

**Negotiating Marginality: The Politics of Identity and Resistance in
Sivakami's *The Grip of Change***

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Abstract

The Grip of Change is one of the most influential works in the Dalit feminist literature, which challenges the multifaceted aspects of caste, class, and gender oppression in modern India. The study discusses how the novel prefigures the intricacy of the intersection between patriarchy and caste hierarchy that define the experience of Dalit women. The story, in its characterization of its lead, reveals silencing and subordination both in major caste systems and even in the Dalit societies themselves, which is patriarchal. The analysis of the way the resistance form of self-assertion becomes a tool of critical importance is discussed as the means of self-assertion of voices marginalized by the structural inequalities. Based on the postcolonial, subaltern, and feminist theories, this paper will examine how the text explains a radical politics of identity, reclaiming control at the periphery. Finally, it states that the Sivakami work is not just a record of the plight of Dalit women, but also a redefinition of resistance as a process of self-definition and empowerment.

Keywords: Multifaceted, Marginalized, Sivakami, Dalit Women, Resistance

Introduction

Some communities especially Dalit and marginalized communities in the large and varied fabric of Indian culture have experienced multiple layers of marginalization, making them not just marginalized but also marginalized among the marginalized. These are the ones whose identity has been masked by the dominant discourses of the bigger marginalized communities, which they belong to, and the mainstream, and which keeps shutting them out. Their experiences and struggles are discussed, and much consideration is given to how their resistance and identity are determined by the specific place at the intersection of a variety of discrimination axes, such as caste, gender, ethnicity, and economic status.

Literature has always been a mirror of the society revealing the progression and the stagnation of the society and its good and bad sides. It has played a crucial role in the development of social consciousness, challenge of the accepted wisdom and the development of a deeper understanding of human nature. Literature has been a powerful instrument especially to the underprivileged communities, which before they could not be heard. Dalit women writers employ literature as one of the most important platforms of resistance and self-

assertion as well as a force of artistic expression. The stories by these authors whose lives can be described as the combination of the two forms of oppression, gender and caste, are also used to confront the social injustices that in the past have pushed them to the peripheries. There is a sense of urgency and purpose in their works, and they are not merely interested in telling their stories but demanding recognition and change. In this context, the words of John Beverley are significant when he pens down:

In a testimonio, the intention is not one of literariness but of communicating the situation of a group's oppression, imprisonment, and struggle. The narrator claims some agency in the act of narrating and calls upon the readers to respond actively in judging the situation. (Beverley 94).

The Grip of Change (the English translation of the original Tamil Pazhayana Kazhithalum) by P. Sivakami is a book of canonical importance in Tamil Dalit feminist literature: it offers a brutal analysis of the intersectional violence of Dalit women in modern India. Such a tedious examination makes Sivakami work more than a history of misery but an important political and literary commentary that charges both exterior caste hierarchy and interior Dalit patriarchy. The novel throws down a challenge to traditional parameters of resistance writing in which the negotiation of marginalized identity would be seen as negotiated across the spaces of the sugarcane field of the upper-caste landlord to the patriarchal home of the Dalit leader.

Palanimuthu Sivakami is a legend, the earliest Tamil Dalit woman writer of novels. Her literary work, which includes six novels, and more than 60 short stories, is always focused on critical Dalit and feminist themes. Her criticism is inherent in her biography. Sivakami had a lot of knowledge which was inside information on the state machinery since she served as an officer in the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) during 29 years. Later she voluntarily retired in 2008 and concentrated on social reform and political action. She dedicated her life to grassroots change, and this is demonstrated by the fact that she started Dalit Land Rights Movement and political party Samuga Samatuva Padai (Party of Social Equality) as a political party founded on the ideas of B. R. Ambedkar.

The novel is so intense in the description of power relationships because the author has a rich experience in bureaucracy and politics. It was first written in 1988, under the title *Pazhayana Kazhithalum*, then ten years later, the second volume, *Gowri: Author's Notes* (Asiriyar Kurippu). This is a structural composition, where Book 1 is about the charismatic leader Kathamuthu and Book 2 is about his daughter Gowri, which offers an essential inner ideological proposal to critique. The attempts of Kathamuthu in the novel to use the state and village hierarchies to bring about some justice to Dalits is construed as a knowledgeable criticism of the real restrictions of political manoeuvring in a caste-twisted system. The plot of the narrative, including the imperfect leadership of Kathamuthu, and the intellectual freedom of Gowri, indicates that the long-lasting emancipation is not possible in the form of

bureaucratic and traditional political authority but in the form of a change in priorities: to emphasize local organizations, intellectual activism, and moral enlightenment of women.

