

The Change: The Study on Caste, Gender, and Political Transformation in P. Sivakami's Novel *The Grip of Change*

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Abstract

The term *Change* generally refers to the dynamic process that creates tension between progress and tradition. In the novel *The Grip of Change*, the author P.Sivakami reimagines her childhood and society through the youth character *Gowri* to define the process of change or transformation that challenges the norms and structure of power and oppression. This paper would like to explore the concept of 'change', focusing on how caste, gender and politics interact and evolves in the lives of Dalit people. Through the narrative, the novel portrays change as a questioned and uneven process. One of the main characters of this novel *Thangam* whose seek for justice against upper-caste oppression has taken her to accept the patriarchal domination by her own community. So, the paper argues that the author does not portray change as a smooth transformation; rather she presents how this change triggers a new form of struggle, negotiation and compromise. Eventually, the novel requires a critical lens to analyse whether real change is possible without questioning both external oppression and internal hierarchies.

Key words: Change, Transformation, Dalit, Caste, Oppression, Progress

Introduction

Dalit Literature in India does not only emerge as a separate literary genre, rather, as a powerful literary and political movement that expresses the oppressive and discriminated life of Dalit community. This literary canvas has given them (Dalit Community) the power to raise the voice against social exclusion and that has brought a progressive transformation in their lives. Within these narratives, the Dalit women writers do not only talk about the caste marginalisation but also they reveal the gender discrimination by both Dalit male dominated society and by upper-caste patriarchy. Thus, Dalit women's writings become a space of resistance where silence is broken, power is questioned from several angles as at the end of the novel C.S. Lakshmi, the director of SPARROW (Sound and Picture Archives for Research on Women), has raised a question:

Why does sexual power work differently for women and men of different castes? Why is it that the lower caste woman is raped by the upper caste man, but the lower caste man always sexually satiates the upper caste woman? (The Grip of Change, 199)

P.Sivakami has portrayed the vulnerable situation of women in this novel through the character of Thangam. She writes:

The significance of the book lies in the fact that it speaks for the most vulnerable members of the Dalit community- its women.....Thangam's body bears testimony to the difficulties faced by Dalit women....The harassment by her brothers-in law whom she refuses to submit to them , the exploitation by her caste Hindu landlord...and so on.. (The Grip of Change 194)

But at the end of the novel this oppressed woman who was earlier spoken by Kathamuthu, has raised her voice against sexploitation. Kathamuthu who gave her shelter was about to take Thangam's body to satisfy his male desire but Thangam was capable to save her by not being violent but by her uttered words:

'You are like a brother to me.... A brother' she groaned (The Grip of Change, 93)

For this incident, the author writes,

It wasn't simply that the upper castes exploit the lower castes. A lower caste leader might exploit his own people. 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. The overall picture presented by the novel is that rich or poor, upper caste or lower caste, the seeds of corruption exist at all levels.. (The Grip of Change, 149)

Thangam becomes able to save herself ultimately as she raised her voice but *Kanagavalli* and *Nagamoni*, the two wives of Kathamuthu, are remained dominated as they tolerated each step silently. So, being outspoken, raising voices has brought the change in Dalit women's life as Sivakami has portrayed it in Thangam's life.

P. Sivakami, the editor of the Tamil Literary journal *Puthia Kodangi* and first IAS Dalit woman, has written the novel *The Grip of Change*, originally in Tamil (*Pazhiyana Kazhidalum*, 1988). In this text, the concept of change operates on multiple levels such as personal transformation, social mobility and political assertion.

The *Grip of Change* is a very well-known novel and numerous researches done on this novel. As the author has highlighted Thangam, the Dalit woman as a victim, most of the study has done from the Dalit feminist perspectives. G. Hephzibah, a researcher has wrote a paper on this novel titled *THE MAN ARRESTING THE CHANGE IN THE GRIP OF CHANGE* and has portrayed "male domination and double colonization/oppression the woman undergoes in the novel 'The Grip of Change' because the man on whom the woman believed, could not deliver justice, moreover, he turns exploitative entity in her life" (Hephzibah, 23). In another article on this novel, titled *FROM INVISIBLE TO INVINCIBLE: RESISTANCE AND EMPOWERMENT IN DALIT FEMINIST VOICES STUDY OF GRIP OF CHANGE BY P. SHIVKAMI* by Komal Bhatt and Dr. Divyabha Vashisth, Dalit feminist voice has been highlighted as the writers have penned down "To create a more inclusive and

