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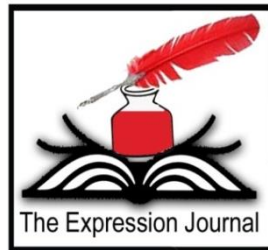
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EXCLUSION AND INCLUSION OF IDENTITY: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF *THE GRIP OF CHANGE*

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Abstract

The essence of *The Grip of Change* revolves around the caste-deprived society, challenging the inscriptions of dominant narratives and central authority. The novel serves as a powerful commentary on the socio-political struggles of Dalits, highlighting the deeply entrenched caste system that dictates their existence. The suppression and humiliation of the lower-class people by the upper class are evident throughout the narrative, showcasing how systemic oppression continues to plague marginalized communities. Dalit literature provides Dalit writers with a platform to express their lived experiences and bring to light the harsh realities of socially deprived communities, giving voice to those who have been historically silenced. P. Sivakami, as a pioneering Dalit female writer, vividly portrays the struggles faced by these marginalized individuals, particularly Dalit women, who endure a double burden of caste and gender discrimination. Her detailed descriptions enable readers to grasp the atrocities suffered by Dalit women at the hands of the upper class, exposing the deep-seated patriarchy and caste-based violence that define their existence. She asserts their identity by reclaiming their history, culture, and traditions, offering an alternative narrative that counters the dominant discourse. Furthermore, Sivakami critically examines power structures that challenge the rights of the oppressed, subjecting them to physical, emotional, psychological, social, and existential suffering. The novel underscores the resilience of Dalit women in the face of oppression, advocating for social change, self-assertion, and collective resistance against caste and gender-based subjugation. Through *The Grip of Change*, Sivakami not only presents a critique of societal hierarchies but also envisions a future where Dalits reclaim their dignity and agency.

Keywords

Dalit Literature, Depressed Class, Gender Discrimination, Sexual Harassment,
Communal Clash, Caste Prejudice, Mental Trauma.

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Introduction

Schedule caste or Dalit constitutes a small group in the society. Dalits are also referred to as scheduled caste because the government scheduled their right to reservations in the field of higher studies and public sector jobs. History provides ample evidence for how the Dalit are excluded from social, cultural, economic, political and civil rights. They are considered as untouchable because the so-called upper castes refused to give them their fundamental rights. The upper Hindu community tags Dalit as impure or polluted jatis:

There is in actual fact a fifth category, the untouchables, who are left outside the classification" ...they are called "Avarnas" or 'outcastes. They perform menial and impure work and hence are considered polluted and relegated to a peripheral existence in the casteist society. Historically they were referred to as 'Untouchables', and called the 'Depressed classes', 'Harijans', and Dalits, which is their cultural and political identity... (qtd in Sharma 2)

Dalits are considered as left out in the caste system in India. Hence, they are called Avarnas or Outcastes. They are deputed to perform menial work like tanning leather, cleaning latrines and scavenging work. The upper-class society imposes them to abide in the outskirts of the village denying the luxurious life of the cities. They are otherwise called untouchables, depressed classes, Harijans and Dalits.

Extrinsic Patriarchy

Dalits are one among the most vulnerable communities who are denied of social and political status as well as land ownership. They are highly targeted by the upper class in the name of religion and caste. They are compelled to be dependent on the society's upper class to make their livelihood. Another major issue in terms of casteism is intersectional oppressions on women under two concepts, being Dalit and women. Even feminists address the gender discrimination and not the intersectional oppressions of women as Dalit:

...the lower social, political and oppression. One is intrinsic patriarchy, which is the oppression of Dalit women by the men of their community. They are taxed, abused, and beaten by the men within the families. The second is the extrinsic patriarchy, which is the oppression and exploitation of Dalit women by the men of dominant castes. They experience economic and labor exploitation and also endure violence by men of dominant castes. They suffer from constant threats of sexual molestation and rape. (Sharma 3)

In India, compared to Dalit men, the plight of Dalit women is crucial in terms of sexual abuse. Women folks are doubly marginalized; the identity of women and a Dalit lodges them on a tight rope retaining them in a state of fix. Fulfilling their own choices and preferences are quite challenging and has severe implications on the execution. Their pathetic state is often noticed but receives less attention. Dalit women face patriarchy suppression from outside and inside as well. They are subjected to sexual harassment from the hands of both of these men. They are the silent victims without having the guts to oppose the “so-called” male society. No words can describe the wretched state of the women folks of this community and the inhuman attitude of male society often evokes the sympathy towards them too.

