

THE JOURNEY OF MARGINALIZATION AND SUPPRESSION IN SIVAKAMI'S *THE GRIP OF CHANGE*

Dr. Khamar Jahan Sk

Assistant Professor of English

Department of H&S

VNR Vignana Jyothi Institute of Engineering and Technology
Hyderabad

Abstract

The fourth world includes a whole range of the tribal and peasant societies that share a number of attributes, including a low level of political and economic integration in the state system, an inferior political status, and an underprivileged economic position. Fourth world literature has gained a new momentum creating its own space among the canon of world literatures and as a mode of discursive articulation endeavours to give voice to the marginalized. Dalit literature is an outburst of the subdued and suppressed voices of the exploited people from many centuries. Many writers have expressed their protest against the established order of society through their writings. One can hear their voices of protest in their literatures focusing on the social, religious, caste, race and colour oppression. Sivakami attempts to explore the plight of a Dalit at three contexts- gender, caste and class. A Dalit woman is thrice victimized simultaneously by hegemonic elite class, male chauvinism and the rich. She has to face not only the caste discrimination but the gender inequalities and economic disparities too. She beautifully articulates the silenced and subjugated Dalit in an oppressive society along with its consequential voices of protests. Her writings brought out many subtle forms of discrimination meted against Dalit and women. Most of her novels are narratives of resistance of the marginalised women who wage a struggle to seek their identity and their rightful place in a hostile society. Sivakami uses the medium of writing to voice out her views about caste oppression and tries to explore the probable solutions based on her individual experience.

Key words: Dalit women writers, suppressed voices, male chauvinism, caste politics, gender bias

Introduction

Fourth world literature has gained a new momentum creating its own space among the canon of world literatures. There has been a tremendous change since it first came into wide use with the publication of George Manuel's *The Fourth World: An Indian Reality* in 1974. He considers the fourth world as the 'indigenous people descended from a country's aboriginal population and who today are completely or partly deprived of the right to their own territories and its riches' (Manuel 1974). Fourth World Literature creates a platform for understanding the socio-cultural experiences of the people who were the victims of ruthless materialism and imperialistic will. The term can be used to designate the poorest, oppressed or under privileged victims, like the natives of south Africa, the aborigines of north America or the Dalits or the tribals, an oppressed class by the caste system of India. The Fourth World comprises of groups working for their identity, in generally in a minority status, whether ethnic, linguistic, cultural or religion. Janusz Bugajski in his publication, *Fourth World Conflicts* (1991), reiterates the economic and victimized image of the Fourth World.

...a whole range of tribal and peasant societies that share a number of attributes, including a low level of political and economic integration in the state system, an inferior political status, and an underprivileged economic position. (Janusz, 1991)



The fourth world includes a whole range of the tribal and peasant societies that share a number of attributes, including a low level of political and economic integration in the state system, an inferior political status, and an underprivileged economic position. It focuses on varied aspects that rationalize the reality of the ongoing marginalization by the imperial power under the banner of modernization and development. On one hand, it intends to investigate the accounts for the process of integration on global scale and the process of self-identification on the local indigenous level on the other hand. Fourth world literature as a mode of discursive articulation endeavours to give voice to the marginal and thus Dalit literature aroused. Dalit is the term much popularized in the Indian context by social activists of several Dalit movements of recent past. According to Babasahab Ambedkar, Dalithood is a kind of 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. A new trend in Dalit writing took birth and inspired many Dalits to come forward with their literary works in Indian languages.

Dalit literature is an outburst of the subdued and suppressed voices of the exploited people from many centuries. These writers now have a platform to raise their voice and assert their identity. These voices resisting exploitation were fully aware of their own strength and dignity, and their writing is characterised by a new level of creativity and pride. M. F. Jilthe has rightly said 'the voiceless found a voice here; the wordless found a word here' (1994). The growing corpus of Dalit texts, poems, novels and autobiographies seek to rectify the phenomenon by examining the nuances of Dalit culture. This literature envisages with identity formation and its assertion to regain the self-confidence and self-worth of the marginalized sections of the society. The aspect of rebuilding society on values that promote honour and dignity, justice and equality is the foremost agenda. Dalit autobiographies serve as recollections with a motive and are called as narratives of pain which carry some historical truth. This literature shoulders immense responsibility as it is a voice of rebellion that opposes as well as exposes all forms of oppression and exploitation of the weak minority by the stronger majority. It installs a tone of immediacy, intensity, violence and strong disapproval of casteism through strong language. As S.P. Punalekar's mentions:

