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Dual Oppression and Deterrents of Equal Rights to Dalit Women: A Post Colonial Reading of Sivakami's *The Grip of Change*

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Abstract:

This paper is an attempt to bring out the sufferings of Dalit women that is echoed in the novel “The grip of change” by Sivakami . She has realistically portrayed the very sensitive issues of Dalits women, particularly in the post independence. Indian society is caste based group where the upper castes exploit the low caste. Human beings are categorized in the name of caste. This inhuman discrimination is the shameful drawback of the Indian society. The novel is about the inter-caste sexual relations and the author sheds light on how patriarchy gets diluted on its way down the caste ladder.

Keywords: Dalit Feminism, Sexual Abuse, Dalit Patriarchy.

Sivakami is one of the earliest Tamil Dalit writers who draw attention to the dual oppression of Dalit women on account of gender and caste at the hands of upper caste men and Dalit men. She was initially an IAS officer, but gave up her job to become a full time writer in 2008. Her first book, “The Grip of Change”, translated in 2009 is based on patriarchy in Dalit society. Dalit patriarchy is an important subject of concern in Tamil Dalit literature. Sivagami's novel prepared the ground for a sustained critique of domestic violence and abuse of Dalit women. Dalit women face sexual and occupational harassment at the hands of upper caste men and also by their own community men.

This paper entitled DUAL OPPRESSION IN THE NOVELS OF SIVAGAMI'S THE GRIP OF CHANGE discusses the inevitable abuse and the violence imposed upon the dalit women for years. The struggle faced by Dalit women is completely different from the Upper Caste women. They are the victims of suppression, isolation and insecurity and are smashed almost at every stage and almost by everyone of their world and by the people outside their world.

The 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.

In this novel, Sivagami questions the sub human status given to Dalit women. She addresses the main theoretical issues connected with feministic ideology. In this novel, *The Grip of Change* the main character - Thangam is a childless widow and she has been tormented at different stages of life. Thangam means 'gold' and here, in this novel, she is misused and she has become a victim as the gold. Gowri - who is a narrator of the first part of the novel becomes a protest and she is against the other male dominant Kathamuthu - a Dalit leader, and unfortunately her father. Gowri focuses on the major events and incidents in the lives of the Dalit and presents how the Dalit women lead their lives in the victimized society. The Dalit women are doubly marginalized as they remain silent victims of even the Dalit men and the upper caste people.

Thangam's husband died and his brothers are not ready to give the share of land to his wife Thangam. "Thangam had rejected the sympathy of those who had not said a word to her husband's brothers when they refused to hand over her husband's share of land. She had lived alone" (The Grip of Change 26 - 27). Even Thangam's 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.

Through Thangam, the novelist gives a thorough picture of Dalit women's silence and their victimized state by the Upper Caste Hindus as well as from their own men. Body and misuses of the bodily pleasures become a central motif of the novel. 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 provides the opening of the novel. She is a widow and so she becomes a 'surplus' woman, when she is harassed by her brothers-in-law even though she refuses to submit to them; she is sexually exploited by her Hindu landlord - Udayar. Thangam described the torment that she has faced :

My husband's relatives spread the 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 (The Grip of Change 6).

Kathamuthu asks her whether Udayar has robbed her femininity. She hesitates to speak everything in front of the stranger. Still, with shame and fear she accepts the truth, 'Udayar has had'. (The Grip of Change 6). She narrates the 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. ..." (The Grip of Change 7).

When Thangam is seduced by Udaiyar, Thangam's relatives are not ready to accept her. They in turn blame Thangam :“ she deserves this and more ! She seduced udayar... Shameless bitch... Ignoring all of us she found succour in him!” (The Grip of Change 26) They think ill of Thangam as they failed to understand the incident fully. Thangam was forcibly raped by Paranjothi with out her willingness. Exploitation of Dailt woman is quite common in India. Her relatives listed Thangam's shortcomings rather than searching for the truth. They say “They beat her up. Good! Why did they leave her alive? the whore thinks too much of herself. She thinks that she is very beautiful. That's why she went after that udaiyar. When she loses her shape, he'll throw her out, and sh'll be in a stable worse than a dog's” (The Grip of Change 28) . Due to the harassment, Thangam left her home. In all the cases, women suffered a lot . In Indian society, if a men involved in immoral activities that will be justified but, if a woman involve in such a activity that is considered as a crime or immoral activity. The Udaiyar commits mistakes, but he is not ready to accept his mistakes. He files fake complaint against her claiming that she has stolen a transistor and cash from his house. Sivagami portrays the sufferings of low caste women through her writing.

Kannamma is an old woman who lived in Puliur. Her son married a woman who is a good and hard working woman. One day her son drank the wine heavily and scolded her wife using foul words. Hence she hanged herself. Kannamma says “two years ago, her daughter in law committed suicide leaving behind two children, aged four and two. The daughter in law had become depressed when her husband, who was usually good to her, had got drunk on today and called her a whore, so she had hanged herself to death” (The Grip of Change 57). A women becomes a victim to a drunkard who tortured her a lot.