Intersectionality: Resistance, and Dalit Feminist Critique

The analysis of the novel should be inevitably based on the critical theory which takes into consideration overlapping systems of domination. The novel is a deep conceptualization of intersectionality, as gender, caste, and class intersect to make Dalit women a distinct subject of exploitation, abuse, and poverty. Thangam who is the protagonist is a strong representation of this weakness as she is subjected to a triple marginalization characterized by her being economically oppressed, gendered, and discriminated against on the basis of her caste.

The paper deploys the Resistance Theory, which is based on the works of such scholars as Foucault and Scott, to examine the multi-layered manifestations of defiance that are being employed by the communities that are marginalized. The issue of resistance in the novel can be seen in social, cultural, political, and narrative aspects, showing that there is an active act of Dalit women and not as a victim. Such rebellions, which are usually marked by exceptional daring, perseverance and ingenious application of traditions, are part of emerging models and images of womanhood.

The novel fits into a trend within Dalit Feminist Critique; it is a work devoted to Dalit women as victims of widespread sexual harassment, molestation, and social economic slavery. Nevertheless, the novel is not going to be characterized only by victimhood, but it accentuates the power and endurance of the characters. The writing of Sivakami has a central role to play in the Dalit feminist debate as it brings out the struggles and aspirations of the Dalit women and insists that they are human beings regardless of the caste. Sexual violence and breaking traditions of gender is the main issue of resistance of Dalit women which is critically reviewed in the text.

Mapping the Margin: Caste, Class, and Gender

Thangam is brought in as a character who has numerous weaknesses: she is a childless widow who is not allowed to inherit the ancestral land of her husband by her in-laws. This condition automatically subjects her to the intersection of gender oppression (widowhood and childlessness usually led to dispossession), social classes oppression (obliging her to landless work), and caste oppression (Dalit/Pariyar). The novel gives a graphic illustration of the interaction of these systems which makes her have no economic agency to survive, thus compelling her to become a laborer hence her physical and sexual susceptibility to those who own the land.

The setting of the novel is the rural India where the social and economic changes have occurred considerably, and more particularly in Dalits. Sivakami is very vivid in the type of caste-based prejudice that is so prevalent in the lives of her characters. The narrative demonstrates that the layers of marginalization experience are shaped by the caste, gender, and class intersections. The work Sivakami puts out brings out the internal life of the Dalit people which is often dwarfed by a bigger narrative of the oppression of high castes.

The kind of misery that Dalits experience is due to a cycle of persecution that has been in existence over several years. The force and monetary position, which supports hierarchies within the caste system, is at the core of this continuing misery. The wealthiest and powerful individuals form the middle of the society, and establish strong organizations that support superiority and dominance. Conversely, the marginalized and disadvantaged have to struggle along the margins as they are not offered the basic necessities such as food, clothing and shelter. This methodical sidelining and institutionalized segregation that characterize the lives of the Dalits is corroborated by the fact that most of the times they are denied access to the upper caste regions.

Using Thangam as a character, the novelist is strong in depicting how Dalit women have been forced to remain silent and be victimised by the upper caste Hindus, as well as by their fellow people. The novel focuses on the exploitation and abuse of the body of Thangam yet it does not overdo sexuality by depicting forced marriages or meaningless romances. In the spirit of recognition of the hardships that Dalit women have to endure, the narrative instead takes a closer look at the personal troubles that Thangam has to grapple with and the impact of the incidents on her body.

Thangam is far more alienated as a widow especially when her brother-in-law harassed her. Here, women, irrespective of their caste are often perceived as mere objects that men can have fun with. These voices of the women are often stifled and in case of any physical violence or interrelationship among various castes, the impact is more on the women than on the males. This is particularly true when such forms of mistreatment are focused on the Dalit women who end up being the sole victims and bear the entire weight of the social punishment. Thangam is a powerful reflection of such structural injustices with its focus on the ubiquitous inequality and the absence of a voice when women are exploited as such.

