

**WOMEN'S STRUGGLE FROM MARGINALITY TO CENTRALITY: A STUDY  
OF P. SIVAKAMI'S THE GRIP OF CHANGE**

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P. Sivakami is a celebrated Dalit writer from Tamil Nadu. She was born in 1957 in a Dalit community. She has done her post-graduation degree in History. After that she thought to take an administrative post. She took up IAS exam and finally became an IAS officer. Being a writer from the core, this job could not give her entire satisfaction to her and she took voluntary retirement from her job and took writing as a full-time profession since 2008. Her works deal with the marginalised status of women and the tyranny of men. An autobiographical novel is a form of novel in which autofiction technique is used autobiographical and fictive elements are merged. The names and places may be changed and the events have resemblance with author's personal life. In the autobiographical novel *The Grip of Change*, Sivakami has used another name Gowri whose life matches with Sivakami. Woman has been depicted as a second-grade gender in her novels and they are loaded with bundles of responsibilities. Vaishali Shivkumar suggests a very famous statement in this context:

'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).

Sivakami's autobiographical novel *The Grip of Change* also deals with the issue of caste discrimination, gender issues, struggles of Dalits and political tactics. This novel narrates the trial and tribulation of a Dalit woman named Thangam. A Dalit leader Kathamuthu tries to save her from the exploitation but there were some personal motives behind it. V. Sangeetha and V. Peruvalluthi write about this novel:

*The Grip of Change* highlights the longing of Dalit to resolve them in this society with their own appraisals among other communities. P. Sivakami, an important Tamil writer, is critical of the Dalit community. (144)

At the outset, Dalits have been shown as victims of caste discrimination. They are not given equal status, respect and position in the society. Thangam comes at Kathamuthu's house for his help due to the encroachment of the Udayars. She tells him that she was physically exploited by Paramjothi Udayar, and when his wife comes to know about it, she, with her brothers, beats Thangam brutally and finds the entire fault in her.

Kathamuthu takes this issue very seriously and he takes immediate action against the culprits. He gives her shelter and registers a case against the oppressors. Thangam was misbehaved because she belonged to a low caste and there was no any man to protect her. She started working in Paramjothi's farm for her livelihood after the demise of her husband. Udayars belong to the upper castes of the village and were dominant also having good property. Paramjothi would use Thangam for his sexual desires. Prof. D. Amalraj comments about Thangam:

Thangam should have stayed in the house of her husband accepting the conditions of her brothers-in-law. Had she remained where she should be, she would not have gone through sexual torture outside her home and met with public disgrace. (44)

When Paramjothi's wife comes to know about this relation, she becomes so enraged that she, along with her brothers, beats her mercilessly. They forget all human feelings and drag Thangam through the street to show others what she has done. This description reminds the readers Rohinton Ministry's *A Fine Balance* in which Thakur Dharmasi's goons kill the Narayan and his family members for having the temerity to ask for a ballot paper. They project their dead bodies on the village square so that they may tyrannise villagers. Such incidents explain the atrocities meted out to low caste people in our country. As soon as Paramjothi comes to know that Kathamuthu has taken up of Thangam's case, he feels much regretful of his illegitimate relationships with Thangam, a Parachi:

He did not fear the police, the courts, the expenditure that he might incur, and the nuisance that would follow. Only the caste concerns made him anxious—the exposure to an affair with a Parachi was humiliating. He would have braved it out even if it had been a murder case of criminal assault. But what a disgrace if he had to own up to a relationship with a Parachi! (32)

Caste discrimination paves the way for the exploitation and oppression. Dalits face all kinds of humiliation by the upper caste people still they must remain silent. Caste antagonism deprives them of their fundamental rights. Revathi Krishnaswami remarks about the casteism:

Caste disappeared from the realm of discourse even as it remained materialized in social practice. Armed not with ritual superiority but with English education, the upper castes retained control of most economic, political, and cultural resources in the modernizing secular nation-state. (76)

Some people relate their caste with their destiny and they do not want to do anything against the caste discrimination they face in their life. All the people on this earth have equal right to live their life. Many social reformers and Dalit activists also have written and struggled for the equality of Dalits. Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar remarks in this context:

The Hindu social order does not recognize equal need, equal work or equal ability as the basis of reward for labour. Its motto is that in regard to the distribution of the good things of life those who are reckoned as the highest must get the most and the best and those who are classed as the lowest must accept the least and the worst. (85)

Another big issue is that every upper caste in hierarchy considers the lower caste people inferior and that's the reason that such people try to suppress the low caste people. According to Sivakami, the people of the different castes keep quarrelling over the trifle.

