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Beyond the “Grip”: Reclaiming the Dalit Female Body in P. Sivakami’s *The Grip of Change*

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Abstract

Autobiographies, written by Dalits, have given a new orientation to the discourses of the marginalized writings and emerged as a distinct genre. Within Dalit literature the form of Autobiography as a literary and cultural expression, challenges the existing literary structures through their articulations of cultural and caste discriminations. But the autobiographies of Dalit men would eclipse the picture of the Dalit women completely, either as suppressed and oppressed or as a portrait of the ideal, sacrificing woman. To protest such a demeaning scenario, Dalit women took the initiative of writing their own stories that convey every breath of toil that a Dalit woman goes through. The present paper attempts to analyze one such narrative of oppression and exploitation- *The Grip of Change* by P. Sivakami. This paper explores critically the autobiographical narrative from a female perspective with the purpose of comparing the narrative strategies of responses to the forces of these oppressions that exist in a gendered society and to show how the silenced and subjugated Dalit woman has articulated her ‘self’ and protested against patriarchal structure pertaining to the issues of caste, class and gender. The major defining part of this novel was entirely played out on a Dalit woman, Thangam’s body. The objectification of Dalit female body by both upper caste and Dalit men is reflected in Sivakami’s writing. She questioned the vulnerability of Dalit women and explores inter-caste sexual relations by exposing the cruel face of Dalit patriarchy in her writing.

Keywords: Dalit feminism, Dalit patriarchy, selfhood, resistance, intersectionality, gender politics.

In recent years autobiographical texts have begun to receive critical attention and the study on the personal narratives by the minorities and down-trodden people, the untouchables from a number of perspectives have become a vital area of research which provides a significant contribution in the literary scenario. The proposed paper aims at exploring critically the autobiographical narrative *The*

Grip of Change by P. Sivakami to foreground the articulation of the silenced voices in an oppressive patriarchal structure. A self-critical technique has been applied to expose the deplorable realities of Dalit patriarchy with special focus on the interlocking nature of a Dalit woman's oppression, endurance and resilience, and her roles to transform the Dalit community. Hence Sivakami's work clearly reflects the Dalit patriarchy along with domestic violence and takes a strong Dalit feminist standpoint. As S. Rege argued, as a non-Dalit feminist, "one cannot speak as or speak for Dalit women, but only make an effort to reinvent one's self as an anti-caste feminist. It is a process which has begun but is far from completion, a process of becoming a comrade in the struggle of Dalit feminism." (Writing Caste/ Writing Gender 2006) This present paper is a step forward in that direction.

Dalit literature which aims at creating counter-narrative to the dominant culture and the society refers to the literary work that is written by Dalit with the Dalit consciousness. Usually Dalit Autobiographies depict the struggle, aspirations and achievements of Dalit, as K. Sachidanandan writes, "Dalit Literature empowers the marginalized by retrieving the voices, spaces and identities silenced or suppressed by casteist powers" (Indian Literature: Positions and Propositions 14). Another critic and writer Arjun Dangle also observes in his introductory remarks to *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature* that "Dalit literature is not simply a literature; it is associated with a movement to bring about change. It represents the hopes and ambitions of a new society and new people" (266). But on the other hand, Dalit women have long occupied marginal positions and been excluded from the important movements in the society. Many critical studies on personal narratives by Dalit women writers explored that Dalit women were silenced and made only the 'guest appearance' (Rao) as in society, in literature too. To fight with such a demeaning scenario and to counter their stereotyped images, Dalit women took the initiative of writing their own stories that convey every breath of toil that a Dalit woman goes through. So, the autobiographical narratives, written by Dalit women, reveal their struggle to establish their identity as a female in their own expression by challenging all the taboos and rejecting the dominant language of patriarchy. Their writings articulate the hurt and humiliation of the marginalized in an oppressive gendered society along with its consequential voices of protests. As Dalit women are placed at the bottom of the social hierarchy, they are thrice marginalized: as Dalit, as poor and as women. These writings are "more inward looking as they tend to interrogate the evil practices of Dalit community" (Dalit Women Talk Differently, 160).