Dalit writers themselves are either victims or witness to social inequalities and violence. Some have direct or indirect links with social, political and cultural organisations of Dalits. A few among them are staunch social activists and use literature a vehicle to propagate their views on Dalit identity and the prevailing social consciousness. (1992)

Many writers have expressed their protest against the established order of society through their writings. One can hear their voices of protest in their literatures focusing on the social, religious, caste, race and colour oppression. When the literary endeavours of the dalit writers are to be mentioned, the foremost and the earliest dalit writer is Shri Valmaki, author of the famous epic, *The Ramayana*. Then, the eleventh century poet Sekkizhar's *Periya puranam* portraying dalits as outcaste, unclean, unreliable, dishonest and unfaithful persons. Medara Chennaiah and Dohara Kakkaiyah belong to the group of early writers who depicted the issues

of racial segregation and injustice. Vunnava Lakshmi Narayana, a telugu writer attempted a great novel on Dalits with the title *Malapalli* in 1922 in colloquial language. It gives a clear picture of pre-independent village life of dalits, their struggle for existence and class and caste wars. Another important novel in kannada is *Chomanadudi* (1931) is a documentary on life of a helpless Dalit. U. R. Ananthamurthy novels *Samskara* and *Bharathipura* and works of Premchand speak about concerns relating to untouchability in Kannada and Hindi respectively. Many of the works have been already translated into English, especially autobiographies saw an age of high visibility during the 1990s.

The first translated Dalit work that was published is *Karukku* by Bama. Some of the Dalit writers whose works have also been translated to English include *The Grip of Change* by P.Sivakami, *Vanmam* and *Sangati* by Bama, *Hindu* by Sharankumar Limbale and so on. Bama Soosairaj's autobiographical novel in Tamil *Karukku* (1992) gives a vivid picture of her childhood, filled with the stains of shame, ill treatments and humiliations. She documents the reality of her community who were not allowed to voice their story. She expresses her grief over the pathetic and helpless condition of Dalits in general and Dalit women are in particular as they are easy targets of the non-Dalit men for sexual harassment and mental torture. Critical in her perspective, Bama presents her life, which is deeply moving as an example of the everyday chauvinism and tolerance that our traditions and customs practice. Daya Pawar, a Maharastrian dalit writer's *Baluta* (1978) depicts his story as a secret not revealed because of the painful history he narrates. The novel tells the experiences of a dalit struggling for an undisturbed existence, emotionally besieged but incapable of retribution in word and deed.

There were indigenous writers writing in their regional languages, few Indian writers in English endeavoured to narrate the plight of the dalits. *Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable* is historical in the sense that it touches upon the caste system, which gave rise to the practice of "Untouchability" that was much prevalent in the Indian society. Placing Bhaka, an untouchable, outcast boy as the protagonist, Anand touches the deplorable plight of the untouchables and how they are segregated and discriminated against the rest of the society. Another classic *Coolie* is the narrative of the underprivileged class of the society and of the oppressed people who cannot even make both ends meet. Through the eyes of the narrator, Munoo, he brings to light the inevitable and hidden evils of the Raj, right from exploitation, caste ridden society, communal riots, and police injustice. The novel takes us to different places and cities showing the inhuman and degrading treatment that the poor Munoo gets at the hands of the socially, economically, and politically affluent and higher classes of Indian society and how he copes with all circumstances alone.

Limbale's *Akkarmashi* narrates not only the pain and humiliation but also the violence involved in the very constitution of identity. It highlights the view that identity is based on collective experience formed by the questions of lineage, descent and legitimacy.

High caste people look upon my community as untouchable, while my own community humiliated me, calling me akkarmashi. This humiliation was like being stabbed over and over again. I have always lived with the burden of inferiority. And this book is a tale of this burden. (2003)

Narendra Jadhav's *outcaste: A Memoir* articulates new concept of caste identity and dalit human rights within the processes of the global modernity. The focus on the future of Dalits in the global contest, reinterpretation of 'caste discrimination' and Dr. Ambedkar's struggle for better life is a significant move that the narrative makes. As Padgaonkar sums up:

Jadhav's memoir...does not suffer from the infirmities of dalit literature. He chronicles the insults and indignities heaped on his kith and kin with admirable restraint...and even as he exposes, through one telling anecdote after another, the inequalities of the caste system and their devastating effect on the Dalit community. (1997)

