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POST-COLONIAL SUBALTERNITY IN SIVAGAMI'S THE GRIP OF CHANGE

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Abstract

Research and studies have recently been initiated on the under-privileged people, namely, the Dalits in India. Though it is an encouraging fact, yet more systematic and classified studies are required because the Dalits are located over a wide range of areas, languages, cultures, and religions, whereas the problems and solutions vary. This paper aims at foregrounding the plight of a Dalit at three contexts- gender, caste and class with reference to P.Sivakami's novel The Grip of Change. Writings of minorities and the other marginal voices have found a perfect platform at literary scenario - be it feminist writing, queer theories, displaced writings of Diaspora, writings about tribal or Dalit writings. But despite social, economical, political and developmental endeavors, Dalits still are at surface in the mainstream society. And this already marginalized movement has further sidelined the issues of Dalit women. The life of a Dalit becomes all the more pathetic when a Dalit is a woman and poor too. Thus, this paper is an attempt to sound out and enunciate the silenced and subjugated Dalit in an oppressive society along with its consequential voices of protests.

Keywords: *Cheri, Dalit, Diaspora, Exploitation of Women, Gramam, Male Chauvinism, Oppression, Parachi, Subaltern, Udayar, and Untouchable.*

The two terms "Subaltern" and "Dalit" are broadly used by critics involved in socio-political as well as anthropological studies. Ostensibly the two terms sound synonymous as both refers to a group of people who are marginalized in society. But there is some insidious 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. Research and studies have recently been initiated on the under-privileged people, namely, the **Dalits** in India. Though it is an encouraging fact, yet more systematic and classified studies are required because the **Dalits** are located over a wide range of areas, languages, cultures, and religions, whereas the problems and solutions vary. Writings of minorities and the other marginal voices have found a perfect platform at literary scenario - be it feminist writing, queer theories, displaced writings of Diaspora, writings about tribal or Dalit writings. But despite social, economical, political and developmental endeavors, Dalits still are at surface in the mainstream of society.

Blooming up of queer theories in the contemporary scenario has already kept aside the feminist writings in the academic area of gender studies. And this already marginalized movement has further sidelined the issues of Dalit women. However, Dalit movement started in the middle of the nineteenth century for the welfare of these marginalized communities, yet issues of Dalit women are still neglected by the mainstream feminist literary movement as well as by the patriarchal Dalit movement. The life of a Dalit becomes all the more pathetic when a Dalit is a woman and poor too. As a Dalit woman, she not only has to face the caste discrimination, but also the gender inequalities and economic disparities too. A Dalit woman is thrice victimized in terms of gender, caste, and class.

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 dilemma of oppressed, downtrodden, neglected 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 as synonymous only to those socially oppressed people who being omitted from the mainstream of the society have been living under the brand of untouchable for centuries. Dalits are socially oppressed, culturally neglected and economically exploited. Even after many years of the Dalit movement, still Dalits are being disregarded by diverse social opportunities. The situation becomes all the more poignant when a Dalit is a poor woman. Hence, insurgence of Dalit feminism is the need of the time and fortunately there are some Indian women writers like Bama Faustina, Urmila Panwar, Babykamble, Meena Kandasamy and Palanimuthu Sivakami who have become a milestone in the domain of Dalit feminism by projecting Dalit women in their writings.

P. 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 became familiar in 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 the glare of publicity and it attracted much larger audience and was applauded wildly when translated into English by Sivakami herself under the title *The Grip of Change* in 2006. Sivakami has also bagged the Presidential Award in 1995 for her short film *Oodaha (Through)* which was selected by the National Panorama.

