

VICTIMIZING THE VICTIM: THE GRIP OF CHANGE

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ABSTRACT:

The Grip of Change is Sivakami's English translation of the *Pazhainya Kazhithalum*. The author speaks about caste problems and women exploitation. Kathamuthu is the leader of the Parayar Caste and the novel starts with his chivalrous act of rescuing a beaten-up woman from the upper caste people. It turns out that he sexually abuses the same woman who was given shelter in his house. Gowri who is considered to be the mouthpiece of the author, observes all these injustices and develops into a strong individual later. It is ambiguous whether the target of the author is caste injustices or vengeance toward her father.

A revelation of all these thoughts is discussed in *The Author's Notes*. The novel *The Grip of Change* is abbreviated as TGC in the research article.

KEYWORDS: Abuse, Caste, Dalit, Exploitation, Parayar.

P. Sivakami's *The Grip of Change* starts with the exploitation of a Dalit woman named Thangam. So, it is well decided that the novel is about the injustice happening to a woman, especially from an oppressed community. Thangam comes running to Kathamuthu, the self-selected leader of the Dalit community. Sivakami did not put a lot of effort to portray Kathamuthu as the protagonist of the novel, though he was considered to be a leader by his community in the novel. Initially, she gave him the power to suppress the women of the house and dominate the uneducated people of his caste, but later she discarded his influence in society and brought a well-deserved leader. When the dynamic change was shown with utmost ease, the people of their village accepted it. People had forgotten their previous leader, Kathamuthu over time. The humiliation he experienced because of the deprivation seems a little personal in the novel since it is considered to be partly autobiographical.

The character, Gowri might be the mouthpiece of the author, or she is impersonating Sivakami in the novel. Either way, she has some connection with the character Kathamuthu. Gowri, daughter of Kathamuthu never looks at her father as a respectable man. She condemns him for being entitled to his position in society and for misusing the powerless. She has seen him maltreating her mother and stepmother. When he saved Thangam from the Udayar men, he was respected by the people of his society. Over time, he misbehaved with Thangam and gave her no reason to complain, since he saved her from the ultimate terror of her life. When Gowri sees this, she was filled with utmost disgust and started crying. "Dogs! Dogs in this house! Shameless as dogs!". (TGC, 93) The author favours Kathamuthu on certain occasions and strongly snatches away the respect he deserved earlier. Because of this portrayal, the readers never took Kathamuthu as a hero. This makes us think that the author has some personal vengeance against Kathamuthu.

Kathamuthu as a father was a proud man. He was proud when his daughter changed a few words in the letter he asked her to write to the Tahsildar regarding Thangam's case and made it even more appealing. He was happy when his daughter got a government job. But he is too proud to accept those feelings. Kathamuthu being a husband to two wives never lets his daughter wear flowers or dress beautifully. Throughout the novel, he blames her for dressing up whereas he is always seen presentable wearing ironed clothes. Sivakami has taken this instance to speak about Kathamuthu's hypocrisy and chauvinism.

"Don't you have another blouse to wear?" (TGC, 147)

“Can’t you wear something that covers your back?” (TGC, 147)

Gowri was never a girl who subjects herself to her father’s wishes. She studied hard to escape from the marriage his father planned if she had failed the exam. She had always said things that would enrage Kathamuthu. For instance, when he damned a man as a drunkard, she questions his integrity to blame someone as a drunkard. A woman speaking about his integrity, infuriates Kathamuthu and he says, “If your daughter is this arrogant, you will have to find some customers for her.” (TGC, 144)

The obscenity in this statement is not common for a father to utter about his daughter. Also, when she was humiliated in the school for not paying fees at the proper time, she unleashes on her mother. “Your husband has the money to drink and sleep around with women, but he can’t spare some for a dhavani? He has fathered a house full of children, why can’t he die instead of putting us to such shame? I can’t even borrow a piece of cloth because of my caste! I want to kill myself!”. (TGC, 162)

We have always seen a tension sustaining between Gowri and Kathamuthu in the novel. When Gowri denied taking him with her when she joined the duty, his ego was hurt. He was also complaining about his return journey on the train standing for days. Even on his death bed, he took the chance to complain about her. This constant misunderstanding appears in the novel. It might have happened because Gowri did not keep her father on the pedestal and respect him as he expected. Despite the fact of being respected by the entire village once upon a time, Kathamuthu was wounded when his daughter had lower values on him. He showed that displeasure by denouncing her.