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* postulates the process of social control through grievances and strains. The novel exposes the social-political situation that disavows brutality, cruel indifference of touchables towards untouchables of Kerala. The characters Estha and Rahel's sufferings reflect the 'dark colours of life' that forms the dualistic approach of society. The disjointed, fractured and disillusioned Baby Kochamma's bitter personality interfaces the intra-national precipitating factors of social discrimination and ostracism in context of caste, creed, sex, birth and gender. Stressing upon the importance of Dalit literature she observes that 'I do believe that in India we practice a form of apartheid that goes unnoticed by the rest of the world. And it is as important for Dalits to tell their stories as it has been for colonized peoples to write their own histories.' (2003)

Only Dalit can write it because only they have experienced the social as well as the economic problems of the lowest of castes. And when educated and no longer poor, they not only remember their childhood, they also suffer from the idea of pollution which remain strong in the Hindu mind and they identify with their village brothers and sisters when they claim their full human rights. (Eleanor, 1992)

Dalit literature is produced by Dalit consciousness. No other writers than dalits, can perfectly voice the oppression and marginalization they are subjected to. Palanimuthu Sivakami (b. 1957), is one among them whose writings empower her to question and contest existing power structure of society. Sivakami is an acclaimed Tamil Dalit writer with a feminist penchant. Serving as an IAS officer, she had the opportunity to meet women and Dalits, and the social issues become her primary concern and avocation. She quit the administrative service after 29 years in 2008 and joined politics a year later, contesting the Lok Sabha polls from Kanyakumari representing the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). In 2009, she founded her own political party, Samuga Samathuva Padai, based on the principles of Dalit educationist and political leader Dr Bhim Rao Ambedkar, a forum for social equality. She even made a short film *Oodaha* (Through) based on a story written by one of her friends. Set in 1995, it was selected by the National Panorama and won the President Award the same year. She started the Dalit Land Right Movement in 2004. Later, in 2008, with the massive support of women, she organised a huge public conference on Women and Politics, which was attended by nearly 250,000 women.

Sivakami's first book *Pazhaiyana Kazhidakum* (1989) took on patriarchy in Dalit society and courted controversy. It was translated into English in 2006 with the title *The Grip of Change* created a stir as it is merely a perspective of realities perceived by the protagonist, a 17-year-old girl. Her repertoire, which includes novels, short stories, non-fiction and poetry talk largely about the Dalits against discrimination and questions patriarchy. Her writings brought out many subtle forms of discrimination meted against Dalits and women. Most of her novels are narratives of resistance of the marginalised women who wage a struggle to seek their identity and their rightful place in a hostile society. In her English translation of the Tamil Text *Pazhiyana Kazhithalum*, she also features *Asiriyar Kurippu* (1999), the sequel in which Sivakami revisits her work. She named it *Gowri's Notes* and smartly knots an attachment of 10 years. Revisit of the protagonist, Gowri to her villages stimulates the creative faculty of readers to reassess their earlier elucidation of the incidents and characters and it represents her own established vision too. She applies a self-critical and deconstructive technique and exposes the deplorable realities of Dalit patriarchy. It critically reexamines the earlier novel and explores the disjuncture between the fictional world of the earlier novel and the author's social circumstances that enabled the creation of the novel. Through the autobiographical elements, she critiques her earlier representation of patriarchy as a monolithic system and rejects and questions the structures of patriarchy- heterosexual, polygamous marriage, family and the village council of elders - that perpetuate misogyny and curtail female empowerment. She says:

In the name of realism, you begin to believe that you are Gowri because everyone calls you by that name. You begin to believe that you are a Dalit because others think you are. (Sivakami, 2006)

Sivakami attempts to explore the plight of a Dalit at three contexts- gender, caste and class. A Dalit woman is thrice victimized simultaneously by hegemonic elite class, male chauvinism and the rich. She has to face not only the caste discrimination but the gender inequalities and economic disparities too. She beautifully articulates the silenced and subjugated Dalit in an oppressive society along with its consequential voices of protests. Thangam is assaulted physically, verbally and sexually not only by upper caste patriarchs but by the male chauvinists of her own community too. After the death of her husband, her brothers-in-law force her to become a prostitute and even her right on share of land is rejected on the basis of her infertile 'body' and the only option left was to satisfy their lust. As she tells Kathamuthu, "My husband's brother 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. . . ." (7) Being a destitute, she works as a labourer in the fields of a upper class landlord Paranjothi Udayar, for her livelihood. The irony is that she cannot save her body from the jaws of hierarchy and poverty makes a poor widow to bear the sexual exploitation silently. After being raped by him, she narrates, "I didn't want it. But Udayar took no notice of me. He raped me when I was working in his sugarcane field. I remained silent; after all, he is my paymaster. He measures my rice. . ." (7)

The narrative opens with the battered body of the dalit woman. Her past is constituted by her widowhood that in a sense makes her a 'surplus' or 'sexually available' woman subject to exploitation by her caste Hindu landlord and harassment by her in-laws; the assault on her by caste Hindu men owing to her apparent sexual/social misdemeanor. When she is sheltered by Kathamuthu, a dalit patriarch and ex-panchayat leader, her vulnerability is exploited. She is forced to physically yield to his desires. Her oppressed and subjugated body, which she cannot claim as her own is the only available option for her to acquire the power to gain ascendancy in Kattamuthu's house that gives her dominance over his wives.

