



## SIVAKAMI'S THE GRIP OF CHANGE: REVISITED

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Palanimuthu Sivakami, a leading Indian writer with a feminine penchant is the first Dalit woman novelist in Tamil. Her varied experiences in life and in profession made social issues become her primary concern. As an Indian Administrative Service Officer with a passion to remove social irregularities and injustices, she made a space for herself and began contributing towards fulfilling her social goals. She has been the editor of a monthly Dalit literary journal, Pudhiya Kodangi and contributed to the issues that touch Dalit and other backward castes and women in Tamil Nadu. She wrote columns on land rights and empowerment for Dalit women and started the Dalit's Land Right Movement in 2004. With the massive support of women, she organized a huge public conference with 2,50,000 women on **Women and Politics**. With a passion to work for the poor and disadvantaged, Sivakami thought it would make no difference if she stayed on in Indian Administrative Service but it would make a big difference if she did what she really wanted to do. She thus quit the job after 28 years of administrative service even eight years before her bureaucratic tenure to end and became a full-time writer. "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. It is not just a question of experience but perspective," she said. As she faced the disparity as a Dalit- feminist, she sent her first work anonymously and got published. Gita Ramaswamy, a Hyderabad-based publisher describes Sivakami's writing as "refreshing and self-critical with a bold modern voice that unapologetic in acknowledging her roots out of which she has grown and evolved successfully". She founded a political party, a forum for social equality based on the principles of Dalit educationist and political leader, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. From her first book 'The Grip of Change' to the recently released 'The Taming of Women' all her four critically acclaimed novels centred on Dalit and feminist themes are set to create waves.

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While the publication of '*Pazhaiyana Kazhithalum*', a semi- autobiographical Tamil novel in 1989 carried Sivakami into glare of publicity as a celebrated Indian novelist, her self- translation of it under the title '*The Grip of Change*' attracted much larger audience with wider applause. It voices the plight of an exploited low caste pariyar (Dalit) woman, Thangam who faces triple marginalization- economic oppression, gender subordination and caste discrimination. The death of her husband forced her to work in the farm of the landlord, Paramjothi Udayar to meet the two ends of life. Her widowhood makes her a surplus or sexually available woman subject to exploitation by her Hindu land lord and harassment by her in-laws. Thangam symbolizes all dalit women who are brutally treated by the upper-caste land lords but forced to maintain silence and never raise their voice. Even her struggle for her husband's share of land is linked to her body and fertility. As she doesn't have children, she is denied the right to inherit her husband's land. Her brothers-in-law seized this opportunity to exploit her sexually. When they realized that she would not yield to their demands, they even spread the story that she had become Udayar's concubine. Owing to it, Thangam was mercilessly beaten up by the landlord's wife and her brothers. With her battered body, she approached Kathamuthu, a respected Dalit leader and an ex-panchayat member, who fights for justice on behalf of Dalits but tries to make the best of the position he is in. When she begged Kathamuthu for justice, he penalized those who abused Thangam but later behaved like the upper caste man. She got justice only after she was yielded to Kathamuthu's desires. Kathamuthu's betrayal was a terrible shock for Thangam. However her oppressed and subjugated body helped her acquire the power in Kathamuthu's house and dominance over his two wives. The predicament of a Dalit woman victimized by the upper-caste Hindus as well as their own men in different capacities not only directly affected the woman's right to life and dignity but also made a strong comment on patriarchy.

The entire story is narrated through the eyes of a young girl, Gowri, the daughter of Kathamuthu. She comments the significant incidents that happen around her. She openly condemns the inhuman

treatment of her father inflicted upon Thangam. When Kathamuthu rapes Thangam, she vehemently shouts,

***"Dogs! Dogs in this house! Shameless as dogs!" (93).***

The character of Gowri represents the symptoms of the growing awareness among Dalits. As her father, a Dalit patriarch allows her to study, she is able to realize the exploitation of women in a patriarchal set up. She thus protests her early marriage,

***The sufferings that my mother underwent in her marriage! I don't want to be tortured like her by some man"(124).***

To avoid marriage, she works hard for her examination, and after getting success, she chooses to study further in the city college. When she crosses the threshold of her home, resisting her father, she thinks she has freed herself from the tyrannical chains. The text beautifully conveys,

***"During floods, waters from overflowing wells mingle with the waters of huge water bodies, transgressing their boundaries". (95)***

Gowri felt that she had crossed over human-made boundaries by her father, her caste and her village – and merged with the ocean of people.

Gowri is bitterly critical of her father's polygamist marital state and always provokes her mother Kangawali and her step-mother Nagamani for liberation. In fact Gowri is the mouthpiece of Sivakami through whom she has voiced the voiceless Dalit women who are bearing the inhuman treatment silently. Meena Kandasamy, in her article "And One Shall Live in Two . . .," gives an insightful review of *The Grip of Change*. She calls Sivakami's daring attempt of self-examination as an exemplar of realist criticism. Though the novel is fictitious, the characters and incidents are realistic enough to verbalize the reality of modern society. Truly P. Sivakami is able to formulate the poignant tale of a woman's struggle to fight and survive in a biased society through Thangam's story and Gowri's protests which suggest that silence and suppression is optimistically replaced by a stimulated and resisting expression. From the beginning to the end, this novel draws attention to violent realities, sexual assaults, psychological torments, and economical



exploitation along with a message that a democratic approach is essential to eradicate such discriminatory ideologies from social fabric.

