

**Negotiating and interacting with Dalit Literature through a Pragmatic understanding of P. Sivakami's *The Grip of Change***

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**Abstract:**

This paper examines P. Sivakami's *The Grip of Change* through a framework of pragmatic interaction, arguing that Dalit literature must be read as an active social and political engagement rather than a passive aesthetic experience. The study foregrounds how Sivakami's narrative disrupts conventional victim-centered representations by exposing the intersecting structures of caste, class, and gender that shape Dalit women's lives. Through the character of Thangam, the novel reveals the brutal realities of sexual violence, economic dependency, and social humiliation, while simultaneously critiquing internal patriarchal structures within the Dalit community through the figure of Kathamuthu. The paper further explores Gowri's emergence as a critical, educated subject who embodies a generational shift toward resistance and self-definition. By analyzing spatial dynamics, economic conditions, and the role of state institutions, the study highlights how power operates both externally and internally. The meta-fictional "Author's Notes" section is interpreted as a self-reflexive critique that challenges the notion of narrative truth and emphasizes the ethical responsibility of Dalit writing. Ultimately, the paper argues that Sivakami's work demands a pragmatic, self-implicating mode of reading that confronts uncomfortable truths and redefines Dalit aesthetics as a site of resistance, fragmentation, and ongoing transformation.

**Keywords:** Dalit Literature ,Pragmatic Interaction ,Intersectionality ,Dalit Feminism

## **1. Introduction: The Praxis of Reading Dalit Literature**

The post-independence Indian literary canon made Dalit literature to emerge as a new genre that revamped existing literary and sociological traditions. Dalit literature functions as a demonstration of power through resistance while it reveals practical knowledge. K. A. Geetha in her book argued that “Literature produced by historically marginalized communities can function as an important tool for social change” (p.90). However, much depends on how this literature is received and interpreted. The body of work requires active reading through ‘pragmatic interaction’ because the reader must perceive its text as a social act that serves political purposes while documenting historical events to reveal their own involvement in the systems of caste and gender oppression. ‘**The Grip of Change**’ which P. Sivakami published in Tamil language as Pazhaiyana Kazhidalum in 1989 and translated to English by her in 2006 operates as a central text within its constantly changing field of study. The first full-length novel by a Tamil Dalit woman establishes its monumental status because it delivers an unflinching self-analysis of Dalit life through its authorial perspective.

Sivakami’s work explores double and “triple” marginalization through its depiction of how caste, class and gender intersect to create specific challenges for Dalit women. The novel depicts life through its fractured narration which contrasts with the one-dimensional victim narratives that outsiders usually use to present sympathetic characterizations. The research shows how upper castes oppress Dalits through their external actions while exposing the internal Dalit patriarchy which controls women in the community. This paper includes an in-depth examination of the novel through pragmatic interaction which enables analysis of how characters in the story deal with two distinct challenges.

## **2. The Theoretical Lens: Pragmatic Interaction and the Dalit Text**

### **2.1 Defining Pragmatic Interaction in the Dalit Context**

The concept of pragmatic interaction for literary analysis describes how texts develop in their connection with their creator’s environment. The reading public who interacts with Dalit literature which exists to create social changes through its textual interaction fulfilled its purpose effectively. P. Sivakami herself declares I want to be an instrument of change.

The novel serves as a political awakening tool while it enables sociological research through its function as literature. The reader needs to examine the text’s truth claims when they approach the story through its transformational process. The novel

exists as a fictional work which reconstructs actual life experiences through its combination of autobiography and socio- historical elements.

The pragmatic reader must navigate through the discomfort of witnessing unedited Dalit patriarchy—a portrayal that caused significant controversy upon the book's release because it refused to present a sanitized, united front against caste oppression. Sivakami expresses her practical belief system through her choice to defend her community against being called a caste traitor while exposing gendered violence. She establishes a procedure for public “dirty linen” cleaning, which aims to redeem the community from internal decay that blocks real emancipation. She argued that “Mainstream literature has boycotted me because I believe that only Dalits can write about issues concerning them... It is not just a question of experience but perspective”(p.69).