Gowri not only stands for her but also advises both her mother and stepmother to stand against domestic violence. There are times when both the wives join together and complain about their husband. Knowing the seriousness of their union, Kathamuthu always provoked a fight between them for his life to be pleasant and safe. Though problems arose between Nagamani and Kanagavalli, they had been there for each other. It is usual to have disputes between two women having the same husband but both of them knew Kathamuthu’s nature. They knew that the man was capable of bringing another woman to their house if he needed. When Thangam was raised to the position of the third wife, it was not a surprise for them. As Kanagavalli invited Nagamani with open arms, they ought to accept Thangam.

There was no other choice given to them or Thangam.

Thangam, a childless widow harassed by the Udayar, running to Kathamuthu for help is how the novel starts. She was denied her deserved piece of land by the brothers of her dead husband since she was childless. Later working in the fields of Paranjothi Udayar, she was abused by the landlord. She never complained about the situation as she had no other choice. She surrendered herself to the needs of Paranjothi Udayar, even though she was appalled by it. When she was attacked by the relatives of the Udayar family, she was powerless. None of her neighbours took a chance to help her that night.

When Kathamuthu, a powerful man of the village took control over the issue, it became revolutionary. People gathered around to fight for their caste and not for the assailed woman. They blindly accepted Kathamuthu’s words. He had gone to every extent of getting justice for Thangam. He discreetly warned the police officer to stand for them and finally brought Paranjothi Udayar to pay some compensation money for Thangam. The woman was raped, molested, and brought to the streets by those men. All she gets as compensation was some money and not even a case filed against him.

When Kathamuthu took Thangam to the police station to file a case against the Udayar men, they burnt the huts in Cheri. This caused huge trouble between the two castes. To subdue the intensity of the combat, Kathamuthu planned a meeting with Paranjothi Udayar. The panchayat started with Paranjothi Udayar saying, “Whatever has happened, has happened” (TGC, 79) as if it was very

casual to assault a woman. The two headstrong men's conversation ended with a bargain of settling the account by paying ten thousand rupees to

Thangam. The victim was neither allowed to speak for herself nor asked for what she wanted.

Since Kathamuthu's motive was to make the upper caste men go downhill in front of the Parayar people, he was happy with his achievement. Anupama Rao (2009) argues that, "The bodies of dalit women are seen collectively as mute, and capable of bearing penetration and other modes of marking upper-caste hegemony because of the over-determination of this violence as caste privilege". (Rao 76)

Not recognizing what she had lost, Thangam saw Kathamuthu as her God who sought justice for her. When he asked for that money, she had got as compensation, she obediently offers him the money. Even then she did not perceive giving up the power to him. Kathamuthu gradually made Thangam a member of the family by buying her clothes and feeding her food as it happened with his wives. One day he made a disgusting move on Thangam when she groaned, "You are like a brother to me...a brother...". (TGC, 93) She won the rights over her land and stayed in Kathamuthu's house as if nothing happened. No one in the family showed any difference. Initially, an upper-caste man assaulted Thangam and Kathamuthu fought for her justice. Then Kathamuthu raped her and no one spoke against it. This shows the hypocrisy and the clear motive behind the revolutionary act of Kathamuthu. Always Thangam falls as the prey to all the injustices and learns to accept the adversities of her life. In fact, Thangam acquired a new power in the house by having Kathamuthu support her whenever there is a duel in the family. Thangam learnt to fit herself in this discriminatory world by learning from her mistakes. When she raised her voice against the iniquity she faced because of the Udayar man, she was termed as an immoral woman.

Later, she learnt to use Kathamuthu's desire for her body to withhold a place in his household. As Vaishali Sivakumar in her paper "A Dalit women Under a Strong Clutch of Patriarchy: A Comprehensive Study of The Grip of Change" mentions,

A very famous statement _Woman is a Dalit from Beginning to End seems really a naked truth at this stage just because of this struggle of the Dalit women against the society, against their own outset and against the traditions their men follow. The patriarchy crushes down the originality, warmth, delicacy, tenderness and even beauty in them. (Shivkumar 3)

When Thangam showed up at his doorstep, Kathamuthu assaulted her with his language. When Thangam narrates how she was molested by the men of the Udayar,

Kathamuthu quotes, "Now tell me, why didn't you go after someone of our caste? It's because you chose that upper-caste fellow, that four men could come and righteously beat you up. Don't you like our chaps?". (TGC, 7) When she had accepted having an affair with

Paranjothi Udayar, he blamed her for ruining someone's marriage. It is ironical to see a woman accused for any misfortune in a relationship. If a man marries or has an illegitimate relationship with a woman, the woman will be accused. If a man rapes a lower caste woman, again the woman will be blamed. To intensify the caste discrimination, the authors always bring in nefarious relationships like an upper-caste man abducting a powerless woman or an upper-caste woman in love with an underprivileged man.