Dalit Literature provides the privilege to pen down and to pour the agony and the sufferings of Dalit women who get caught in the web of caste, religion and patriarchal oppression. “Dalit Literature is the writing about the Dalit’s, a mistreated Indian class under the Indian rank framework” (Thattil 49). Palanimuthu Sivakami is the pioneer of Dalit women novelist in Tamil. She worked as an Indian Administrative Officer and her primary concern is to root out the social injustice and inequality that prevails among the people. She mainly renders her voice to establish the basic rights of Dalit women. Hence, she started Dalit’s Land Right Movement in the year 2004. Next, with the tremendous support of women she has organized a public conference on women and politics. Then she quits her job and has decided to play the role of a full time writer and her primary goal is to project the deplorable state of her community. She has stated that, “Mainstream literature has boycotted me because I believe that only Dalits can write about issues concerning them and that only women can write on feminist issues...” (qtd in Supriya 69). She has been editor for Pudhiya Kodangi, a Dalit literary journal which highlights the issue of subjugation over Dalit people and also the woes of other lower caste women.

Existential Crisis and Caste in *The Grip of Change*

The novel *The Grip of Change* (2006) is the translation of Tamil novel *Pazhiyana Kazhidalum* which was written in the year 1989. The author P. Sivakami herself has translated this novel. She has classified this novel into two manifolds. One is entitled *Kathamuthu – The Grip of Change* and the second is *Gowri – The Author’s Note*. Sivakami has written four novels and published four short stories. The first part of *The Grip of Change* initiates with the atrocities faced by Thangam in the hands of Udayar, an upper caste man in Puliur.

Thangam is a widow with no children. Hence she struggles to inherit her husband’s ancestral property. She works as a labour in the farm of Udayar for her livelihood. He maintains sexual relationship with Thangam beyond the thought that she is a lower caste woman. Though Thangam dislikes this relationship, she is compelled to subdue for the desires of Udayar. The protest of Thangam encourages Udayarto make his desire a habitual. Whenever he is sexually urged, he approaches Thangam and satiates his urge. Repeatedly, he

raped Thangam because she never expresses her consent to have sexual relationship with him.

Kamalam, wife of Udayar, smells her husband's lustrous deed. Being a woman, she is timid enough to enquire about his husband's illegal adulterous relationship with Thangam. She is cognizant of the fact that Thangam is a lower caste woman, a widow, and a barren woman. She builds her imagination that Thangam becomes a concubine for her husband. She sends her brothers and brothers-in-law to attack Thangam and accomplishes the mission too. She is now satisfied that she has revenged her husband by hurting a voiceless woman.

On the other hand, Thangam is cornered by her brother-in-law. She claims her husband's share but they refused to settle her husband's share as because she has no children. They wish Thangam to be in a romantic partnership with him. She objects to his wish and so he patches up a story that she is the concubine of Udayar. She is besieged by her own community people too. When Kamalam's supporters attacked Thangam, even her relatives did not come forward to rescue her. The attack on Thangam becomes the base for the conflict between the upper caste and lower caste. Thangam with the help of Kathamuthu who is a leader of Athur and nearby villages files a case against Udayar. The second part of the novel reflects the thoughts of the writer through the character Gowri. She analyses the existence of caste and its horrible facets in the society. This novel highlights the fact that caste can be used as a tool to enhance one's strength in the political realm.

