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## Engaging with the Voice of the Twice-Cursed: Self-Reflexive Narrative in P. Sivakami's *The Grip of Change*

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### **Abstract:**

The Dalit novel represents self-critical and self-reflexive voice of the Dalit movement and politics. It offers an ethical and moral reflection on the Indian society, especially, on the Dalit life world. The Dalit novel problematizes the binaries between the dominant and the oppressed; the literary gaze shifts towards the internal dynamics of the Dalit life world. To use Paramjit S. Judge's idea, Dalit novel emblemizes the third disposition of Dalit writing; it means it moves beyond questions of the existence and identity, and visualizes dalit liberation in a more inclusive fashion. It complicates Dalit discourse and explores the contours of shifting Dalit consciousness. This literary form contemplates Dalits and their life-world from the different points of view; it focusses on the contradictions and paradoxes of Dalit communities. Engaging with P. Sivakami's *Pazhaiyana Kazhithalum (The Grip of Change)*, this paper investigates the novelistic representations of the complex Dalit life world, and examines how the novel perceives this world from the perspective of a Dalit woman who remains a doubly oppressed and marginalized figure in the casteist and patriarchal world. The self-reflexive narrative of the novel, apart from charting the trajectory of the protagonist's mental, intellectual and spiritual growth, assesses the trajectory of the Dalit movement and also acts as a critique of caste hegemony. Book Two of the novel titled as "Author's Notes" remains the focal point of scrutiny.

**Keywords:** Dalit Novel, Self-Reflexive, Narrative, Caste, Novelistic, Representation.

### **Introduction: Self, Society and Dialogic Narrative**

Lukacs rightly observes, 'In the novel the subject, as observer and creator, is compelled by irony to apply its recognition of the world to itself...for great epic literature.' (Lukacs 75). *Pazhaiyana Kazhithalum (The Grip of Change)* is the first novel by a Dalit woman writer; it was originally produced in Tamil in 1989 and later got translated into English in 2000 by P.

Sivakami herself. Its major intervention is that *The Grip of Change* focusses on the different layers of marginalization Dalit women face emerging due to the hegemonic structures of class, caste and gender. It foregrounds the intersectional nature of Dalit women's oppression and marginalization. It unveils how various structures of power like caste, patriarchy and class operate intersectionally to produce vulnerable and abject subjects. In Dalit novels, Dalit women are not delineated as passive and suffering individuals nor are they romanticized. *The Grip of Change* brings to the fore the internal contradictions plaguing the Dalit castes; it humanizes Dalit communities and thus underscores that their world is also shot with paradoxes and blind spots.

There emerges a humanistic treatment of Dalits in *The Grip of Change*; multiple shades of human character are revealed in the novel; Dalits come across as morally upright, assertive, committed, generous and also as opportunistic, individualistic, greedy, licentious. Dalit writing, philosophically, hinges on the idea of human sociality, to use Emmanuel Levinas' concept, to indicate our responsibility towards others. In Dalit philosophy, the Other unveils itself in its alterity not by negating the 'I'. It has its own ethic of the Other. One understands the transcendence and heteronomy of the Other. Dalit philosophy conceptualizes subjectivity as essentially ethical. Our care for others determines our subjective being-in-the-world/Dasein. Luckacs' argument is significant in that he perceives reflection as "the deepest melancholy of every great and genuine novel" (Luckacs 85). Dalit novel conceptualizes life beyond dichotomies.

Dalit novel problematizes the binaries between the dominant and the oppressed; the literary gaze shifts towards the internal dynamics of the Dalit life world. To use Paramjit S. Judge's idea, Dalit novel emblemizes the third disposition of Dalit writing; it means it moves beyond questions of the existence and identity, and visualizes dalit liberation in a more inclusive fashion. It complicates Dalit discourse and explores the contours of shifting Dalit consciousness. This literary form contemplates Dalits and their life-world from the different points of view; it focuses on the contradictions and paradoxes of Dalit communities. Engaging with P. Sivakami's *Pazhaiyana Kazithalum (The Grip of Change)*, this paper investigates the novelistic representations of the complex Dalit life world, and examines how the novel perceives this world from the perspective of a Dalit woman who remains a doubly oppressed and marginalized figure in the casteist and patriarchal world. The self-reflexive narrative of the novel, apart from charting the trajectory of the protagonist's mental, intellectual and spiritual growth, assesses the trajectory of the Dalit movement and also acts as a critique of caste

hegemony. Book Two of the novel titled as “Author’s Notes” remains the focal point of scrutiny.