equitable society, the study ultimately highlights the value of highlighting Dalit feminist voices and their contribution to the deconstruction of repressive systems” (Bhatt and Vashisth, 36). Varsha, A Research Scholar at Kurukshetra University, has written a paper titled *VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS: A STUDY OF P. SIVAKAMI'S THE GRIP OF CHANGE* and aimed “to critically analyze the representation of women characters in the narrative *The grip of Change by Sivakami*” (Varsha, 43). B.Siva Priya, in her article *Suppression and Sufferings of Dalits: A Study of P. Sivakami's The Grip of Change* has only highlighted the sufferings of dalits.

This paper explores how change is portrayed in the lives of Dalit Youth in this novel. The research asks: Does the novel promote a radical model of social change or does it reveal the limits of such change within existing power structure?

This paper would like to use qualitative textual analysis of this novel and close reading of character interactions to understand how the novel constructs and critiques the idea of change.

Change as Resistance

Usually, changes come through revolution or evolution and for that one should have the resistance power to be alive. This scenario has been portrayed in this novel also. Casteism was so active in India that the lower caste people started to believe themselves as inferior. One more thing that stopped to raise voice is their poverty. But this novel has portrayed self-respect over stomach and that is one of the great changes in Dalit community.

Thangam is a childless Dalit widow. Legally or morally she owns her husband's land. But her brother-in law would not give her the land until she becomes the 'whore' to him. Thangam says:

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. Each time one of

them came near me I brandished the broom. After that none of them came anywhere near me.

I am a childless widow. There is no protection for me. (The Grip of Change, 7)

That poor woman loses her property but has not let them dominate her. She has used the broom as her weapon and that indicates the change as she has protested. Like other Dalit women (Kaganavalli and Nagamoni) in this novel, she has not silently accepted the oppression. To run her stomach, she becomes agricultural labour in Paranjothi Udayar's (A upper-caste Hindu) land. There also she has been objectified, tortured and raped by Udayar. She has remained silent that time as he is her master. But when Udayar's wife and brother has bit her black and blue as she was intimated to Udayar, she complained against them to Kathamuthu. She has urged:

Sami, these hooligans who beat me up, they should be jailed for at least a day and tortured.

The pain is killing me..(The Grip of Change, 5)

The more striking incident is that the police have accepted the FIR of a Dalit woman against an upper-caste man and started an enquiry regarding the incident which refers a progressive change in Dalit community.

Gowri, the daughter of Kathamathu, also a Dalit woman has refused to get married even at her age of 31. She holds a doctorate degree and has chosen teaching profession which also refer the change in Dalit society. The author writes:

Gowri was thirty one. She had continued studying, had done research, received a doctorate and was now teaching. She had stubbornly refused to marry..(The Grip of Change, 124)

The change proceeds towards progression when whole parayar community raised voice against upper-caste Udayar community by supporting Thangam and placing their demand to increase their labour fees.

In this way resistance brings changes in this novel but this change sometime becomes contradictory and leads to corruption.

The contradictory Transformation:

Kathamuthu, who is portrayed as a leader of Dalit community, has a contradictory character. It seems that he saves Thangam and tries to give her justice but actually he has done it for his own benefit. Though he has saved Thangam but on the other hand He has tried to have Thangam. He manipulated the parayar villagers to revolt against Udayar and he managed the argument and made a deal between Udayar and Parayar community by increasing 50 paisa as labour charge but after that Udayar community increased the labour hour also but there was no re-revolt against that:

*They stayed back and worked. In continuance with the tradition of the society they lived in ,
the lower caste had learned to tolerate the intolerable..(The Grip of Change, 76)*

The situation has remained same but the meeting was held to show that both Kathamuthu, their leader and The Udayar Community think about Dalit's progression as they need to hold their position in the society.

One of the upper-caste friend of Kathamutho, Naiker who acts like he is very liberal regarding caste but when Kathamuthu's relatives come to buy something from his shop, he gives the thing maintaining certain distance as they are from lower caste, they are untouchable.

