

The Crisis of the Cornered: with reference to Sivagami's *Grip of Change*

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ABSTRACT

Literature is an echo of emotions and when it emotes sorrow and misery, it resonates so loudly that it rings in the minds of the multitude. Dalit literature reverberates the crisis of the cornered and records the trials and tribulations of the Dalits. This paper showcases the literature of the downtrodden and portrays the emancipation of Dalits with reference to Sivagami's novel *Grip of Change*. Social crisis such as discrimination, casteism, Sexual harassment, exploitation of women, intra- dalit strife and so on are discussed as depicted in the novel. The paper throws light upon the author's remedial measures of the social crisis such as unity, inter –caste marriage, good leadership and education. Thus in the lives of dalits, as like food; the fortitude to fight, the unity to stand up; the courage to withstand, the education to enrich; the leadership to light; the faith to face the failure and the hope to hold on to life; are inevitable.

Keywords: Violence,sex,slavery,crisis,trials,exploitation

Literature is a gentle breeze that caresses every single heart and leaves no stone untouched. It blows beyond boundaries and spreads with it a splendid fragrance that awakens even the deserted souls. Nothing but literature can reach the places untraveled. Dr. Ambedkar, the father of Dalit Movement, in his book *Ostracized Bharat* writes: 'Dalithood is a kind of life condition that characterizes the exploitation, suppression and marginalization of Dalit people by the social, economic, cultural and political domination of the upper castes' Brahmanical ideology'. The Dalit movement has come to prominence in Marathi literature with the founding of the Dalit panthers in 1972. Through writing, dalits have started reconstructing the history. Limbale's views have been quoted, in an article in *Literary Criterion* stating, 'The form of Dalit literature is inherent in its Dalitness, and its purpose is obvious to inform Dalit society of its slavery and narrate its pain and suffering to upper caste Hindus' (28).

The pioneers of Dalit literature, who have lit the candle of enlightenment are Dr. Ambedkar, Mahatma Phule, Baburao Bagul, Bandhu Madhav and Shankarao Kharat. Tamil dalit writers have indeed found their own voices and their revolutionary diction; and their writings are now being translated into English. 'I want to be an instrument of change', states Sivakami, whose fame mainly rests on her writing caliber on dalit women and the issues of the dalit community. Sivakami has been one of the senior most administrative officers in the state of Tamilnadu.

Sivakami has published four novels and four short story collections, and is a regular contributor to the literary magazine *Pudiyaa Kodangi*. She is one of the pioneers of dalit writing in Tamil, who has written the first Dalit Tamil novel in 1989, *Pazhiyana Kazhidalum*, which has been translated as *The Grip of Change* (2006). The Tamil version of *The Grip of Change* has been written, when the novelist is twenty – six years old. *The Grip of Change*, is a process of understanding the dynamics of caste and the ‘woman’ who is inextricably involved in the process. The novel has been translated by the author herself. The novel has two books: The book one is entitled as Kathamuthu; *The Grip of Change*; The book two is entitled as Gowri; Author’s notes. There are two readings contributed by Meena Kandasamy and C.S. Lakshmi. The second novel *Anandhayee* (1992), is about the lives of dalit women and also about the violent treatment of women. The central Institute of Indian languages in Mysore has been translating her novel *Kurukkuvettu* into five languages.

The first book of *The Grip of Change* gleams with the spirit of hope and change; and also tries to accelerate the morale embedded deep inside the heart of the Dalits. The novel opens with the exploitation of the low – caste parayar woman, Thangam, wife of Kaipillai. She has been betrayed and cheated out of her inheritance by her brother-in-laws, after her husband’s death. Her circumstances cornered her in such a way that she has to bend and succumb to the carnal pleasures of the ‘high’ – caste landowner, Paranjothi Udayar. She appeals to Kathamuthu, the leader of the parayar community, for justice. The domineering Kathamuthu, who has been a panchayat president, manages to get justice for Thangam.

The affair between a low – caste woman and a high – caste man has provoked a bitter conflict between the upper caste and the lower caste people. The clash leads to a series of events such as bribing the police, boycotting the services of the parayars, in order to break their movement; and even burning the Dalit settlement.

Finally the generosity of the upper caste is obvious, when the terrific humiliation of the Dalits is compensated by a trivial amount. The novel also exhibits the secret affair between the other upper caste woman, Santha and the lower caste man, Kaliyan; and also the secret love between Lalitha, the upper caste girl and Elangovan, the lower caste man.

The second book of the novel *The Grip of Change* consists of the author’s note which projects Gowri, the daughter of Kathamuthu, assuming the persona of the writer of the first book. The Author’s Note also presents the return of Gowri back to her village, re-examining the circumstances and situations. Gowri acts as Sivakami’s mouthpiece, who has pictured a caste-driven society where humiliation and discrimination have become a routine in the day to day life of the upper caste. *The Grip of Change* is not only a novel about caste – discrimination but it further unveils the truth that caste can be used as an axis along which power can be exercised. Thus the novel retains the humility of the oppressed.

