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Voices in Shadows: The Dalit Women's Fight in Sivakami's *The Grip of Change*

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Abstract

*Human lives and experiences are fundamental to literature. It reflects all of the facets of the society. It serves as a medium through which the social problems that are occurring in the local community are depicted. Renowned author Sivakami examines the hardships faced by Dalit individuals, particularly women, across the country. Her translated book *The Grip of Change* describes Dalit women's predicament in society in dramatic detail. Sivakami depicts a variety of women in *The Grip of Change* who endure various forms of social tyranny. The two elements that put Dalit women in the lowest social classes are the author's primary areas of concentration. Being a Dalit woman, Sivakami has experienced caste, gender, and class oppression.*

Keywords: Underprivileged Women, Gender Hierarchy, Inequality, Gender Identity, Alienation

Literature not only represents people's lives, but it also revolves around their livelihoods and those of society. It reflects the many facets of the immediate society. It serves as one of the vehicles for portraying both the brighter and darker aspects of society. It sheds light on the social ills that exist in society. The twenty-first century reveals numerous types of literature in and throughout the world. One such literature of the twenty-first century is 'Dalit literature.' Dalit literature first emerged in India around the 1930s. This literature focusses mostly on the lives of Dalits. Dalit literature acquired popularity in Maharashtra, and it eventually expanded into numerous regional literatures across India. Baburao Bagul used the term 'Dalit Literature' for the first time at a Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangha (Maharashtra Dalit Literature Society) meeting in Mumbai. Following him, several Dalit writers emerged and began the Dalit Movement through their writings. As D.R. Nagaraj observes: "The Dalit Movement, I suggest, is a product of the mental state that believed in the firm rejection of the Gandhian model of tackling the problems of Untouchables, and that has shaped the contours of its themes and patterns." (21-22) They illustrate the harsh realities faced by Dalit women, reflecting how societal and communal attitudes

impact their lives. Much like African-Americans, Dalits endure both physical and psychological suffering due to their marginalized status. They experience division and discrimination along lines of caste, gender, and socioeconomic class. Similarly to African-Americans, Dalits strive to assert their identity, cultivate their literature, and enhance their standing within society. Sharankumar Limbale has stated, “Dalit literature is precisely that literature which artistically portrays the sorrows, tribulations, slavery, degradation, ridicule and poverty endured by Dalits. This literature is but a lofty image of grief.”(30)

Initially, Dalit writings were primarily composed in Marathi. Over time, numerous Dalit writers began to express their experiences and struggles in various regional languages. As a result, Dalit literature gradually expanded its presence across different literary genres and became an integral part of the broader literary landscape. Arjun Dangle has defined Dalit literature as: “Dalit literature is one which acquaints people with the caste system and untouchability in India... It matures with a sociological point of view and is related to the principles of negativity, rebellion and loyalty to science, thus finally ending as revolutionary.”(319).

Prominent Dalit women writers such as Shantabai Kamble, Bama Faustina Susairaj, Urmila Pawar, Gogu Shyamala, P. Sivakami, Vijila Chirappad, and Babytai Kamble have made significant contributions to literature by articulating the experiences of Dalit women. Their writings shed light on the multifaceted nature of their oppression, revealing how Dalit women face discrimination not only from within their own communities but also from the larger society. These authors address issues of gender, caste, and socio-economic marginalization in their works, providing a nuanced perspective on the struggles and resilience of Dalit women.

This paper focuses on P. Sivakami’s novel *The Grip of Change*, which offers a profound exploration of the triple oppression experienced by Dalit women. Through its narrative, the novel delves into how these women are simultaneously marginalized by their caste status, gender, and economic conditions. By examining Sivakami’s work, this paper aims to highlight the intersections of these layers of discrimination and to contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by Dalit women.

P. Sivakami, a distinguished Dalit writer born in 1957 in Tamil Nadu, has made significant contributions to literature while navigating personal experiences of discrimination due to her caste and gender. Raised in various parts of India, she faced caste-based prejudice and was also suppressed by her own father due to her status as a woman. In addition to her literary achievements, Sivakami served in the Indian Administrative Services (IAS), demonstrating her versatility and dedication. Sivakami’s works, all written in Tamil, address the issues of segregation and marginalization faced by Dalits in India. Her notable novel *The Grip of Change* was initially published in Tamil and later translated into English by the author herself. Originally titled *Pazhaiyana Kazhithalum*, the Tamil version was first penned when she was twenty-six. A decade later, she revisited and revised the novel, adding a section called *Asiriyar Kurippu* (The Author’s Note), where she reflects on the novel from a third-person perspective and concludes it with an autobiographical touch.

