

Suppression and Sufferings of Dalits: A Study of P. Sivakami's *The Grip of Change*

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Abstract

The unique and inhumane treatment of the Dalits as untouchables is mirrored in many of the literary works created by the Dalit writers. The Dalit writers have the vision of removing untouchability and establishing equality. They take up the mantle as they feel that no one else will take it up with such authenticity. P. Sivakami is one of the earliest Tamil Dalit writers who draws attention to the dual oppression of Dalit women on account of gender and caste at the hands of upper caste men and Dalit men. The article titled "Suppression and Sufferings of Dalits: A Study of P. Sivakami's *The Grip of Change*" portrays the plight and sufferings of the Dalits.

KEYWORDS: oppression, plight, sufferings, downtrodden

Dalit Literature is a purposive revolutionary transformation and protest literature. It is marked by revolt and negativism, since it is closely associated with the hopes for freedom by a group of people who, as untouchables, are victims of social, economic and cultural inequality. The unique and inhumane treatment of the Dalits as untouchables is mirrored in many of the literary works created by the Dalit writers. The Dalit writers have the vision of removing untouchability and establishing equality. They take up the mantle as they feel that no one else will take it up with such authenticity.

P. Sivakami is one of the earliest Tamil Dalit writers who draws attention to the dual oppression of Dalit women on account of gender and caste at the hands of upper caste men and Dalit men. She was initially an I.A.S. officer. She gave up her job to become a full time writer. She is self-translator too. The novel *The Grip of Change* written by Sivakami was first published in Tamil as *Pazhaiyana Kazhithalum* in 1989 and later translated to English by the author herself. Sivakami's novels portray the rustic story of women who suffer at the hands of men who strongly believe in and stand for patriarchy. The conflicts and struggles are between tenacious women and tyrannical men in the contemporary society. The article titled "Suppression and Sufferings of Dalits: A Study of P. Sivakami's *The Grip of Change*" portrays the plight and sufferings of the Dalits.

The sufferings of Dalits are a never ending chain for several decades. Power and economical background is the main source for hierarchical structures of caste. People who have power and position are placed at the centre of the society and they become dominant groups while the poor and the powerless are pushed to the marginalized. The Dalits are deprived of all basic needs- food, clothes and shelter. They are not allowed to reside in an area where the higher caste people live. They were marginalized as untouchables, discriminated and denied their basic human rights. In *The Grip of Change*, Kathamuthu, Thangam, Gowri and many other characters experience the caste bias.

Kathamuthu and Naicker in *The Grip of Change* enjoyed the company of each other, still Naicker was quite conscious of his caste. His indirect exhibition of his caste consciousness irritates Kathamuthu. Once, someone brought to the notice of Kathamuthu, the comments of Naicker, "Poor fellow, he belongs to a lower caste. Can't you tell from his gross speech?"

(18) Grieved at this comment of Naicker, Kathamuthu waits for the right moment to wreak his vengeance on Naicker. Precisely at that moment, one of his relatives who buy a silver arignan for his newborn baby from Naicker's jewellery shop complains to Kathamuthu about his behaviour. Kathamuthu understands from the relative that, "Naicker kept him standing and carefully dropped the silver piece on his palm from a distance in order to avoid touching him... The following day, Kathamuthu showed up at Naicker's store... 'Why don't you sit? What's wrong?' Naicker put his hand on Kathamuthu's shoulder. 'Why are you touching me Naicker? Isn't it a sin if you touch me?' asked Kathamuthu provocatively. (19)

The Dalit labourers are not treated as human beings by the upper caste people. They are forced to obey their upper caste landlord. The oppression has happened not only to the girl child but also to the boy child. A Dalit boy works under Naicker master. When the boy breaks a couple of Kambu stalk to fill his stomach, his master tied him to a pole and violently beat him, and he gets his meal only after six in the evening. His Naicker master thrashed him. But his father sends him again to the Naicker for work. For Dalit people, there is no other way. They have to accept whatever the uppercaste people do. The poverty of the Dalit people is one of the main reasons for their oppressed state.