Kathamuthu as a leader is full with hypocrisy. One side he is against caste based society and other side he does not want his women to be spoken by themselves. This is a patriarchal nature. Gowri and Sekaran has assumed the hollowness of his authority and they have prepared themselves to confront it. When Kathamuthu tries to control the youth Sekaran, he replies:

*Don't worry Appa. Unlike some men we know I am not into collecting wives or hoodwinking
the world reciting stories from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata*

(The Grip of Change, 125)

This contradiction lies in the gap in between public discourse and private practice. Kathamuthu has tried to give justice to Thangam rather this; he has positioned himself as progressive minded fellow to gain his own political power. In this sense change becomes contradictory, a space for both hope and disillusionment, a goal that is desired but distorted in its practice. Kathamuthu is not only the hypocrite character, the other has been analysed in above. Now the novel questions weather structural change is possible without personal transformation, especially in the male leaders who reproduce patriarchal power even while challenging caste oppression.

Structural and Personal Change

The novel lastly presents a big change in society. Sivakami has written that *women protested against the practice of dowry* (The Grip of Change, 124). To refer the change Sivakami has written a beautiful line from the perspective of Kathamuthu as he is going to lose his power but cannot come out from his authorial habit. She writes:

The ground beneath his feet was shaking. Earthquakes were emanating and floods were rising to change the very structure of the world..She went past her father who spent his time demanding of an MLA post. (The Grip of Change, 126). In another section she writes to express Kathamuthu's depression for the change:

Kathamuthu felt depressed by the changes taking place without his knowledge. At the same time he felt reassured by the thought that people like Subramoni could hardly affect his position in the community. (113)

The author has talked about even *Sanskritisation* as some lower-caste people, here specially Vanniyars have started to imitating Brahmins habit to uplift their position in the society. She writes:

Some vanniyars had begun to wear the sacred thread like the Brahmins. (The Grip of Change, 121)

Gowri hates her tradition of Drum beating; the sound of *Mridangam* attracts her. *Mridangam* is only for uppercaste people and she wants to adopt that culture in her society also. Their desire has change. But there is contradiction between youth generation and earlier generation. When Gowri asks her mother why they can't have *Mridangam*, her mother replies it is reserved for upper-caste. The author writes:

Gowri ran up to her mother, 'Amma, why don't we have had the mridangam? This is horrible, it sounds as if we are at a funeral.'

'At our marriages we should follow our traditions. Mridangams are for the upper caste, not for us.' (The Grip of Change,117)

Gowri has broken the educational tradition as “she was one of the very few girls of their caste who had entered college” (117). She has portrayed another leader who is actually the youth generation of Kathamuthu's family, Chandran. Chandran has been portrayed as a quiet successful leader who thinks about the progression his community. The main striking thing is he accepts criticism. He gives value to the decision that taken by union. Marxism has influenced them. He shows that he is not the individual who can raise voice against oppression, for progression they need collective voice and he is representative of that. This has showed the contradiction between Kathamuthu as a leader and Chandran as a leader. The author writes:

Chandran had gradually earned the respect and trust of not only the people of his caste, but also of other castes... Upper caste men greeted him respectfully at every instance.(112).

The author has shown inter-caste relationship between an upper-caste woman, Lalitha and a parayar man. People from upper-caste also raise revolutionary questions: “Why do we have upper and lower castes?” (108). In earlier aspect, Dalit labour used to smoke beedis and murmured regarding their poorness. But youth Dalit labours read newspapers and those who

are illiterate they hear the contemporary news. Even a school was established for Dalit community. Dalits were started to get government job which leads towards progression. Ma

But this progression becomes slower when cinema has attracted them, they again have started to believe in their fate and become lethargic. The author writes:

Cinema, politics and all pervasive corruption in everyday life had numbed their minds. The rebirth of life and hope was a painfully slow process. (106).

Maybe a lot of changes had taken place towards the progress leaving behind all the prejudices but this change had got time to be changed further and it has started to walk backward.

Conclusion

The author has shown certain changes and critical vision of transformation within Dalit community. Though she urges for the social change but also she raises questions against those who claim to lead it. While Chandran, Sekaran, Lalitha, Gowri want real progression in their community, Kathamuthu enjoys his own authority over his community. This novel is not about empowerment or idealistic model. Here the author simply critiques the external and internal domination and claims that to bring a structural change, a change must begin with self-reflection. The paper would like to conclude by quoting author one line that has portrayed that the *change* contains both grief and progression. The author writes: *But the world, marching forward in progress, still carried many ugly leftover burdens. (124).* The novel does not end with happiness but with reality and hope.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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