

Subalternity and Power Hierarchies in P. Sivakami's *The Grip of Change*

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Abstract

"The differences between men and women is not greater than the differences existing amongst men and women" says American Sociologist. Women cannot be homogenised only by their sex and gender rather they are heterogeneous with respect to their social differences. This paper analyses the existing social differences among women with reference to P.Sivakami's novel, "*The Grip of Change*". According to Patricia Collins, Intersectionality is a model used to analyse complex problems with various dimensions. Intersectionality as a conceptual framework will be used to analyse the differences existing in terms of Class, Caste, Gender, Ethnicity, Marital Status and Kinship. This paper delves to look at the social problems faced by a widow of dalit community. The condition of Thangam as a Dalit widow and no kinship makes her vulnerable to the physical and sexual exploitation of upper caste men, women and lower caste men. The subaltern position of Thangam makes her voiceless and agencyless. Reproductive rights, Property rights, Body Politics, Wrath of Patriarchy and Violence, Victim Blaming, Power politics and Power distribution between men and women and amongst women will be analysed using this novel. This paper also tries to put forward the role of social markers and violence in placing dalit women in the marginal positions of the society.

Keywords: Intersectionality; Marginalisation; Patriarchy; Power politics and distribution; Victim blaming.

Introduction:

'Slavery is terrible for men, but it is far more terrible for women' (Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, 1861) says Harriet Jacobs. According to the statement of Harriet Jacobs, at any given point of time women are the most oppressed in the society and are prone to severe violence. In India, the sufferings of women are generalised despite the existing Socio-hierar-

chical structures. Dalit male writers were aware about the dalit consciousness, but failed to look at the issues of dalit women. This was a discussion in the National Federation of Dalit Women held in the year 1995 by Ruth Manorama to look at the ignored aspects of the oppression of dalit women. These ignored aspects were the major stories of Dalit Female Writers. Dalit female writers term their autobiographical narratives as 'self-stories' or 'self-reportings' (Kumar, 2010, p. 150) because they see their writing as 'a movement' (Limbale, 2007, p. 105) with timely sociological, economic and political base. Dalit women narratives have become a platform for social and political activism against various hegemonic discourses that otherwise exclude the experiences of the Dalit female population. In *Writing Caste/Writing Gender*, Sharmila Rege asserts that 'the intention [of Dalit testimonies] is not one of literariness but of communicating the situation of a group's oppression, imprisonment and struggle' (Rege, 2014, p. 13). Personal narratives of Dalit Female Writers expressed the plight of dalit women to the society. Such writers are Bama, Sivakami, Babytai Kamble, Urmila Pawar, Sharmila Rege, Gogu Syamala, Joopaka Subhadra etc.. These women wrote their personal stories to represent themselves and women of their community.

Dalit life writing 'situates personal and collective suffering within a larger discourse of human rights' (Nayar, 2006, p. 237). These personal narratives put forth the oppression faced by women of their community with respect to their caste, gender, class and other intersectional factors. The intersectional factors are discussed in detail to prove the complexity faced by dalit women. Their identity as a dalit and a woman is always been a problem despite all other social structures. One such novel is P.Sivakami's 'The Grip of Change' which deals with the subalternity faced by a Dalit widow due to the upper caste men and women and also the men and women of Dalit community.

As Gayathri Spivak states in her book "Can the Subaltern Speak?" the subaltern people are not able to talk due to their hopeless condition in the society. If they manage to talk back for themselves, they are ignored, unheard and unseen. This is the condition which Sivakami also portrays in her novels. Sivakami narrates that The grip of Change helped her to write about the plight of Dalit women and also includes herself in the story. This paper deals with the major reasons for oppression and its consequences. The paper will also look into various intersectional factors like class, caste, gender, education, marital status and kinship as the depressing factors thrown on Dalit women.

