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Voicing the Silenced: Dalit Feminist Assertion in P. Sivakami's *The Grip of Change*

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Abstract: This paper critically examines *The Grip of Change* by P. Sivakami through the lens of Dalit feminist discourse, foregrounding the intersectionality of caste, gender, and power. As one of the earliest novels written by a Dalit woman in Tamil in 1989 and later translated into English in 2006 by the author herself, the text offers an insider's perspective on the lived realities of Dalit women who were for a long period of time i.e. for centuries excluded from both mainstream literary representations and feminist theorising. The narrative explores how Dalit women are doubly marginalised, first by the oppressive structures of caste and then by patriarchal norms within their own communities. This paper argues that *The Grip of Change* is a powerful act of narrative resistance, wherein the silenced voices of Dalit women find articulation through complex characters like Thangam and the assertive presence of Kathamuthu. While the novel critiques the male-dominated political structures masquerading as social reform, it also exposes the internal contradictions of Dalit patriarchy. Through a close textual analysis, the paper investigates how Sivakami dismantles both Savarna feminism and Dalit male hegemony to carve a distinct space for Dalit feminist assertion. Ultimately, the paper positions *The Grip of Change* as a seminal work in Dalit literature that not only challenges dominant literary canons but also reclaims narrative agency for the most silenced subjects in Indian society.

Keywords: Dalit feminism, caste and gender, intersectionality, narrative resistance, subaltern voices, feminist literary criticism

Introduction

Since 1970s Dalit literature has emerged as a powerful literary and political movement that contests the caste hierarchies entrenched in Indian society. Rooted in the lived experiences

of the most oppressed castes, Dalit writing serves not merely as a mode of expression but as a form of resistance and a tool of social transformation. It challenges the Savarna dominance of Indian literature, which historically excluded the narratives of the marginalized. As Satyanarayana and Tharu (2011) assert, Dalit literature is “a site of political assertion and aesthetic innovation,” offering a counter-narrative to the homogenized cultural history constructed by upper-caste intellectuals. Central to this literary and ideological movement is the emergence of Dalit feminism, a critical paradigm that foregrounds the intersectionality of caste, gender, and class. Unlike mainstream (Savarna) feminism, which often abstracts gender from caste realities, Dalit feminism insists that the two are inseparable (Rege, 1998; Paik, 2014). As Sharmila Rege (2006) famously argued, Dalit women are not just subjects of caste violence but also agents of knowledge production. Their experiences lie at the confluence of multiple axes of oppression i.e. patriarchy, caste, and economic deprivation and therefore demand an analytical framework that recognizes this complexity. Dalit women's narratives, however, have often been rendered invisible in both male-authored Dalit literature and upper-caste feminist discourses (Guru, 1995; Sunder Rajan, 2011). As Gopal Guru (1995) notes, Dalit women have to “speak differently” because their realities do not align with either group. Their literature resists being co-opted into dominant narratives, instead articulating a “double critique” (Rege, 1998) that questions both caste-based and patriarchal oppression.

One of the most significant contributions to Dalit feminist literature comes from P. Sivakami, whose novel *The Grip of Change* (*Pazhainya Kazhidalum*, 1989; trans. 2006) occupies a seminal place in Indian literary history. As the first Tamil novel by a Dalit woman to be translated into English, the work is groundbreaking in both content and form. Sivakami, a bureaucrat-turned-writer, uses fiction to expose

the contradictions within Dalit political movements and the patriarchal structures that govern them (Kumar, 2016). Her portrayal of characters like Thangam, a widowed Dalit woman subjected to brutal caste and sexual violence, and Kathamuthu, a complex figure who oscillates between protector and patriarch, reflects the nuanced dynamics of power and resistance within Dalit communities. Contemporary scholars have increasingly acknowledged the novel's continuing relevance, especially in light of resurgent caste-based violence and the rise of intersectional activism in India (Anandhi, 2020; Teltumbde, 2018). The text compels readers to examine how structures of power operate within marginalized groups and how gendered caste violence is often rationalized under the guise of social reform (Aloysius, 1998; Limbale, 2004). Therefore, this paper explores how *The Grip of Change* gives voice to the silenced experiences of Dalit women and articulates a distinctly Dalit feminist assertion. The narrative does not merely represent victimhood but foregrounds agency, resistance, and ethical ambiguity. Through a close reading of the text, this paper investigates how the novel critiques the performative nature of male-led Dalit activism while simultaneously dismantling the caste-blindness of Savarna feminism. In doing so, it redefines what counts as literary resistance in contemporary India. The key research questions focused in this study are:

1. How does *The Grip of Change* represent the voices and agency of Dalit women?
2. In what ways does the novel critique both caste-based oppression and patriarchal control within the Dalit community?

