

## ARTICULATING THE VOICELESS: A STUDY OF P. SIVAKAMI'S *THE GRIP OF CHANGE*

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Writings of minorities and the other marginal voices have found a perfect platform at literary scenario - be it feministic writing, queer theories, displaced writings of Diaspora or Dalit writings. But despite social, economical, political and developmental endeavors, Dalits still are at periphery in the mainstream society. Popping up of queer theories in the contemporary scenario has already pushed aside the feminist writings in academic area of gender studies. And this already marginalized movement has further sidelined the issues of Dalit women. Although Dalit movement started in mid nineteenth century for upliftment of these marginalized communities, but 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 and poor too. Then she has to face not only the caste discrimination but the gender inequalities and economic disparities too. A Dalit woman is thrice victimized by hegemonic elite class, male chauvinism and the rich, that too, simultaneously. This paper aims at foregrounding the plight of a Dalit at three contexts- gender, caste and class with reference to P.Sivakami's novel *The Grip of Change* (2006). Thus this paper is an attempt to articulate and foreground the silenced and subjugated Dalit in an oppressive society along with its consequential voices of protests.

The word 'Dalit' comes from the Sanskrit root 'dal' which means broken, downtrodden, or oppressed. It has also its origin in Sanskrit and Hindi word 'Dalita' which literally means oppressed. Regarding the origin of the word 'Dalit', there are variations, but it unanimously symbolizes the dilemma of oppressed, downtrodden and other exploited minorities. Singha and Acharya define, "The term 'Dalit' literally means crushed or grounded and it describes the living conditions for centuries of a large group of socially oppressed people in India" (xxi). Generally, 'Dalit' refers to all the exploited and disadvantaged people but in its particular sense, it is used as synonymous only to those socially oppressed people who being excluded from the mainstream of the society have been living under the stigma of untouchability since centuries. Dalits are socially oppressed, culturally neglected and economically exploited. Even after many years of Dalit movement, still they are being disregarded by diverse social opportunities. Still the hegemonic ideologies are oppressive and authoritative, keeping a Dalit's 'being' at constant threat. Pariah of society, a Dalit is maltreated to the extremity. 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 poor woman. Thus insurgence of Dalit feminism is the need of the hour and fortunately there are women writers like Bama Faustina, Urmila Panwar, Baby kamble, Meena Kandasamy 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 opus 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 *Pazhaiyana Kazhithalum* carried her into glare of publicity and it attracted much larger audience and was applauded widely when translated into English by Sivakami herself under the title *The Grip of Change* in 2006. *Anandayee* and *Karukkuvettu* 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. In her English translation of the Tamil Text *Pazhiyana Kazhithalum*, she smartly knots an attachment of 10 years later revisit of the protagonist Gowri to her villages which stimulates the creative faculty of readers to reassess their earlier elucidation of the incidents and characters and it represents her own established vision too. *The Grip of Change* is enlisted by Hanif Mohammed, the Pakistani novelist, among his five favorite Indian Novels for its superb realistic depiction of caste, gender and class merged with socio-political machination. Through her political activism and literary medium Sivakami has been articulating the voice of the voiceless Dalit women. By projecting a woman instead of a ‘man’ protagonist in her very first novel, she has opposed the mainstream sexist ideology. The protagonist of the play is Thangam, a poor parachi 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. As vaishali shivkumar suggests:

A very famous statement ‘Woman is a Dalit from Beginning to End’ seems really a naked truth at this stage just because of this struggle of the Dalit women against the society, against their own outset and against the traditions their men follow. The patriarchy crushes down the originality, warmth, delicacy, tenderness and even beauty in them. (3)

Undoubtedly the rhetorical question of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak ‘Can the subaltern speak?’ has its background in post-colonial subalternity but it is quite relevant to Dalit woman’s subalternity too. They can’t articulate against the oppression inflicted upon them. Thangam is treated as a ‘body’ in this novel. Time and again she is assaulted physically, verbally and sexually not only by upper caste patriarchs but by the womanizers of her own community too. After the death of her husband she becomes a ‘surplus woman’ for her brothers-in-law and they force her to become a prostitute. Even her right on share of land is rejected on the basis of her infertile ‘body’ which could not produce child. She can get share of property only if her ‘body’ can satisfy their lust. As she tells to Kathamuthu, “My husband’s brother tried to force me, but I never gave in. they wouldn’t give me my husband’s land, but wanted me to be a whore for them! I wouldn’t give in. . . .” (7) But she is unable to save her body from the jaws of hierarchy. Devoid of money, the destitute and dispossessed Thangam moves outside her home to earn her livelihood by working as a laborer in the fields of a upper class landlord Paranjothi Udayar and there she is raped by him. She narrates, “I didn’t want it. But Udayar took no notice of me. He raped me when i was working in his sugarcane field. I remained silent; after all, he is my

paymaster. He measures my rice. . .” (7) What can be the justification for this heinous crime which not only shattered a woman physically but psychologically as well? This brutality of class hierarchy made her ‘subaltern’ who can’t even speak! Thus poverty makes a poor widow to bear the sexual exploitation silently.

