

P.Sivakami's *The Grip of Change* (1989): A Widow's Plight in Patriarchy and Caste Structures

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ABSTRACT

The present paper intends to offer a critique of P.Sivakami's polemical masterpiece *The Grip of Change* (1989) with an emphasis on the plight of gendered subalterns. Revolving around a widow's plight in patriarchy and caste structures, this poignant narrative explores the key role of caste structures and patriarchal ideology in the construction and perpetuation of gender roles. The novel's protagonist, Thangam is a lower caste *pariyar* widow representing the exploited and deprived Dalit masses, especially women facing the multiple oppression and jeopardy of her caste, class and gender. Most of her activist concerns/themes such as male dominance, exploitation, caste discrimination, gender violence, sexual harassment, the inhuman treatment by the upper castes and the people of her own community find its fullest expression in this fictional classic.

Keywords: Patriarchy, gendered subalterns, caste hierarchy and socio-sexual abuses.

Palanimuthu Sivakami (b.1957) is one of the foremost activist-writers in India voicing the excruciating suffering and predicament of the Dalits, especially women under patriarchy and caste hierarchy. She is the first Tamil Dalit woman novelist battling against the prevalent oppressive socio-cultural practices in Tamil society with missionary zeal. After taking voluntary retirement from her job as secretary-ranked bureaucrat in the Indian administrative service, she started her career as a politician cum writer with social conscience and dealt with the contemporary socio-cultural issues in her works. She appeared on the Indian literary horizon with her short story collection *Ippadikku Ungal Etartamulla* (Realistically Yours,1987). Her

maiden novel *Pazhainya Kazhithalum* (1989) translated into English under the title *The Grip of Change* (2006) by the novelist herself portrays a picture of caste hierarchy leading to social inequality and injustice. It was followed by numerous short stories, poems and popular novels like *Anandhayee (The Taming of Women, 2011)* and '*Kurukku Vettu*'(Cross Section).

Her novels and stories highlight the plight of Dalit women through the depiction themes such as male dominance, exploitation, caste discrimination, gender violence, sexual harassment, the inhuman treatment by the upper castes and the people of her own community. Originally written in Tamil language under the title *Pazhainya Kazhithalum*, this classic narrative gives a poignant expression to the marginalization and oppression arising from the prevalent caste hierarchy in Tamil society. It presents the miserable lives of the Dalits in a caste ridden society which stratifies people as 'high' and 'low'.

The novel's protagonist, Thangam, is a lower caste *pariyar* widow representing the exploited and deprived Dalit masses, especially women facing the triple jeopardy of her caste, class and gender. She is denied the right to live her life with dignity after her husband's untimely death. She is compelled to work like a bonded labourer on the farm owned by Paramjothi Udayar, an upper caste landlord. She has to witness repeated acts of sexual harassment by the upper caste people as well as her own in-laws. She undergoes all sorts ill-treatment and exploitation mutedly in order to make both ends of life meet, but when the relatives of the landlord know about her relationship with Paramjothi they beat up her brutally and forcefully evacuate her. After this physical assault, she goes to Kathamuthu, a village Dalit leader to seek his help and justice, but he also makes immoral relationship with her and keeps her as a concubine. Such a despotic use of power by the Dalit leaders has been portrayed with great detail with a view to expose the hypocrisy of the so-called the Dalit leaders.

This semi-autobiographical narrative is depicted through the eyes of Kathmuthu's young daughter, Gowri, the novelist's alter ego. Thangam's existential struggle and predicament is thus seen through the eyes of a rebellious girl critical of her father's patriarchal mentality and polygamous behaviour. The brutal atrocities and abuses of patriarchy scattered throughout this narrative are recounted in a highly realistic manner. Her plight gets worsened after her husband's

death as she is denied the right to inherit her husband's land and property. She becomes a mute spectator of her own condition as a helpless widow charged of adultery. Gowri's father, Kathamuthu gives her shelter only after the gratification of his sexual desires and treats her same as upper caste men. His initial response is highly indicative of his womanizing attitude as he says to her, "Why don't you go after someone of our caste? It's because you choose upper fellow, that four men count come and righteously beat you up. Don't you like our chaps?" (TGC: 7). This comment suggests his biased mind and corrupt attitude. It indicates how women are an object of sexual gratification, a puppet to slake lust not only by the upper caste but by the own male relatives too. When her father rapes Thangam, Gowri slants her father thus: "Dogs! Dogs in this house! shameless as dogs!" (TGC: 93)