In a male dominated society, caste is the most demoralizing aspect in a woman's identity. Caste disparities lead to violence against lower caste woman, who is expected to yield to upper caste male chauvinism and the cruelty of discrimination is exposed exploiting masculine brutality. When the liaison between Udayar and Thangam is discovered, she is attacked and threatened by his brothers-in-law. Even Udayar abuses her, "Ungrateful whore! Even if she was hurt by the hand adorned with gold! 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. . ." (31) The hypocrisy of Hindu caste system who on one hand hate the lower caste considering them untouchables, and on the other hand gratify their corporeal hunger through Dalit bodies is revealed. Thangam's saga of exploitation still continues as she is exploited at the hands of the rich of her own Dalit community. Unguarded in her own village, she seeks help of her so called guardian Kathamuthu. The rich and influential Dalit Panchayat leader Kathamuthu who earlier gave shelter to Thangam not only grabs all her money but also abuses and rapes her. She becomes his mistress forever. Ironically, Thangam epitomizes the dilemma of all the subjugated women as the novel projects her in a wretched condition of an outcaste from the beginning to the end. B. Mangalam, rightly puts:

Sivakami's fiction documents violence against women within the domestic space. Her fiction exposes caste and gender hierarchies outside and inside the home that renders the woman an outcaste in her community. (2004)

The novel also exposes the dynamics of relationships within Dalit households throwing light on the space inhabited by women. The cruelty of the stepmother modeled on the stories that she had already read upon on the same topic evokes ire of her father. "Your stepmother has been slogging in the kitchen since the day she stepped into this house, You don't do any work, you spend all your time reading storybooks and then you write about a stepmother's torture" (157). At the same time the sequel also reveals the other side of the story, jealousy that has been constantly nurtured within the household: "Her stepmother spent a lot of time provoking her mother. She would then complain to her husband and earn a round of blows for her mother" (171).

The novel also portrays how caste is being used as a mask to represent the problems faced exclusively by women within the community. The yawning gap exists not only between Dalit and non- Dalits but among Dalits too. A Hindu upper caste Udayar feels ashamed after

the exposure of his liaison with a parachi. His wife, an upper caste Hindu woman sends her brothers to assault Thangam for having an illicit affair with her husband. On the other hand, Kangawali, a lower caste woman has to bear her husband's second wife Nagamani and later they both bear Thangam in their home. They even develop a bond too. After lunch, they sat together in the coconut grove chewing betel leaves and chatting. They no longer served the leftover food. She ate what they ate" (88). Meena Kandasamy, a contemporary Dalit writer appreciates Sivakami for this honest self-criticism,

The first Tamil novel by a Dalit woman... it evoked a great deal of discussion because it went beyond condemning caste fanatics by using fiction to describe how we were shackled, and tangled among ourselves. Instead of being the journey of her individual voice and consciousness, it was a unanimous expression of the youth of this oppressed community- eager and waiting for change "(193).

In the sequel she added, Sivakami uses the medium of writing to voice out her views about caste oppression and tries to explore the probable solutions based on her individual experience. The author of *The Grip of Change* had criticised the leadership of the Dalits- the lowest of the low- at a point when the Dalit movement was gaining ground. She had poked fun at the leaders of Ambedkar Association (150). She also exposes the pressure that she had to face from the non-Dalit community when she criticised the leaders of the Dalit movement in the sequel: It is not good to expose a Dalit leader's exploitation of his own community. A leader who is conscious of his Dalit identity will not be exploitative exposing him will only strengthen the opposition (178). By critically engaging with the beliefs and actions of Dalit community, she tries to envisage a place with equality of opportunity and universal justice. She says, "It wasn't simply that upper castes that exploit the lower castes. A lower caste leader might exploit his own people" (149) laying emphasis upon the caste identity along with justice for everyone. She reveals how she felt when her father, Kathamuthu shouted at the mother and the son who in his opinion were trying to 'show off'. The passengers had enjoyed the scene created by her father, it had livened up their boring journey. And he enjoyed the effect it had created. But she hated attracting unnecessary attention (146). She focuses on the major events and incidents in the lives of the Dalit and the women are portrayed with that true and vivid picture of victimized society. They are doubly marginalized as they remain silent victims of even the Dalit men. This is the simple reason why according to Beauvoir, the 'woman' becomes the second sex/ gender. She is placed there by the other gender rather than she herself has taken the position on the second rank. That is how the patriarchy works in every social milieu.