Limbale has remarked that a violation that takes place at any nook and corner of the country is like the violation of his mother. Similarly when Thangam has been assaulted by being pulled up by hair, dragged out to the street, flogged with a stick, accused for having an affair with Paranjothi Udayar, Gowri with deep despair states, 'I belong to the same caste as that woman. How can I be sure that I won't be beaten black and blue like her? I have seen things like this happening in the cinema. This is real, terror is sleeping on a mat in my house' (Sivakami 14). The words that have been ringing in the mind of Sivakami have acquired form and shape when it is delivered by Gowri. These vibrating thoughts have become the scenario behind the formation of the book.

'Know thyself' is the cardinal virtue for defining one's personality and it is the tag that showcases one's identity. The sense of self provides the sense of free will. It is said that man is born free but everywhere he is in chains; but in the case of dalit, a dalit man is born free and forever he is in chains. The free will of dalit is seized from the secluded, as they keep their eyes and mouth closed even when they are pierced to death.

Since the dalits have lost their identity for generations, they are unable to identify themselves in the multitude of masters, except through caste. They design their character through caste. They call themselves by the name of their caste. This is evident in *The Grip of Change*, when Thangam introduces herself to the Inspector of Police, 'I belong to the Hindu Scheduled Caste Community. I am a poor Parayar, an orphan, a widow. I earn my living by working for a daily wage' (Sivakami 11).

Discrimination is a disease that has plagued the dalits from time immemorial. Marginalization has made them live their life at the mercy of those who don't own them. They are thrown out as garbage, after squeezing from them the essence of life. They live, they breathe, and they work just to escape from the monstrous clutch of poverty and starvation. The effect of starvation has indeed led them to dreadful consequences. This is obvious when Rangam Pillai, a villager, has vigorously slain a young boy for stealing the peanuts. He has killed him by slapping the boy hard on his face and has also eaten his ear, saying without any guilt or contempt, 'the sin of killing will be rid in the eating' (Sivakami 172).

Caste has become a boon and a bane for the dalits. When a dalit is abused, he or she is given prominence and the issue is dealt in terms of caste and not in terms of an individual. When Thangam has been molested by the Paranjothi Udayar, a compensation of rupees ten thousand has been given to Thangam, since she is a low caste woman and not because that she has been seduced violently or she is a woman. Here caste has been used as a bait to acquire material and money. Since they are not able to gain money, they use these strategies to gain profit in a crooked way. This attitude becomes a stumbling block in their advancement.

Similarly when Kathamuthu has been elected as a member of legislative assembly, the Tahsildar of the village has failed to offer him a seat. The Tahsildar, that is the village officer, has also grumbled about being forced to treat, Kathamuthu, who is a parayan, as his equal. When Kathamuthu has reported this to the Thanjavur collector, who is his

friend, the collector has advised Kathamuthu to beat the Tahsildar with his slipper. As per the instruction of the collector, Kathamuthu has hurried with a gang of men to the Tahsildar's office and they have asked him, 'So you called him a Parayan? You couldn't spare a chair for him?' (Sivakami 140).

Thus when power is bestowed upon the dalits, due to the enthusiasm of gaining the power, they misuse it or they use it so unjustly that the bestowing of power in itself unjust. Dalits react like the rubber balls which bounce back with same force after being hit. The air in the rubber ball is like the power given to them. It is that power and the pain that has caused during the hit make them bounce back.

The Dalits' condition and state are measured mainly through the outward appearance. The nature and the personality of the dalits are not determined through disposition but mainly through the dressing and demeanor. However dalits toil to render themselves decent and dignified, the upper caste people treat them only as dirt. Though they are stalwarts in their service to their masters, they are still suppressed and alienated. Dalits are cast away mainly due to the prejudice that they are unclean and uncivilized.

Caste is like an uncontrollable hurricane holding in its clutches, the lives of all. The wicked Caste has victimized the whole human community, and it requires great hardship to fight war against it. Dalit woman are dalits amongst the dalits. They are harassed to death and are denied normal life. They have to walk without reluctance into the burning desert of casteism in search of their oasis. They are restricted even to step into the shadow of education. They get up even before the sun, they toil like donkeys carrying the burden of their family, they eat the left over, sometimes even the left overs are not left for them. Only one or two have stepped into the school.

