

A Dalit Woman under a Strong Clutch of Patriarchy: A Comprehensive Study of *The Grip of Change*

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“Women always face violence from men. Equality is only preached, but not put into practice. Dalit women face more violence every day, and they will continue to do so until society changes and accepts them as equals.”

-- Bharati, West Godavari district, Andhra Pradesh (who was beaten, verbally abused and forcibly incarcerated by dominant caste men of her village for contesting the panchayat elections in 1999)

Meena Kandasamy, a Leading Dalit Writer

Meena Kandasamy, the poet, presents the basic idea of ‘casteism’ in Indian Politics introduced by M. K. Gandhi. When Mr. Gandhi thought about it and implemented the idea of providing opportunities for the development of *Harijans*, he just wanted to give those ‘down-trodden’ people a stage and support socially. But afterwards it became impossible to remove that ideology of demarcation and so ‘Dalit’ people became an important focus of politics in India. The political parties won and lost with or without the support of Dalits many a times; and promises were given them for a stable life, economically, socially, politically and mentally.

Arjun Dangle on Dalit Literature

But that dream remained a dream only because in the villages and in many other locations, the ‘Dalits’ are treated harshly as rude, rustic and asocial people by the Upper-Caste people. They are always treated as the ‘Other’ in the caste Hindu system. That is the reason why the Dalit writers put forward their literature as the literature of revolt or protest. Arjun Dangle, A Marathi Dalit Writer, editor and activist, says, “Dalit literature is marked by revolt and negativism, since it is closely associated with the hopes for freedom by a group of people who, as untouchables, are victims of social, economic and cultural inequality.” Dangle traces the origin of Dalit

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literature to Ambedkar. Ambedkar's 'revolutionary ideas stirred into action all the Dalits of Maharashtra and gave them a new self-respect. Dalit literature is nothing but the literary expression of this awareness.'

A Critical View of Gandhi

A stanza taken from the poem '*Mohandas Karamchand*' is appropriate to be mentioned here.

"You knew, you bloody well knew,
Caste won't go, they wouldn't let it go.
It haunts us now, the way you do
With a spooky stick, an eerie laugh or two." (21-22, Touch)

The Subaltern in the Village – *The Other of Upper Caste Hindus*

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's well-known question 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' is basically posed against the colonizer – colonized framework with reference to post-colonialist and subalternity deriving from Indian and metropolitan intellectual circles (Limbale 2010, 1-18).

Here, the researcher/writer of this paper wishes to establish the Dalits' subalternity not in a colonial structure, but in the caste-based social, cultural and economic structure of Hindu society, i.e., the village they are living in. Their 'Otherness' appears through their settlements as they cannot live inside the villages. They have to settle outside the boundaries of the villages. Their food, clothes, language, life-style, work and work-style or jobs, education and almost everything is different from the upper caste Hindus. They are living separately and also they are cremated separately. This separation creates this 'Otherness' and the Dalits become the 'Other' of Upper Caste Hindus.

Rejection of Tradition

Dalit literature is marked by an extensive rejection of the tradition. The aesthetics, the language and the concerns of a Brahmanical literature, even at its best, carried within it the signs of the caste-based social and cultural order. This subaltern has started speaking through literature but

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the majority or dominant group suppresses the voice, language, tone, style or tradition of this subaltern group, just like the colonized were victimized by the colonizer because of the power the colonizers had at that time.

That is why Limbale compares the Dalit consciousness with that of a slave's Religious norms, social hierarchical system and many more notions of people make the Dalit unique and distinct. The suppression, segregation, subjugation, dispossession and experiences that resemble those of other groups result from this fundamental reality. Thus, Dalits may attain educational, economic, social and political success, but their unique 'Dalitness' remains. (Limbale 2010, 1-18)

Dalit Women and Patriarchy

Specifically, when the question of women is concerned, the struggle is completely different from the Upper Caste men and women, and even it is different from the problems of Dalit men. 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. They are destroyed almost at every stage and almost by everyone of their world and by the people outside their world.

Meena Kandasamy asks a question, "If the system does not allow a woman to marry a man because he is from another caste ... is it not a direct oppression of her sexuality?"