Ultimately, this study positions Sivakami's novel as not only a pivotal text in Dalit literature but also a prescient commentary on the continuing struggles of Dalit women. It challenges dominant literary and feminist canons while offering a radical

reimagining of justice, community, and resistance from the margins.

Review of Literature

Dalit literature, born out of centuries of caste-based exclusion and resistance, has developed into a significant counter-discursive tradition that reclaims agency for the marginalized. It is not merely a literary practice but a radical socio-political act aimed at rewriting cultural memory and disrupting the hegemony of upper-caste narratives (Satyanarayana & Tharu, 2011). As their edited anthologies *No Alphabet in Sight* (2011) and *From Those Stubbs Steel Nibs Are Sprouting* (2013) demonstrate, Dalit writing across Indian languages is marked by testimonial urgency, political resistance, and aesthetic innovation. These works foreground “writing as political practice” and insist on the legitimacy of voices traditionally silenced in Indian literature for a long time. While early Dalit narratives focused primarily on the structural violence of caste, Dalit feminism has emerged as a critical framework that addresses the layered and intersectional oppressions faced by Dalit women. Sharmila Rege's foundational essay *Dalit Women Talk Differently* (1998) is pivotal in articulating the necessity of a Dalit feminist standpoint, which challenges both Savarna feminist caste-blindness and Dalit male patriarchy. Rege (2006) contends that Dalit women's testimonios are not just confessions of suffering but also acts of knowledge production and epistemic resistance. This standpoint has gained further support through the works of scholars like Gopal Guru (1995), who argues that Dalit women's experiences are irreducibly distinct and must be theorized independently. Similarly, Gail Omvedt (1995) adds another dimension by historicizing the political activism of Dalit women, drawing attention to their role in anti-caste and labour movements. She stresses that Dalit women's resistance

should not be framed purely in terms of victimhood but as active political engagement a position echoed in contemporary feminist historiographies (Paik, 2014).

In this context, P. Sivakami's novel *The Grip of Change* (1989/2006) stands as a landmark text that not only articulates Dalit feminist concerns but also embodies them through its narrative structure and character complexity. The novel critiques both caste-based violence and internal community patriarchy, offering a dual critique that was largely unprecedented at the time of its publication. The protagonist Thangam, who is sexually exploited and socially ostracized, represents the embodied realities of caste-gender violence, while Kathamuthu, the male reformist figure, becomes a site of critique for his patriarchal benevolence masked as political leadership. As Mini Krishnan an academic translator notes in her introduction to the English translation of 2006 edition, Sivakami's act of self-translation is itself a form of narrative control, ensuring the authenticity and political integrity of her message across literary and linguistic audiences. Recent scholarship has further expanded on the implications of *The Grip of Change* within broader debates on caste, gender, and narrative power. Anupama Rao's *The Caste Question* (2009) offers a crucial analytical lens by demonstrating how gendered subjectivity is central to Dalit politics. Rao identifies how narratives like Sivakami's interrogate public-political discourses that simultaneously marginalize and tokenize Dalit women. Raj Kumar (2018) similarly argues that Dalit women's writing, including Sivakami's, transforms literature into a space of contestation where history, identity, and justice are actively renegotiated. Yet, despite growing attention to *The Grip of Change*, critical gaps persist. Much of the existing scholarship has either privileged caste as the primary site of critique or addressed gender in isolation. This fragmentation risks undermining the intersectional complexity that is central to Dalit women's lived realities. Moreover, relatively few

studies focus on the narrative strategies such as the use of irony, ambiguity, and polyphonic voices that Dalit women writers employ to challenge dominant literary conventions (Ravikumar & Azhagarasan, 2008).

