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Dalit Patriarchy in Sivakami's *The Grip of Change*

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Abstract

Sangam literature is basically the ancient literature prevalent in southern part of India particularly in Tamil region during 300 BCE to 300 CE. The corpus includes *Tholkappiam*, *Pattupatu*, *Pathinenkilkanaku*, *Pathinenmelkanaku* and the two epics *Silapathikaram* and *Manimegalai*. It refers to the political history of Chera, Chola and Pandya dynasty. It gives detailed information about the social and economic conditions of the period. *Tholkappiam* mentions the fivefold divisions of land with the associated occupations and the chief deity. So the life of the people depends on the land of the society. Historically all these works shed light on ancient southern Indian history predominantly their socio economic life. But voices of the Dalits were not recognized. Colonization brought many changes in the minds of front yard people and back yard people. The mainstream literature became a protest literature. They were triggered against colonialism. Customs such as child marriage, dowry and widowhood rites have their origins in the precolonial era.

The origins of structures of inequality in male dominant social systems led to discrimination against Dalits and women. Dalit literature started off as Protest literature.

Keywords

Dalit Literature; Dalit Feminism; Dalit Patriarchy; *The Grip of Change*.

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During the 19th century, the social reformers like C.Iyodhee Thass Pandithar, Rettai Malai Srinivasan, B. R, Ambedkar, Jyotiba Phule , Periyar EVR paved the way for Dalits to revolt against the mainstream literature. The voice of Dalits slowly emerged and the British rule helped the Dalits to seek social recognition. The problem of Dalits became focus of law and politics.

Indian Constitution has provided many securities and protections to the Dalits. It was done with a view to ensure social progress. But these people were conditioned to live under the dominant of so called upper class/caste people. Dalit literature first articulated in Marathi in the 1960s and 70s, and then in other languages like Hindi, Tamil, Telugu and Kannada. It founded the way to express their suppressed voice. After the centenary celebrations of Dr. Ambedkar, Dalit literature witnessed several genres – novels, short stories, poetry and performing arts. Even genres like fiction, poetry and drama became largely autobiographical in the hands of Dalit writers. The contribution of Dalits to literature is of immense value since it helps to bring about the social uplift of Dalits. It educates people on bringing about social equality and claiming their rights. Social transformation will occur only when the issues are addressed by the oppressed themselves. As Dr. M. N. Wankhede says, “The pens of the Dalit writers are ready as lever, to lift the people’s democracy out of the mud of anarchy” (12).

Sivakami is an acclaimed Dalit writer in Tamil Nadu. An I.A.S turned novelist chose a deliberate exit from significant post mainly to fight atrocities against Dalits. Her contribution to Dalit Literature created a space to express Dalits’ oppressed emotion. In an interview to *Outlook* she says “Mainstream literature has boycotted me because I believe that only Dalits can write about issues concerning them and that only women can write on feminist issues. It is not just a question of experience but also perspective”.

The Grip of Change is originally written in Tamil. The original Tamil version of *The Grip of Change* was *Pazhayana Kazhithalum*, published in 1989. It was her first novel. This novel deals with the problems of Dalits especially Dalit women. The writer served as collector in Thoothukudi district of Tamilnadu. The setting of the novel is also the surroundings of Puliur and Athur in Thoothukudi district. The realistic portrayal of Dalits sparks the sufferings of down trodden-people. The novel brought out the theme of

untouchability and victimization by the land owners and the officials. And the integrity among the dalits is also evidenced by the writer.

The protagonist of the novel is Thangam. She is a victim of patriarchy. India is a patriarchal society. The age old practices of the society relegates women. Both women and men are responsible for upholding the patriarchal system in India. The canonical literature exposes in favour of patriarchy. They value women only for their beauty and pleasure. Though they deserve dignity and respect, society sees them through male perspective. India believes to have a very traditional society. But tradition is a euphemism for entrenched patriarchy. Dalit women are often trapped in highly patriarchal societies. Patriarchy within Dalit communities is one issue which repeatedly appears in the novel. Dalit women are doubly marginalized. Firstly, as a Dalit and secondly as a woman. Dalit patriarchy has made Dalit women doubly oppressed among the oppressed Dalits in India. As Vaishali Shivkumar suggests:

‘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)

Dalit women have become easy targets because they are unable to protest. Dalit women face more problems than the upper caste women when it comes to violence and discrimination. The novel opens with the female protagonist Thangam. She experiences imbalanced social, economic and political power equations. They are vulnerably positioned at the bottom of caste, class and gender hierarchies. Thangam is exploited by Paranjothi Udayar an upper caste man. The upper-caste perpetrators of these crimes are protected at all levels of the system. 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). Caste-based sexual violences are silenced in society. Dalit women suffer from severe limitations in access to justice and there is widespread impunity if the perpetrator is a member of a dominant caste. Dalit women are therefore considered easy targets for sexual violence and other crimes. Thangam is deprived of her husband's share of property by her brothers-in-law, who expect her to yield to their sexual demands. 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). And she is exploited by her own community too. The Dalit panchayat leader Kathamuthu once helped Thangam then exploited her and swindled her money despite her resistance. Thangam assumes the status of Kathamuthu's third wife. She is brutally beaten by Paramjothi's wife and her brothers too. Being a widow and Dalit, Thangam is exploited at all levels.

The situation of women has certainly changed but not to the extent it should have been. Dalit women are treated by a cruel form of discrimination among women. The novelist gives a glimpse of hope in delineating the character of Gowri. The only way these Dalit women can escape the vicious cycle of poverty, abuse and oppression is through education. Through education more Dalit women can come to know their basic human rights and they can raise stronger voice against the abuses and exploitation of the upper castes. They can challenge the patriarchal mind set through education. Education brings economic progress in the patriarchal society. The young Dalit girls are often married at a very early age and thus unable to continue their education. But Kathamuthu, a Dalit patriarch allows his rebel daughter Gowri to study and this creates an awareness within her that she is able to realize the exploitation meted out to women in the 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). And she boldly breaks the barriers to continue her education. The heinousness of Dalit women is also addressed through Gowri. The novelist describes, "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 of her father, her caste and her village and merged with the ocean of people" (95). The change in the caste status is envisioned through Gowri's empowerment through education, financial independence and rebelliousness. Perhaps Gowri is the mouthpiece of the novelist.

The characters are presented as they are. They symbolize all Dalit women. The story depicts the human struggle against every form of mindless tyranny and manipulative suppression. The narration is realistic because the novelist has presented the incidents that happened around her. The storytelling indicates that the narration of the novelist is resistance narrative. The realistic portrayal rings out the old and rings in the new. Meena Kandaswamy points out that

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 willing for change (193)

The novelist creates an impact in formulating a tale of Dalit society. Being the first Tamil novel by a Dalit woman, Sivakami successfully voiced against the patriarchy of the Indian society. The words of Ambedkar, 'Educate, Agitate and Organise' have got the proverbial status in the uplift of the Dalits by the Dalits.

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