Discrimination Based on Work and Descent

Discrimination based on work and descent affects globally around 260 million people – also known as Dalits, the 'untouchables' or 'outcastes'. In the countries of South Asia (India, Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka), Dalit women are placed at the absolute bottom of the social hierarchy as they face systemic and structural discrimination threefold: as Dalits, as poor, and as women. The caste system declares Dalit women to be intrinsically impure, 'untouchable', which sanctions social exclusion and exploitation. In class terms, the vast majority of Dalit women are poor; many are landless wage laborers and lack access to resources. As women they

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are subjugated by patriarchal structures, both in the general community and within their own family.

As a result of this Dalit women are subjected to inhumane living conditions and human rights violations; discrimination and violence systematically deny them opportunities, choices and freedoms in all spheres of life. This undermines not only their dignity and self-respect, but also their rights to equality and development. The nature of violence against Dalit women is accompanied by equally systemic patterns of impunity for the perpetrators.

Multiple Deprivations

The causal links that result in the deprivation of political, civil, economic and social rights of Dalit women are multiple. As women, they suffer from gender bias in the same way as non-Dalit women, but caste and class status deprive them further. Compared to non-Dalit women their status of health and education is low, because they are denied access to services. They are also restricted in employment opportunities and confined to ‘unclean’ occupations, such as manual scavenging, due to the notion of purity and impurity embedded in the caste system.

Violence against Dalit women

The experiences of Dalit women present clear evidence on widespread exploitation, violence and indecent, inhumane treatment. Their life stories tell of physical and verbal abuse, forced labour and slavery, trafficking, abduction, and sexual violence, including rape, which give insight into how their social position makes them vulnerable to these human rights violations. Dalit women are especially targeted for the *devadasi* and *jogini* systems of forced prostitution. Numerous other religious practices and specific social customs subject Dalit women in particular to discrimination.

Most often violence against Dalit women is used as a means of punishment and demonstration of power by the dominant castes towards both the woman herself and her community. Other demeaning and degrading abuses include dominant castes forcing Dalit women to parade naked or eat vile substances, such as human faeces.

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Meena Kandasamy

Courtesy: www.meenakandasamy.com

Focus of This Paper



In this paper, the writer wishes to center a Tamil novel named Pazhaiyana Kazhithalum translated by the novelist herself with the name The Grip of Change. This paper's first focus is the minor character – Thangam who is a childless widow and tormented at many different stages of life. Thangam means 'gold' and here, in this novel, she is misused or, we can say, she is

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related to the misdeeds and lust of the people as gold can be related to the yearning of people. Gowri – who is a narrator of the part of the novel and becomes a protest also against the other patriarchal forces, i.e., her father – Kathamuthu – a Dalit leader, and some other Upper Caste Hindus. Gowri and even the novelist – P. Sivakami focuses on the major events and incidents in the lives of the Dalit and the women are portrayed with that true and vivid picture of victimized society. They are doubly marginalized as they remain silent victims of even the Dalit men.



P. Sivakami

Courtesy: www.sunday-guardian.com

Portrayal of Dalit Women’s Silence

Through *Thangam*, the novelist gives a thorough picture of Dalit women’s silence and their being victimized by the Upper Caste Hindus as well as they are sexually exploited by their own caste men equally. Body and misuses of the bodily pleasures become a central motif of the novel and yet the novelist does not glamorize sexuality by smattering the text of the novel with careless elopements and gauche marriages. The majority of the description part in the novel focuses on the incident which takes place with *Thangam* and her body. Her body bears acknowledgment to the difficulties faced by Dalit women. Her tortured body does the opening of the novel. She is a widow and so she becomes a ‘surplus’ woman when is harassed by her brothers-in-law when she refuses to submit to them; she is sexually exploited by her Hindu landlord – *Udayar* and the assault on her by Caste Hindu men owing to the sexual and social misconduct, and so on.