The novel underlines the sheer dependency of women in patriarchy as they are unable to deal with the things in social life on her own. After her husband's death, Nagmani disillusioned by her members of family and society, becomes Kathamuthu's second wife in order to get rid of the society. Shivkami underlines the predicament of women in general and a Dalit woman in particular happening not only outside her own community but also within family. When Thangam's sister-in-law (wife of her husband's brother) came to know about the news that Thangam has been beaten up by the upper caste landlord, she didn't bother about her who was her family member. Moreover, she retorted saying: "They beat her up. Good! Why did they live her alive? That whore thinks too much of herself. She thinks that she's very beautiful. That's why she went after that Udyar. When she loses her shape, he'll throw her out, and she'll be in a state worse than a dog's." (TGC: 28)

The novel abounds in several examples and incidents that underlie the caste system in Indian society which became the obstacle for lower caste people and support for the upper caste people. When Kathamuthu, a dalit leader, goes to police station to lodge the complaint against the upper caste landlord who sexually harassed a Dalit widow, the protagonist of the novel also admits the caste power saying that: "...tell me a place where caste doesn't exist. Just because you I don't talk about it, ...it will persist till you and I die." (TGC: 22) It makes very clear that the caste is the unique feature of Indian society where a person's social identity is more important

than his/ her self-identity .The whole social structure formed on the basis of caste is useless for the lower caste which keeps them away from the dignified life and denies the justice. There is no respect for the women in her own community. When she is beaten up by landlord, she seeks for help by her own people but, instead of giving help they tortured her saying: "She deserves this and more! She seduced Udayar...shameless bitch...ignoring all of us she found succour in him!" (TGC: 26)

The complex problems of Tamil Dalit women including loss of self-identify are described through the pitiable condition of Thangam. She is trapped between the caste hierarchy and patriarchy. Kathamuthu considers himself a sole leader of Parayar and handles every situation on behalf of the entire community. Though he is helpful for his people, he lacks integrity and idealism in his personal life. There are many incidents demonstrating the mismatch between his theories and practical behaviour. For example, he keeping of Nagmani as his second wife and Thangam as the third one indicates this. His portrayal as a corrupt person and tricky middleman is portrayed through the incident of accepting money from landlord Udayar as a bribe for the settlement of Thangam's matter. Presented as a representative Dalit woman suppressed by the caste system, Thangam becomes the face of entire womenfolk suffocated under the burden of patriarchy.

She indirectly attacks the dual mentality of upper caste people. She very skillfully explained it when Kathamuthu, Dalit leader, as usual goes to police station, on the way he spends few minutes at the shop of Naicker, who is an upper caste fellow and runs the jewellery shop near the police station. Kathamuthu always borrows money from this jeweiier and repay it whenever it possible. Naicker always enjoys Kathamuthu's spicy language, that he has a skill to convert any dull issue into interesting one using picturesque language. Though they are friendly with each other Kathamuthu is very conscious about his caste. He never bears any abuse about his caste even strongly refute such comments made by anyone. When he learnt that Naicker made abusive comments regarding his lower caste, he takes jibe on the shopkeeper, but shopkeeper makes another comment to escape from previous. He says: "I am not Brahmin

preserving the old order, afraid of the wrath of the Gods. All that I am particular about the cleanliness. That's all.” (TGC: 19)

P. Sivakami makes an earnest plea for the complete dismantling of patriarchal norms and caste structures by demonstrating how the caste dominance and exploitation operates in every walk of Indian life. This harsh reality of discriminatory socio-cultural practices prevalent in Indian society is strengthened through the religious rituals and bombarding of festive occasions that promote the social disparity among the masses. An eminent feminist theorist, Jennifer Mather-Saul illustrates the pivotal role of the prevalent power structures in the marginalization of women: “Families both shape and are shaped by factors that are clearly of political significance, in particular their structures play a key role in impoverishing and disadvantaging women; and their structures are shaped in part by constraints imposed by laws, workplaces and the ways that children are educated” (2003:78).