This paper tries to contribute to the existing literature by addressing these critical lacunae. Through a close reading of *The Grip of Change*, it explores how P. Sivakami constructs a Dalit feminist narrative space that simultaneously critiques structural caste violence and patriarchal paternalism. By analysing narrative voice, character dynamics, and symbolic structures, this study demonstrates how the novel functions as an act of textual resistance and epistemic agency. It aims to reposition Sivakami's novel not only as a foundational Dalit feminist text but also as a literary intervention with continued relevance in today's struggles for intersectional justice.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws upon three interrelated theoretical frameworks to analyse P. Sivakami's *Grip of Change: intersectionality, subaltern studies, and Dalit feminist criticism*. Each offers a critical lens to unpack the multiple and overlapping layers of marginalisation experienced by Dalit women, while also foregrounding the strategies of resistance and self-assertion embedded in the narrative. The concept of intersectionality, coined by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989), provides the foundational premise for this analysis. Crenshaw argues that traditional modes of feminist and anti-racist discourse fail to address the specific experiences of Black women in the United States because they treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories. In the Indian context, intersectionality is crucial for understanding how caste, gender, and class simultaneously shape the lived realities of Dalit women. *The Grip of Change* illustrates this dynamic vividly through the character of Thangam, who is not only

subjected to caste-based violence but also denied support and autonomy within her community. The protagonist's social positioning cannot be understood through a singular lens of gender or caste; instead, it is the intersection of these identities that constitutes her oppression. This framework enables a nuanced reading of how multiple axes of identity intersect to produce unique forms of marginalisation and resistance. Complementing is the theoretical orientation offered by Subaltern Studies, particularly Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal essay "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*" (1988). Spivak critiques the tendency of elite intellectuals to speak for the marginalised without enabling them to speak for themselves. Her analysis reveals how subaltern voices are often co-opted or erased within dominant discourses. In this context, *The Grip of Change* can be read as a literary act that *reclaims the voice of the Dalit woman*, not through external representation but through an insider's articulation. Sivakami, herself a Dalit woman, navigates the complexities of narrative voice and authorship to foreground subaltern agency. The act of self-translation from Tamil to English is not merely linguistic but epistemological, allowing the subaltern voice to enter transregional and academic discourses on terms.

The third and most central framework for this study is Dalit feminist criticism. As advanced by scholars like Sharmila Rege (1998) and Gopal Guru (1995), Dalit feminism interrogates both Savarna feminism's caste blindness and Dalit male discourse's gender insensitivity. Dalit feminist criticism focusses on the lived experiences of Dalit women, emphasising autonomy, dignity, and political subjectivity. Sivakami's novel disrupts the narrative control of male reformers like Kathamuthu by illustrating how even well-meaning patriarchs reproduce domination. Through characters like Thangam and the unnamed narrator (often read as Sivakami's alter ego), the novel offers a critical reflection on intra-community gender politics and the often-paternalistic tone of Dalit male

leadership. Together, these theoretical lenses allow for a comprehensive analysis of *The Grip of Change* as a text that narrates the marginalisation of Dalit women and constructs a literary space for their voice, agency, and resistance. The intersection of caste, gender, and power will thus serve as the analytical anchor for interpreting the narrative, characters, and thematic concerns of the novel.

Textual Analysis / Discussion

The novel powerfully articulates the silenced voices of Dalit women and critiques both caste oppression and internal patriarchy. The following sections examine key themes in the novel through close textual analysis, supported by critical theory and scholarship.

i) **Caste and Gender Oppression:** The novel opens with the character of Thangam, a Dalit widow who is brutally beaten and thrown out of her house by her upper-caste landlord, highlighting the harsh realities of caste and gender-based violence. Thangam represents the intersectional victim a Dalit, a woman, and a widow positioned at the bottom of the socio-cultural hierarchy. Her vulnerability is compounded by her economic dependence and lack of familial protection, making her susceptible to both physical violence and social stigma. Sivakami does not portray Thangam merely as a passive victim; instead, her suffering becomes the catalyst for the narrative's central conflict. The villagers' initial indifference and the reluctant intervention of Dalit leaders emphasise how caste solidarity often overlooks gender injustice. As Sharmila Rege (1998) argues, Dalit women face a "triple burden" of caste, class, and gender, and is starkly visible in Thangam's circumstances. Her marginalisation is not just a result of casteist oppression by the upper castes but also due to the internal patriarchy of her own community.

