

Between Margins And Voices: The Fractured Identity Of Dalit Women In P.Sivakami's The Grip Of Change

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This paper examines the fractured identity of Dalit women in P. Sivakami's *The Grip of Change*, a novel that vividly portrays the multiple layers of oppression shaping their lives. The text reveals how the triple burden of caste, class, and gender fractures their subjectivity, leaving them torn between silence, subjugation, and the desire for agency. Caste hierarchies dehumanize them, patriarchal authority objectifies them, and economic marginalization intensifies their vulnerability, resulting in a divided sense of self. Sivakami, however, does not present fractured identity as mere disintegration; instead, she demonstrates how these women transform rupture into resilience. Their fragmented subjectivities become spaces where trauma coexists with defiance, and where brokenness generates strength. By capturing this tension, *The Grip of Change* exposes the psychological and emotional costs of systemic injustice while also foregrounding Dalit women's determination to reclaim identity and dignity. This paper argues that the novel redefines fractured identity not simply as a symptom of oppression but as a site of negotiation and empowerment, where silenced voices find articulation. In doing so, Sivakami offers a searing critique of entrenched social hierarchies and reimagines Dalit women's struggle as a broader pursuit of justice, selfhood, and collective survival.

Keywords: fractured identity, oppression, subjectivity, resilience, agency

Introduction

P. Sivakami occupies a unique position in the Dalit fiction in Tamil. She is a respected writer among the first generation of Dalit writers in Tamil who began writing in the late eighties. As a woman Dalit writer, she brings into focus for the first time, the gendered relations among castes - upper castes and Dalits as well as among Dalits in Tamil Nadu. Sivakami's career graph brings to focus the possibilities thrown open to Dalits through the constitutional mechanism of positive discrimination. She is an IAS officer and does extensive work among tribal communities and backward groups. Apart from her early novels and her first collection of short stories, Sivakami has written substantially on issues and persons that transcend the question of caste, largely taking up gender related issues with an incisive insight on class position of the characters represented. Her choice of form, style, and narration have varied from realism to surrealism, dream sequences to post-modernist techniques. She has also taken an unambiguous feminist stand. However, her approach to feminism is tempered with self-reflexiveness and a critical awareness of the caste question and the Indian social context. Sivakami perceives a strong need to foreground the caste question within the matrix of the feminist discourse in India. She has excelled in representing how gender and class paradigms

impinge on caste relations, thus, underscoring the need to develop a comprehensive, non-isolationist vision of social culture. Her focus on class is well-nuanced and subtle yet scathing. This dimension of her writing infuses a fresh and much needed corrective perspective on Dalit writing and criticism which of late, has become unidimensional with an exclusivist, uncomplicated, foregrounding of caste in both short fiction and novel. She employs a self-reflexive tone, an interrogative stance and a subtle narrative voice bereft of overt anger or rhetoric. She succeeds in sensitising the reader on issues that lay interrelated and complex without raising a loud outcry.

The representation of the "other" woman is a significant entry point to the discussion of power relations within a Dalit community. Such a woman is an obvious victim of male power. Her entry into the family house of her master precipitates a violent re-ordering of relations amongst the different members of the family. While the family perceives her as a usurper, as someone who enjoys enormous power over the head of the family, she, in fact, suffers utmost violence at his hands, (both sexual and psychological) and remains a victim of male desire. The experience of a woman who is ostracized and subjugated on multiple levels, and her subsequent attempts to resist and escape her oppressors, serves as a powerful metaphor for the power dynamics at play between Dalits and upper castes. An examination of the position, power, the subjugation, the intensity of violence that a Dalit woman is subjected to, helps to probe the larger issue pertaining to the treatment of Dalits by upper castes in the society.

