

Volume-1, Issue-VI, Sept- 2017

Research maGma

An International Multidisciplinary Journal

CONFERENCE

of

**Thiruvalluvar University
College of Arts & Science, Arakkonam.**

on

**"EMERGING TRENDS IN ENGLISH
LANGUAGE & LITERATURE"**



Research maGma

An International Multidisciplinary Journal

ISSN NO- 2456-7078 IMPACT FACTOR- 4.520 VOLUME-1, ISSUE-7, SEPT-2017

THE SUBALTERN CAN SPEAK: VOICE OF THE VOICELESS IN SIVAKAMI'S *THE GRIP OF CHANGE*

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to bring out the position of the oppressed in the Indian society and the sufferings of Dalit women that reflected in Sivakami's 'The Grip of Change'. Basically, Indian society is caste based group where the upper castes exploit the lower caste. Human beings are categorized in the name of caste. The novel, The Grip Change, throws light in the inter-caste sexual relations. The issues of Dalit women are still neglected by patriarchal Dalit movement, although Dalit movement started in mid 19th century for the upliftment of the marginalized communities. The plight of a Dalit becomes more pathetic when a Dalit is especially a woman. She has to face not only the caste discrimination but the gender inequalities and economic disparities too. In this novel, a Dalit woman is three marginalized- by caste-Hindu men, caste-Hindu women and Dalit men simultaneously. P.Sivakami realistically portrayed the existing caste discrimination and highlights the sensitive issues of Dalit woman and how she is socially, economically and sexually exploited by the so called "the caste Hindus", particularly in the post independence era.

KEY WORDS:

Oppressed, Patriarchal, Marginalized, discrimination, Exploited.

INTRODUCTION

The word 'Dalit' comes from the Sanskrit word 'dal' which literally means oppressed, downtrodden or broken. It also has its origin in other languages. In Hindi and Sanskrit, the word 'Dalita' which means oppressed. Though there are many variations, it commonly symbolizes the overburdened minorities and abused. Many critics defined this term as 'crushed or grounded and it describes the living conditions of a large group of socially oppressed people in India'. The word 'Dalit' generally refers to all the oppressed and exploited people and it is synonymous only to those who have been forbidden from the mainstream of the society and living with the shame of untouchable since centuries. This shameful condition has led them to dehumanization, poverty, slavery, and exploitation. This position

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becomes more painful when a Dalit is a woman. By projecting Dalit women in their writing, many Dalit feminist writers like P.Sivakami, Bama Fathima, and Urmila Pawar have become a milepost in the realm of Dalit feminism. Palanimuthu Sivakami, a leading Indian novelist-cum-politician, who published a full length semi-autobiographical Tamil novel *Pazhainya Kazhithalum* (1989). This novel is a new alembic composition to Dalit Literature and Dalit Feminist literary tradition in Tamil. She herself translated this novel into English under the title *The Grip of Change* (2006). After the translation of this novel into English, she was widely applauded and acquired much larger audience. She has opposed the mainstream sexist ideology by projecting a woman instead of 'man' in her very first novel, *The Grip of Change*. The protagonist of the novel is Thangam who suffers not only for being a widow but also for being a Dalit woman. After the death of her husband she is left uncared by her family members in Puliur. In order to survive, she worked in Udayar's sugarcane field and one day she was raped by her pay master, Paranchothi Udayar, in the sugarcane field. Because of his political power Thangam remained silence and therefore he made regular advances. She had no choice. Udayar's brother in law saw Thangam and Udayar together and conveyed this to Kamalam whose brothers beat her up cruelly until she bled. Thangam sought help from Kathamuthu who is the leader of parayar community and she explained how she was brutally abused by her pay master. Instead of offering a solution to the assault, Kathamuthu advised her to choose the men of her own caste. Unfortunately she is left alone without any protection. The policemen who came for investigation favored the upper caste and blamed Thangam by declaring that she had an illegal affair with the Udayar. The policemen received bribe from Udayar and told him an idea to file a false complaint against Thangam, that she stolen money and transistor from his house. After knowing this news, Kathamuthu sent one of his men to guard Thangam's house. Udayar was angry and he never thought that thangam would betray him. After this incident the upper caste people planned to hire workers from the neighboring village and they were ready to pay for the labourers rather than to the men/women of lower caste. A communal riot happened among the two groups after the upper class burnt down three huts in the Cheri. The Dalits believed that the upper class people burnt the Cheri because of their refusal to work for them. At last the police entered the village for an agreement. To ease the issues, the upper caste people were advised to accept their requirements and offer compensation for the victims with an increase of fifty paise on their daily wages. Kathamuthu demanded Paranjhothi Udayar a sum of 20,000 rupees as repayment for Thangam. But he disagree it and parted with 10,000 rupees as repayment. Then Thangam was physically abused by Kathamuthu and she is forced to settle down in Kathamuthu's house as his third wife. The second part of the novel is Author's Notes: Gowri, in which Sivakami projected the novel through the eyes of Gowri, daughter of Kathamuthu.