P. Sivakami is one of the pioneers in Dalit women writing who foregrounds the Dalit women's issues, their exploitation and protest in her writings. She is the first Dalit woman to write the first Tamil novel, *Pazhainya Kazhithalum* (1989). It was translated into English by Sivakami herself under the title *The Grip of Change* in 2000. This novel is a critique of Dalit patriarchy, and it examines Dalit women's lives, sufferings by using an innovative form. After a decade the author went through a self-interrogation and the result was the second part of the book, *Asiriyar Kurippu* or *Author's Note*. The present edition of the work from 2006 onwards is divided into two books - *Kathamuthu: The Grip of Change* and *Gowri: Author's Notes*. Sivakami's first focus in the novel is the female protagonist, Thangam, who is a childless widow and tormented at many stages of life. Through Thangam's character, she reflects how the marginalized Dalit women like Thangam received violence on their bodies by both the upper caste men and men from their communities. The next focus is on the character Kathamuthu, a political leader and a man of consequence in the Parayar community, who is influential in local politics. The majority of the description part in the novel focuses on the incident which takes place with Thangam and her body. What is of particular interest in the novel is the elision of sexual violence by caste violence. In the hands of Kathamuthu, the Dalit patriarch, Thangam's battered body is perceived as an instance of caste-violence and not as a rape. The Second part of the novel focuses on the critical self-examination by the challenges with the genre of the fiction. *Author's Note* is about "the change that is happening, the past that has faded away, it is about the present trying to dream its future" (And One Shall Live in Two...2006). The work is also a unanimous expression of the youth of the oppressed community eager to and waiting for change. Hence the second book portrays the critical examination

of the self, the psyche of the author. The author, by challenging the existing structures of meaning deconstructs her own fictional representation of reality. It being an autobiographical narrative, the author provides testimony of caste, gender and class; and defends her stand in 'Author's Notes' in a later edition, which helps one to understand the dynamics of Dalit testimony.

The narrative begins with Thangam's story and ends with Gowri's firm decision to not to get married after not finding any answer to patriarchy. The female protagonist Thangam's battered body frames the opening scene. It is mainly through the character of Thangam, that the author challenges the oppressive patterns and mechanisms of the patriarchal society which perceive the female body as a mere object of male gratification. The majority of the description part in the novel focuses on the incident which takes place with Thangam and her body. Her body becomes the symbol of protest and subversion in the novel. On the other hand, Gowri is the representative voice of Sivakami through whom she has voiced the inhuman sufferings of the voiceless. The novel opens dramatically with Thangam's battered body- to be witnessed by Kathamuthu and his two wives. As Thangam decided to take the matter to Kathamuthu, an inspiring Parayar leader, early morning of that same night, she arrives at Kathamuthu's doorstep and tells him about her plight as a childless widow. She claims that she has been physically abused by her upper caste landlord Udayar Paranjoti, for whom she works as laborer after her husband's death and was also assaulted by his brother and brothers-in-law for her rumored affair with him. The worst nightmare of Thangam's life began thereafter as Paranjothi too had casted his lustful eyes on her body. Paranjothi despite of being an upper caste man, seduced her, and assaulted her. Thangam recounts her experience as: "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." (The Grip of Change 7) Without any resistance she yielded herself to Udayar and her helpless, poor body caught in the claws of the patriarchy by an upper caste. Udayar relentlessly used her body whenever he wished to fulfil his lustful wishes, and ended up in frequent rape of Thangam, who cried for help in silent way. In this context Professor D. Amalraj's observation is noteworthy in his article, "Sex Knows No Caste: A Study of P. Sivakami's The Grip of Change":

"... a higher caste man treats the Dalit man and woman as unequal beings and he always keeps them at a distance. But when he feels attracted sexually towards a woman, he does not see whether she is a higher caste woman or an untouchable. He is more concerned with the assets of her body than with her caste... Since such an immoral act is carried out in secrecy, the woman affected goes silent accepting her fate for want of economical support." (42)

But Thangam's body has to face humiliation when the matter got revealed by the landlord's brother-in-law. She became subjected to further oppressions- both physical and psychical. Her body became a witness to such uncouth brutalities as in the midnight, Paranjothi's wife's brothers and her brother-in-law, four men, entered her house. They severely beat and abuse her by dragging her out of her hut with her hair. At that time, she did not get any support from her brothers-in-law, or any man or woman of her community. Suruchi Sharma acutely observes in her article on *The Grip of Change* as "It is a bitter truth in the society that Dalits are considered untouchable and impious and so is the case of Dalit women. If Dalit women are not worth touching how and why they can be sexually harassed by the upper caste people who enjoy having sex with them." (Dalit Marginalization to Resurrection in Sivakami's The Grip of Change 102) Thangam decided to take the matter to Kathamuthu, an inspiring Parayar leader, early morning of that same night.

