

Women in Dalit Literature in P. Sivakami's the Grip of Change

OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 13

Special Issue: 3

Month: April

Year: 2026

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

Citation:

Shimsy, A., and
K. Sankar. "Women
in Dalit Literature in
P. Sivakami's the Grip
of Change." *Shanlax
International Journal
of Arts, Science and
Humanities*, vol. 13,
no. S3, 2026, pp. 52–54.

DOI:

[https://doi.org/10.34293/
sijash.v13iS3-Apr.10489](https://doi.org/10.34293/sijash.v13iS3-Apr.10489)

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Abstract

*Dalit literature has emerged as a powerful medium for expressing the experiences of marginalized communities in India. It challenges the oppressive caste system and exposes the social, political, and economic injustices faced by Dalits. Within this discourse, Dalit women occupy a unique position as they experience both caste discrimination and gender oppression. This article examines the representation of Dalit women in Indian English Dalit literature with special reference to P. Sivakami's novel *The Grip of Change*. The study analyzes how the novel portrays the intersection of caste and patriarchy while highlighting the struggles of Dalit women for dignity, justice, and identity. The article argues that the novel not only critiques upper-caste dominance but also questions patriarchal structures within Dalit communities, thus contributing significantly to Dalit feminist discourse.*

Keywords: Dalit Literature, Oppression, Dalit, Gender Discrimination, Marginalization.

Indian society has long been structured by a rigid caste system that has marginalized certain communities for centuries. Among the most oppressed groups are the Dalits, who were historically considered "untouchable" and excluded from social, cultural, and economic opportunities. The emergence of Dalit literature represents a significant literary and social movement that challenges this historical injustice and provides a platform for marginalized voices.

Dalit literature is not merely a form of artistic expression but also a powerful instrument of social protest. It seeks to expose the harsh realities of caste discrimination and to demand equality and human dignity for oppressed communities. Inspired by the ideas of social reformers such as Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit writers use literature to question the hierarchical structures that sustain inequality. Within Dalit literature, the experiences of women are particularly significant. Dalit women face multiple forms of discrimination due to the intersection of caste, gender, and class. Their lives are shaped by both external oppression from dominant caste groups and internal patriarchal structures within their own communities.

P. Sivakami's novel *The Grip of Change* is a notable work that addresses these issues. The novel provides a critical examination of caste and gender relations in rural Indian society and highlights the struggles of Dalit women who seek justice and dignity. Dalit

literature emerged as a response to the exclusion of marginalized communities from mainstream literary traditions. For a long time, literature in India was dominated by upper-caste perspectives that either ignored the realities of Dalit life or portrayed them through stereotypical images. Dalit writers challenged this exclusion by writing about their own experiences and by presenting authentic representations of social oppression. Their works emphasize realism, protest, and resistance against injustice. The themes commonly found in Dalit literature include caste discrimination, poverty, social humiliation, violence, and the struggle for dignity. These themes reflect the everyday experiences of Dalit communities and highlight the structural inequalities that exist in Indian society.

Dalit literature therefore functions as both a literary movement and a political statement. It challenges dominant narratives and encourages readers to confront the realities of caste-based oppression. Dalit women experience a unique form of marginalization that cannot be understood solely in terms of gender discrimination. Their oppression is shaped by the intersection of caste, gender, and class. Unlike upper-caste women, whose struggles are often associated primarily with patriarchal restrictions, Dalit women must also contend with caste-based violence and social exclusion. As a result, they are often described as facing double or triple oppression. Dalit women are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and violence because of their social position. In many cases, they lack access to education, economic resources, and legal protection. These factors make it difficult for them to challenge the structures that perpetuate their oppression.

Dalit feminist thinkers have emphasized the importance of recognizing these unique experiences. They argue that mainstream feminist movements have often overlooked the specific struggles of Dalit women. As a result, Dalit women's voices have remained marginalized within both feminist and Dalit political movements. The *Grip of Change* presents a powerful narrative that explores the complex relationship between caste and gender. The novel centers on the character Thangam, a Dalit woman who becomes the victim of sexual exploitation by an upper-caste landlord. Seeking justice, Thangam approaches Kathamuthu, a prominent Dalit leader who claims to advocate for the rights of oppressed communities. Initially, Kathamuthu appears to support her cause and challenge the injustice she has suffered. However, as the narrative develops, it becomes clear that Kathamuthu's actions are driven by his desire for power and authority rather than genuine concern for Thangam's welfare. This revelation exposes the contradictions within social movements that claim to fight for equality while simultaneously perpetuating patriarchal control. Through this portrayal, the novel highlights the vulnerability of Dalit women within both caste and gender hierarchies.

One of the central themes of the novel is the critique of patriarchal power structures. While the narrative exposes the brutality of caste oppression, it also reveals how patriarchal attitudes persist within Dalit communities themselves. Kathamuthu's character represents the complexities of leadership and authority within marginalized communities. Although he positions himself as a champion of Dalit rights, his behavior toward Thangam reflects deeply ingrained patriarchal attitudes. This portrayal challenges the assumption that caste solidarity automatically leads to gender equality. Instead, the novel suggests that true social transformation requires confronting both caste discrimination and patriarchal domination.

The ideas presented in *The Grip of Change* resonate strongly with the principles of Dalit feminism. Dalit feminist scholars argue that caste and gender oppression are closely interconnected and cannot be analyzed separately. Dalit feminism emphasizes the need to include the voices and experiences of Dalit women in discussions about social justice and equality. It also challenges the limitations of mainstream feminist discourse, which often focuses primarily on the experiences of upper-caste women. By highlighting the struggles of Dalit women, the novel contributes to a broader understanding of intersectional oppression and encourages readers to rethink traditional

approaches to feminism and social reform. Dalit literature has played a crucial role in challenging caste-based discrimination and giving voice to marginalized communities in India. Within this literary tradition, the representation of Dalit women is particularly significant because it reveals the complex interaction between caste and gender oppression. P. Sivakami's *The Grip of Change* provides a compelling exploration of these issues. Through the story of Thangam, the novel exposes the multiple layers of injustice faced by Dalit women and questions the patriarchal structures that exist within marginalized communities. The novel ultimately suggests that meaningful social change requires a comprehensive approach that addresses both caste inequality and gender discrimination. By foregrounding the experiences of Dalit women, Dalit literature continues to contribute to ongoing debates about justice, equality, and human dignity.

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