Thangam a widow of dalit community lives with her in-laws after her husbands' untimely death. Thangam has always been accused of not having children, hence denied property. Her brothers-in-law seize this opportunity to sexually assault her and when she doesn't yield to their demands, they spread rumours that she has become Udayar's concubine. The death of her husband and the harassment of her in-laws forces her to work in the fields of the Landlord Paranjothi Udayar for her survival. Udayar violates her sexually, while she was working in his fields. By knowing this Udayar's wife Kamalam and her brothers beat her up inhumanely and threaten her to leave the village, or else she will be killed. Having been physically exploited, she reaches Athur, a nearby village where she seeks help from Kathamuthu. A respected Dalit leader and an ex-panchayat member, Kathamuthu listens to her patiently only to use this opportunity to establish his power. He takes all her money, sexually exploits and forcefully makes her his third wife. He plays dirty politics to be powerful in his community. Gowri, daughter of Kathamuthu observes all the above-mentioned incidents and turns out to be a different person who is able to break the norms and get educated. This paper delves into the life of a Dalit childless widow, uneducated, financially unstable, powerless woman with many more constraints.

Power Politics and Victimization:

Dalit women suffer many layers of oppression and violence, and there is a necessity to understand the Intersectionality of Dalit women's realities. Thangam the protagonist, being a Dalit widow has been put in the margin of the society. She becomes powerless, while compared to the other women in the novel be it the upper caste or Dalit women. The women characters Kamalam, Kanagavalli, Nagamani, are seemed to be privileged in some or the other way with respect to their class, caste and status within the family and the society. As Michael Kimmel's theory suggests, differences among women seem to create more impact than differences existing between men and women. In this patriarchal society power always lies in the hands of men. However, women also hold power, but that has a difference with respect to the social markers. Kamalam being the upper caste woman holds a certain level of power where she uses her power on Thangam for being with Paranjothi Udayar, whereas she is not able to use her power towards her husband. She uses it on Thangam (who is her subordinate) by physically and linguistically exploiting her.

Udayar's wife Kamalam and her brothers hit Thangam for no fault of hers. She is blamed and battered for Udayar's lust. Kanaganavalli and Nag-

amani being lower caste women and wives of a dalit leader are safer compared to Thangam. Thangam is exploited by men and women of her own family for being a widow and trying to be independent. In addition the upper caste men exploit her for her body and women exploit her for being with the upper caste man Udayar. This proves that Thangam is the more powerless who is exploited for her gender, caste, economic distress and marital status. So the power distribution itself is calculated by the above mentioned social structures which keeps the protagonist in the margin of the society.

Caste is the most demoralizing aspect in a woman's identity who is already located at the periphery of a male dominated society. Caste disparities lead to violence against lower caste women, who are expected to yield to upper caste male chauvinism. The cruelty of caste discrimination is exposed when she moves from passivity to active assertion of her angst against the exploiting masculine brutality and has to suffer social indignation.

B.Mangalam in her article "Caste and Gender Interface in Tamil Dalit Discourse" point 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 out-cast in her community" (p.111). As Jacobs' words point out (to what can be considered as a fact) that in any oppressive situation, women suffer more violence. Dalit women are exploited physically, sexually, psychologically and economically. Thangam the widow is exploited in all possible ways for the power struggle of the patriarchal men. It includes the violence within her in-laws' home, a domestic space. The physical and sexual exploitation of Udayar in the work place which is the public space. The exploitation of Thangam at Kathamuthu's house is to play dirty power politics. Dalit women suffer violence from all sides and corners including their own family. Violence inflicted on Dalit women highlights the 'incongruence between Dalit women's reality and the universal right of women to freedom from any gender-based violence that results in physical, sexual or psychological harm' (Irudayam et al., 2014, p. 3). The atrocities also point to 'both the Indian state and Indian society for failing to respect, protect and fulfill Dalit women's rights' (Irudayam et al., 2014, p. 3). In addition, victims are blamed for the perpetrators' atrocities.