The Grip of Change by P. Sivakami is a breakthrough novel which intricately explores the vulnerability of Dalit women and their battles against oppression. It gleams with the spirit of hope and change, and also accelerates the morale embedded deep inside the heart of the Dalit women. The novel opens with the exploitation of the low caste parayar woman, Thangam, the wife of Kaipalli. She has been betrayed and cheated out of her inheritance by her brother-in-laws, after her husband's death. Her circumstances cornered her in such a way that she has to bend and succumb to the carnal pleasures of the high caste landowner,Paranjothi Udayar. She appeals to Kathamuthu, the leader of the parayar community for justice. Kathamuthu is a local Dalit leader who commands enormous clout and respect among Dalits in his town as well as nearby cluster of villages. Even the upper caste landlords and the police officers are influenced by him and fear him. He has two wives – Kanagavalli, his legally wedded wife who bears him a daughter Gauri and a son Sekar, and another wife named Nagamani, whom he acquired through an extramarital relationship. She hails from an upper caste family. But being a childless widow, she is an easy catch for Kathamuthu despite the caste difference. He brings her home, in all probability, without any legal or religious rites. Nagamani's widowhood renders her vulnerable to sexual exploitation by different men who desert her soon enough. She receives no support from her family and her economic and social position is extremely insecure and pathetic. Kathamuthu seizes her precisely owing to these reasons. Nagamani accepts him as her husband so as to escape the travails of a poor, abandoned woman, left to fend for herself. To Kathamuthu, however, she is a prize catch and he exults in the fact that he has acquired a high-born woman and brought her home. The men from her caste seethe with anger at this settlement but Kathamuthu is dismissive, "I am a man. And I am well off too. Does any one dare to question me?" (18). He masks his lust and casteist designs by claiming to be Nagamani's saviour: "I have given her shelter. She was a widow and led a miserable life. I have given her a new lease of life ... " (20)

Thus, gender and class position play a significant part in fixing a woman's social identity while they aid a man in consolidating his social prestige. What is the gain for one in terms of caste pride is a loss for the other in terms of self-esteem. If Dalits are exploited for their labour and they accept the upper castes as their lord and master, Nagamani's choice is no different either. She renders sexual labour and accepts her exploiter as her protector. In the process, she acquires the identity of the "other woman", a second wife, a chakalathi- a co- wife who is privileged by the husband in bed but occupies a secondary position in the household. In simple terms, Nagamani becomes Kathamuthu's concubine. She has no alternative but to move in with Kathamuthu. She thinks that it is better to concur in her sexual exploitation by one man within the confines of a respectable household than to become a prey to numerous men on the street. Sivakami thus seriously questions the legitimacy of marriage as an institution that thrives on exploitation of women. Both Kanagavalli and Nagamani are enmeshed in this exploitative, patriarchal arrangement. Both the legal wife and the concubine receive a rough deal in their bargain for respectable domesticity. Both are driven by their poverty and sexual intimidation at the hands of men to give themselves up to one man who enjoys a fixed income and social prestige. In return, they offer their body to their master who inflicts enormous violence and demands ceaseless service. This labour, is no less strenuous or oppressive as the Dalit farm labourers' who are bound to his/her master's land in return for a sack of grain and a pittance of meal.

Sivakami's representation of the "other woman" indicates not only an oblique comment on the status of Dalit women at large, but also depicts how the victim could also possibly subvert or challenge her protector/tormentor's easy assumption of power. Initially the male plays one woman against the other, harnessing each one's sense of insecurity and in the process gaining abject subservience from both. The predictable verbal duels between the wife and the concubine, the resulting domestic disharmony, and its impact on his children are never sought to be put down by the male master. Kathamuthu enjoys this spectacle and does nothing to allay the children's fear and apprehensions. But to his dismay over a period of time Nagamani and Kanagavali become friends, in fact, allies who raise the banner of revolt against his authority. The concubine is subjected to physical and verbal violence as much, not more than that received by the wife. After a decade of similar suffering at the hands of their common master, the wife and the concubine develop a cherished friendship and solidarity and share an intimate emotional bond. They console, sustain and support each other. Nagamani treats her chakalathi's children as her own. There is no bitterness between the two women and their occasional disagreements are soon forgotten over their shared labour inside the kitchen or at the backyard.