### **Viewing the World from Dalit Feminist Lens**

For P. Sivakami, writing “remains a process of understanding and sharing” (vii). For her, writing is a deeper philosophical, intellectual and ideological engagement with human life. As an example of self-reflexive narrative, she candidly confesses in “the preface to the novel” that she penned down *The Grip of Change* at the age of twenty-six; however, when she browsed through it a few years later she realized that the narrative had certain limitations. With the mediations on life by a mature person, she could take a re-look at the author more critically, and this analytical reflection culminated in the production of the second book of the novel called *Author’s Notes*. Sivakami observes, ‘It is natural for me as a Dalit and a woman-factors decided by birth-to write about those factors. And thereby I firmly place myself within a circle, influencing the politics surrounding me’ (vii). Her specific location as a doubly marginalized person in casteized and gendered social order equips her with a broader vision to comprehend the working of the society and the dynamics of politics.

The novel titled as *The Grip of Change* {1986 (2009)} was translated by the author herself. It is divided into two books- Book 1 titled as “Kathamuthu” and Book 2 titled as “*Asiriyar Kurippu*” (*Author’s Notes*). The novel presents a multi-layered narrative; it critiques caste system and patriarchal order; however, at the same time, the novel offers a scathing critique of Dalit patriarchy and Dalit politics. Kathamuthu, the protagonist of the novel in Book One, emerges as a typical patriarch though he is assertive, courageous and well-versed in the dynamics of grass root power struggle and politics. On the one hand, he whisks helpless Dalits out of trouble, ironically, on the other hand, he exploits and fleeces them. He is a formidable Dalit leader; he rescues Thangam, a Dalit woman, from the clutches of the upper-caste landlord-Paranjothi Udayar who sexually exploited her when she used to work in his fields. Kathamuthu uses his clout with the state machinery and shakes the village hierarchy to secure justice for Thangam. Kathamuthu has two wives- Kanagvalli and Nagamani. Gowri and Sekharan are two kids of Kathamuthu and his first wife-Kanagvalli. Nagamani though hailing from an upper-caste community settled with him because of his charisma as a leader and more so because of her being rendered a ‘surplus woman’ (Ambedkar used this term to refer to a widow in a hierarchical society controlled by caste and gender norms). Their competitive relationship always helps Kathamuthu to stay in power as they keep vying for his attention and love. His intervention on behalf of Thangam proves his understanding of local power politics. He gets Thangam’s complaint drafted by Gowri. He changes the script to suit the immediate

context and to strengthen her case in the court. Thangam is a poor widow who has no children because of which her husband's relatives do not give her share in her husband's property and malign her character saying that she had become Paranjothi's mistress. After her husband's death, Thangam began to work as a labourer in Parantho Udayar's fields. Paranjothi is a rich upper-caste landlord who is highly dominant because of his wealth and power. He rapes Thangam as he perceives her weak and helpless because she hails from a lower caste community. Sivakami mentions, "She was his servant. Besides, Thangam was no princess or minister's daughter. For that matter, she did not even have a husband. There would not be soul to rescue her if he imposed himself on her. Moreover, she was only a lower-caste labourer". (32). There are so many factors which add to Thangam's marginality; her caste, class, gender render her vulnerable in the society dominated by the culture of caste and patriarchy. It is mentioned in the novel that Thangam resists the sexual violence unleashed on her by Paranjothi. The hypocrisy of the casteized self is exposed in the fears and anxieties of Paranjothi. His gnawing worry is about the unravelling of his affair with a *Parachi* ( a woman of Parayar community which is an untouchable community in Tamil Nadu). It is pertinent to recall Arundhati Roy's statement 'to rape is pure, to love is impure' in the context of the sexual exploitation of Dalit woman's body. The whole discourse of purity and pollution hinges on double-standards, deceits and lies of culture controlled by casteism and gendered power relations. Paranjothi's words beautifully illustrate it

All the people in the village knew! He cursed Thangam, 'Ungrateful whore'! Even if she was hurt, she was hurt by the hand adorned with gold! A Parachi could have never dreamt of being touched by a man like me! My touch was a boon granted for penance performed in her earlier births! And then the dirty bitch betrays me! How can I face the world with my name thus polluted?' (31).

We can use Gilles Deleuze's terms to comprehend the justification of sexual violence. Such rationalization can emanate from a casteized and majoritarian self. The intriguing thing to note is the sense of superiority enjoyed by the casteized individual who deems sexual use of a Dalit woman's body as an act of pity on her. Indeed, the culture of caste and patriarchy is superman's salvation and common man's condemnation. The morality of a society which is predicated on caste and gender relations is a farce. As a single woman, Thangam becomes more vulnerable, which strengthens her husband's brothers' confidence to make sexual overtures towards her. In Ambedkar's words, she is 'surplus woman' (Ambedkar 10-11). As a single woman, she becomes a threat to the endogamous order of caste, which can be addressed into

two ways- either she is burnt on the funeral pyre of her husband or permanent widowhood is imposed on her with strict implementation of the system of discipline and punish.