The only girl, who has knocked the doors of school and college, is Gowri. Gowri has inscribed her identity through her education. She has been overwhelmed with happiness on the day when she has to leave for college. She has been one among the many, who has entered into the college field with high hopes, desires and dreams. Education, for Gowri is like an elixir of 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. But when the rain stops, the floods recede and thorn bushes emerge. Whenever she went back home for the holidays, caste revealed its murderous teeth like an invincible monster. (Sivakami 95)

The people of the village use to abuse and criticize about her education. Gowri's education and intelligence have made them the green eyed monsters. Once when Gowri has taken the cattle to graze, the cows has strayed into the groundnut field, as she has slipped into a day dream. Gowri then has become conscious and then she has driven those cattle out. Only then she has been collecting the plants that which the cows have uprooted. Gowri's brother has seen that and has complained to her father. He starts blasting her, with whom Gowri's step mother has also joined remarking, 'Because you are educated are we beneath you? Do you think you are a queen? Keep your education to yourself' (Sivakami 169).

Sexual violation against dalit women has been seen as something natural and spontaneous. Dalit women are not allowed to attend schools after attaining puberty, and are subjected to sexual assaults by much older husbands, are sexually harassed or raped by father-in-law, brother-in-law, if they are widowed they are subjected to regular beatings by alcoholic husbands, and are burdened with heavy labour at home and also in the fields apart from nurturing their numerous children and the aged. This is a typical path taken by the dalit women, which is full of thorns and stones. The ignorant dalits do not recognize the importance of educating women.

In the author's note of *The Grip of Change*, Sivakami has noted that a number of violent clashes have been uprooted between the Vanniars and Parayars. Because of the intra – dalit strife many have been killed and attacked. The remedies suggested by the novelist are inter-caste marriage, good leadership and a united struggle against casteism. This is evident through the married life of Kathamuthu, the Paraya community leader and the caste Hindu widow Nagamani, in which she earns a rightful place by being 'installed' as his wife in Kathamuthu's home. His generosity is high lightened when he says, 'I'm living with this woman who doesn't belong to our community. She is upper caste. She was a struggling widow, so I provided her a safe haven' (Sivakami 10).

Sivakami suggests that inter – caste marriage and a united struggle against casteism are the remedies that can be implied against the caste discrimination. Instead of advocating organizational protest to seek their identity, to fight against oppression and to demand equality, she points out that the dalits have to join hands with the vanniars, who perpetrated violence on them. She emphasizes on the need to have dalit solidarity which will ultimately help them to free themselves from oppression.

A leader is like a lighthouse to his clan. He directs them shows them the right path, enlightens their life, enriches their thoughts, guides them and even protects them from unwanted clash. The nature and the thoughts of the subject, reflects the leader of the clan. Even Sivakami in *The Grip of Change* portrays Kathamuthu as a domineering dalit, usurping the rights of others. Only a selfless person can lead a community and can lift them up, where as Kathamuthu proves to be a self – centered leader, disregarding the needs of his own people. He profits himself in the name of helping them. When an elderly man has requested Kathamuthu to make arrangements for the loans in the co-operative society, Kathamuthu replies,

That's my job, isn't it? I have no other work! Do you know when I had breakfast yesterday? At nine in the morning! . . My health is spoiled. And I have to work on my land too. You spend all your time in your fields and enjoy the benefit. You have fresh vegetables, fruits. Look at me . . . I have no money to educate my daughter. The rules of the cooperative society are such that without cooking up accounts you can't get a loan – all that takes money. And if I keep doing your work how will I make a living (Sivakami 36).

These lines highlight the egocentric nature of Kathamuthu. His character elucidates the selfish nature of the dalit leaders. Such leaders prove themselves to be hypocrites and exploit their kith and kin. In the author's notes of *The Grip of Change* the author throws light upon the crux of the novel. She highlights the issues, that the novel reflects,

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 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 exists at all levels. (Sivakami 148)

The dalits have darkness spread around them and also within them. To wear the new clothes of hope, advancement and aspiration, they have to get rid of the torn clothes such as submission, intra – dalit strife and illiteracy.

The Dalits have to renew themselves to become emancipated. Trust is the only ship that can land them ashore. Only by changing themselves, they can be an instrument of change. It is time that they cease to survive as dalits but to live as human beings and grow within them the rose of hope amidst thorns of adversity.

The novelist has explored not only the darker side of the marginalized society but also its gleaming brighter side. She has carved not the crisis of the cornered but has drafted even the solution for the persisting plague, the cast – discrimination, of the society. Slavery, intra-dalit strife and poverty can be eradicated through unity, inter –caste marriage, good leadership and education. The novelist has indicated the inevitability of accepting and welcoming change in the lives of the dalits and also in their society. The novel has laid down a path of hope to be travelled by the dalits.

To be heard, one has to speak; to be answered, one has to question; and to be recognized, one has to speak louder. Sivakami's voice is also loud and clear; sonorous and sound; that it is not only heard by one but all. She has raised her voice not only for her but also for her multitude that are unseen and unheard. Sivakami emphasizes in an article published in *Hindu* stating, "Tell me which constituency is not communally sensitive? The problem persists across the country. If it is not religion, it is caste. This should change. In the last ten years, the world has changed a lot and you cannot afford to remain unchanged". *The Grip of Change* is indeed powerful enough to speak this truth for itself.

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