This bonding between the co-wives irritates and amazes Kathamuthu. He feels lost out on his privileges and attention. The two women no longer treat each other as rivals clamouring for his attention. Instead, they hang up and dump him to fend for himself. They place the cooked meal before him and retire to the kitchen to gossip or taunt him over his electoral debacle. When he calls upon them to massage his legs, they remind him that they are yet to catch up with their lunch and ask him to massage their aching heads first. Sivakami subtly brings out a shared space and discourse of oppressed women - one a neglected wife and another a runaway appendage. Once they recognise their source of torment as male oppression sanctioned by social and familial structure, they come together to challenge such a concentration of power. Rejecting the popular cultural stereotype of two women fighting

over a male and measuring up to his love and attention, Sivakami depicts the possibility of an emotional bonding between the two women victims. Indeed, they unite, organize, and agitate against their oppressor almost emulating the Ambedkarite dictum propagated in the context of Dalit oppression by the upper castes. Feeling neglected and abandoned instead of being pampered by the two wives, Kathamuthu wonders if he should bring in "another one" in order to "curb their insolence" (30). So while the victims subvert their master's authority, he in turn, works upon strategies to keep them dependent and insecure. The dynamics of power relations within a Dalit family serve as a microcosm for the broader mechanisms of power institution and consolidation within the community. Specifically, this process is largely facilitated by the exploitation and manipulation of the "woman question", highlighting the critical roles that gender plays in shaping social hierarchies and power structures. This is illustrated best in Kathamuthu's conquest of Thangam as his yet another concubine. Acting as his community's power broker in intra community affairs, Kathamuthu shrewdly politicises the assault on Thangam by her lover's wife's male relatives, bargains for a hefty compensation for her, pockets it himself and fixes the woman as his latest catch at his home. Masking his self-interest as his commitment to justice for the underdog, Kathamuthu succeeds in blackmailing the upper caste landlords, manipulates the police officials and uses Thangam to fill up his pocket as well as a ruse to put down his wives' increasing insubordination. Thangam's fate confirms the exploitative paradigm that governs Dalit women's lives. She is a young, childless widow, a farm labourer, whose share in her dead husband's ancestral land is usurped by his brothers and is driven away from home. She lives in a hut alone in the Dalit hutment, a little away from the huts of her in-laws. Her landlord, Paranjoti Odaiyar casts a lustful eye on her and under the pretext of assigning a task for her in the sugarcane fields, rapes her, and continues to exploit her sexually every now and then. Thangam is forced to accept this fifty-year-old, upper caste, rich master's "lustful assaults" (57). Abandoned and cheated by in-laws, without any support from her natal family, the poor, Dalit widow is unable to refuse her landlord's assaults. He gives her twenty or fifty rupees occasionally and she is asked to hire farmhands to work at his field and supervise their work. Class hierarchy and vulnerability owing to gender constraints facilitate Thangam's sexual exploitation. She can only shed tears but not, refuse the Odaiyar's arrangement. One night, his wife's brothers beat her up severely and the villagers and her in-laws do not come to her rescue. She walks the six-mile distance to reach Kathamuthu's place to seek his help to get justice.

The novel opens with her loud lament at the break of dawn at Kathamuthu's door. He seizes the opportunity and makes this assault engendered by class and gender bias into an issue of casteist discrimination, and drafts a complaint to the police, where he underplays the sexual abuse and twists the case to make it appear as caste abuse and an issue of upper caste's high handedness. He tutors Thangam to stand by his version, forcing the police officer to take immediate action as it is a matter to precipitate a caste-riot. Thus, while violence is perpetrated on Thangam's body, sexually by Paranjoti Odaiyar and physically by his brothers-in-law, Thangam is used by Kathamuthu as mere clinical evidence to strengthen his allegation of caste violence, thereby bringing political pressure on the Odaiyar. Thangam is asked by Kathamuthu to lift up her saree, show her raw, bleeding wounds on her thighs and back, orders her to make a loud oppaari (ritual lament) and presents her as a gory spectacle at the police station rather than as a person, as a victim of violence. Dalit women like Thangam are