Thangam is abused physically, verbally and sexually, not only by the upper caste landlords but also by the patriarchs of her own community. After her husband's death, she became a 'surplus' for her brothers-in-law who snatched her due right of her husband's land. They claimed to return her land with the condition that her body must satiate their lust. As Thangam narrates, "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." (The Grip of Change, 7) Thangam's demand for her share in her

husband's paternal land is refused and she is usurped all of her due rights as she is considered to have an infertile body. A woman's identity is determined by her womb here in this patriarchal society. Beauvoir puts it in her words as: "She is a womb, an ovary.... this word is enough to define her." (The Second Sex 41) Here Sivakami shows how the marginalized Dalit woman becomes the victim of the patriarchal system. But she did not comply with it, instead became subversive through her attitude and her narrative reconstruction- both in the form of narrating her tortured experience to Kathamuthu (where it finds a violent outburst), and also in the form of Sivakami's narrative reconstruction of it.

Throughout the novel, Sivakami questioned the vulnerability of Dalit women. She allows her character to awake at right time and take step against the violence. Her casual existence, marked by mute submission and resistance at varying points of time is noteworthy. Finally, Thangam takes a right step by filing a police complaint against Paranjothi Udayar. When Udayar finds that Thangam, a lower caste widow has dared to file a case against her upper caste landlord, he curses Thangam as "Ungrateful whore!" (31) But on the other hand, Kathamuthu suppresses and distorts Thangam's sexual exploitation in the petition and restates it as a caste violence issue. Kathamuthu's changing of Thangam's story can be interpreted as a patriarchal dismissal of a woman's exploitation. As Arunima Ray writes, "The focus now shifts from Thangam to the clash between the two castes. The irony of the whole situation is that the series of incidents that get unleashed starts due to the fact Thangam's body gets violated. But the way Kathamuthu deals with the case, the main issue gets totally sidelined." (Gender in Dalit Discourse 205)

Thangam's body is still vulnerable to the hands of the rich patriarch of her own community. Mangalam in her article "Caste and Gender Interface in Tamil Dalit Discourse" points out that, "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 outcaste in her community." (111) When helpless Thangam takes refuge hoping for justice, her body is violated again by Kathamuthu who earlier gave her shelter. With the help of Kathamuthu, Thangam can settle the case against Udayar, but her suffering does not end here. Even Kathamuthu gets the money from Thangam as she gets it from Udayar to settle the case outside the court. At the cost of giving her food and shelter, Thangam's body is exploited and she is forced to yield his desires. This continued for days and weeks, until she became almost his third wife. "'You are like a brother to me... a brother...' she groaned, but her eyes remained shut." (92) Kathamuthu whom she believed to be a brother and protector too, raped her giving her liquor after locking his wives and daughter inside. Kangavalli and Nagamani, the two wives of Kathamuthu are also representatives of oppressed women in Dalit households.

Ironically, Thangam epitomizes the dilemma of all the subjugated women in a patriarchal society. As D. Mitra in his article, "Multiple Facets of Dalit Patriarchy in P. Sivakami's *The Grip of Change*" writes, "It seems that Kathamuthu uses the discursive Dalit body of a woman to tilt the scale of sympathy in his favour." (157) Thangam remains in Kathamuthu's house where her body and money made her a dominant person in the household. The same body through which she is oppressed and subjugated, grants her power to gain ascendancy in Kathamuthu's house. The two wives of Kathamuthu also developed a good bonding with Thangam in the house. As Sivakami writes in her novel, "Kangavalli and Nagamani became accustomed to having Thangam in the house." (88) Thangam's earning a place in Kathamuthu's house reflects the fact that caste becomes subsidiary for a small sphere and patriarchy becomes a major role where women are treated as objects. Thangam's body assumes a subversive status and puts up a resistance through the process of its narrative strategies. Following Cioux's comment, it can be said that the female body becomes a semiotic trope of subversion against the masculine repressive measures and opens up "the very possibility of change." (The Laugh of the Medusa 879)

As Sivakami unravels many facets of Thangam's story, it also reveals that the social reform comes from the younger generation. A new consciousness emerged among people. Kathamuthu's nephew, Chandran comes back to his home from Malaysia and becomes a union leader at a local mill. He promotes literacy and encourages unity of workers and transcendence of caste. Kathamuthu's son, Sekharan also rejects his father's philosophy of corruption in politics and exploitative practices. Gowri becomes the revolutionary example of change as she refuses early marriage, educates herself and remains single. Her strict refusal to the oppressive institution of marriage is evident in her words: "The sufferings that my mother underwent in her marriage! I don't want to be tortured like her by some man... Moreover, I need a father who can respect his son-in-law." (The Grip of Change 124)