DISCUSSION:

In *The Grip of Change*, Sivagami questions the status given to Dalit women. She connected the theoretical issues with the feminist ideologies. The novel's Protagonist is Thangam, a childless widow who has been tormented at different stages of life. Her name literally means 'gold' but here she is abused, misused and become a victim as the gold. Gowri- the daughter of Kathamuthu and also a narrator of the first part of the novel becomes a protest against the male dominant Kathamuthu, a Dalit leader and unfortunately her father. Through the eyes of the Gowri, the author focuses on the major events and incidents in the lives of the Dalit and presents how the Dalit women lead their lives in the

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discriminated society. In this novel the Dalit women are thrice marginalized as they remain silent victims of even the Dalit men and the upper caste people. After the death of her husband, his brothers are not ready to give the share of his land to Thangam. Although Thangam's struggle for land is linked to her fertility and her body, she does not have children, and so her brother's-in-law refuses to give her a share in the family land.

Thangam had rejected the sympathy of those who had not said a word to her husband's brothers when they refused to hand over her husband's share of land. She had lived alone (The Grip of Change, 27)

Through the character of Thangam, the novelist gives a thorough picture of Dalit women's silence and their victimized state by the Upper Caste Hindus as well as from their own women and men. Misuses of the bodily pleasures and body become central motif of the novel. Most of the parts in this novel display the incidents that happened in Thangam's life and her body. Her body is used as a symbol to denote the difficulties faced by the Dalit Women and it provides the opening of the novel. She has become a surplus woman because she is a widow. Even though she refuses to submit them when she is harassed by her brother's-in-law, she is sexually exploited by her Hindu landlord, Udayar. She described the anguish that she has faced:

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 hit me, and flogged me with a stick stout as a hand. They merely killed me. No one in the village, none of my relatives, come to help me. I begged for mercy, but they wouldn't stop. They abused me and threatened to kill me if I stayed in that village any longer. They called me a whore. (The Grip of Change, 6)

Caste is the most depressing aspect in a woman's identity who is already located at the circuit of the male dominated society. Caste disparities lead to violence against a lower caste woman, who is expected to yield to upper caste male chauvinism. The brutality of the Caste discrimination is apparent when she moves from passivity to active assertion of her agony against the exploiting masculine brutality and had to suffer social displeasure. Udayar's brothers-in-law beat her roughly and even threatened to be killed when the love affair between the Udayar and Thangam is disclosed. The cunning of the upper caste is apparent 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... (The Grip of Change, 31)

In 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak classified women, non-European non-whites and oppressed castes and frames them in the subaltern description. She brings forward series of questions regarding cultural subjugation, resistance; representation of the perspectives of exploited, marginalized and oppressed which it is quite relevant to Dalit woman's subalternity too. They cannot articulate against the oppression inflicted upon them. The Dalit woman is never a fighter but always victim. The character Gowri, literally symbolizes that education is the recovery of Dalit's condition. Kathamuthu allows his daughter Gowri to study and thus her education makes her to realize the exploitation of women in the patriarchal setup. Being an educated girl, she protests against her early marriage, "The sufferings that my mother underwent in her marriage! I don't want to be tortured like

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her by some man" (124). After getting success in her examination, she chooses to study further in the city college. She then crossed the threshold of chauvinistic home. The text beautifully conveys, "During floods, waters from overflowing wells mingle with the waters of huge waterbodies, 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 violently shouts, when Kathamuthu rapes Thangam, "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. Through Gowri, Sivakami has voiced the voiceless dalit women who are bearing the inhuman treatment silently. The dalit woman, Thangam, in this novel enjoys no safety and being exploited, cruelly run down and discriminated by the men and by the caste divisions. Through education women can acquire financial independence. Education is the only path that could render them free from 'the grip' of exploitation and give them courage to question and fight all discrimination. Hence in this novel Sivakami offers a world of possibilities with a world of negativities. K. Sachidanandan observes, "Dalit literature empowers the marginalized by retrieving the voices, spaces and identities silenced or suppressed by castiest powers" (14). Thus, from the beginning to the end P. Sivakami formulate the poignant tale of women's struggle to fight against the biased society by portraying two women characters, Thangam and Gowri. Education gives them the chance to narrate the voices of distress.

CONCLUSION:

The novel *The Grip of Change* voices the plight of an exploited Dalit woman. In order to counter-struggle the misinter presentations of Dalit women in Indian English Literature, the first generation of Dalit writers constructed Dalit Women in Dalit literature. The female characters in Dalit Literature are dynamic not static. Dalit writers do not look upon widows, prostitutes, depraved women, as Dalit, the exploited with compassion alone; but they make them towards radiance. In the stories and novels of Annabhau, Shankar Rao Kharat, BabuRao Bagul and others, through the nature of the struggle of woman in the beginning is individual; later it becomes class conflict. As a consequence of this, Dalit female characters end the journey of deep darkness and behold dreams of sunrise... They fight for truth and for themselves. They revolt to protect their self respect. The revolt of Dalit women is not person-centered but society-centered. That is why Dalit writers do not portray Dalit women as hollow identities, overflowing with love as embodiments of sacrifice. The contribution of Dalit women writers to Dalit Literature is significant and Sivakami is one among them who always focuses the plight of Dalit women.

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