Dalit women in India are alienated on the basis of their caste. Rape and molestation are unleashed as weapons against the Dalit women to crush their identity. They are doubly marginalized both as a woman and as a Dalit. In *The Grip of Change*, Sivakami allocates enough space for women-related issues, especially, the issues of sexual abuse. The Dalit women are either browbeaten by the upper caste or by Kathamuthu, a Paraiyan himself. Till Thangam's introduction into Kathamuthu's life, Kathamuthu follows only bigamy. He is married first to Kanagavalli and then Nagamani, a widow. According to the sociological study, the bickering within his family is inevitable too.

After the death of her husband, Thangam was forced to become a prostitute by her brothers-in-law. Even her right over her husband's ancestral land is denied as she is a childless widow. She can get her share of the property only if she can satisfy her lust. Devoid of money, the destitute and dispossessed Thangam moves outside her home to earn her livelihood by working as a labourer in the fields of an upper class landlord Paranjothi Udayar who rapes her. 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) 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. 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)

Thangam, a victim of rape, sexual abuse and physical assault seeks Kathamuthu's aid. Kathamuthu champions the cause of Thangam only for his own welfare. The amount that he gets as compensation from Udayar for allegedly raping Thangam, he spends on himself and his family. Initially, he borrows a part of it from Thangam and then uses the whole lot. In lieu of it, he provides her with food, clothes and shelter. Thus Thangam is often assaulted physically, verbally and sexually not only by the upper caste patriarch but also by her own community men. Sivakami, thus portrays the painful real life of women suffering at the hands of men. The women suffer double marginalization because they suffer as they belong to the lower class and the suffering is augmented because of the patriarchal system

Dalit children are made socially disabled in the educational institutions. In *The Grip of Change*, Sivakami documents how Gowri, the daughter of Kathamuthu too was disturbed by an event in which she gets wounded on the remarks of a student belonging to a backward caste. Gowri asked the student who was returning after getting her scholarship money: 'How much did you get?' 'For you, it is different', the girl replied. 'Aren't you from a Scheduled Caste?' Gowri enquired doubtfully. 'Nonsense! I am a Vanniyakula Kshatriya'. 'If you are not from a Scheduled caste, Just say no ! Why do you have to prefix 'nonsense'? (95)

The social and economic conditions propel the Dalits to forgo education most of the time. But, gifted Dalits like Gowri in *The Grip of Change* avidly pursues education and proves their mettle, only to rise higher and higher from the ashes of discomfiture. Gowri is differently distinct from the other Dalit woman of her age. After completing her schooling, Gowri pursued higher education at college. There she faced casteism in its crude form. She was abused by her classmates' casteist remarks. She disliked any mention of her caste. She even felt ashamed of getting "scholarship application form for scheduled caste students from the administrative office of the college" (95). Though humiliated at times, she did not give up her education. Through Gowri, the ideal of education in the recovery of Dalits' condition is also established.

The 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. This is only by the awareness provided by education that Gowri was able to realize the exploitation of women in a patriarchal set up. She hated the mention of caste and married life. Her dislike for married life attributed to Kathamuthu's (her father) polygamy and gender injustice. Gowri is firm in her conviction that she will not marry and as a ship she is hopeful that the world is gripping change towards an ideal world of equality for all. Gowri finds that society is subverting towards equality when and only everyone is educated.

The Dalits have to renew themselves to become emancipated. Trust is the only ship that can land them ashore. Only by changing themselves, they can be an instrument of change. It is time that they ceased to survive as Dalits and started living as human beings growing within them the rose of hope. P.Sivakami through her novel, *The Grip of Change* has attempted to champion the cause of her brethren through her creative expressions. She exposes various kinds of oppression on Dalits by the upper caste people. Men, women and children irrespective of their age were subjected to shame. They were

externally made to live at the mercy of the upper caste. Sivakami describes how untouchability has been rampant in their village. She gives a clarion call for the upliftment of the Dalits. The novel serves as an ice breaker and voices out the pain and suffering of Dalits.

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