

**READING VIOLENCE AGAINST DALIT WOMEN THROUGH
P.SIVAKAMI'S *THE GRIP OF CHANGE***

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“My husband’s relatives spread the story that I had become Paranjothi’s concubine. That’s why Paranjothi’s wife’s brothers and her brother-in-law, four men, entered my house last night. They pulled me by my hair and dragged me out to the street. They hit me, and flogged me with a stick stout as a hand. They nearly killed me. No one in the village, none of my relatives, came to help me. I begged for mercy, but they wouldn’t stop. They abused me and threatened to kill me if I stayed in that village any longer. They called me a whore.’ She began to wail again.”

(P. Sivakami, *The Grip of Change*, 6)

Thangam’s predicament is enmeshed within different forms of caste, class and gender discrimination that are brutally demarcated on her body. As a widow, her husband’s family dismiss her claim to any right to land. She seeks to earn her livelihood by working on Paranjothi’s farms, who then sexually exploits her. She is gravely physically assaulted by a group of upper caste men. Verbal abuses amounting to character assassination are hurled at her. Her will to survive triumphs over every form of barbarism, and she walks miles despite her frail state to seek justice for herself. This description of brutalities heaped on Thangam are indicative of multitudes of exploitative structures routinely encountered by Dalit women. The experiences of violence against Dalit women are often recorded in Dalit women’s writings.

Dalit literature is being produced at an unprecedented scale in times when carnages against Dalits are on a rise (S. Anand 5). While violence against Dalit women is represented in various ways in Dalit women’s writings, there usually is a silence in mainstream media on actual instances of unspeakable violence against Dalit women. It has been observed that these cases do not garner the kind of massive outrage reserved for victims from more privileged castes and class. The unstated assumption of acceptance of routine violence against Dalit women is all pervasive. There is also an ever present trap of aestheticizing violence in speaking of violence. In interrogating violence and its ramifications, the aim of this paper is to analyse the multifarious nature and levels at which violence against Dalit women is perpetrated and the ways in which violence against women has been analysed, along with a reading of P. Sivakami’s *The Grip of Change* (2006).

An evaluation of the idea of violence, why and how violence is perpetrated in the case of Dalit women; to strengthen the hegemonic practices of the caste system and also patriarchy,

are important questions to be probed. In this respect, many times, the notion of class is also crucial. The deeply disturbing question of using violence as a means of coercion at every level, in the case of Dalit women is examined in this paper. Stanly French, Wanda Teays and Laura N. Pardy (1998), in assessing widespread violence against women, point out that various cultures have their own distinct forms of violence. In India, the caste system can be considered as a cause of violence against Dalit women. Violence against Dalit women needs to be placed within the rubric of the oppressive caste system without excluding the concerns of gender and class.

It has often been observed that Dalit women's existence is caught between the dual axes of caste and gender, and therefore, they are twice oppressed. In the case of Dalit women, caste and gender are considered as two markers of identity, their concerns are often addressed in terms of a single attribute without taking into cognizance the interrelated linkages between caste and gender. Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis (1983) argue in context of Black Feminism that: "Race, gender and class cannot be tagged on to each other mechanically for, as concrete social relations, they are enmeshed in each other and the particular intersections involved produce specific effects" (62-63). A similar observation can be made about Dalit women. The assumption to treat caste and gender as two discrete markers added to one another, overlooks the complex relation between the two, i.e. there are instances when caste and gender may work jointly or when they may not impinge on each other. This problem is complicated in analysing violence against Dalit women because it is riddled with several aspects of casteism and patriarchy which require to be analysed separately as well as in combination, in terms of the nexus between them. It is difficult and often erroneous to strictly categorise violence against Dalit women as casteist or sexist or at times both.