Sivakami articulates the voice of the voiceless Dalit women in her novel *The Grip of Change*. By projecting a woman as a protagonist instead of 'Man' in her very first novel, she has opposed the mainstream sexist ideology. The protagonist of the play is Thangam, a poor parachi widow who suffers not only for being a Dalit but also for being a woman. Ironically, she is victimized even by her own Dalit community also. She faces triple victimization

in terms of economic oppression, gender subordination and caste discrimination. Clutched in the jaws of patriarchy, she is being abused, raped and beaten up 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 outset and against the traditions their men follow. The patriarchy crushes down the originality, warmth, delicacy, tenderness and even beauty in them. (3)

Undoubtedly the rhetorical question of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak 'Can the subaltern speak?' has its background in post-colonial subalternity, but it is quite relevant to Dalit woman's subalternity too. They can't speak out, or voice out against the oppression obtruded upon them. Sivagami's character 'Thangam' is treated as a 'body' in this novel. Time and again, she is ravished physically, verbally and sexually not only by upper caste patriarchy, 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 for share of land is rejected on the basis of her infertile 'body' which could not produce children. She can get a share of property only if her 'body' can satisfy their lust. As she tells to Kathamuthu, the leader of her community, "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. Lacking of money, the destitute and dispossessed Thangam goes 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 (a dominant community in Tamil Nadu) 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)

What can be the justification for this heinous crime which not only shattered a woman physically but psychologically as well? This brutality of class hierarchy made her 'subaltern' who can't even speak!. Thus poverty makes a poor widow to bear the sexual exploitation silently. Caste is the most demoralizing aspect in a woman's identity is already located at the periphery of a male dominated society. In a male dominated society, Dalit women suffered unimaginable oppression, not only through caste, but gender too, from which there was no escape. Caste disparities lead to violence against lower caste woman, who is expected to yield to upper caste male chauvinism. The cruelty of caste discrimination is exposed when she moves from passivity to the active assertion of her against the exploiting masculine brutality and has to suffer social indignation. When the liaison between Udayar and Thangam is disclosed, Udayar's brothers-in-law attacked her and beat her like a dog 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 the Hindu caste system who at one hand hate the lower caste considering them untouchables and at the other hand gratify their corporeal hunger through Dalit bodies. But Thangam's saga of exploitation continues throughout her novel. Still, she has to face 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 her village, but this helps proves transitory. Not only her money is grabbed but her 'body' is also violated. The rich and influential Dalit Panchayat leader Kathamuthu who earlier gave shelter to Thangam, turns into a cruel rapist and repeatedly her 'body' is abused. In the afternoon, while she was sleeping in the kitchen, he rapes her and she is so tormented that she can't 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 outcast 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 outcast in her community"(111). Dalits are *Other* in Hindu caste structure and in the novel their *Otherness* is ostensibly set off the Dalit communities in *Cheri*, (separate outcast area for all minorities) whereas, the upper castes live in *Gramam*. The discrimination doesn't stop in separate places; its roots extend to the relationships too.

Truly, confirming its title, the novel *The Grip of Change* not only voices the plight of an exploited Dalit woman, it also records the waves of 'change' also in the Dalit consciousness; thus, providing a kind of cure for the ailments of the society. Through the character of Gowri, the ideal of education in recovery of Dalit's condition is also established. This 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. 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 saying, "The sufferings that my mother underwent in her marriage! I don't want to be tortured like her by some man"(124). She defies the decision of her father about her marriage by working hard for her examination, and after getting success, she chooses to study further in the city college. When she crosses the threshold of chauvinistic home, resisting her father's intimidation, she thinks that she has conked out the tyrannical chains.

The text beautifully conveys, "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-her

father, her caste and her village – and merged with the ocean of people” (95). 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). She is also critical of her father’s polygamist marital state and always stimulates her mother Kangawali and her step-mother Nagamani for liberation. In fact, Gowri is the mouthpiece of Sivakami through whom she has voiced the voiceless Dalit women who are bearing the inhuman treatment silently. The vocalization and resistance chiefly rests upon firebrand spirited Gowri.

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. K. Sachidanandan observes, “Dalit literature empowers the marginalized by retrieving the voices, spaces and identities silenced or suppressed by castiest powers” (14). And truly 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 and Gowri’s protests which suggest that silence and suppression is optimistically replaced by a stimulated and resisting expression. Thus, from the beginning to the end this novel serves as an icebreaker and draws attention to violent realities, sexual assaults, psychological torments, and economical exploitation along with a message that a democratic approach is

essential to eradicate such discriminatory ideologies from social fabric.

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