## **2.2 The Politics of the Insider-Outsider**

Sivakami's position serves as the core element which enables her to create practical interactions. She maintains an **insider** status through her birth and caste experience, yet she exists as an **outsider** because of her social ascent and her access to bureaucratic authority. The dual perspective which she possesses enables her to examine state organs from the inside while she describes subaltern life from the lower social levels. Kanak Yadav sees this as a controversial aspect and tries to address this by suggesting that “Pazhayana Kazhidalum was as controversial as it was acclaimed, with reviewers complaining about her representation... like an outsider”.

The text operates as a bridge between these two worlds, which leads to a collision between them. The reader must navigate through Gowri's narrative voice, which oscillates between her experiences as a Dalit daughter and her observations as an educated social critic. The novel's practical strength derives from this conflict which creates dynamic tension.

## **3. The Landscape of Puliur: Spatial and Social Geographies**

### **3.1 The Semiotics of Space**

The novel creates its entire story through the fictional rural Tamil Nadu village of Puliur which serves as its setting. The text demonstrates its fundamental reality through the physical separation by representing upper-caste settlement and Cheri which represents Dalit colony. The existence of this boundary extends beyond its physical form because it creates two separate domains which control all aspects of human life.

The Cheri functions as an active space which hosts vibrant activities and political movements instead of being a place where people suffer silently.

Sivakami observes the Cheri landscape through her anthropological training and her ability to appreciate beauty as a poet. The community faces economic deprivation which emerges through the description of the streets and housing and public spaces. The Cheri serves as the location where people launch their resistance activities. The Paraiyar community creates its identity through the court organised and conducted by Kathamuthu where people shares and express their grievances. The understanding of space functions as power control through which space operates. The upper castes control all land resources while Dalit's face constraint to their personal labour and physical presence which remains under continuous threat and surveillance.

### 3.2 The Economics of Dependence

Puliyur's social geography operates through its feudal economic system. The novel illustrates the concept which states that 'Dalit is not a caste'. They are the people exploited by the social and economic traditions of their country. Udayars who serve as landlords work together with Paraiyar's who operate as labourers according to the rules of agricultural servitude which remain unspoken. The novel shows how the caste system maintains its power through the combination of debt and low wages which creates a danger of starvation.

Sivakami shows how economic violence manifests in everyday life through her daily battle to obtain rice. Thangam, who works as a landless agricultural labourer embodies the complete powerlessness of her situation. Her life depends on the 'kindness' which her oppressors choose to show. The economic conditions of the story create a difficult situation which complicates the moral decisions which are to be endured by the people.

Dalit characters experience forced compromises because they need to protect themselves from danger which they perceive as necessary for their survival. We must navigate these **Gray areas** of survival strategies because people in complete deprivation use negotiation as their main resistance method instead of fighting back.

## **4. The Anatomy of Violence: Thangam and the Triple Burden**

### 4.1: The Economics of Silence

Thangam serves as the central character through which the story of oppression develops. The young childless widow exists as the lowest social class member who experiences threefold discrimination through her caste, class and gender. Her narrative begins when her upper-caste landlord Paranjothi Udayar sexually

assaults her in a sugarcane field violently. The analysis of her response to the attack brings about a need for thorough evaluation of the situation.

She stays quiet without making any noise or putting up any defence against the assault. Roy and Choudhury correctly opined that “Thangam’s body bears testimony to the difficulties faced by Dalit women... from the sexploitation by her caste Hindu landlord... to the patriarchal domination by her own community (Sayani Roy & S. Choudhury). The text contains her most terrifying and revealing sentence through which she explains her continued silence: “I remained silent; after all, he is my paymaster. He measures my rice” (Sivakami, 2006, p. 7). The statement creates an overlap between sexual violence and economic coercion because both acts involve the same forced control over people. The landlord sees Thangam as a body violator who performs his role as the person controls her ability to stay alive. The act of measuring rice functions as an ultimate power statement due to the power of the person who controls food distribution holds dominion. Thangam uses silence as a practical method to stay alive because she knows her poverty will make her rights appears negligible in the eyes of the village hierarchy.