My husband's relatives spread the story that I had become Paranjothi's concubine. That's why Paranjothi's wife's brother 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 did come to help me. They abused me and threatened to kill me if I stayed in that village any longer. They called me a whore. (15)

The sexually violence in the novel is not presented as a chance occurrence but a planned political and social tool- a weapon that is used against Dalit women to squash their identity. The key element of this exploration is the experience of Thangam. The upper-caste landlord, Paranjothi Udayar, rapes her in his sugarcane plantation. "What she did ... she made no answer; how can he, he is my paymaster? He measures my rice..." (57) and creates a ruthless cause and effect relationship: financial reliance determines sexual susceptibility. The necessity to survive and earn a living legitimizes the violence, and sexual exploitation is reshaped into a working mechanism of the socioeconomic lever. This factor makes the life of the Dalit woman unique

because the constant risk to her existence of the basic livelihood makes the rebellion against the exploitation inherently more dangerous.

The morally hypocritical caste system is further uncovered through the two-sided character of Udayar. Whereas the Dalit people are technically untouchable, the body of the Dalit woman in the context of rape, becomes fruitily touchable, and this shows a lethal grayness in the caste pollution regulations. Udayar tries to justify his action by implying that his touch was a blessing bestowed after penance done in her previous incarnations and this reveals the deformed theological and social reasoning of the perpetrators to declare the hierarchy and excuse the cruelty.

This communal meaning of the attack on Thangam is exaggerated; it is seen as a way of attacking her and her whole community. After the rape, it is all about punishing her, she is viciously beaten by the family of the landlord and even her own brothers-in-law who take the advantage to slander her by pronouncing her the concubine of the landlord, Udayar. This response proves that the Dalit woman body is considered as a representation of community prestige and limits, such that violence on her is a socialized tool of establishing caste dominance and reining in Dalit desires.

Sivakami gives in the novel key textual examples that show how the whole Dalit community is oppressed by outsiders, and thus the particular plight of Thangam is put into perspective. Caste discrimination is also seen when Naicker, an upper-caste man, though he enjoys the company of the Dalit leader Kathamuthu, is nevertheless very conscious of his caste, indirectly showing his discriminating attitude by tossing the silver piece at his shop on his palm, making sure not to do so manually. In this context, Kathamuthu's response as follows to an elderly man who asks her to arrange the loan at the cooperative society points out:

That's my job, isn't it? I have no other work! Do you know when I have breakfast yesterday? At nine in the morning! My health is spoiled. And I have to work on my land too. You spend all your time in your fields and enjoy the benefit. You have fresh vegetables, fruits. Look at me...I have no money to educate my daughter. The rules of the cooperative society are such that without cooking up accounts you can't get a lone all that takes money. And if I keep doing your work how will I make a living. (36)

In addition to the ritual pollution, the novel brings out economic entrapment. Dalit workers are not regarded as human beings, needing to serve the upper caste landlords. In the memorable example, Dalit boy under the employment of Naicker master is brutally beaten and sent strung on pole just because he had broken two stalks of Kambu to take a bite. His father takes him back to work, despite being brutalized saying there is no other way. This assertion sums up the economic stranglehold that strengthens and creates the existence of the worst kinds of caste subordination, showing how the denial of dignity is perpetuated by the absence of economic options.

Conclusion

Sivakami comes out in the novel as a radical work that brings out the multidimensionality of Dalit womanhood and the nature of negotiation of identity within the overlapping caste and patriarchal systems. The novelist, through the character of Thangam and Gowri with the aspect of reformist consciousness, depicts how Dalit women are fighting, not just with external oppression of upper-caste dominance, but also the internalized oppression of their patriarchs in society. The novel turns into a place where the politics of resistance is restructured not in terms of victimization, but of self-assertion, consciousness and social action. Combining feminist and Dalit dialects, Sivakami gives a story that speaks to the silenced, and challenges the hierarchies as well as tokenistic reforms. Finally, the concept of regaining agency and re-writing the history of Dalit women, and projecting their personalities onto systems of oppression that attempt to push them to the periphery are predetermined in the text. Therefore, *The Grip of Change* is a literary and political interference in the discussion of the identity, resistance, and change in modern Dalit feminist literature.

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