Caste had always been persistent in breaking up relationships. When Lalitha fell in love with Elangovan, a paraya boy her mother showed strong opposition. Lalitha representing the youths, questions about caste differences to her mother which was unanswered. The end of their love story was never mentioned in the novel. We will never know whether they were married or separated or were killed by the upper caste monsters. In another instance, we see Ramalinga Reddiyar's Wife, Santha having a relationship with the servant, Kaliyan. When Paranjothi Udayar looked at Santha and Kaliyan in a compromising situation he spat out with disgust. It was contradictory to see Paranjothi Udaya who was accused for abducting

Thangam felt a sense of disgust at Santha's act as if he was a saint. Santha and Kaliyan's story was also enigmatic.

Readers might have questions like, what would have happened to Santha especially Kaliyan? Will their secret be revealed? What would have been the consequence? Would the villagers have burnt both of them or just Kaliyan? The author gives us the liberty to think about all these circumstances because she deliberately ignored the small talk. Her motive was to focus on the injustices happening to her people. She brilliantly used all these incidents to show a picture of the environment, she has laid as a background to her story.

Sivakami suffered a lot during her childhood. Since her motive was to focus chiefly on the caste differences her people suffered, she neglected the chances of portraying her story. She feels that if a writer speaks about one's own experience in a work it can't be categorised under literature. Only in the Author's notes, a reader gets to know her lifestyle. In the novel, her father was portrayed as one of the important heads of the village. But the fact of being financially miserable is consciously ignored. She remembers a moment when the teacher asks her Nadar friend to lend her a dhavani since hers was faded. The reply she got from her friend disturbed her throughout her life. She said, "My mother says we can't lend you a dhavani. You belong to the Paraya caste...". (TGC, 161) The novelist was one among the five students of the school who belonged to the lower caste. Everyone treated them differently. In the school drama when Pachaiammal, a lower caste girl enacted as a boy she used unparliamentary words which were very common in their lifestyle. From then, the drama committee decided not to let lower-caste students enact in the play. When the novelist is questioned about her style of writing, she burst out in anger replying "You fault the lower castes for their lifestyles. You fault them for even living" (TGC, 163).

Sivakami wanted to embody the pain of her villagers and not hers. It might be the reason why there are some deliberate differences between Sivakami and Gowri despite the work being semi-autobiographical. In the Author's Notes, she brings in an interviewer who asks her a lot of challenging questions. The interviewer questions the authenticity of the novel. It is asked, "As an author, don't you think that your life should be true to your writing? If it is not, then writing is just a skill to earn money or reputation.". (TGC, 166) One wonders whether the questions are asked by the author to herself.

In an article entitled From Limits to Liminal Spaces: A Study of Select Works of Sivakami and Imayam

To be heard, one has to speak; to be answered one has to question; and to be recognized, one has to speak louder. There are many writers who are trying to speak clearly and loudly and writer Sivakami's voice is loud and clear; sonorous and sound; it is not only heard by one but all. She has raised her voice not only for herself but also for her people who remained unseen and unheard. (42)

Some critics appreciate her for focusing on the social issues whereas others blame her for taking revenge against her father out of personal vengeance. They say, "Instead of viewing the unhappiness of her family against the background of social and historical forces, the novelist simplistically blamed it on her father's polygamy.". (TGC, 171) One might be provoked by this statement if they question the author for accomplishing her goal of bringing justice to her village.

Despite all the criticism the novel has received, P. Sivakami has excelled in picturing the sufferings of a woman from all castes and classes. She has depicted the story of a Dalit widow woman physically abused and mentally tortured by the men of both the upper caste and by the men of her own caste. She has not failed to shower the light on the domestic abuse a woman would experience despite the man of the house being a Dalit leader. Later to answer all the criticisms, P. Sivakami has dedicated the Author's Notes. Though the novel majorly speaks about the caste discrimination and injustices faced by women in a patriarchal society, she has consciously portrayed the development of the protagonist, Gowri in the novel. Gowri who was brought up by a misogynist father turns out to be a well-educated woman and broke all the barriers to be a self-made Dalit woman. Emancipation of Gowri is an inspiring ray of light to many women of the same social background who can break the shackles and lead an empowering life.

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