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Land, Body and Fertility

Even her struggle for land is linked to her body and her fertility – she does not have children, and so her brothers-in-law refuse to give her a share in the family land. When she is sheltered and fed by Kathamuthu, her vulnerability is exploited and she is forced to physically yield to his desires. The same body, through which she was oppressed and subjugated, also grants her the power to gain ascendancy in Kathamuthu’s house and gives her dominance over his wives. ‘We will Rebuild Worlds’- a poem by Meena Kandasamy talks about the same kind of experiences of Dalit women and their lives:

“but the crimes of passion/
our passion/ your crimes/ poured poison and pesticide through the ears-nose-mouth/
or hanged them in public/ because a man and a woman
dared to love/ and you wanted/ to teach/ other boys and other girls/ the
lessons of/ how to/ whom to/ when to/ where to/ continue
their caste lines.” (60 – 62, Touch)

Instruments for Joy

They can be the instruments to be enjoyed/ of entertainment or joy for the (people) Men of their case as well as the Men of the Upper castes but they cannot raise their voice against this kind of crimes committed by the men. The men and women of different castes can fall in love but when the society punishes them, it punished the woman only and not the man. Especially, when the love-affair or physical suppression is done on the Dalit woman, she becomes the victim for the man who misuses her as well as the victim of the society.

The Narrator

The narration of the novel The Grip of Change and novel’s surprising turn of events are at once authentic and terrifying. A single woman’s life and victimized status is capable of sparking a caste riot. Her casual existence, marked by mute submission and stubborn resistance at varying points of time, can trigger so many events that will leave several lives forever changed. Thangam described the torment she has gone through to Kathamuthu, “My husband’s relatives spread the

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story that I had become Paranjothi's concubine. That's why Paranjothi's wife's brothers 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, come to help me. I begged for mercy, but they wouldn't stop. They abused me and threatened to kill me if I stayed in that village any longer. They called me a whore." (6, Sivakami)

Assumed Feminine Qualities

Kathamuthu asks her whether she is speaking is truth or not; what actually she has done without thinking about her 'feminine' qualities. How can she speak everything in front of a man who is almost new to her except his name and fame? Still with shame and fear she accepts the truth, 'Udayar has had' (7, Sivakami) her but that is not the complete truth. She explains the truth of events to Kathamuthu, "Sami, is there anywhere on earth where this doesn't happen? I didn't want it. 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. If you think I'm like that, that I'm easy, please ask around in the village. After my husband's death, can anybody say that they had seen me in the company of anyone, or even smiling at anyone? My husband's brothers 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. ..." (7, Sivakami)

Inter-caste Sexual Relations

In conferring and trying to explore into inter-caste sexual relations, the author – P. Sivakami sheds light on how patriarchy gets diluted on its way down the caste ladder. In the affair between the Dalit Kathamuthu and the caste Hindu widow Nagamani, she earns a right place by being 'installed' as his wife in his home. On the other hand, when Paranjothi Udayar forces himself on Thangam, at best engages her as a mistress. She is not brought within the confines of a socially approved relationship because of her being outcast. Then, caste purity is not protected only through control of caste Hindu women, but also through the absence of social sanction to certain inter-caste relationships.

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Even Kathamuthu gets the money from Thangam as she gets it from the Udayar to settle the case outside the court. He tries to be sympathetic to her and starts giving her a special treatment. He, suddenly, feels that Thangam is getting a soft and glossy skin and hair. He gets interested in her and somehow rejects the social and familial bondages by managing to get her by hook or crook. He gets the 'Foreign brandy' (89, Sivakami) for the 'people' of the house: Nagamani, Kanagavalli, Thangam and himself. Even if his deed is remarked by Nagamani that, whatever he is doing is not right, he does not listen to it. And when everybody in the family gets asleep in the afternoon, Thangam – Who is lying in the kitchen – is again raped by Kathamuthu. She groans, "You are like a brother to me ... a brother." (93, Sivakami) but her eyes remain shut as she cannot face a man, who was once compassionate and sympathetic towards her, becomes full of lust and destroys herself psychologically – again into pieces.

Becoming a Woman

Simone de Beauvoir's famous statement "one is not born woman, but, rather, becomes one" suggests the construction of 'woman', definitely the agent of which is the other gender (8, Butler). This is the simple reason why according to Beauvoir, the 'woman' becomes the second sex/ gender. She is placed there by the other gender rather than she herself has taken the position on the second rank. That is how the patriarchy works in every social milieu.