### **Engaging with Self-Reflexive Narrative**

Book Two titled as “Author’s Notes” of *The Grip of Change* looks back at the narrative of Book One. The self-critical impulse distinguishes the novelistic tradition from other literary traditions. The Second Book of *The Grip of Change* entails a narrative self-reflexivity as the literary gaze shifts to the narrative of the First Book of the novel. It can be termed as a metafiction because of its commentary on the narrative of the first book. Metafiction is fiction about fiction. In the novel, we discern and interpret the world from the prism of Gowri who is a Dalit woman. We get a glimpse into the mechanics of caste and patriarchy through the internal musings of a self-conscious narrator. Self-reflexivity refers to self-inquiry through reflection on lived experience that helps an individual to reach self-realization. Self-reflexivity indicates not just self-referential process; it is a self-transforming process. To be reflective does not necessitate the other where as to be reflexive requires the other and a consciousness of the act of self-scrutiny. (Chiseri-Strater 117). It results in self-change as the self-knowledge arising from reflection constitutes an important part, and re-structures one’s understanding of the world. In philosophy of idealism from Plato to Pearson, reflexivity is seen as pivotal to objective knowledge. It is described as an original act of self-poiesis. (Popoveniuc 210). Reflection aims to look at things objectively by distancing oneself from one’s experiences. This can be discerned in *Author’s Notes* because Sivakami scrutinizes *The Grip of Change* in *Author’s Notes* from a temporal distance. Reflection enables us to locate gaps between theories and practices, and critical reflection studies incidents as events of the past and draws lessons for future. (D’cruz et al. 83). While reflexivity engages with the idea of knowledge formation that structures actions in a specific context.

It is crucial to understand the differences and similarities between reflexivity and reflectivity in order to decipher how Sivakami’s text engages with both of processes of reflexivity and reflectivity. Possibly, there are three variations of the meaning of the concept ‘reflexivity’. (D’cruz 74). The first dimension of reflexivity refers to well-thought out response of an individual to an immediate event or situation and exercising choice for further action. For instance, in *Author’s Notes*, the narrator describes an event where Gowri was actively working with college’s students’ association and was calculating marks allotted by the jury for an oratorical contest, when a participant walked up to her and insisted to find out her marks before they were declared. However, Gowri declined to fulfil her demand, which enraged the

contested

“who had walked away after calling her a Scheduled caste bitch. The contest had nothing to do with the caste system. She was left wondering why men and women of the upper castes were governed so strongly by caste and employed it to abuse others at every possible opportunity. Perhaps the novelist had been affected by such prejudices. (Author's Notes 140-141).

One can see that Gowri reflects on the psychological effect of social prejudice. The novelist ponders over if she has been influenced by caste prejudice as caste is a social relation and practice as caste roles are practiced and are disseminated by both Dalits and non-Dalits. Here there is a reflection and examination of the self which could be instrumental in shaping the future choices. (Simon 216).

The second variation of reflexivity is concerned with “an individual's self-critical approach that questions how knowledge is generated and, further, how relations of power operate in this process”. (D'cruz et al. 75). Gowri's thinking about the casteist behaviour of the participant propels the former to dig deep into the historical legacy of caste. This reflection of Gowri, according to Simon, can be deemed as second dimension of reflexivity. Individual tales and experiences help in creating knowledge and thus construct the 'self'. (Simon 216). The third dimension of reflexivity is related to its second variation with the understanding that various factors shape knowledge production, however it also takes cognizance of emotions and how there is strong link between thoughts and feelings and vice-versa. (D'Cruz et al. 75). It helps us understand the reasons underlying an emotional response to a situation. In *Author's Notes*, the narrator recollects an instance Kathamuthu asks Gowri to wear another blouse which would not expose her back; Gowri reacts by pulling her sari on her blouse. Her inner thoughts and the conflicting act of covering her back unveils her emotional nervousness in this context. (Simon 217). In this interaction with her father, Gowri comprehends the social convention with regard to the female body, and also understands there is a hierarchical relation between her and her father.