ii) Assertion and Agency: The character of Kathamuthu, a local Dalit leader, embodies a complex form of male dominance masquerading as progressive activism. While he champions Thangam's cause by confronting her oppressors and facilitating a legal settlement, his actions are marked by patronising attitudes. He uses Thangam's suffering for his own political growth. His decisions are unilateral, made without consulting Thangam, thus reproducing the same structures of control that he ostensibly opposes. The unnamed narrator often interpreted as Sivakami's alter ego presents a counterpoint to Kathamuthu. She is educated, assertive, and conscious of the gendered power dynamics within the community. While Kathamuthu exercises control through public activism, the narrator asserts agency through introspection and critique. She questions the authenticity of male-dominated reformist politics and highlights the silencing of Dalit women in both public and private spaces. This theme aligns with Gopal Guru's (1995) critique of Dalit male intellectual discourse, which marginalises women's voices under the guise of community representation. The narrator's reflections offer an alternative model of leadership rooted in empathy and inclusivity, rather than dominance and performance.

iii) Narrative Technique and Voice: Sivakami employs a layered narrative structure that gives space to multiple voices, challenging the monologic tendencies of both mainstream and Dalit male narratives. The use of a first-person narrator allows for an engagement with the inner world of the Dalit woman, making visible the psychological dimensions of oppression. The act of self-translation from Tamil to English is particularly significant. Unlike most translated texts, *The Grip of Change* is rendered into English by the author herself. Through this translation nuances of the Tamil Dalit experience are not lost in translation. As Mini Krishnan (2006) observes, self-translation here is an act of reclaiming narrative agency in a

multilingual literary culture often dominated by Savarna voices. Through her narrative voice, Sivakami reclaims the right to represent Dalit women's experiences on terms, resisting both literary or linguistic and cultural erasure. The first-person perspective, interspersed with dialogues and community interactions, creates a dialogic space where silenced voices can speak and contest dominant narratives.

iv) Critique of Upper-Caste and Dalit Patriarchy: One of the most powerful aspects of *The Grip of Change* is its double critique of both upper-caste and Dalit patriarchy. The novel refuses to romanticise caste solidarity by exposing gendered power relations within the Dalit community. Kathamuthu's interactions with women, especially Thangam and the narrator, reveal how patriarchal control is justified as protection or guidance. The novel also critiques upper-caste complicity in systemic violence. Thangam's humiliation and the community's apathy highlight how caste privilege operates with impunity. However, Sivakami goes further by illustrating how Dalit leaders mimic these hierarchical structures in communities. This is evident in Kathamuthu's desire for control, his dismissiveness of women's opinions, and his insistence on political image over genuine empowerment. Sharmila Rege's (2000) call for a Dalit feminist standpoint is embodied in Sivakami's narrative strategy. By refusing to separate caste from gender, the novel articulates a politics that is both intersectional and transformative. It critiques the dominant political rhetoric that uses Dalit women's suffering as a symbol without addressing their real concerns and voices.

Ultimately, *The Grip of Change* emerges as a pioneering text that challenges both the mainstream literary canon and internal patriarchal discourses. It foregrounds the agency of Dalit women not through heroic posturing but through everyday acts of resistance, introspection, and the assertion of voice. Sivakami's narrative insists that true change lies in not reproducing power under new names but in dismantling the

structures that silence, marginalise, and control. By illuminating the lived experiences of Dalit women, the text calls for a radical rethinking of societal norms and values. It champions the importance of listening to these voices and recognises their struggles as integral to the broader fight for justice and equality.

Conclusion

P. Sivakami's *The Grip of Change* emerges as a landmark in Dalit feminist literature, offering a compelling portrayal of the intersectional oppression faced by Dalit women and their quest for dignity, identity, and agency. This paper has shown how the novel powerfully challenges both the external structures of caste-based discrimination and the internal patriarchy within Dalit communities. Through complex characters such as Thangam, who embodies the brutal consequences of marginalisation, and Kathamuthu, who represents the contradictions of patriarchal leadership, Sivakami critiques not only Savarna hegemony but also the gendered hierarchies within Dalit political and social life. The narrator's reflective and assertive voice provides an alternative feminist lens that emerges from lived experience and resists being co-opted by dominant discourses. The novel's act of self-translation by the author further reinforces this resistance, preserving cultural authenticity while asserting control over how Dalit stories are told and received. In voicing the silenced, Sivakami not only disrupts canonical literary spaces but also redefines the parameters of feminist literary criticism in India. *The Grip of Change* thus becomes more than a narrative of individual or communal suffering; it is a political text that reclaims authorship, asserts Dalit womanhood, and calls for a more inclusive and intersectional approach to literary analysis. The study reaffirms the importance of engaging with Dalit feminist narratives that challenge both caste-based and

gender-based hierarchies, paving the way for a more just and representative literary tradition.

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