



# The Gripe of Change: Casteist-oppression & Men-subjugation

**Sanjay Kumar**

Assistant Professor

PG Department of English

Magadh University, Bodh Gaya

## Abstract

P. Shivakami's *The Grip of Change* serves as a powerful expression of the youth from the oppressed communities who are fervently questioning patriarchal dominance. The novel begins with the story of Thangam and concludes with Gowri's resolute decision to remain unmarried after grappling with unanswered questions about subjugation by men.

The paper reveals the profound beauty of its narratives, which is deeply rooted in body-centricity. Thangam, a Dalit woman's body, becomes a poignant testament to the myriad difficulties and violence faced by Dalit women. It praises the author for skilfully relating Thangam's body to fertility, symbolising her struggle against a social structure that marginalises her on multiple fronts—social hierarchy, power relations, and patriarchal oppression. Thangam's character is intricately portrayed as a subaltern Dalit widow, embodying the intersectional nature of oppression.

It highlights the systemic violence and discrimination faced by Dalit women, whose bodies are often sites of exploitation and marginalisation. Thangam's experiences reflect the broader societal injustices that Dalit women endure, underscoring their triple marginalisation. The narrative's focus on body-centricity not only emphasises the physical and emotional toll of such oppression but also brings to light the resilience and strength of these women.

Gowri's decision to remain unmarried is a bold assertion of autonomy in the face of relentless patriarchal pressure, symbolising a refusal to conform to societal expectations. Her choice marks a significant departure from traditional narratives, offering a nuanced critique of the deeply entrenched patriarchal values that govern women's lives.

It elucidates a vivid and unflinching portrayal of the complexities of Dalit women's lives, challenging readers to confront the harsh realities of caste and gender oppression. Through the lives of Thangam and Gowri, it poignantly captures the struggle for dignity and justice, making a significant contribution to Dalit literature and feminist discourse.

Key Words- Subjugation, Patriarchy, Hierarchy, Autonomy, Oppression, Injustice.

## Oppression by Caste & Subjugation by Men

P. Sivakami is a pioneering Tamil Dalit writer who shines a light on the dual oppression faced by Dalit women due to their gender and caste. They are oppressed both by upper-caste men and men within their Dalit community. Initially an I.A.S. officer, Sivakami left her job to dedicate herself to writing. She is also a self-translator, ensuring her works reach a broader audience. Her novel "The Grip of Change," originally published in Tamil as "Pazhainya Kazhithalum" in 1989, was later translated into English by Sivakami herself.

Sivakami's novels vividly depict the harsh realities faced by women in rural settings, who endure suffering at the hands of men staunchly upholding patriarchal values. Her stories highlight the conflicts and struggles between resilient women and tyrannical men in contemporary society. Through her narratives, Sivakami portrays the tenacity of women who fight against the systemic oppression embedded in both caste and gender hierarchies.

"The Grip of Change" is a stark exploration of these themes, drawing attention to the plight and sufferings of Dalits. The novel's portrayal of Thangam, a Dalit woman, emphasizes the intersectional nature of her oppression, where she is marginalized not only by caste but also by gender. Thangam's body becomes a testament to the violence and exploitation Dalit women face, symbolizing their broader societal struggles.

Sivakami's work is crucial in the realm of Dalit literature, as it gives voice to the often-overlooked experiences of Dalit women. Her narratives challenge readers to confront the brutal realities of caste and gender oppression, advocating for dignity and justice. The paper underscores the significant impact of her writing in highlighting these critical issues. Through her powerful storytelling, Sivakami continues to contribute to the discourse on social justice and the fight against the subjugation of men.

The sufferings of Dalits have been an enduring chain for several decades, rooted deeply in the power dynamics and economic structures that support hierarchical caste systems. Those with power and wealth occupy the central, dominant positions in society, while the poor and powerless are relegated to the margins. Dalits, often deprived of necessities like food, clothing, and shelter, face systemic exclusion. They are barred from living in areas inhabited by higher caste individuals and are marginalized as untouchables, discriminated against, and denied their fundamental human rights.

Characters such as Kathamuthu, Thangam, Gowri, and others poignantly illustrate the pervasive caste bias and its devastating effects on Dalit lives. Kathamuthu, a domineering Dalit leader, manipulates the caste system to his advantage, highlighting the complex interplay of power within oppressed communities. Thangam, a Dalit widow, endures multiple layers of oppression due to her caste, gender, and widowhood. Her struggle for justice and dignity underscores the systemic violence faced by Dalit women.

Gowri, another central character, symbolizes the younger generation of Dalits who are caught in the crossfire of traditional oppression and the fight for emancipation. Her journey reflects the persistent challenges and the resilient spirit of Dalit women striving to carve out a space for themselves in a hostile society. The novel does not shy away from depicting the harsh realities of caste-based discrimination, showing how deeply entrenched these biases are in social and familial structures.

"The Grip of Change" serves as a stark reminder of the ongoing struggles faced by Dalits. It sheds light on the resilience and resistance of those who fight against systemic oppression while highlighting the need for societal transformation. By bringing these stories to the forefront, P. Sivakami's work contributes significantly to Dalit literature, providing a voice to the voiceless and challenging readers to confront the injustices of the caste system. The novel is not just a narrative of suffering but also a call to action for a more equitable and just society.