Thangam's description of her physical assault reveals the various levels at which violence against Dalit women is predicated. Thangam is isolated by her own community because of allegations of illicit relationships and attacked by the landlords' wife's relatives who punish her for a crime which she is not guilty of. Instead of blaming Paranjothi, they choose to treat Thangam as a pawn to teach him a lesson for cheating on his wife and warn him against further indiscretions. Clearly, Thangam is a victim of competing masculinities and bears the brunt of caste prejudices; she is first sexually exploited by Paranjothi, then beaten up and almost murdered. She is even asked to leave the village as if she is the cause of trouble and that would straighten the landlord's predatory conduct. There is a failure to recognise the actual perpetrator and instead she is judged to be guilty. The entire exercise is sought to be justified by labelling her a promiscuous woman. Sexuality and its expression are stereotypically encoded and its victims are denied any assertion. Anupama Rao (2009) argues that "the bodies of dalit women are seen collectively as mute, and capable of bearing penetration and other modes of marking upper-caste hegemony because of the over-determination of this violence as caste privilege" (76). Thangam's body is deeply scarred by intersecting streams of caste, class and gender. Her body is marked by upper caste sexual exploitation and then physical beating. Kathamuthu in manoeuvring a settlement for her, solely focuses on this incident as one of caste concern, as he is convinced that only then will there be any police intervention and action. His own gender biases are amply recorded in his treatment of the women in his household.

Any attempt at defining violence is riddled with problems of context, situations, social discriminations, 'perceived differences' and notions of exercising power through control. The use of violence and its ramifications on the coding of women's behaviour is a well-documented issue. Sylvia Walby (1989), in her essay "Theorising Patriarchy", defines patriarchy "as a system of social structures, and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women" (214).

She recognises that the “intersection of ethnicity and gender may alter ethnic and gender relations” (217) which can also mean a difference in the “sites of oppression of different women”. She further adds that male violence “has a regular social form and, as a result of women’s well-founded expectations of its routine nature, has consequences for women’s actions” (224). Thangam is publicly beaten up while the actual offender Paranjothi remains unscathed because of his caste and gender. Violence against Dalit women is perpetrated as a means to validate both caste and gender hierarchy. While Thangam is denied her rightful share in land by her in-laws; Brahmanical patriarchy as explained by Uma Chakravarty, is displayed in Paranjothi’s conduct of taking advantage of a labourer in his fields and then feigning innocence.

Sharmila Rege (1995) in the essay “Caste and Gender: The Violence Against Women in India” charts the history of study of violence against women in India. She makes an interesting argument that this study concentrated specifically on the violence faced by upper caste women such as dowry related, regulations on women’s conduct pertaining to sexuality, and emphasizes that Dalit women are more vulnerable to collective forms of violence of sexual assault. The assumption of universalizing the experiences of Indian women not just occludes the differences generated due to caste and class but also erases these markers of the perpetrators of violence, in this case, caste Hindu men. In many studies of violence against Dalit women in India, a significant problem is posed due to this lumping together of victims and perpetrators along gender lines without providing optimum attention to the linkages between gender and caste or class.

It is often observed that both the Feminist movement and the Dalit movement have failed to properly address the concerns of Dalit women. Gopal Guru (2003) makes an argument along these lines in his essay “Dalit Women Talk Differently” where he emphasizes the ways in which Dalit women talk differently with regard to resisting attempts of homogenizing them under the wider rubric of caste/ Dalit or gender/Woman. He states that: “Dalit women justify the case for talking differently on the basis of external factors (non-dalit forces homogenizing the issue of dalit women) and internal factors (the patriarchal domination within the dalits)” (81). Guru’s analysis firmly identifies the need to examine and forward Dalit women’s concerns specifically. In cases of violence against Dalit women, it is evident that they have been at the receiving end due to compounded oppressive structures. Sharmila Rege (2003) in her essay “A Dalit Feminist Standpoint” places the blame of presence of multiple patriarchies squarely on ‘Brahminical conspiracy’ and on the relation of the caste group to the means for production. Such systems further marginalise Dalit women as women, Dalit and often landless labourers. Thangam becomes a victim of a combination of these factors. Since the factors of class and caste often overlap, Dalit women find themselves at the receiving end of poverty induced violence which they encounter almost every day. Thangam is also forced to look for work as her deceased husband’s brothers do not wish to share the land which is rightfully hers. Her will to survive leads her to work in Paranjothi’s farms.

The acts of violence also need to be analysed. These acts are directly influenced by the immediate social setting in which they take place and its participants. There is a difference between interpersonal and collective violence. The phenomenon of collective violence has often been scanned separately as it involves a complex analysis of individuality dissolving into group identity.