#### **4.2 The Entitlement of Caste: ‘**

The novel unveils how upper-caste people who commit violence develop a twisted way of thinking about their behaviour. When the affair is discovered, Paranjothi Udayar shows no signs of guilt. instead, he expresses outrage that people have betrayed his ‘benevolence’. He exclaims “Even if she was hurt, she was hurt by the hand adorned with gold! A Parachi could have never dreamt of being touched by a man like me” (Sivakami, 2006, p. 31).

The statement reveals how caste entitlement leads people to treat sexual violence as a ‘gift’ from the caste based hierarchical micro universe. For Paranjothi, His high-caste touch exists as a purifying act. Due to which, even Paranjothi’s use of violent contact is projected as a way to elevate Parachi women. Through his words he views her body as a tool which exists to provide him with enjoyment when he says, “My touch was a boon granted for penance performed in her earlier births!” (p.31). The oppressor uses this rhetoric to achieve two goals by turning the victim into a nonhuman being while he transforms the assault into an act of divine Favour which protects him from moral responsibilities. We must encounter grotesque reasoning when Sivakami forces them to see through feudal paternalism to discover the misogynistic and casteist foundations that operate between these two social structures.

#### **4.3 The Spectacle of Shame and Community Betrayal**

Thangam's body transforms into a public display which shows how the upper class of Puliur fight their caste battles. When Kamalam, Paranjothi's wife learns about the affair, she directs all her rage towards Thangam instead of addressing and punishing her unfaithful husband. She sends her brothers to attack the Dalit widow. The people who performed this violence used physical force, Thangam describes the assault thus: "They pulled me by my hair and dragged me out to the street. They hit me, and flogging me with a stick stout as a hand..... They called me a Whore" (p. 6).

The public flogging serves as a 'spectacle of shame' which functions to spread fear throughout the entire Cheri. Thangam gets dragged "in the middle of the night to be beaten up like an animal" which leads to her total psychological breakdown. She describes "The shock of being dragged out by her hair in the middle of the night to be beaten up like an animal had affected her mind deeply. The sound made at night would cause her to wake up in panic" (p. 87). B. Siva Priya sees this as a political use of sexual violence and suggests 'Rape and molestation are unleashed as weapons against the Dalit women to crush their identity (p.159)'. On the other hand, Sachin Gadhire describes this as "A Dalit woman's body becomes a contested site where caste-based power dynamics are violently enacted (p.53)".

Thangam needs protection but her own community offers her no safe space to stay. The people who should have protected her became the ones who attacked her. They make sexual advances toward her, treated her body as "common property" while they refuse to grant her ownership of properties that belong to her. The **double marginalization** which makes her unsafe in both Udayar fields and Paraiyar homes becomes evident through this betrayal. People treat her body as "common property" which indicates that anyone has the right to access her physical space.

## **5. The Internal Critique: Kathamuthu and the Politics of Dalit Patriarchy**

### **5.1 The Charismatic Leader as Oppressor**

The Dalit woman shows her most vulnerable state through Thangam while Kathamuthu demonstrates the dualistic character of Dalit leadership who possesses both simple and complex leadership qualities. The father of the narrator Gowri named Kathamuthu serves as a 'charismatic Paraiyar leader' who possesses the ability to speak truth to power through his process of public mobilization. Sivakami shows him through her harsh realistic assessment as the person who fully represents 'Dalit patriarchy' and its existence.

Kathamuthu operates as a 'tyrannically dominating person' who champions public freedom while he maintains domestic control over his household. His multiple

marriages enable him to prey upon the vulnerable women of his own community. The novel posits that “seeds of corruption exist at all levels” as argued by Jisha M.D "The tyrannous use of power exists at all levels, and women suffer the most (p.27)while Kathamuthu serves as the principal disseminator of corruption throughout the movement. He uses his position to create a new hierarchy which enables him to reach the highest position in a different power structure that operates within the Cheri.