Moreover, according to Butler, a great deal of feminist theory and literature has nevertheless assumed that there is a "doer" behind the deed. Without an agent, it is argued, there can be no agency and hence no potential to initiate a transformation of relations of domination within society. Wittig's radical feminist theory occupies an ambiguous position within the continuum of theories on the other hand; she retains the human subject, the individual, as the metaphysical locus of agency. While Wittig's humanism clearly presupposes that there is a doer behind the deed, her theory nevertheless delineates the performative construction of gender within the material practices of culture, disputing the temporality of those explanations that would confuse "cause" with "result". In a phrase that suggests the intertextual space that links Wittig with Foucault (and reveals the traces of the Marxist notion of reification in both of their theories), she writes:

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“A materialist feminist approach shows that what we take for the cause or origin of oppression is in fact only the mark imposed by the oppressor; the “myth of woman,” plus its material effects and manifestations in the appropriated consciousness and bodies of women. Thus, this mark does not pre-exist oppression ... sex is taken as an “immediate given,” a “sensible given,” “physical features” belonging to a natural order. But what we believe to be a physical and direct perception is only a sophisticated and mythic construction, an “imaginary formation”.” (25, Butler)

The Power in Society

Beauvoir, Butler and Foucault discuss the question of “power” in the society. The distribution of that power focuses on the “construction” of social status of the gender. Because of social milieus being patriarchal, the power remains with them only. They are the powerful personalities who decide what to be done and how.

How do women react to such circumstances where caste and convention and even morality are bypassed? The Dalit woman Kanagavalli, Kathamuthu’s wife, remains a silent bystander and even develops a bonding of friendship with his second wife Nagamani. “Kanagavalli and Nagamani became accustomed to having Thangam in the house. After lunch, they sat together in the coconut grove chewing betel leaves and chatting. They no longer served her left-over food. She ate what they ate.” (88, Sivakami) On the other hand, Kamalam, wife of Paranjothi Udayar, provokes her brothers to assault her husband’s mistress, Thangam. And the climax lies in Thangam ‘earning’ a place in Kathamuthu’s house. Here, caste becomes subsidiary for a small portion and patriarchy becomes a major role where women are used just like the non-living things and this loneliness of the women sheds a particular light on the sick and lusty mentality of the men. Kathamuthu, somehow, rises as an inhuman womanizer here.

The Truth of Dalit Patriarchy

Thus, somehow, with the help of the character of Thangam, Sivakami does not want to focus on the patriarchy of the common society but she wants to expose the truths of the Dalit patriarchy

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and the shocking realities of Dalit Movement as a whole. She does not want to level her novel just on the subject of casts and the basic problems of the social hierarchy but she also wishes the readers to feel the feministic quality which she has as a writer. Her agenda to write the novel The Grip of Change becomes more complicated and critical just because of this reason. When Sivakami wrote this novel, she was just twenty-six. Almost after ten years, she revisited the novel and provided a mature version of experiences in Author's Notes which talks about the mature perspective of life. So the questions raised by her are answered just by her. She portrays Gowri as a victim of her mother's experiences or we can say that she has that courage to move on from the Victimhood of her mother! As a daughter, she is completely against the theory of her father's politics and mentality to misuse women in every possible way. She thinks that even women should have the right to live according to their own thoughts and they should get their own freedom. She can think like that because she is educated and mature person to understand the need of a common woman in a normal life.

Dogs! Dogs!

After the incident of Kathamuthu's sexual assault of Thangam, Gowri shouts, "Dogs! Dogs in this house! Shameless as dogs!"(93, Sivakami) Gowri cannot accept this kind of lusty eyes and behavior in men and particularly in her father that is the reason why she hates her father. She does not like her father's being polygamist and his being loutish. Her notions of the 'civilized' world are completely modern and far from her father's primitiveness or crudeness.

The Word in Marginalization

When we put the margin in the center of any kind of study, every word becomes a pitch for contestation. Sivakami, as a novelist, puts her idea about the marginalized people with a very bright light of criticism and analysis of the society. The novelist tries to focus on the marginalized Dalit women becoming the victims of the patriarchal system of society. Thangam, the lady whose poor and pathetic situation creates havoc in both the areas of society – Cheri as well as the gramam, is a victim on both the sides.(Cheri is a ghetto located at the margin of the village and the Dalit communities are confined to it. The village or gramam is that part where the caste Hindus lives.)

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This shows how suddenly the clouds of patriarchy are in the sky to partially cover the Sun of the human life and its sustainability. This creates a problem as the down-trodden people get a deteriorated place in the social system of hierarchy because of that. Patriarchy does not only destroy the psychological peace of the females living rather suffering under that roof but it also destructs the feministic emotions. Slander becomes slaughter-house for the women like Gowri and Thangam as they are marginalized because of patriarchy and its consequences.

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