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Subalternity of a Voiceless Dalit Woman: A Study of Sivakami's *The Grip of Change*

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Abstract

Writings of minorities and the other marginal voices have found a perfect platform in the literary scenario - be it feministic writing, queer theories, displaced writings of Diaspora or Dalit writings. Despite social, economic, political and developmental endeavours, 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 side-lined the issues of Dalit women. Although Dalit movement started in mid nineteenth century for the uplift 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. She has to face not only the caste

discrimination but the gender inequalities and economic disparities too. A Dalit woman is thrice victimized – by caste-Hindu men, caste-Hindu women and Dalit men, simultaneously. 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).

Keywords

Oppression; Dalit Women; Sivakami; *The Grip of Change*.

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The two terms “Subaltern” and “Dalit” are widely used by critics engaged in socio-political as well as anthropological studies. Apparently the two terms sound synonymous as both refers to a group of people who are marginalized in society. But there is a subtle difference in the nuance of the two terms caused by the nature of marginalization. Over the past two decades, the concepts of ‘subalternity’ and ‘marginality’ have received much critical attention from the scholars in various disciplines. The term ‘subaltern’ is derived from a Latin word ‘subalterns’; as a noun, means an officer below the rank of captain, specially a second lieutenant, at its adjectival level it means of an inferior rank, the later meaning is applicable as for as literature is concerned. Obviously, the term covers the subjects, the masses, the deprived and neglect section of society, same as marginality refers to something that pertains to the edge, border or boundary. Now a day, ‘marginality’ emerges as a literary concept and behavioural model, shaped by societal norms and traditional canons.

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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 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 synonymous only to those who have been socially oppressed, excluded from the mainstream of the society and have been living with the stigma of untouchability since centuries. Dalits are socially oppressed, culturally neglected and economically exploited. 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 woman. Thus insurgence of Dalit feminism is the need of the hour and fortunately there are women writers like Bama Faustina, Urmila Pawar, Baby Kamble 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 *Kurukkuvettu* 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. 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 novel is Thangam, a poor Dalit 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 caste and against the traditions their men follow. The patriarchy crushes down the originality, warmth, delicacy, tenderness and even beauty in them. (3)

Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak categorized women, non-whites, non-European and oppressed castes and frames them in the subaltern description in her 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' She brings forward series of questions regarding representation, resistance, cultural subjugation of the perspectives of marginalized, exploited, and oppressed which it is quite relevant to Dalit woman's subalternity too. They cannot 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 over her husband's ancestral land is denied as her infertile 'body' could not produce a heir. She can get her share of the 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 an 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). The brutality of class and caste hierarchy made her 'subaltern' who cannot even speak! Thus poverty makes a poor Dalit widow to bear the sexual exploitation silently.

Caste is the most demoralizing aspect of the Indian society. Caste disparities lead to violence against lower caste women, who is expected to yield to upper caste male chauvinism. The cruelty of caste discrimination is exposed when a Dalit woman moves from passivity to active assertion against the sexual exploitation of masculine brutality but she 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 caste-Hindus, who at one hand hate the lower caste considering them untouchables, and at the other hand gratify their carnal hunger by sexually exploiting them. But Thangam's saga of sexual exploitation is not complete yet. She faces 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 cannot 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 Dalits) whereas the upper castes live in gramam. The discrimination does not stop with the segregation of places; its roots are extended to human relationships as well. 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 with her husband's second wife Nagamani. Later they both bear with Thangam in their home. Ironically there develops a bond between these three victimized Dalit women. "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). Sivakami has criticized the caste hierarchical order existing among Dalits by giving an elaborate description 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 Dalit women for which she has been weighed down over the manifold layers of exploitation due to the

caste hierarchy. Meena Kandasamy, a contemporary 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)

The novel *The Grip of Change* does not only voices the plight of an exploited Dalit woman, it records the waves 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. 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 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)! 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. Thus 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.

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