### **5.2 The Commodification of Justice:**

The political approach of Kathamuthu becomes evident through his actions in Thangam's case. The political value of Thangam's rape and beating becomes apparent to him because he views it as an opportunity to gain political advantage. The police will handle his case of sexual assault through two options they can either close the case or choose to operate in a discreet manner. He redefines the story through his new narrative perspective which enables him to create maximum control over the situation.

He tells Thangam: “That's Why I have changed the whole story. You are such a bitch. Don't you understand?” (p. 12). He creates a ‘caste slant’ through his factual distortion which transforms a specific act of gendered violence into a broad caste related violence’ issue. The community mobilization approach accomplishes its goal, but it results in Thangam's personal pain disappearing from view. The ‘larger cause’ demands the sacrifice of her authentic self.

The justice that Kathamuthu obtains operates through a system of exchanges. He negotiates a settlement of ten thousand rupees from the Udayars but keeps the money, promising to repay Thangam later. The wage increase he negotiates for the labourers is similarly compromised; the Udayars agree to pay more but demand longer hours: “Don't worry. We'll make them work an extra hour. When we pay more, we have the right to demand more work from them” (p. 75). The leadership of Kathamuthu allows him to maintain economic exploitation through its function while claiming to decrease its control.

### **5.3 The Betrayal of the Female Body**

Kathamuthu shows his worst character through his sexual predation behaviour. He forces Thangam into a sexual relationship after saving her from the Udayars because he wants to take her as his third wife. The text notes that Thangam's ‘justice’ was only served after she was ‘sexually exploited by Kathamuthu’. He used his fake position as her saviour to ‘lure her sexuality’ while removing her

psychological independence from her. Thangam tries to establish a boundary by groaning thus: "You are like my brother to me..... A brother" (p.93)

Sivakami demonstrates through this betrayal that the Dalit movement creates two incompatible sides which lead to its internal contradiction. The leader who fights against the **touch** of the upper caste feels entitled to the bodies of the women he leads. In context of double oppression faced by Thangam, **Supriya** argued that "The predicament of a Dalit woman victimized by the upper-caste Hindus as well as their own men made a strong comment on patriarchy". Kathamuthu uses Thangam to create jealousy between his other wives which results in a domestic environment that uses competition as its primary mode of operation. Sivakami argues through Kathamuthu that patriarchy **gets diluted on its way down the caste ladder** but its power to suppress feminine sensitivity continues to exist.

## **6. The Emergence of the Subject: Gowri and the Generational Shift**

### **6.1 The Watchful Observer and Critic**

Gowri serves as the ethical centre of the novel and the 'mouthpiece of the author herself'. She exhibits a new educated Dalit awareness which enables her to investigate both the external world of caste oppression and the internal world of community corruption. She observes everything while she criticizes her father by using modern justice standards and gender equality principles to measure his traditional oppressive behaviour.

Gowri experiences self-discovery through her life story. She transforms from a terrified child into a courageous defender of women's rights. She witnesses her father's predatory behaviour towards Thangam and his maltreatment of her mother which makes her explode in rage: "Dogs! Dogs in this house! Shameless as dogs!" (p. 93). The daughter breaks traditional Tamil household rules through her outburst. The act shows that Gowri has started to contest patriarchal control over her life while she establishes her own moral decision-making power correctly opined by **Supriya** endorse this through her following statement: "The narrator [Gowri]... rebels against her father. She, in fact, undertakes an earnest attempt to educate her mother and Nagamani... to help them emerge out of Kathamuthu's subjugation (p.71)".

### **6.2 Education as Transgression**

The novel establishes education as the main process through which people achieve social and personal transformation. She wants to 'get educated and leave the caste-focused village' according to her goals. Education becomes a double

transgression for a Dalit woman because it defies both caste grounded restrictions and gender-based female freedom related limitations.