Drawing on the works of Gustave Le Bon, Alvarez and Bachman (2008) term this phenomenon “deindividuation”, which is accompanied by anonymity and loss of individual responsibility. It is interesting to observe how the individual gives way to a combined group

identity. It is as if the individual ceases to exist and an unthinking beast like entity emerges. Being part of such a group may give the idea of abdicating all norms and a sense of getting away without punishment. This also means that one kind of identity takes precedence over every other identity. And when caste is that identity, along which groups align themselves, there should be a serious questioning of this blinding force which when coupled with violence can have regressive repercussions. Charles Tilly (2003) in *The Politics of Collective Violence*, while assessing various kinds of collective violence points out the factor of social inequality which is contingent on exploitation and opportunity hoarding. He further adds that: “Boundaries of ethnicity, race, religion, gender, or nationality reinforce exploitation and opportunity hoarding. In their turn, exploitation and opportunity hoarding lock such differences in place by delivering greater rewards to occupants of the ostensibly superior category.” (10). Caste poses one such boundary in the Indian context. As class also gets combined in this analysis, a power wielding group is formed and strengthened by exercising violence. So both exploitation and blocking opportunities is part and parcel of the caste system. To a large extent the urge to maintain this hegemony dictates the selection of collective violence as a means. Collective violence usually brings together the vested interests of a certain group as a whole and aims to suppress the other. The methods which are employed to achieve this end are designed to work on the prevailing discriminations.

In the context of caste, violence against Dalit women needs to be considered in both interpersonal and collective forms. The exploitation of Dalit women in their workplace is a manifestation of both caste patriarchy in particular and caste hegemony in general. Violence in the household and the community is an exercise of both assertion and maintenance of dominance over women. Here, the category ‘Woman’ is the primary location of the enactment of violence, which functions as a measure to maintain the hegemony between the sexes.

Collective forms of violence, as theorized in the discourse on race, are instruments of social control predicated on the supposed supremacy of one group over the other. Caste based discriminations often results in violence against Dalits. Gopal Guru (2003) rightly points out that “the caste factor also has to be taken into account which makes sexual violence against dalit or tribal women much more in terms of severity and magnitude” (Guru “Dalit Women”, 81). The extreme acts of violence include murder, and rape. Needless to add, these extreme acts may have been preceded, accompanied and succeeded by a variety of gruesome and cruel atrocities. The argument is not to evaluate the various acts of violence based on their intensity. In case of a dominant group exercising its control over a subordinate group, violence is sought as the most available means to demonstrate hierarchy and reinforce the same. This demonstrative aspect of violence must be analysed. The body on which violence is acted out becomes a site for inscribing caste and gender dominance. Possession of the body is an enactment of social discrimination and is premised on apparent helplessness of the victims. Sexual violence is a manifestation of several related power edifices. It is inextricably linked to notions of sexuality and power, the ones who are denied its assertion and the ones who abuse it. The site of sexual violence is primarily the female body even when caste and class may be the initial factors of oppression.

Physical assault is part of interpersonal and collective violence. It is used to counter any attempts at resisting economic or sexual exploitation. Physical assaults, in the case of Dalit women, are often accompanied by sexual violence. Also sexual violence is inextricably linked to casteist notion of Dalit womanhood characterized by their ‘perceived’ inferiority in caste, class and gender status. Dalit women’s bodies are marked by the labour they perform and restrictions

on wearing certain clothes. Body is primarily the site of violence involving notions of sexuality, masculinity and patriarchy which impinges on Dalit women's identity.

David Riches (1986) in *The Anthropology of Violence* points out that the selection of violence to achieve one's aims at one's opponent's expense is of crucial importance. Not only should violence be explained as arising out of discriminations, and disregard for the other as unworthy of humane treatment, but the acts of violence should be probed deeper because there is both an air of justification and impunity along with it. Violence can also be perceived as a potent means to reinforce divisions and strengthen discriminations. In this way, violence acquires symbolic importance. Not only the victim, the witnesses as well as their group affiliates are sought to be scared into submission. There are ways in which violence remains embedded in not just the individual memory but also in the collective memory of the community and, therefore, ensures far reaching consequences for both. As a constant, persistent reminder it works as a mechanism to regulate a certain code of conduct. The dimension of continued psychological influence provides a sharper edge to the selection of violence as a means. The physical harm is compounded with the ensuing trauma which sustains the repeated threats in the future. The assumption is that violence will forcefully strengthen prevailing discriminations and help in maintaining their rigidity.

Any attempt to understand violence is riddled with complexities of a wide range of acts and terms which qualify as violence. Such analysis is instrumental in laying bare the multiplicities of violence against Dalit women combining caste, class and gender.

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