Truly confirming the meaning of the title, the novel *The Grip of Change* not only voices the plight of an exploited Dalit woman, it also records the waves of 'change' in the Dalit consciousness. It provides a kind of cure for the ailments of the society through the character of Gowri. This novel postulates a crude stereotype of the patriarchy along with a hopeful vision presented by Gowri. The glimpses of the growing consciousness can be seen in the novel when Kathamuthu allows her daughter Gowri to study. The awareness provided by education makes her to realize the exploitation of women in a patriarchal set up and protests

against 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). She defies the decision of her father about her marriage by working hard for her examination, and after getting success she chooses to study further in the city college. When she crosses the threshold of chauvinistic home, resisting her father's intimidation, she thinks she has conked out the tyrannical chains. During floods, waters from overflowing wells mingle with the waters of huge water bodies, transgressing their boundaries. Gowri felt that she had crossed over human made boundaries her father, her caste and her village – and merged with the ocean of people” (95). She openly condemns the inhuman treatment of her father inflicted upon Thangam. She is against her father's polygamist marital state and always stimulates 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. K. Sachidanandan observes, “Dalit literature empowers the marginalized by retrieving the voices, spaces and identities silenced or suppressed by castiest powers” (14). And truly Sivakami formulated the poignant tale of a woman's struggle to fight and survive in a biased society and culture through Thangam's story and Gowri's protests which suggest that silence and suppression is optimistically replaced by a stimulated and resisting expression. Though there are women writers like Bama Faustina, Urmila Panwar, Baby kamble, Meena Kandasamy and P. Sivakami, the insurgence of Dalit feminism is the need of the hour. The future of Dalit literature is bright blowing new reforming waves. So, voice of the voiceless is voiced here and that should be heard by society and the mainstream as well. Dalit writers use their words to create a change more powerfully than weapons could to protest against inequality and ill treatment in all spheres of life the problems of Dalits.

References:

1. Manuel, George, *The Fourth World: An Indian Reality*. Canada: Collier-Macmillan, 1974. (p-40)
2. Bugajski, Janusz. *Fourth World Conflicts: Communism and Rural Societies*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1991. (p-1)
3. Jilthe, M. F. *The First All India Dalit Writers Conference. A Commemorative Volume and Who's who*. United States: The University of Michigan, 1994.
4. Punalekar, S.P. *The scope of Dalit literature*. Orient Longman, 1992. (p- 242)
5. Limbale, Sharan Kumar. *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi*. Trans. Santosh Bhoomkar. Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2003. (p- ix-x)
6. Punalekar, S. P. *Sociology of Dalit Autobiography. Social Transformation in India. Essays in Honour of Prof. I. P. Desai, Vol.2, New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 1997.* (p- 371-39)
7. Roy, Arundhathi. *Affirmative Fictions*. Outlook. Oct 20, 2003.
8. Zelliott, Eleanor, *Dalit Sahitya: The Historical Background. An anthology of Dalit Literature*, Mulk raj Anand and E. Zelliott,(Eds.) New Delhi: Gyan Publication, 1992. (p. 18-19)
9. Sivakami, P. *The Grip of Change and The Authour's Notes*. Chennai: Orient Blackswan, 2006. (p-153)
10. Mangalam, B. *Caste and gender Interface in Tamil Dalit Discourse. Signifying the Self: Women and Literature*. Delhi: Macmillan, 2004. (p- 111)
11. Jadhav, Narendra. 2003. *Outcaste: A Memoir*. New Delhi: Viking.
12. Naganawar, V.F. " Dalit Writings: Relocating Self-Identity" *Deccan Literary Journal*. D.T. Angadi(Ed.), Gulbarga, Vol.-1, Issue-1, July-2011.



13. *Irudayam, S. J., Aloysius, Jayshree P. Mangubhai, Joel G. Lee. Dalit Women Speak Out: Violence against Dalit women in India. Overview Report of Study in Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Tamil Nadu/ Pondicherry and Uttar Pradesh. National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights. New Delhi, 2006.*
14. *Kandasamy, Meena. Touch. Peacock Books, 2006.*
15. *Limbale, sharankumar. Towards An Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations. Translated by Alok Kumar Mukherjee (from Marathi). Orient BlackSwan, 2010.*