

Voice of The New Woman in P. Sivakami's *The Grip of Change*

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The paper analyses P. Sivakami's novel *The Grip of Change* (2006) and argues that it presents the emerging voice of the contemporary New Woman in the protagonist Gowri. The narrative is a realistic record of the physical abuse faced by Dalit women at the hands of upper caste men, Dalit men and upper caste women. The identity, individuality and status of a woman from the marginalised section of society are considered worthless. Her right to live as an individual in contemporary society which has government regulations as support is declining day by day. Physical abuse and sexual assault appear the lesser crimes in comparison to the lack of identity and loss of individuality suffered by the female protagonists' in the novel. The paper argues the emerging voice of the New Woman in the women's voices in the novel.

Key words: New Woman, expression of individuality, changes towards a better future.

COMPLETE PAPER

The New woman was a concept which emerged at the end of the nineteenth century which saw women writers express themselves regarding concerns of education, choice in the issue of marriage and be financially independent. This paper argues women's writing of the nineteenth century reflects the above ideas and is seen in literary work by women writers Krupabai Sathianadhan (1862-1894), Cornelia Sorabji(1866-1954), Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hussain(1880-1932),Shevanthibai M Niakmbe and Pundita Ramabai (1858-1922)of India. The contemporary social conditions for the women of low caste and class are such that women's writing today is an echo of nineteenth century writing and expresses similar concerns in their writing which is seen in the work of P.Sivakami' s *The Grip of Change* (2006).

In the present social milieu where some women of the upper caste and class and few women of the low caste and class are educated and employed, the issue of women's education and consequential benefits appear common. Yet this paper argues that for a large number of women from the low class and caste the situation of

education, choice in marriage and employment is still an unrealized dream and a far cry from reality. The Indian Hindu caste system which propagated the idea of the people of low caste being considered as pollutants and shunned from mainstream society is the reason for them to be denied access to education and consequent benefits. This paper argues that women of the low caste and class are marginalized even today in their access to education, exercising choice in marriage and financial independence.

Literary work from the marginalized sections of society in contemporary writing of women is seen in narratives like Bama's *Karukku* (2000), *Sangati* (1994) and *Vanmam* (2002), Baby Halder's *A Life Less Ordinary* (2006), Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (2009) and P. Sivakami's *The Grip of Change* (2006). This paper analyses *The Grip of Change* (2006) by P. Sivakami as it traces the continuing emergence of the New Woman. Sivakami portrays real life situation of the women protagonists who belong to the low caste particularly in Thangam, Kanagavalli, Nagamani and Gowri. Kamalam represents the upper caste females in the narrative. While Kanagavalli and Nagamani belong to the older generation and make a compromise with their lot as wives married to Kathamuthu, Thangam is the unfortunate solitary woman who suffers not only at the hands of the upper caste men but is exploited by the people of her own caste. Gowri on the other hand, belongs to the younger generation and rebels against the contemporary social conditions, patriarchy and her father. Sivakami portrays the New Woman of India today in the character Gowri as she seeks education, employment and exercises choice in marriage. She thinks independently and expresses individuality rebelling against patriarchal dictates.

Thangam represents the Dalit woman of India who becomes the 'body' of contention between the upper and lower caste. Thangam is alone as her husband is dead and she does not have children. She works hard for the upper caste Paranjothi in his agricultural lands as a labourer. This paper analyses her situation and presents her exploitation at four levels.

- 1) **Sexual abuse by the upper caste:** The upper caste landlord Paranjothi is a man of great libido and exploits her body whenever he feels the need to satisfy his sexual urge. He sends her into the middle of the sugarcane field on the pretext of finding a lost hoe and follows her stealthily, "Before she could even guess what Paranjothi was up to, he grabbed her from behind and held her buttocks right against his thighs, murmuring harshly, Don't shout" (2006:33)
- 2) **Sexual oppression by men of her own caste:** Thangam's brothers-in-law after her husband's death attempt to assault her modesty, to which she does not agree and as a result she is refused a share in her husband's family property as she does not have children. "After my husband's death, my husband's brothers tried to force me, but I never gave in. they wouldn't give me my husband's land, but wanted me to be whore for them! I wouldn't give in" (2006:07).
- 3) **Subjugation by upper caste women:** Kamalam wife of Paranjothi is heartless in her desire to have Thangam punished. She makes all efforts to get Thangam arrested by the police. "Can't you manage the police?"(2006:34) is her question when the case takes a serious turn. She directs her brothers to beat Thangam despite being fully aware of her husband's sexual promiscuity.

- 4) **Sexual exploitation by Kathamuthu:** He destroys all notions of hope and security with which Thangam has gone to his house by exploiting her sexually by getting her intoxicated with drink. He cleverly manipulates his two wives to his bedroom, noticing his daughter Gowri is studying in her room he locks both the doors from outside and seduces Thangam who is in the kitchen. Gowri becomes aware of her father's manipulations and shouts at him, "Dogs! Dogs in this house! Shameless as dogs! She went back into her room weeping" (2006: 93).

Gowri on the other hand, belongs to the younger generation and rebels against the contemporary social conditions, patriarchy and her father. Sivakami portrays the New Woman of India today in the character.

1. **Independent thought and action:** She thinks independently and expresses individuality rebelling against patriarchal dictates. Thangam's physical abuse at the hands of the upper caste men chills her to the bone and begins the process of questioning in her mind, "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"(2006:94).
2. **Gowri pursues education:** Gowri is steadfast in her interest to be educated. She goes to school, college and pursues higher studies with zeal and works hard to be successful in examinations. The negative attitude of peers around her does not lessen this desire in her. Her father Kathamuthu treats her like an animal, stating that if the donkey passed the exams it would go to college". She joins college with dreams and desires keen to learn.
3. **Gowri seeks employment:** As she completes her education she realises economic independence is important for her to lead life without being dependent.
4. **Gowri exercises choice in marriage:** Gowri observes and analyses her father in his relationship with his wives. She understands his patriarchal attitude and begins to question it silently. At the age of thirty one, she refuses marriage holding her father responsible for her decision, "The sufferings that my mother underwent in her marriage! I don't want to be tortured like her by some man moreover; I need a father who can respect his son-in-law".⁷ It is her father's behaviour of physical abuse, mental torture through taunts and complete disrespect of his wives as individuals that puts the fear of marriage in Gowri's mind and she refuses to be married citing the above reasons. Conclusion: This paper has demonstrated how Gowri is the emerging New Woman of contemporary India from the low caste and class. Gowri's aspiration of being educated, financially empowered and exercising a choice in marriage are fulfilled. These actions the paper argues are a result of great determination due to the social conditions prevalent around her. The paper has demonstrated how the concept of New Woman is an echo of the questions raised by the women writers of the nineteenth century from the upper caste and class. The paper highlights the relevance and statutory nature of education for women in order to develop their status and be independent to work for the betterment of society.

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