

Power Dynamics and Female Subjugation in P. Sivakami's *The Grip of Change*

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Abstract

This paper tries to analyze the power dynamics and female subjugation in the novel *The Grip of Change* by a Dalit woman writer P. Sivakami. Tyrannous use of power exists at all levels and the women suffer the most. This paper foregrounds the exploitation of Dalit women by upper caste men and men of their own community. They suffer caste discrimination, gender discrimination and economic oppression. As a result they face triple marginalization. The misuse of power by male Dalit leaders is also discussed here. Kathamuthu represents such a leader. Thangam's story depicts how a Dalit woman gets oppressed by caste, class and patriarchy. Gowri, an educated Dalit girl in the novel, is represented as the mouthpiece of the author herself and it is proved that only by changing themselves they can be an instrument of change. The author sees the possibility of the emergence of new movement for the Dalits. So she presents the youth of the community as eager people who are ready to fight for a change. Chandran, the ideal leader, is presented to prove this. Only with commitment and sincerity of action Dalits can be uplifted. Thus the author of this novel gives voice to the voiceless.

Key words: Power, Subjugation, Marginalization, Patriarchy, Change, Uplift.

Introduction

P. Sivakami, Tamil, Dalit writer, is a member of the Indian Administrative Service. She took voluntary retirement from Government service and from then she has been working for the uplift of the Dalits. She is the first Dalit woman to write a novel titled *Pazhainya Kazhidalum* in 1989. This novel was translated by the author herself and published in English titled *The Grip of Change*. She has published four novels and four short story collections and she is a regular contributor to a literary magazine.

Gangadhar Panterwne, a Dalit journal editor, says; "Dalit is not a caste. He is a man exploited by the social and economic traditions of their country." This remark is only about the 'men' of Dalit community. Here the 'women' are ignored. The voice of Dalit women is rarely heard in literary world. In this situation, Sivakami takes up the task of telling stories of her people in her own words. She tries to give voice to the voiceless. As a woman she projects Dalit women in her writings and the indifference to the plight of the Dalit women is also explored. As a Dalit woman she could foreground the differences in experience of Dalit men and Dalit women. As a Dalit

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woman writer she has dual responsibility. She has to write against the atrocities of the caste system and at the same time gender discrimination also should be highlighted. Sivakami writes from her own experiences and all her novels are centred on Dalit and feminist themes. She states in the preface of this novel that it is a process of understanding the dynamics of caste system and the 'woman' who was inextricably involved in the process. It is natural that she writes about Dalits and women as these two factors decided by birth. To write about these factors she places herself within a circle, influencing the politics surrounding those factors. Sivakami says, "I understand that it is the need of the hour and the requirement of the future." So she continues with her efforts both in creative writing and in other spheres.

The violence on lower caste people and the power relation between the Dalit woman and her landlord are the age-old stories. Arrogant attitude towards Dalit community, violence, women and politics are discussed in her writings. The sufferings of untouchables are never ending chain but writers like P. Sivakami tries to give an identity to the people whose existence has been underestimated by the society. Dr. Kleetus Varghese says;

"The power determines the position of social group and the individual depending on the power and position of social groups; they are placed either at the centre or on the fringes- margins- of a given society."

Power and economic background are the main source for hierarchical structures of caste. Those who have power and position have become the dominant groups whereas the poor and powerless are considered marginalized. Through her writings P. Sivakami finds awareness in her people. As a result, her novels prove that it is not a question of experience but also perspective. In her novel she includes the theme of patriarchy also. Dalit women, as the other women, are dominated by the men in their community. They are treated as a slave, as an inferior. She presents characters to change the social structure in her novels.

In *The grip of Change* P. Sivakami foregrounds the sufferings of Dalit community and this voices the plight of an exploited low caste woman. She projects the exploitation of Dalit women by upper caste men and men of their own community. The novel is divide into two parts. The first part is a fictional representation of caste infested rural society. The second part is 'Author's Notes'; the motive behind writing the first part. The novelist presents the character, Thangam, to depict how a Dalit woman gets subjugated by patriarchy, caste and class. Thangam is a victim of the triple marginalization in the form of caste, class and gender. These keep the Dalit women at the bottom most position in the pyramid of power hierarchy. They suffer as they are poor, landless and wage laborers. Thangam symbolizes all Dalit women brutally treated by the upper caste land lords. In this novel, Thangam's life captures the life of unseen, unedited side of Dalit patriarchy. Meena Kandasamy, in her reading on this novel, says that the significance of the novel lies in the fact that it

speaks for the most vulnerable members of the Dalit community- its women. Thangam's body bears the testimonies to the difficulties faced by Dalit women. As Simon de Beauvoir says one is not born woman but rather becomes one. This novel shows the dominance of patriarchy to make a woman an object of second sex. The important women characters in this novel are Thangam and Gowri. Thangam is portrayed as a subaltern Dalit widow and Gowri represents the symptoms of growing awareness among Dalits. The novel is narrated through the eyes of Gowri. Thangam is a Parayar woman and all the incidents in the novel take place around her. The novel begins as Thangam is mercilessly beaten up by her landlord's wife and brothers. After her husband's death she was denied the right to inherit her husband's property by her brothers-in-law. Instead of protecting her they tried to exploit her sexually. This forced her to seek work in the farm of Paramjothi Udayar. But one day she was raped by her master. She says;