Kathamuthu forced the upper caste people to pay for the atrocities meted out by the Dalits. They had to compensate for the rehabilitation and exploitation of the Dalits. He was an influential figure that's why Paramjothi request him, "Kathamuthu, can't we settle the matter in the panchayat? Why should we take a matter concerning a woman to the court?" (74). Paramjothi had to pay ten thousand rupees to Thangam and she gets a bit relief. Kathamuthu's thinks that "Those who bear their suffering in patience will ultimately rule the world" (73) invites disagreement in the village among the educated youth.

The strange thing is that though Thangam is saved from Paramjothi's exploitation yet she has to succumb to Kathamuthu. Thus, the hypocrisy of people has been beautifully narrated by P. Sivakami. There are many Thangams who are exploited by the upper caste people and the people of their own caste also leave no stone unturned to exploit them. Thangam's life is made a hell just because she is a woman—a sexual object for everybody. After the death of her husband, his brothers evicted Thangam from his husband's land and they wanted to molest her. She considered Kathamuthu as her guardian but he also used her. It was like "stepping on shit while walking on a riverbank" (87).

P. Sivakami has written about the life of Dalit women in Indian villages how they have to face multiple exploitations in the society. Other women of the village have to suffer all the

humiliation and exploitation silently because they know it well that if their family is not with them who can help them from the society. They preferred to bear everything silently. Here Thangam is a good example who is rescued from one oppressor but her saviour also exploits her later.

Kathamuthi is a Dalit patriarch who gives opportunities to his daughter Gowri to study and thus, Gowri starts understanding the problems of Dalit women. It was her education that she protests against her early marriage because she had seen many things in her own home. She says, "The sufferings that my mother underwent in her marriage! I don't want to be tortured like her by some man" (124).

Thus, education provides her a platform and support to defy her father's decision and she starts working hard for her examination. This incidence resembles with Bama's autobiography *Karukku* in which Bama also prefers to get high education so that she may come out of the cruel clutches of the caste. Likewise, Gowri decides to get higher education in a college. When Gowri crosses the threshold of chauvinistic attitude, disobeying her father's intimidation, she is filled with energy that she has conked out the tyrannical chains. She breaks all the barriers coming on her way and becomes the part of the mainstream:

During floods, waters from overflowing wells mingle with the waters of huge water bodies, transgressing their boundaries. Gowri felt that she had crossed over human-made boundaries—her father, her caste and her village—and merged with the ocean of people. (95)

Gowri's education gives her strength to fight not only for herself but also for other women like Thangam. She condemns her father Kathamuthu's inhuman attitude towards Thangam. She knew it well that her father is taking undue advantage of Gowri that's why when her father rapes Thangam, Gowri vehemently shouts, "Dogs! Dogs in this house! Shameless as dogs!" (93). Gowri has been depicted as a mouthpiece for Dalit women. She stimulates her mother Kangawali and her step-mother Nagamani also for their equal status in the society. In this book, Gowri's life resembles with P. Sivakami's own life that's why it is an autobiographical novel. K. Sachidanandan observes, "Dalit literature empowers the marginalized by retrieving the voices, spaces and identities silenced or suppressed by castiest powers" (14).

Through this novel, P. Sivakami has brought out two women characters Thangam and Gowri from different perspectives. Thangam's life remains full of struggles and exploitations and she has to face many blows of fate one after one. On the other hand, Gowri has been presented as a strong girl who dares to break the patriarchal rules and wants to give equal status to all women.

Thus, this autobiographical novel is an icebreaker for Dalit women. Though they have to undergo the sexual assaults, humiliations, psychological torments and multiple exploitations, yet education may be a ray of hope for the Dalit girls. Thus, it has been given a message to all Dalit women that education can change the lives of Dalit women. Girls like Gowri should come forward to change the social set up otherwise drastic change in the society will be difficult to see in future. Ginni Rani writes about this novel:

Through the character of Gowri, the ideal of education in recovery of Dalit's condition is also established. This novel postulates a crude stereotype of the patriarchy along with a hopeful vision presented by Gowri. The glimpses of the growing consciousness can be seen in the novel. (Rani 686)

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