The novel uses a powerful metaphor to describe this transgression: "During floods, waters from overflowing wells mingle with the waters of huge water bodies, transgressing their boundaries" (p. 95). Through her actions, she becomes a flood which destroys the boundaries of the wells to unite with the complete human population. The metaphor illustrates that transformation functions as a natural phenomenon which completely converts existing boundary into new frontiers.

### **6.3 The Rejection of Patriarchal Marriage**

Gowri chooses to remain unmarried as her most powerful act of defiance. She declares her intention to avoid all future male suffering because she has seen 'sufferings that my mother underwent in her marriage! I don't want to be tortured like her by some man' (p. 124). Gowri challenges the 'conventional yet transformative' social expectation that women must marry in her rural community by choosing to live her life as a single woman.

At the age of 32, she declares her 'single, unmarried status' to the world which now knows her as she wishes to be understood. The woman who refuses to take part in this practice shows that she opposes the tradition by using her body as her rite of her ownership. She makes it clear that her body and her life belong to herself without any ownership claims from a husband or father. On the other hand, Chandran represents the new kind of leadership which Gowri wants to see developed in society, yet she becomes the transformation she wants to achieve because she is an independent Dalit woman who speaks for herself and possesses her own power.

## **7. Meta-Fictional Strategies: Author's Notes (Asiriyar Kurippu)**

### **7.1 The Sequel as Critique**

The Grip of Change requires its sequel Author's notes Tamil Asiriyar Kurippu to be studied in detail for a holistic understanding. The second section of the work serves as a meta-fictional assessment through which the author uses the character of older and matured Gowri to evaluate the text. The new structural design presents seminal clarity because it creates a break in the readers' ability to accept the story as real thus making them need to experience its storytelling. Sivakami writes: "After about ten years, I went back to my novel as a third person, with the hope that I could see the author more objectively". The novel presents its narrative as established 'truth' which readers must understand according to its particular methods of storytelling as highlighted by Kanak Yadav in her book that "rewriting the novel

with autobiographical elements in the form of a sequel... allowed engagement with the form of the text”.

### 7.2 Deconstructing the ‘Truth’ of Fiction

Gowri the narrator and author of Author's Notes performs an intense examination of her younger self who represents ‘the novelist’. Through her critique the novelist she identifies uses upper-caste literary standards as her basis to describe the intricate details of caste. Through her writing Gowri shows how the novelist uses language to build Kathamuthu’s subconscious because he uses metaphors and symbols to show his “hypocrisy of addressing 'the rich with respect and the poor with disrespect’”. The narrator presents a conflicting statement which says that all elements of the novel were real at the same time she declares that ‘the novel was false’ because it didn't present the complete details of the village caste structure. She criticizes the first book for reducing the village dynamics to a binary conflict between upper castes vs. lower castes, which ignores the ‘various internal hierarchies’ and restrictions that exist even between Dalit sub-castes. Through this statement the novel changes from showing constant reality into displaying ongoing investigation into how much reality can be depicted.

### 7.3 The Dialogue of Self and Community

The sequel shows the struggle between the single author and the shared community. The community in the text challenges the author: “Why didn't you just write about the experiences that affected your life? Why did you have to mock the Dalit leadership?”. Sivagami defends herself against this accusation through her practical defence of her artistic integrity. She explains that “Caste is still an indomitable force... The combined effort of all oppressed castes is necessary, continuous focus on the problem of caste is necessary”. She believes that real freedom comes from facing the unedited truth. The Author’s Notes thus describes the writer’s social obligations which she owes to her community through her artistic responsibilities towards her creative expression.

## 8. Dalit Aesthetics: Language, Form, and Resistance

### 8.1 The Aesthetics of the ‘Raw’ experience

Sivakami’s research disputes the Brahminical aesthetic standards which have controlled Tamil poetry throughout its historical development. The traditional Tamil literary rules demand that writers maintain language ‘purity’ according to established rules and aesthetic taste. Dalit aesthetics developed by critics including Sharan Kumar Limbale establish their own artistic standards through the rejection of established

frameworks which define 'raw' and 'outcaste' and 'rebellious' artistic expressions. Arunabha correctly explains this fractured narration why suggesting that "Tamil Dalit women writers engender novel literary forms that embody the intimate and depersonalised as well as the singular and collective aspects of pain"(p.110).