Victim Blaming becomes an important aspect of this novel. Thangam being a dalit is blamed for being a woman, low caste and a widow. She is also accused of being childless and for demanding her husband's proper-

ty. She runs away from her in-laws home and finds a place, escaping the torture of her brother in-laws who tries to make her submit to their sexual desires and when she doesn't yield, they call her a whore. For survival, she works under Paranjothi Udayar who quenches his lust whenever possible. He states that she is lucky to have his hand on her. The whole village blames her for having an affair with Udayar. However, Thangam states that Udayar was the one who raped her and silenced her not to let this out. Even Katha Muthu blames her for destroying the marital life of Udayar. However, it is Thangam who is physically and psychologically hurt and blamed for the fault of Udayar. This intends that victims are blamed for the fault of the perpetrators where the society forcefully silences and takes away the agency of the victims. The victims are not even given the right to talk back and this reminds of the Spivak's Subaltern theory where the subalterns cannot talk back for themselves, despite talking they are unheard and unseen by the society. The portrayal of violence within and outside the domestic space put forth the idea that women of lower caste are exploited physically, sexually, economically and psychologically.

Women have been fighting for their reproductive rights and bodily autonomy for ages. This was the agenda of Radical feminists in the west. To apply in Indian context women are just seen as objects of sex, desire and commodification. In this novel a woman's body is used for the men's desire and sexuality. Desire in terms of attaining political power, creating caste conflict, seize money and using her body for fulfilling the sexual desires. Thangam, Kamlam, Nagamani and other women have no bodily autonomy and reproductive rights. Kamalam being the upper caste woman have no choice but yielding to her husband, despite the affairs he had with other women. She had to stay with Udayar with no choice. Nagamani and Kanagavalli, the wives of Katha Muthu, had to be with him despite their choices of leaving him for all the atrocities he did for them. Thangam is used for the personal gains of both Katha Muthu and Udayar. Udayar uses her to quench his sexual desire where she has no choice, because he is her boss who gives her daily wages.

Katha Muthu uses her body and money to make him look more powerful within his caste and upper caste. He uses her condition and makes her his third wife leaving no room of her choice. Every woman in this novel has been exploited for her reproductive rights and bodily autonomy. They have no hold on their own body, rather have to yield to the men who exploit them in all possible ways. This proves that women are oppressed and victimised for their sexuality and gender. The power of patriarchy, gender differences and caste discrimination pushes them to have no

rights on their own body.

Property rights of women in India have been an important issue for decades despite the existing laws. The social markers class, caste and gender plays a major role in deciding the property issues. In general Dalits are mentioned to be lower class and caste. So they don't have a hold over property rather they work in the fields of the upper castes. However, there are dalit people who has property for themselves and all that would be held by the men of the community. Here comes the social marker, Gender where women are denied their property rights. The protagonist's brothers in-law wanted her to be their whore rather than giving her the share of her property, because she is a woman and no kinship. This intends women are denied of their property rights and especially Dalit women don't have a hold over property. If the dalit woman is childless, she is exploited and pushed to the periphery. She is silenced by the in-laws by threatening to throw her out of the home.

Conclusion:

Thangam the protagonist manages to fight back all the evils imposed on her. When her in-laws threaten her for not giving the property and throwing her out of the home, she moves to a new place to live independently. She starts to work in the fields of Udayar, the Landlord to make ends meet, however he exploits her physically by raping her and using her. When it comes to light she is physically assaulted by Udayar's wife and her brothers. To escape the wrath of upper caste violence, she takes refuge under Kathamuthu, the Dalit leader with the intention of seeking justice. She uses her agency to talk for herself but it goes unheard and unseen because of the hidden evil intentions of him. She uses her to spread his power and uses her money and makes her dependent to depend on him. Eventually, he marries her to be his third wife. This proves that the oppression on Dalit women takes into account not only caste and gender, in addition, class, sexuality, education, power politics and power distribution contributes to the marginalisation of Dalit women.

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