The novel describes the occasion of Mariamman festival involving the holy chariot and deities. The holy chariot is pulled up by the lower caste people but someone from upper caste pays the respect to the deity. According to the customs and traditions of the village the deity satisfies only after the respect paying from upper caste people. The typical caste mentality of the upper castes is clearly evident from the conversation between upper caste girl, Lalitha and lower caste lad Elangovan, a peon in the bank :“Elango, don’t be offended, but why are your people so violent? I believe they nearly attacked those who came to hire labourers, is that true?’ asked Lalitha, emphasising ‘your people”(TGC: 56) In above conversation the use of ‘your people’ by the upper caste girl makes much difference that shows the divisive mentality. We are supposed to change this ‘your people into ‘our people’. On another occasion the sub-collector, tahsildar and police officer come to investigate the burnt issue lower caste peoples’ huts.

Thangam’s pathetic journey begins when she starts to work on the field of upper caste landlord. This upper caste landlord once attacks her vulnerability and made her his concubine. She doesn’t expose this injustice in order to avoid the defame in society. “My husband’s relatives spread the story that I had become Paranjothi’s concubine. That’s why Paranjothi’s wife’s brothers and her brother-in-law, four men, entered my house last night. They

pulled me by my hair and dragged me out to the street... They called me whore'. She began to wail again." (TGC: 6) It is clearly evident that she is compelled to face this injustice because she belongs to lower caste. Thus, the lower caste people are compelled to face discrimination, mental torture, atrocities, exploitation.

Kathamuthu's daughter, Gowri concentrates on her study in order to escape from getting married by her father in the age of learning. She doesn't want to live her life in a way that her mother lived. She makes a harsh comment when her father insists her for getting married. She says: "The sufferings that my mother underwent in her marriage! I don't want to be tortured like her by some man.' She also added, 'Moreover, I need a father who can respect his son-in-law.'"(TGC: 124) Here, Sivakami seems to juxtapose the changed attitude and zest of new generation willing to transcend the boundaries of caste and creed. Educated girls like Gowri emerge as a symbol of transformation and changes.

The novel presents Kathamuthu as a representative of older generation taking care of her own family rather than community whereas his daughter thinks differently. Somewhat she dislikes her father because of his swindling and polygamy. She faces the caste discrimination in the college when she makes an enquiry about the scholarship with her friend slightly upper in the social ladder. When she asked her "how much did you get?" the girl replied, "For you it is different. Her next question "Aren't you from a scheduled caste?" annoyed her and she gave a rude response thus: "Nonsense! I am a Vanniyakula Kshatriya." (TGC: 95).The novelist presents both Gowri and Chandran as the true leaders of new age. He doesn't want to call the priest in his wedding ceremony. Chandran makes good relationship with all the mill labourers and becomes their beacon light.

Thus, the novel *The Grip of Change* probes deeper into the exploitative machinery not only of caste hierarchy and patriarchy but also of gender discrimination and socio-sexual abuses faced by womankind. One is inclined to agree with the questions raised by the renowned critic C.S.Lakshmi in the appendix of this novel: "Why does sexual power work differently for women

and men of different castes? Why is it that the lower caste woman is raped by the upper caste man, but the lower caste man always sexually satiates the upper caste woman?"(TGC:199). These questions raised by C.S.Lakshmi endorse the authorial stance evident through the realistic portrayal of the caste discrimination between men and women especially the sexual harassment of the Dalit women depicted as something natural and spontaneous. Sivakami's character-sketch of Kathamuthu as a domineering Dalit, a self-proclaimed leader and selfish hypocrite is intended to provide an answer to these socio-economic and political problems raised in this novel.

Precisely speaking, this celebrated narrative is remarkable in its condemnation of caste mentality nursed by the upper castes as well as the patriarchal values and hypocrisy of the Dalit community leaders like Kathamuthu. Her unusually bold exposition of the Dalit movement and patriarchy through feminist eyes adds an enviable artistic beauty and originality to the events described in the novel. In the end, one is tempted to quote from Meena Kandasamy's judicious appraisal of the novel:

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 shackled, and tangled among ourselves. Instead of being the journey of an individual voice and consciousness, it was a unanimous expression of the youth of this community-eager and waiting for change (TGC:193).

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www.the-criterion.com *The Criterion: An International Journal In English* Vol. 7, Iss I Feb.2016