The text of *The Grip of Change* presents its content through direct and raw language. The characters use Paraiyar dialect for all their spoken lines, which establishes their community's unique language heritage. The characters used dialect as a political statement, which made their words valid for people in power while making upper caste readers to interact to the Dalit perspective through direct experience.

The novel's structure uses Author's Notes which function as meta-fictional elements to create breaks in the standard realistic narrative flow of novels. The story demonstrates the fractured identity of the Dalit character through its fragmented storytelling. The story presents two outcomes which disrupt the flow of the narrative and create opposing elements. The text denies readers the sense of resolution which usually comes from a 'happy ending' and a straightforward victory for the good characters. The character Thangam achieves 'salvation' through Kathamuthu, who subsequently keeps her in bondage, while Kathamuthu achieves political success at the same time becomes powerless through his morally corrupt actions. The rejection of closure serves as a fundamental component of Dalit aesthetics because it depicts the ongoing battle against caste discrimination which remains unsettled.

## **9. The State, The Law, and The Bureaucracy**

### **9.1 The Insider's Critique**

P. Sivakami uses her experience as an IAS officer to create a practical evaluation of state operations which she conducts through her bureaucratic positions. The police officers and revenue officers and panchayat members in the novel function to sustain the caste system instead of performing their roles as disinterested individuals of the justice system.

The upper caste will extends through the State which operates as a governing force for the entire novel. The police inspector establishes power relationships which dominate the concern department which is proved through his interview with Kathamuthu. Kathamuthu possesses no rights which the inspector must acknowledge because the officer only respects him for his ability to create disturbances in social order. The bureaucracy exists as a 'grip' which prevents progress and only grants

advantages to Dalits who adhere to the rules of the game which the upper class has established.

### 9.2 The Failure of Legal Remedies

The novel shows how the legal system fails to deliver justice to Dalit women. Thangam faces disgrace and receives a payment as a settlement for the injustice done to her after she tries to obtain justice through the legal system due to the sexual assault unleashed on her. The law considers her assault to be a disagreement over the ownership of assets or the value of her honour instead of recognizing it as a violation of her physical rights. Sivakami believes that the legal system lacks the ability to solve the fundamental caste-based violence problems which exist in society.

Sivakami decided to leave her IAS career because, she became disillusioned with the system. She understood that her work in the bureaucracy would not create any change, so Sivakami chose to become a writer and activist to make an impact. The Grip of Change demonstrates that how state authority reaches its boundaries while social movements remain essential for progress.

### 10. Conclusion: Unclasping the Grip

The title **Change** refers to which specific transformation according to the author. Sivakami presents change not as a successive positive development but as a destructive disordered and frequently painful transformation. The past (caste tradition) and present (corrupt leadership) both create a strangling force that the Grip represents. The novel depicts change as a questioned and uneven process which shows wage gains countering gender relationship and subsequent losses.

The Grip of Change can only be understood through pragmatic interaction which requires acceptance of its uncomfortable truths. The reader must recognize that Dalit life extends beyond the **oppressor versus oppressed** framework. The novel forces us to confront the reality through the following statement or a unwritten social principle that a man can be a hero to his caste and a villain to his wife. The investigation makes us recognize that "corruption" begins to develop within all organizations.

P. Sivakami's *The Grip of Change* represents a revolutionary transformation of Indian literature. She expands Dalit literature through her work which centres Dalit women's experiences while she delivers a harsh critique of the patriarchal structure in Dalit society. Gowri demonstrates a vision of an educated individual who possesses critical thinking skills and personal freedom. The Author's Notes present a framework for intellectual integrity which shows that fighting against caste requires battling the

limits of personal understanding. The author claims that “Dalits should write about their own issues while only women should write about feminist matters”. The novel serves as a practical demonstration of that belief which uses text to hold readers until they reach complete comprehension of the work.

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