“I remained silent, after all, he is my paymaster. He measures my rice.” (Sivakami, 2006,P.7)

Thangam is only a representation of the Dalit women who were brutally raped by upper caste land lords. They had to keep silence and they never tried to raise their voice against them because they financially depend upon men. These women are considered a mere toy in the hands of the upper caste men. In this novel the land lord makes it a habit to keep on exploiting her. But finally only she is blamed for having committed adultery not the land lord. He is saved by the people in the village. Even her brothers in law blamed to have “seduced” the land lord. Paramjothi Udayar thinks;

“Even if she was hurt, she was hurt by the hand adorned with gold! A Parachi could have never dreamt of being touched by a man like me” (Sivakami, 2006, P31).

He feels that his touch is a boon granted for penance performed her earlier births. For him, having committed adultery with a low caste woman is not a problem but the exposure of an affair with a Paraya woman is humiliating; only the caste concerns made him anxious.

In this novel Thangam is exploited both by an upper caste man and by men of her own community. This exposes the patriarchy within Dalit community. Thangam reaches Kathamuthu, a respected Dalit leader, seeking his help. He is a leader who fights for the liberation of Dalit community but his behavior is like an upper caste man. He shows his dominance everywhere. Thangam's story of sexual exploitation is not over with Paramjothy Udayar. She got justice only after sexually exploited by Kathamuthu also. He changed the entire story of Thangam to make it benefit for his political career. He simply made the story as Thangam was beaten by the upper caste when she walked along their street. After the police enquiry the upper caste people planned to hire workers from the neighbouring village. Later, some huts were burned

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down and the Dalits believed it was done by the upper caste people. Before a communal riot the police arrived and people from both sides were called for reconciliation. As a result, the upper caste accepted the demands put forward by Kathumuthu. They were advised to give ten thousand rupees for Thangam as compensation. They also agreed to increase their daily wages.

Later, Kathumuthu goes on to deceive Thangam for giving her shelter and assistance to get the compensation. He even physically abuses her and she is accepted as his third wife. So it is clear from this novel that Dalit women-poor, landless and wage labourers- have to suffer discrimination on the basis of caste, gender and class. This novel also projects that Dalit leaders exclude the interest of women while fighting against the upper caste's domination. Society does not recognize and respect the self identity of a woman. Meena Kandasami states;

“In *The Grip of Change* most of the incidents occur in the body of Thangam. Her body becomes the sight for all kinds of contestations, symbolically making the body of a Dalit woman, a territory on which any one can tread as against that of an upper caste woman whose body is inviolable”.

In the Author's Notes Sivakami says that it wasn't simply the upper caste's exploit the lower caste. A lower caste leader might exploit his own people. It is not only the upper caste men who prey up on lower caste women. The overall picture presented by the novel is that rich or poor, upper caste or lower caste, the seeds of corruption exists at all levels. The author of this novel has criticized the leadership of the Dalits. She presents Kathumuthu as a tyrannically dominating person. The novelist only wanted to portray the deep roots of caste oppression in villages and how violence erupted even within a caste group. She wished for a change in the leadership of the scheduled caste. Her wish was for a revolutionary leadership. That is why Sivakami presents Chandran who is accepted by the Dalits in this novel. They join together in a powerful movement. So we can say the novel presents a logical solution. According to Meena Kandasami it is a unanimous expression of the youth of this oppressed community-eager and waiting for change. The author's vision is a changed society and she believes that it is in the hands of the youth. Only organized, educated Dalit youth who will stand united with commitment and sincerity of action can uplift the Dalits. As the title of the novel indicates a new change is inevitable when the old things are cleaned up and thrown away.

John E. Mary states;

“In present-day-society a Dalit woman is also considered to be an equal to her man. Today, Dalit women, who constitute the major working force, are thrice alienated and oppressed on the basis of their class and gender.”

The novelist also stated that the women and their role in the society are changing and so the patriarchy and their role must be changing. So she presents the character Gowri as an epitome to such change. Through Gowri she sees the possibility of the emergence of a new movement for all the downtrodden people. Gowri realizes the exploitation of women in a patriarchal set up. She is educated and she studied well only to avoid marriage. She detests her father's two qualities-his polygamy and coarseness. She often challenges the order of the society. By refusing marriage she violates patriarchal code concerning women's role within the family. Through this character Sivakami urges women to come out of both caste and gender injustice. It will be possible only through education, work, ideological conscious, participation in collective, organized socially committed movements.

Conclusion

Thus, this paper projects the power dynamics and female subjugation in Dalit community. The portrayals of the dynamics of caste and sexuality deserve our applause. The novelist takes the roles of the critic and the author. In this novel she presents caste in all its dimensions. The oppression of women had been interwoven with the problems of caste. The lower caste should shatter their particular identities and then they can identify themselves as one class. If the struggle is centred on the Dalits, class and caste equality will be attained. As a Dalit woman writer P. Sivakami depicted the reality encountered by Dalit women who are ignored by the outside world. But Sivakami has undertaken this complex and multi-faceted task very well.

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