ways by the hands of patriarchy. Thangam, belonging to the lower caste faces triple marginalization and her community treats her as a

slave. On the one side, Sivakami narrates the hardship, pain, and sufferings of lower caste people especially women, on the other side, she portrays the desire of women to live their life with pride and dignity. In the end, Gowri has been shown as the epitome of such change. They constantly raise their voice against the tyranny of her recruits to preserve their honor. "They continue to claim and manifest social justice and human dignity despite remaining vulnerable to repeated caste-based violence" "Under conditions of poverty and vulnerability," women have to face violent sexual abuse. No attention is paid to their demand for justice, rather she is harassed and raped. Their stories of victimization are suppressed by the dominant setup of society. Thangam and Gowri's assiduous efforts and perseverance keep them motivated to remain involved in 'strategic actions towards change'. Sivakami depicts the harsh reality of child labor. She shows how oppression is not limited to the boy child but the girl child also. Once a Dalit boy breaks some of the kambu stalks to fill his stomach is beaten, thrashed, and humiliated by his master. "The boy urinated and defecated in fear and pain" Sivakami emphasizes that it is important for women to raise their voices against the atrocities and injustices that they have been facing for years. At the home of Kathamuthu, Thangam boldly claims her new identity as she holds an unwavering potential within her soul. The strength in the voice of Gowri expresses this potentiality when she poses questions against her father. It becomes unbearable for Goweri to see the lust in her father's eyes for other women. She shouts, "Dogs! Dogs in this house! Shameless as dogs!"

Sivakami portrays a black picture of a society where women are considered as commodities existing to serve men and a heinous crime such as rape is justified and normalized.

On the other hand, Thangam's violence by Kathamuthu is perhaps more problematic than the earlier rape. Due to the lack of socio-economic agency,

Kanagavalli and Nagamani become mute spectators in Kathamuthu's household.

The second part of the novel can be seen as an attempt at self-analysis by the author. The author as Gowri is looking back at her narration of the earlier events. She focuses on the negative traits of her father rather than his redeeming qualities. The author feels the need for organized and responsible leadership that can combat the rising tide of injustice.

In the village, Gowri is the only girl who knocks at the door of school and college. She builds her identity through education. Education is like the elixir of life for her. She realized that she has transcended the human-made boundaries- her father, her caste, and her village and merged into the ocean of educated people. Whenever she comes back to her village she finds the dreadful clouds of caste discrimination and sexual exploitation are still hovering over. Sexual exploitation of Dalit women has been considered natural and instinctive. These women are not allowed to attend schools after receiving puberty and they become a victim of sexual harassment by older husbands, burdened with labor at home and also in the fields apart from nurturing their numerous children. Ignorant people do not recognize the importance of educating women they just put them into the well of Darkness.

In Author's note, Sivakami describes that many violent clashes have been uprooted between the Vanniars and Parayers. Several people have been killed and attacked due to intra-Dalit strife. She suggests a remedy of being united to this social ailment. She emphasizes the need to have solidarity which will ultimately help them to free themselves from oppression and colonized attitude of dominant people. One has to speak to be heard; one has to ask a question to be answered, and to be recognized, one has to speak aloud. Sivakami's voice is also loud and ringing in the minds of the downtrodden who are unseen and unheard. The grip of change, rather than being a journey of her voice and

consciousness sets forth the voice of the oppressed community who is eager and waiting for change.

Gower opposes her father's patriarchal control by advocating the rights and respect of the three women under his supervision. Gower escapes the ghetto of country life by attending university in the city. Kathamuthu falls short of expectations by being cruel to his wives and exploiting Thangam for his carnal lust. Gower takes up the role of leader by rebelling against his father's brutal and carnal tyranny of these women by raising their understanding of rights. Gower is representing the novelist. Her childhood trauma harms her throughout and obscures even the other characteristics of her father, as she confesses in the Author's note. Through her commitment to justice and dignity, Gower brings about a change in society.

Gowri as the mouthpiece of the writer Sivakami returns to her village and assesses the circumstances that have remained unaffected by the grasp of change. Marginalization has forced the downtrodden to live at the mercy of those who exploit them. Their essence of life is sucked out and discarded as junk. The effects of starvation have forced them to dire consequences. The life of these people is surrounded by darkness and even within them. It has been suggested in this writing that in order to get rid of torn clothes like subjugation, inter-Dalit discord, and illiteracy they have to wear new clothes of hope for progress and aspiration. They have to renew themselves to get emancipation. Hope is the only ship that can bring them ashore. They need to speak for themselves and fight for their rights, dignity, and bring change in their life, in this way roses of hope can grow in the thorns of adversity. The character of Gowri shows a willingness to overcome the subalternity by manifesting many traces of self-consciousness. Women have always been the sufferers of marginalization almost everywhere but the condition of subaltern women is totally different from that of other women.

The novel *The Grip of Change* narrates a desire for justice and unflinching determination for change in blemished and terrible circumstances and their courageous efforts for uplifting themselves from the bottom of the darkness. Sivakami portrays the untouchable aspects of Dalits by exposing the harsh reality of their situation that has been less recognized in Indian literature. A large part of this novel shows the discrimination between man and woman in this small village and how sexual violence against women is normalized by the people as it is considered natural and spontaneous. Gowri emerges as a courageous woman with an indomitable human spirit resisting oppression. Sivakami is also critical of the Dalit leaders who often try to improve their power at the expense of their community. She emphasizes that instead of sticking to anxiety and depression, there is a need to challenge the status quo and turn the table of sorrowful times into happy ones by claiming and fighting for their rights for the social and economic agency. The noteworthy aspect of this narrative is in the following lines: “The significance of the book lies in the fact that it speaks for the most vulnerable members of the Dalit community– its women”.

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