The Grip of Change is an embodiment of communal clash between upper class and the lower class and also the oppression of women as Dalit. The protagonist Thangam is the best example. Few incidences that aid us from the novel itself will substantiate this view and help us to understand this issue better. Udayar's advantage over Thangam, Kamalam's acquisition on Thangam and the sexual harassment against Thangam illustrates the truth that she is oppressed by the upper class as well as her own community people as because she is a woman and a Dalit:

My husband's relatives spread the story that I become Paranjothi's concubine. That's why Paranjothi's wife brother 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 nearly killed me. No one in the village, none of my relatives, came 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'. (TGOC 6)

Thangam's relatives call her a whore because they know that Udayar is often seducing her. Udayar's wife wants Thangam to move from Puliur. Hence, she sends four men to threaten her. They brutally attack Thangam and they nearly kill her and abuse her too. They also call her a whore.

The next incident which substantiates the opinion of Dalit Women is the relationship between Santha, an upper caste women and Kaliyan, a lower caste man. Reddiyar belongs to the upper class. He is one among the powerful men in Puliur. He is old and his inability to satisfy his wife induce Santha to maintain an illegal affair with Kaliyan:

Kaliyan had been slaving for Reddiar's household for many years. He was an extremely skilled worker...He was also equally skilled in pleasuring Santha. Santha's lust could have also been inspired by his beauty and youth...when Paranjothi Udayar looked over the wall, he found Kaliyan in the tight embrace of Santha. (TGOC 47-48)

Though Reddiar is a rich, powerful and elderly person in the village, Santha is not true to him. Santha maintains illicit sexual relationship with Kaliyan, a lower caste man, who works in

Reddiar's farm for years. Santha is attracted towards him because of his robust physic and youthfulness. Accidentally, Paranjothi Udayar witnesses their illegitimate relationship.

Paranjothi Udayar's abusive nature earns the little 'Concubine' for Thangam even then she submits herself to the desire of Udayar out of fear. Santha as an upper class woman boldly extends her illegal affairs with Kaliyan. She does not bother about the society. Udayar also did not enlarge what he has visualized in the backyard of Reddiar's house. "He turned on the light in their shed saying how can I describe what I saw?" (TGOC48). The justice provided for these women Santha and Thangam reflect the partial view of the society. Thangam as a Dalit Women is grappled with harassment and ill-treatment which often become a common occurrence in her life. On the other hand, Santha is not even portrayed as a taboo of disgrace for her community or society.

P. Sivakami expresses the communal clash between the upper class and lower class vividly. Thangam files a case against Udayar. His anger towards Thangam resonated in different ways. Udayar intellectually and cunningly calls Chakkili (lower caste) women to work in his farm. This triggers Parayar when Udayar plans to weaken the economic status of Parayar. "Disappointed and annoyed at the sight of chakkili women proceeding to work, they complained the old man Pichapillai..." (TGOC51). The revengeful thought of the upper class kindles them to say:

For us Parayar, Pallan, Chakkiliyan, Valluvan and Vannan may be different. For them we are all the same - all untouchables ... As long as we continue to differentiate among ourselves and beg for their favour, they will continue to manoeuvre and hammer us into submission. (TGOC62)

There are two classifications of caste systems prevalent in India, the upper caste and the lower caste (untouchables). These divisions are classified according to the occupation of the people. The lower caste is imposed to perform menial jobs such as cleaning and scavenging. They are called domestic servants. Parayan, Pallan, Chakkiliyan, Valluvan and Vannan have different professions but they are all called untouchables and the differences too evoked a sense of separation and unity.

Conclusion

The pain and anguish of the Dalit people are simply branded as mere occurrences and consequently, they get minimal focus with less orientation and it further exacerbates their mental trauma. Dalit writings should not be categorized as creative writings for they are not artistic or imaginative rather they are the cravings: cravings for their birth right, cravings for their equality and cravings for social justice. Their differences are marked by their skin colour, their occupation and at times, their religion as well. Their efforts to achieve their basic rights often end with insults including verbal and physical abuses. There are a wide range of supports for the marginalized people throughout the world in the present context, yet they fail to take notice in the wider sense. The sufferings and humiliation meted out to their ancestors for years allow them to embark a journey filled with tears and bruises. The villainous approach of the high caste men always gets ruminated in their painful heart and this memory combined with their real-life fatalities loot their mental peace and they create a collage in their mind fixing the vagaries of life and betrayal. The expectation for a peaceful existence often compromised with the thought of 'this is not new'.

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