Caste is the most demoralizing aspect in a woman’s identity who is already located at the periphery of a male dominated society. Caste disparities lead to violence against lower caste woman, who is expected to yield to upper caste male chauvinism. The cruelty of caste discrimination is exposed when she moves from passivity to active assertion of her angst against the exploiting masculine brutality and has to suffer social indignation. When the liaison between Udayar and Thangam is disclosed, Udayar’s brothers-in-law attack her and beat her doggedly and even she is threatened to be killed (6). The duality of the upper class is exposed when Udayar abuses her, “Ungrateful whore! Even if she was hurt by the hand adorned with gold! A parachi could have never dreamt of being touched by a man like me! My touch was a boon granted for penance performed in her earlier births. . .”(31) These words reveal the hypocrisy of Hindu caste system who at one hand hate the lower caste considering them untouchables, and at the other hand gratify their corporeal hunger through Dalit bodies. But Thangam’s saga of exploitation is not complete yet. Still she has to face oppression for being poor and particularly a ‘woman’ and now she is exploited at the hands of the rich of her own Dalit community. Unguarded in her own village, she seeks help in Arthur village but this help proves transitory. Not only her money is grabbed by her so called guardian Kathamuthu but her ‘body’ is also violated. The rich and influential Dalit Panchayat leader Kathamuthu who earlier gave shelter to Thangam turns into animal and once more her ‘body’ is abused. In an afternoon while she was sleeping in the kitchen he rapes her and she is so tormented that she can’t even see his face. And then she becomes a mistress to him forever. Ironically, Thangam epitomizes the dilemma of all the subjugated women as the novel projects her in a wretched condition of an outcaste from the beginning to the end. B. Mangalam, rightly observes, “Sivakami’s fiction documents violence against women within the domestic space. Her fiction exposes caste and gender hierarchies outside and inside the home that renders the woman an outcaste in her community”(111).

Dalits are OTHER in Hindu caste structure and in the novel their OTHERness is ostensible by the setting of the Dalit communities in Cheri, (separate outcast area for all minorities) whereas the upper castes live in gramam. The discrimination doesn’t stop in separate places; its roots are extended to the untouchability and relationships too. A Hindu upper caste Udayar feels ashamed after the exposure of his liaison with a parachi but a lower caste Kathamuthu brings a ‘foreign brandy’ Nagamani to home as his wife (39). Udayar’s wife, an upper caste Hindu woman can send her brothers to assault Thangam for having an illicit affair with her husband but Kangawali, a lower caste woman has to bear her husband’s second wife Nagamani. Later they both bear Thangam in their home. Ironically there develops a friendship bond too between these three victimized Dalit women. Kangawali and Nagamani became accustomed to having Thangam in house. “After lunch, they sat together in the coconut grove chewing betel leaves and chatting. They no longer served the leftover food. She ate what they ate” (88).

The yawning gap exists not only between Dalit and non- Dalits but among Dalits too. Sivakami has criticized the self destructive tendencies of Dalit community by exposing caste hierarchical order existing in Tamil Nadu, by giving an elaborated narrative in the text. She says:

Even amongst the lower castes, hierarchy existed- pallars were agricultural labourers, Parayars were drummers and menials, and the Chakkiliyars

were cobblers. The first grade -the Pallars-were absent in Puliur. The Pallars considered themselves superior to the rest. The Parayars considered themselves higher than the Chakkiliyars, who in turn considered themselves superior to the Para- vannars, the washer community. The para-vannar men washed clothes for the lower castes and the women worked as midwives for them. Similar to all other human communities, the women were considered to be lower than the men. Everyone established their worth by pointing to those beneath them. (63)

And this series of hierarchy in every culture and every social group concludes with the one and only perpetual prey i.e. woman of that culture or social group .Paradoxically such totalitarian tendencies survive even in the midst of the lowest of the lower castes. Each caste wants to dominate another. And such a hierarchy proves to be a curse especially for the Dalit woman for which she has been weighed down over the manifold layers of exploitation due to this caste hierarchy. Meena Kandasamy , a contemporary Dalit writer appreciates Sivakami for this honest self criticism, "The first Tamil novel by a Dalit woman, it evoked a great deal of discussion because it went beyond condemning caste fanatics by using fiction to describe how we were shackled, and tangled among ourselves. Instead of being the journey of her individual voice and consciousness, it was a unanimous expression of the youth of this oppressed community- eager and waiting for change "(193).

Truly confirming its title, the novel *The Grip of Change* doesn't only voices the plight of an exploited Dalit woman, it records the waves of 'change' also in the Dalit consciousness; thus providing a kind of cure for the ailments of the society. Through the character of Gowri, the ideal of education in recovery of Dalit's condition is also established. This novel postulates a crude stereotype of the patriarchy along with a hopeful vision presented by Gowri. The glimpses of the growing consciousness can be seen in the novel. 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 defies the decision of her father about her marriage by working hard for her examination, and after getting success she chooses to study further in the city college. When she crosses the threshold of chauvinistic home, resisting her father's intimidation, she thinks she has conked out the tyrannical chains. The text beautifully conveys, "During floods, waters from overflowing wells mingle with the waters of huge water bodies, transgressing their boundaries. Gowri felt that she had crossed over human -made boundaries-her father, her caste and her village – and merged with the ocean of people" (95). 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). She is also critical of her father's polygamist marital state and always stimulates her mother Kangawali and her step-mother Nagamani for liberation. In fact Gowri is the mouthpiece of Sivakami through whom she has voiced the voiceless Dalit women who are bearing the inhuman treatment silently. The vocalization and resistance chiefly rests upon firebrand spirited Gowri. 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 exemplar of realist criticism. Though the novel is fictitious but still the characters and incidents are realistic enough to verbalize the reality of modern society. K. Sachidanandan observes, "Dalit literature empowers the marginalized by retrieving the voices, spaces and identities silenced or suppressed

by castiest powers” (14). And truly P. Sivakami is able to formulate the poignant tale of a woman’s struggle to fight and survive in a biased society and culture through Thangam’s story and Gowri’s protests which suggest that silence and suppression is optimistically replaced by a stimulated and resisting expression. Thus from the beginning to the end this novel serves as an icebreaker and draws attention to violent realities, sexual assaults, psychological torments, and economical exploitation along with a message that a democratic approach is essential to eradicate such discriminatory ideologies from social fabric.

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