exploited both by upper caste men as well as leader and spokesman of Dalits. This further strengthens Sivakami's premise that women are vulnerable to male exploitation and caste is a secondary category in the context of violation of women's dignity. While Kathamuthu gains respectability for sporting two wives and exults over "keeping" Nagamani born in a higher caste, he reverses the equation and seriously reprimands Thangam for having a liaison with an upper caste man. "Didn't you get a man from our caste that you succumbed to an Odaiyar?" he needles her (16). While a Dalit male, if he is well-off, can bring in an Odaiyar woman, an Odaiyar male cannot and will not marry or bring home a Dalit woman. She can only be his concubine but cannot enter his house. They can only meet up at his fields. This is stated by Kathamuthu himself while taking pride at his claim that he has given Nagamani "shelter and a protected life" (20-21). The Gender predominates over caste in the lives of both men and women. Thus, Nagamani and Thangam share a similar career graph, undergo a similar pattern of sexual abuse and further, end up as concubines to the same man as well. While Paranjoti Odaiyar picks up the low-born Thangam to satiate his lust and assert his power over her, he castigates his neighbour Ramalinga Reddiar's wife, Shanta's liaison with the farmhand, Kaliyan. Almost viciously, he switches on his courtyard's lights in order to separate their private moments of passion. He is "nauseated" by the sight (78). As a result, it becomes evident that men, regardless of their Dalit or non-Dalit status, uniformly deny women autonomy over their own sexuality and reproductive choices. Thangam is shunned by her own community and harassed by the landlords' wife's relatives, who punish her for a crime which she did not commit. Instead of blaming Paranjothi, they decide to use Thangam as a pawn to punish him for cheating his wife and warn him off from doing so again. Since Thangam is initially exploited sexually by Paranjothi before being physically assaulted and nearly killed, it is obvious that she is a victim of conflicting masculinities and suffers the weight of caste stereotypes. The landlord's predatory behavior is so extreme that she is even requested to leave the village as if she is the source of the problems. Instead of identifying the true offender, she feels guilty since no one else refers to her as a promiscuous woman, the entire exercise is attempted to be justified. The stereotypical representations of sexuality and its expression exist, and its victims are forbidden from making any claims. Anupama Rao (2009) argues that: The bodies of dalit women are seen collectively as mute, and capable of bearing penetration and other modes of marking upper- caste hegemony because of the over-determination of this violence as caste privilege (76). Caste, class and gender as interacting streams have left extensive scars on Thangam's body. Her body bears severe beatings after being sexually exploited by members of the upper caste. In negotiating a settlement on her behalf, Kathamuthu considers the incident only to be a caste-related issue since he is confident that only then the police will step in and take action. His behaviour towards the women in his home is clearly indicative of his own gender preconceptions. M. Naik and P. S. Kamble pointed out that, "Women are possessions, subjugation of man, they have no independence. Their life is meant for giving pleasure and comfort to their men. They are called 'fair sex' and are shown 'unfair treatment'" (54).

Thangam's body becomes a poignant testament to the myriad difficulties and violence faced by the Dalit women. Nobody is worried about the hardships that she has endured. She struggles to fall asleep the following night, still reeling from the events of the previous evening. Following that specific episode, no one expresses concern for her psychological state. Violence of this sort was like a storm in a calm sea to a childless widow. She recalls as: Whenever she

remembered her life in Puliur, she wept. She equated the incident in the sugarcane field with the repulsive experience of stepping on shit while walking on a riverbank. She could not recover easily from the troubles she had suffered. 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. She would gasp awake at night at the slightest sound. (Naik & Kamble 14)

The way Thangam reacts is very awful. Her long hair is once a concern for her, but she is no longer concerned about it. She covered her head with sari and pins it up without any concern at this point. She sees that Gowri feels a delicate lightness spread across her body as she applied her makeup for school while singing a famous song from the radio, but the feelings vanishes in an instant. At this moment, P Sivakami demonstrates how Thangam, a downtrodden Dalit woman, ends up being a victim of society's patriarchal structure. As Vaishali Sivakumar suggests:

A very famous statement 'Woman is a Dalit from Beginning to End' seems really a naked truth at this stage just because of this struggle of the Dalit women against the society, against their own outset and against the traditions their men follow. The patriarchy crushes down the originality, warmth, delicacy, tenderness and even beauty in them. (3)

The most important thing to be noted is that Thangam approaches Kathamuthu to penalize those people who abuses her, but she gets justice only after she is sexually exploited by him. She is compelled to satisfy in to his demands physically. The only way she has to obtain control over Kathamuthu's women and establish ascendancy in his household is through her tormented and subjugated body, which she is unable to claim as her own. Kathamuthu's betrayal is more of a shock to Thangam than the higher-caste Udayar's vicious lust. Both wealthy men and members of her own community must be feared by her. Meena Kandasamy, one of the most significant writers of Dalit literature, makes the following observation:

In *The Grip of Change* most of the incidents occur on the body of Thangam. Her body becomes the site on which power relations are played out. Her body becomes the site for all kinds of contestations, symbolically making the body of a Dalit woman a territory on which anyone can tread, as against that of an upper caste woman whose body is inviolable. (193)

Know thyself is the basic virtue for defining one's personality and it is the label that showcases one's identity. Man is born free but all over he is in chains; but in the case of dalit, a dalit is born free and forever he is in chains. The free will of dalit is detained from the secluded, as they keep their eyes and mouth closed even when they are pierced to death. Since the dalits lost their uniqueness for generations, they are incapable of identifying themselves in the multitude of masters, except through caste. They plan their character through caste. They called themselves by the name of their caste. This manifest in *The Grip of Change*, when Thangam introduces herself to the Inspector of Police, "I belong to the Hindu Scheduled Caste Community. I am a poor Parayar, an orphan, a widow. I earn my living by working for a daily wage" (Kandasamy 169).

P. Sivakami describes that inequity is a virus that plagues the dalits. Marginalization makes them live their life at the sympathy of those who don't own them. They throw it out as garbage, after squeezing from them the spirit of life. They live, they work, and they breathe just to escape from the horrible clutches of poverty and starvation. The result of starvation really leads them to dreadful consequences. This is apparent when Rangam Pillai, a villager, forcefully slain a young boy for stealing the peanuts. He strucks and kills the boy with a forceful slap to

the face. In an act of extreme brutality, bit off his ear.

Gowri is the only girl who knocked the doors of school and college. She adorned her identity through her education. She is overwhelmed with pleasure on the day when she has to leave for college. She is one among the many, who enter into the college with high hopes, dreams and desires. Education is like an elixir of life for Gowri. Gowri believes that she has violated the limitations imposed by humans. She says, "Her father, her caste and her village merged with the ocean of people. But when the rain stops, the floods recede and thorn bushes emerge. Whenever she went back home for the holidays, caste revealed its murderous teeth like an invincible monster" (Kandasamy 148).

P. Sivakami sears through the darkness of marginalization to reveal not only the brutal realities of caste, poverty, and oppression but also the radiant possibilities of transformation and hope. She confronts the systemic chains like social slavery, economic deprivation, intra- community strife that binds Dalit women and asserts that these are not eternal. Unity, visionary leadership, inter-caste alliances, and education are not mere ideals, but are instruments of liberation, capable of dismantling centuries of injustice. In her vision, Dalit lives are not passive or predetermined, they are arenas of resistance, courage, and renewal. For Dalit women in particular, Sivakami charts a path from invisibility to voice, from subjugation to agency, and from despair to possibility. Her thought resonates with clarity, depth, and urgency, demanding to be heard by all, not just a privileged few. In illuminating the struggles of the silenced and the strategies of survival, she transforms literature into a weapon of conscience and a call for collective awakening. Through her writing, oppression is exposed, hope is proclaimed, and the promise of a just and inclusive society is made unmistakably tangible.

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