In *The Grip of Change*, Sivakami explores the intersecting factors of caste, gender, and class that contribute to the oppression and marginalization of Dalit women in society. Through her narrative, she provides a profound examination of how these elements collectively impact the lives of Dalit women, offering insights into their struggles and resilience. The main character of the book is Thangam, a poor widow of a Dalit who works as a wage labourer in the fields owned by an upper caste man named Paranjothi Udayar. She becomes the “other” in her own country after being sexually assaulted in the sugarcane field by the owner, Paranjothi Udayar. The fact that Thangam is a member of the lower caste and Paranjothi Udayar is an upper caste member explains his behaviour. Paranjothi Udayar expresses that “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!...How can I face the world with my name thus polluted?"(Sivakami 31)

Because she is a member of the lower class and labours in Thangam's farm, Pranjothi Udayar takes advantage of him. And since no one is questioning him, he believes he has every right to touch her. "She was his servant. Besides, Thangam was no princess or minister's daughter... There would not be a soul to rescue her if he imposed himself on her...she was only a lower caste labourer."(Sivakami 32). Since Thangam's husband passed away, she is left living alone in the countryside without any support from her brothers-in-law. Her brothers-in-law take advantage of these occasions and approach her with dirty minds, but she frequently tells them to stop. The people gathered to her after Udayar sexually assaulted her, accusing and blaming her because she was a low caste woman, poor, and without anyone to support her. The aforementioned events provide a clear explanation of the predicament faced by Dalit women and the hardships they endure due to the prevalent caste system in society. To get justice for her, Thangam goes to the local chief, Kathamuthu. Lower caste Kathamuthu strives to elevate his people to a respectable standing in society and works tirelessly for their betterment. The locals treat him very differently even though he belongs to the same caste as Thangam. When Thangam asks for help from Kathamuthu, he too uses the chance to seduce her. "It is not only upper caste men who prey upon lower caste women. Men like Kathamuthu are perfectly capable of taking advantage of vulnerable women."(Sivakami 149) Kathamuthu makes a promise to Thangam, but deceitfully takes all her money instead. Despite Thangam's implicit trust and her willingness to lend him everything she has, he betrays her. Through this incident, the author highlights the struggles and exploitation faced by Dalit women. Another character is Gowri, who parallels the writer herself. Gowri, Kathamuthu's daughter, is depicted as a silent observer who disapproves of her father's polygamous relationships. As an educated woman striving to break free from societal conventions, she endures significant criticism from her father, who embodies the patriarchal norms of the society. Kathamuthu has two wives: Kanagavalli and Nagamani. Nagamani, a widow from an upper caste, later marries Kathamuthu.

Even though Nagamani is from an upper caste, she is referred to as being "installed in his home" (Sivakami 3), reducing her to the status of property rather than recognizing her as a human being. Kathamuthu, by virtue of being a 'man,' is afforded the privilege to engage in extramarital affairs with upper-caste women, a right that goes unquestioned by society. However, because she is a "woman," a lower caste woman who is raped by an upper caste man is held responsible for the crime. This story demonstrates the harsh reality of society in a very plain way. Dalit women are not treated like human beings, but rather as objects. Kathamuthu constantly asserts his male superiority over his wives and daughter, Gowri. Despite this, Gowri successfully completes her exams and leaves the village to pursue higher education. She feels a profound sense of relief and happiness as she embarks on this new chapter of her life. Gowri felt that she had crossed over human-made-boundaries-her father, her caste and her village-and merged with the ocean of people." (Sivakami 95)

Through characters such as Kathamuthu and Pranjothi Udayar, Sivakami vividly illustrates the pervasive male chauvinism and the systemic subjugation of Dalit women, addressing critical issues of caste, class, and gender. Kathamuthu's actions and attitudes reflect the entrenched patriarchy that perpetuates the marginalization of women, particularly those from lower castes. Pranjothi Udayar's character further exposes the complexities and injustices faced by Dalit women, highlighting their struggles within a rigid social hierarchy.

Dalit women are depicted as the 'minority within a minority,' emphasizing their double marginalization—both as women and as members of a lower caste. This dual oppression results in their being treated as mere objects rather than individuals with agency and dignity. Sivakami's

portrayal serves to spotlight these injustices and the compounded challenges faced by Dalit women, who are often sidelined in discussions of social reform and equality. Despite these adversities, Sivakami offers a message of hope and empowerment. She envisions Dalit women rising above their circumstances, akin to a phoenix emerging from the ashes. By encouraging them to assert their rights and reclaim their identities, Sivakami advocates for a transformative journey of self-empowerment and social activism. She underscores that education is a crucial tool for this transformation. Education not only provides Dalit women with the means to challenge societal norms but also equips them with the knowledge and skills needed to drive change and reshape societal attitudes.

Sivakami's work thus calls for a profound shift in societal perceptions and practices, advocating that true enlightenment and progress for Dalit women can only be achieved through the pursuit of education. This empowerment through learning is presented as a pathway to overcoming suppression, gaining equal footing in society, and effecting lasting change in the deeply entrenched structures of caste and gender inequality.

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