Sivakami's *Author's Notes* came out in 1997, eight years after the publication of *The Grip of Change*. The *Author's Notes* is primary a supplementary narrative to *The Grip of Change*; It shares a critical relation to the main text. Importantly, this text divides the 'authorial persona' into four personae': writer- as- Gowri (who is an important character in the novel),

narrator, writer of *The Grip of Change* (Sivakami), and the Authorial self of the *Author's Notes* (which is also Sivakami) (Simon 210). The self-reflexive narrative is described as a kaleidoscopic form of writing in which we see multiple authorial selves and personae. Simon views translation as another facet of authorial self or function. She further argues that kaleidoscopic writing and generic experimentation constitute a part of “literary performativity that celebrates an aesthetic of impurity that aims to provoke deep questions about the kinds of identities and selves produced by caste, and how to disidentify from them.” (Simon 211). The purpose of introducing multiple personae is to offer different perspectives on things. The conscious use of the third person in the *Author's Notes* unravels the narratorial persona. The narrator begins by unveiling another person, ‘she’, who is “at the town mentioned in the novel *The Grip of Change*” (131). As the title of the second part of the novel is *Book Two Gowri: Author's Notes*, and the person being mentioned is the first person feminine singular pronoun as ‘she’ is most probably Gowri. So, we can consider Gowri as the ‘author’ in the *Author's Notes* as the title is also indicative of it. Moreover, the narrator shares that ‘she’ intends to collect details about the author of the *Grip of Change* (131), but “her memories faded and she only remembered in snatches” (131). It hints at the fact that ‘she’ is Gowri who has revisited her home. Besides, one of Gowri’s uncles mentions about her father, Kathmuthu (*Author's Notes* 134). It clearly indicates that it is Gowri from *The Grip of Change*, who is addressed as ‘she’. A close reading of *Author's Notes* reveals that the text has three narratorial voices- the narrator, ‘she’ (Gowri), and the writer of the novel (Sivakami). There are many instances in the text which show that Gowri, narrator and the author are the one and the same person. For example, how does Gowri’s mother know the author? Moreover, she remembers that one of Gowri’s relatives asks her why engages in writing “this and that” when her level of education will allow her to step out of the car onto the carpet”. (142). The relative suggested that Gowri should abandon writing. The narrator informs us that such comments discomfited the “novelist”. (142) although the remarks were meant for Gowri. This further signals that Gowri and the novelist of *The Grip of Change* are Sivakami.

In addition, Gowri examines the spatial and temporal settings described in the novel learning that the house and the garden “looked different” (131). Gowri ponders over the fact that the year *The Grip of Change* was produced, the author had “twelve brothers and sisters” and her household “had approximately two dozen children” (131) while only two siblings are mentioned in the novel. Interestingly, three personae overlap many a time. It appears that Gowri and Sivakami are same and the narrator is scrutinizing Gowri and the author. The use

of the third person narrative in the Author's Notes enables the author to critically reflect on the events, people and space. Additionally, it accords narrative self-reflexivity to the novel. Linda Anderson in her book *Autobiography* mentions Roland Barthes' claim that "a coherent self is a fiction, that it must always involve being seen from a distance, through the perspective of the Other" (Anderson 68). In the Author's Notes, Gowri studies the author's past and the narrator looks at the author's trajectory of development from Gowri to her present self as a wise, critically conscious and reflective being. More importantly, Sivakami, is trying to comprehend her 'self' from a critical distance as a different being, from the prisms of the narrator and Gowri. In words of Surya Simon, the use of multiple personae by P. Sivakami may be read as a form of kaleidoscopic writing. (Simon 214). Helen Groth's argument is relevant here. She argues that delineating an event as kaleidoscopic produces "a sense of perpetual transformation" ... kaleidoscope keeps the observer in a visual field that never lets the eye rest and thus, creates "a visual effect" that tests "the limits of verisimilitude" (Groth 217). Simon opines that kaleidoscopic writing generates a transformative narrative such as the Author's Notes, which keep the reader on their tenterhooks by involving the reader with multiple personae. Such a transformative narrative style creates a space for constant reflexivity not just reflectivity. (Simon 214). One can discern the functioning of both the processes-reflexivity and reflectivity in-Sivakami's text. However, reflexivity is a more appropriate for self-scrutiny and critical investigation of text, narrative and characters.

### **Conclusion: Towards Kaleidoscopic Vision**

Dalit novelistic narrative reflects the expanding Dalit imagination as it indicates the journey of Dalit literary tradition from its overt engagement with the political to its deep commitment to the ethical. It foregrounds the Dalit authorial figure's achievement of aesthetic distance and to critically engage with their literary works. It elevates Dalit literature from its sociological base to more literary and philosophical plank. Sivakami's attempt to introduce multiple personae leads to the complication of truths about Dalit society, because in the postmodern society, truth is inaccessible as meaning is perennially deferred. Michel Foucault's notion of authorial functions can be employed to understand Sivakami's use of plurality of personae. Using Simon's argument, it can be said that a careful study of personae in *Author's Notes* enables us to understand that the author has multiple functions such as 'author as source', 'author as a writer', author as a 'critic', and 'author as a translator'. The close examination of the making of the self as protagonist, narrator and author shows the use of self-reflexive narrative in *The Grip of Change*.

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