The narrator, a school girl seems to be observant and shows positive affinity towards her mother and her father's co-wives and rebels against her father. She, in fact undertakes an earnest attempt to educate her mother and Nagamani, her father's second wife to help them emerge out of Kathamuthu's subjugation. Sivakami portrays Gowri as the witness of her mother's experiences but she has the courage to move away from the victimized state of her mother. She is completely against the theory of her father's politics and psychology to misuse women in every possible way. She exposed and reviewed Kathamuthu's corruption, polygamy, tyrannical behaviour towards his family and her father's politics and psychology to misuse in every possible way. Gowri's plays the role of watchful observer and critic with her modern notions of the civilized world completely different from her father's conservative ones. Further through the autobiographical character of Gowri, Sivakami questions and rejects the very structures of patriarchy which curtail female empowerment and hints that future lies in the hands of young and educated women with a critical bent of mind which possesses the ability to observe their community critically. She questions her father's authority and chooses an alternative political ideology offering him a challenge in his political arenas well. Backed by her ideological conviction, she interrogates and subverts her father's authority and his abuse of power. She refuses marriage because in her opinion marriage is a patriarchal institution that legitimizes gender oppression. She thus violates patriarchal code concerning women's role within the family. Gowri battles against casteist, capitalist and patriarchal institution hegemony in rural society. At 32, she prefers to affirm her single, unmarried status. The novel concludes with Gowri's article wherein she foregrounds the need for evolving a "strong movement that would join hands with backward, oppressed and poor caste." Her brother, Sekharan advises her to work in co-ordination with Chandran who would help in translating "a vision into reality". He comments: "it is not enough to write. He

((Chandran) knows how to put it into action". (193) Gowri's smile reflects the confidence of the new leadership that works in unison with the community to realize its potential and aspirations. Together, the movement spearheaded by Chandran and Gowri stands for working towards an anti-capitalist, anti-casteist and anti-patriarchal structure in which Dalits can live a life of dignity and equal opportunity. Sivakami urges women as Ambedkar advocated to come out of both caste and gender injustice through education, work, ideological conscious, participation in collective, organized, socially committed movements. Truly confirming its title, '*The Grip of change*' records the waves of 'change' even in the Dalit consciousness providing a kind of cure for the ailments of the society.

Sivakami wrote *The Grip Of Change* when she was 26. Part two of the book, *Author's Notes: Gowri* assumes the form of a critical examination of the earlier novel that explores the gap between the fanciful world of the earlier novel and the author's social condition that enabled the creation of the novel. So almost after 10 years, she revisited and provided a matured version of experiences in *Author's notes* which talks about a wide perspective of life. Gowri who had just started going to college in the first part came back to her story in part two. Sivakami stopped at certain passages trying to understand why she wrote them. Though she had touched upon facts and experiences that belong to contemporary caste-based politics and life unsparing in its treatment of people, events and happenings in the first novel, she destroyed it with accusation and self-reflection with all its hidden aspects revealed. It then turned into another act of creation with added elements and meanings, different entries and different exits.

When Sivakami ended the novel with Thangam becoming the third wife of Kathamuttu, she wanted to be sure that her words provided satisfactory expression to her intent. She then realised as her critic expected her to that she had not done anything noteworthy. As an author, her life should be true to her writing. If it is not writing, it is just a skill to earn money or reputation. As a human being she leads a simple life and helps people when she is able to. As a critic and reviewer, she questions



the writer . Though she is dead to the readers, the critic in her brings her back to life. She thus gave the manuscript to a literary friend who commented that it is not good to expose the exploitation of a leader of her own community. He felt that the end portion had not shaped up well. The novelist carried away by his suggestion added a tail to her novel. Therefore she created an honest youth in the community to play the role of a revolutionary and showed that dalits and Vaniyars will unite. Writing, correcting, re-writing, seeking opinions and carrying out corrections had consumed a considerable amount of time. A decade has passed since the completion of the novel. It was a good opportunity to check whether the contents of the novel and contemporary reality match. Dalits are gaining strength and threatening to become a powerful force. The novelist projected herself as a responsible citizen to offer solution to this social problem. She constructed events in her narrative to suit the interpretation of class and caste. Therefore in her story she removed some characters and created fresh ones to fit her theory. She went ahead merging them at her own sweet convenience. In order to hide such inadequacies she cleverly fluffed the story with description of real life rural activities as she attempted to visualize the novel in its complete form.