After the bitter incident with Udayar's family, Thamgam lived in kathamuthu house. Kathamuthu also misused her. One day Kathamuthu serves wine to Thangam while she is lying on the kitchen floor. Kathamuthu entered the room and

Thangam was still lying down, on her stomach, her hair damp with sweat. Kathamuthu bent down, intoxicated by the alcohol and posture. Why don't you eat something he muttered into her. She did not answer. He smoothed her hair and snaked his palms her armpits and pressed her breasts. She turned over and he fell on her (The Grip of Change 92-93).

Thangam considered him as a brother but Kathamuthu failed to think like that. He seduced her. It shows that there is no difference between Kathamuthu and Paranjothi Udaiyar and both treat woman as a sedative element . These activities express male domination on women. This proves that how Dalit Women are exploited even by her own caste men.

In conferring and trying to explore into inter-caste sexual relations, the author Sivakami sheds light on how male chauvinist gets diluted on its way down the caste ladder. In the affair between 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 and engages her as a mistress. She is not brought within the confines of a socially approved relationship because of her being outcaste. 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.

Lalitha is a Padayachi girl who falls in love with Dalit young boy Elango. Sivagami points out Lalitha's feelings :

The whole village gossips about me. Kadiresan attributed my behaviour to my being the brat of a widow! They talk ill about my mother too. I endure everything for his sake! He doesn't have to experience any such difficulty, does he? She attempted to console herself. (The Grip of Change 107)

Simone de Beauvoir's statement “one is not born woman, but, rather, becomes one” suggests the construction of ‘woman’, definitely the agent of which is the other gender” (Butler 8). 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.

As a mother, Kanagavalli teaches male domination on women to her daughter Gowri. She has a thorough knowledge of male chauvinism that prevails over Indian society. “Gowri constantly goaded Kanagavalli and Nagamani with talks of women's liberation. However, both women were used to bending to Kathamuthu's demands. They were happy for Gowri, but felt it was too late for them”. (The Grip of Change 125) Gowri as a young girl knows how women are tormented by men in particular. She hates marriage as it bonds women with men with chains of torture and harassment.

As a daughter, Gowri is completely against the theory of her father Kathamuthu's politics and mentality of misusing 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 is educated and mature person to understand the need of a common woman.

For the upper caste woman, her family is her world and argues for self-modification centered on individual liberalism. On the other hand, for the Dalit woman, her community is her family and aimed towards the upliftment of the community. In short, her family centered on communitarians. It is a widely held perception that Dalit woman considered as ‘Other’ and it is the impact of the centuries-long alienation and loneliness created by patriarchal and Brahmanical values at all levels in society, which in turn causes the high level of exclusion, structured and domestic violence which every Dalit woman experiences throughout her life. Thus, even among women, she is perceived as ‘Other’. She belongs to the ‘lowest’ category manifested in her condition of social, physical, economic, and political vulnerability.

Kathamuthu's sister narrates the bitter incident when she was seduced by the caste Hindu old man . She describes the scene :

we gathered huge bundles of grass, twelve of us, and carried it to the Gounder's house. I was the last one to come out. That old Gounder tried to lock me in the

cattle shed. I pushed him with all my strength and came out shouting. “old rascal!” by the time I reached home I couldn’t control my sobs (The Grip of Change 155).

The Dalit woman is never a fighter but always a victim. In order to counter - struggle the misrepresentations of Dalit women in Indian English literature, the first generation of Dalit writers constructed Dalit women in Dalit literature.

The female characters in Dalit Literature are dynamic and not static. Dalit writers do not look upon widows, prostitutes, deprived women, as Dalit, the exploited, with compassion alone; but they make them towards radiance. In the stories and novels of Annabhau, Shankar Rao Kharat, Baburao Bagul and others, though the nature of the struggle of woman in the beginning is individual, later it becomes class conflict... As a consequence of this, Dalit female characters end the journey of deep darkness and behold dreams of sunrise... They fight for truth and for themselves. They revolt to protect their self- respect... The revolt of Dalit women is not person-centered but society-centered... That is why Dalit writers do not portray Dalit women as hollow identities, overflowing with love as embodiments of sacrifice (Prasad 46).

Unlike Dalit men, only a few Dalit women have written their autobiographies, their narratives of pain. Most of them write in regional languages and they have hardly been translated into English. The position of Dalit women is as marginalized in Dalit literature as they are in their community. Education gives them the chance to narrate their voices of distress, and sorrows in their autobiographical writings. The contribution of Dalit women writers to Dalit Literature is significant and Sivagami is one among them who always focuses the plight of Dalit women .

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