The narrative in discussion postulates a stereotype of patriarchy along with a hopeful vision of liberation presented by Gowri. Gowri follows the principles of higher education and thereby tries to liberate her community women from the shackles of caste-discrimination and gender oppression. She urges to merge with the people of the society at a larger scale by crossing the man-made boundaries in the casteist society. Through the embodiment of the character of Gowri, Sivakami questions and rejects the very structure of patriarchy that curtails female empowerment. Gowri further makes an effort to educate her mother and step-mother to liberate them from Kathamuthu's subjugation. The novel concludes with Gowri's article where she asserts the need for "a strong movement that would join hands with backward, oppressed and poor caste." (The Grip of Change) At the end of the first part of the novel, Kathamuthu still harbours visions of becoming a leader in the State assembly though he has lost several elections and Thangam manages his financial and public life with her shrewd management of people. *The Grip of Change* ends with the fall of Kathamuthu, who finally realizes as the title of the novel suggests that things have changed. Emergence of young leaders defies his power. Sivakami points out that within a period of ten years a lot of changes occurred. Sivakami takes up the excruciating task of being self-critical of her own work, by writing the second part of the novel, entitled as, *Gowri: Author's Notes*. Sivakami revisited and provided a mature vision of experiences which portrays a wider perspective of life. Here the author takes a deconstructive position to point out the gap between fact and fiction. Sivakami appears as a critic of her own text with an empathetic perspective. As she writes in the preface, "I wrote the Tamil novel, Pazhaiyana Kazhithalum, when I was twenty-six. But when I read it later, I found that my expressions were limited to that of a seventeen-year-old girl. Perhaps due to the fact that I could not stretch myself to the distant past with ease and fluency, and the present proved to be tough meat to chew." (*The Grip of Change* vii)

Hence, the re-visitation of her earlier novel, *The Grip of Change*, explores the tension between the fictional world of the novel and the social circumstances that enabled the creation of the novel. As C. S. Lakshmi notes, Sivakami's sequel to the novel is about the process of writing, about choosing some and leaving out others, about deep-lying hatred that can alter truth, and about life experiences that change perspectives." (Once Upon a Time There Was a Novel 199) Hence in the second part, the author deconstructs the produced images, representations, narrative mode, characterization, the process of writing. When the author returns to her native place, she can witness the change in social and familial atmosphere. She too changed; her outlook and attitudes differed. She begins to analyze things with her new perspectives. As far as Sivakami as an author is concerned, the text marks the growth of the writer. In her childhood, she feels that generalized concepts, institutionalized education system confused her. Works of social concern emanated from real life experiences are rejected. Her failure in presenting a romantic view of life in her writings, invites criticisms inside and outside of the educational systems. This discussion finally ends in a deconstructive analysis. Sivakami deconstructs herself as an author and the process of writing is put under question. For many times, the novelist moves away from the reality and true concerns. Sivakami also poses questions in her novel that are perhaps unanswerable. As Meena Kandasamy presents it in her writing, "And One Shall Live in Two",

“By writing this, not only did she distance herself from the first book, but pre-empted critical probing with her intense self-examination. *Author's Notes* declares, ‘I have the questions, and the answers’. And if we have more questions about Gowri’s story, whom should we address them too? For instance, when Gowri refuses to marry, is it because she is a victim of her mother’s experience? Or is it a brave assertion that she is walking away from the victimhood of her mother? Or is it merely independence? ... When the margin is the center, every word becomes an arena for contestation. Sivakami’s strength lies in the fact that she does not seek to convince. She merely moves on.” (197)

To conclude, it can be said that Sivakami offers glimpses of hope to defy the patriarchal structures of the society through educational enlightenment and economic empowerment of the women in Indian context. The growth of changes in the Dalit community is reflected clearly through Gowri’s empowerment in education and liberty in all moral concerns. Sivakami represents Gowri’s voice as the voice of all outcaste women in a patriarchal set-up. Her writing the novel, *The Grip of Change*, clearly portrays how women in the lower strata of the society are changing their roles, how they have become aware of fighting their own rights and how they have enabled themselves to assert their own identities. It is better to conclude with Kandasamy’s observations, as she writes :“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 waiting for change.” (193) Through the embodiment of the character of Gowri, Sivakami questions and rejects the very structure of patriarchy that curtails female empowerment. *The Grip of Change* ends with the fall of Kathamuthu, who finally realizes as the title of the novel suggests that things have changed. Thus, truly confirming its title, *The Grip of Change* records the waves of change even in the Dalit consciousness providing a kind of cure for the ailments of the patriarchal society.

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