In the realm of realism, the author believes that she is Gowri because everyone calls her by that name. The novelist and the character must be one and the same person. Time destroyed all traces of existence and those images she had created in *The Grip of Change* no longer existed. In describing Kathamuthu's character, she had paid little attention to rudimentary truth. As the novel derived from the novelist's imagination, she had tried hard to justify her work. Gowri's father was never shown expressing respect to elders. Indeed Kathamuthu had so much love and respect for elders. At the very beginning of the novel Kathamuttu is shown standing with a posture suggesting his dominance over his second wife. When Thangam is beaten up for her illegal affair with Udayar, she seeks justice and help from Kathamuttu, but the novelist has presented it from an entirely different perspective that she had merely been punished for her immoral behaviour and Kathamuttu had intervened and succeeded in

blowing it into caste related violence. The impression created was that the upper castes had handled the incident as a man vs woman problem, whereas the lower caste had given it the caste slant. The novelist dared to distort history with impunity.

The novelist had to bend and twist her stories to prescribed endings. She should be guided by the reader rather than by her own instinct. Both seemed to be the same until she carefully analysed them. Sivakami changed herself so much to suit the reader or she willingly wore the mask to attract the attention. During her childhood, her father woke everybody up at 5 o'clock in the morning insisting that his children work on the farm. She hated being seen with a bundle of hay on her head by anyone of her classmates or friends. Her father had chided her for feeling shamed about doing work. Her letter to her father appeared to bear the true weight of her emotions. But her letter had been read aloud to many and subjected to ridicule when she went home by her father saying she would like to serve the people. She had cringed with shame. Had she planned to wreak vengeance on his mockery that is why she wrote of her father as a fraud who had been benevolent and kind in real life. Perhaps it was drawn from general impression.

Recollections caused old wounds to bleed. In her childhood he had loved her and she had loved her father. The domestic situation changed when other women and more children came and stole his time and strength. Then The confusion began. She could of course have set aside those negative aspects and made an attempt to look at her father dispassionately. When she got high marks and wanted to show her report card to her father, her step brother has splashed some water on it and she slapped him. Her father slapped her so hard for it that food went flying from her mouth. She had achieved a revenge of sorts in the novel. At the end she had reduced her father to a counterfeit coin showing him as an old man reading a newspaper lying on an easy chair. She blamed her father that he had money to pay for his drinking but not for her college fees. Her father brought money and told that he did not want to fail in his duty. Sometimes he told others proudly that there is no one to match his daughter's brilliance. He does not like her to wear



flowers, bangles and fashionable clothes. The novelist may have remembered these incidents while writing the novel. Some facts about Kathamuttu had been selectively omitted. Even when her father had been well off and did not have to engage in physical labour, he had worked on his farm with enthusiasm. He had been a staunch advocate of manual labour. He would not allow anyone to stay idle. He had believed strongly in helping the needy and feeding the poor. During his term as an MLA, he had returned the gift sent by the rich Arumbavur Gounder. The author of *'The Grip of change'* had constructed an effigy of her father and burned him in her novel. Thus she wanted to prove through **Author's Notes** that there was no full and complete truth. A writer could avoid subjective conclusions. A careful reading can easily identify the subjective quality with just changing notations. The character Gowri appeared too good to be true or else she had not been drawn with sufficient depth.

Nothing in the novel was untrue but the novel was false, she felt. Characters were mixed up with events not related to them. She wanted to share her experiences, but at the same time protect her own self and identity. The author of the *'The Grip of change'* had criticized the leadership of dalits when the dalit movement was gaining ground. Novels had to be read against the background of their times. Anyone could not oneself to betray one's community. The shallowness of her thinking influenced by her childhood memories is clear. So she stepped down from the pedestal of the much talked about novel of the 80's. She is under the illusion that she had created a literary master piece. She has to turn her eyes towards those who applauded her work. They are blessed with the best opportunities that life can bestow. The upper castes laid her because she accepted their rules of the game and she mistook that as acclaim for her book. The spirit of the novel is grossly misunderstood. Instead of killing the concept of dalit in their minds, she was eager to project herself as fair and just. Caste is still an indomitable force challenging all those who try to break it down. The present leadership lacks spirit and is inadequate. The combined effort of all the oppressed caste is necessary. The novel was primarily influenced by these concerns. The expressions of her conscious,

educated and logical mind are present in the novel. Her sub-conscious mind and its contrary thoughts are evident in the language of her writing. She carefully guarded the image of the upper caste addressing them with respect through many of her characters. Those who labour for upper castes are hardly referred to with respect or endowed with dignity.

At the end, the critic in Sivakami told her that she could not portray the life of the low cats people or the aesthetics of their life effectively because she saw herself different from them. She did not comprehend that their life is literature. Her expression was limited by existing literary standards. Language should be constructed on the basis of life experience and the questioning of life. She should not take refuge in mechanical translation in the name of skill or identity. By self –translating both these works, Sivakami has once again entered the realm of re-rendering and re-interpretation, and has completed yet another re-visitation.

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