The socio-economic conditions often force Dalits to abandon their education, trapping them in ongoing poverty and marginalisation. Nevertheless, talented individuals like Gowri in "The Grip of Change" disrupt this cycle by vigorously pursuing education and showcasing their potential. Gowri distinguishes herself from other Dalit women of her generation. After finishing her schooling, she continues her higher education at college, where she faces raw casteism. Her peers' casteist remarks and discriminatory behaviour target her, yet she remains determined. Gowri feels a profound sense of shame when applying for scholarships meant for Scheduled Caste students, highlighting the internalised stigma linked to her caste.

Despite these humiliations and challenges, Gowri remains steadfast in her educational journey. Her determination and resilience epitomise the transformative power of education for Dalits. Gowri's story emphasises the critical role of education in enhancing the socio-economic status of Dalits. Through her character, the novel illustrates how education can serve as a key instrument for social mobility and empowerment. Gowri's experience demonstrates that, despite systemic barriers, education can help Dalits transcend their circumstances and confront the oppressive structures that seek to marginalise them. Her achievements symbolise hope and inspiration for the Dalit community, reinforcing that education is vital for their progress and upliftment.

In the novel, Thangam, a childless widow, faces numerous challenges within her own caste, which dictates her social status. In contrast, when Kathamuthu has an affair with Nagamani, an upper-caste widow, she gains a legitimate place in his home through marriage. Thangam's situation is starkly different; Paranjothi Udayar exploits her to satisfy his desires and treats her merely as a mistress. Sivakami uses this contrast to highlight the patriarchal mindset prevalent among Hindu men. When society discovers the illicit relationship, Paranjothi refuses to acknowledge his connection with Thangam. His power, pride, and aggression are evident in his reaction:

*Ungrateful whore! Even if she was hurt, she was hurt by the hand adorned with gold! A Parachi could never have dreamt of being touched by a man like me! My touch was a boon granted for penance performed in her earlier births! And then the dirty bitch betrays me! How can I face the world with my name thus polluted? ( p. 31).*

This passage underscores the harsh realities faced by Dalit women, who endure exploitation and humiliation while their oppressors maintain their social standing and power.

Paranjothi Udayar is deeply anxious that his enemies will use his indiscretions to win votes in the upcoming election. He believes that if the situation were different, his wealth and power could resolve it. His wife, Kamalam, shows no empathy for Thangam and even sends her brothers to beat Thangam. She dismissively instructs Paranjothi to manage the police, saying, "Can't you manage the Police?" (p.34). This highlights how the violence against Thangam, a Dalit widow, is seen as insignificant compared to the potential police case, caste issues, and false pride.

Kamalam's indifference, despite being from a higher caste, is revealing. Thangam's experience of violence is a familiar story, reflecting the longstanding power dynamics between Dalit women and their landlords. While working in Paranjothi Udayar's fields, Thangam was constantly watched by him. He viewed her as a mere servant, a powerless and poor widow with no one to defend her, which emboldened him to exploit her sexually, believing she had no recourse.

From the very first day, the sexual violence Thangam endures leaves her deeply scarred. Having spent three years of widowhood without any man's touch, she is horrified and disgusted by Paranjothi's advances. Her anger and helplessness are evident as she sobs alone in the field, realizing she has no choice but to endure the abuse. Thangam's plight underscores the systemic exploitation and abuse faced by Dalit women, who are often left without support or justice in a society that prioritizes caste pride and patriarchal control over empathy and fairness.

In her novel, Sivakami intricately explores the vulnerability of Dalit women and their battles against oppression. She empowers her protagonist, Thangam, to recognize her own strength and resist the violence inflicted upon her. This shift is particularly evident when Thangam takes the bold step of filing a police complaint against Paranjothi Udayar, which catches him off guard. Paranjothi had always seen Thangam as a helpless widow he could easily control with money, never expecting her to take such a decisive action.

Thangam's courage doesn't end there; she also pushes Kathamuthu to pursue legal action for her husband's share of the land. Her initial bravery against Paranjothi gives her the confidence to confront further injustices. The novel clearly depicts how Thangam was forced into a relationship with Paranjothi against her will, challenging the entrenched belief that male dominance should never be questioned and that the burden of proof always falls on women.

Despite the violence and exploitation, Thangam, with Kathamuthu's help, manages to navigate her difficult circumstances. However, Kathamuthu himself is not devoid of patriarchal tendencies, attempting to use Thangam as a pawn to control his two wives. When he first makes an advance, Thangam makes it clear that she sees him as a brother, although she feels too ashamed to openly voice her objections.

Thangam's role in Kathamuthu's household becomes significant due to her assertiveness and financial contributions, positioning her as a dominant figure. Her case gains political traction under Kathamuthu's influence. As a former president of the Panchayat union in Athur, Kathamuthu manipulates the narrative around Thangam and Paranjothi's affair and the ensuing violence, emphasizing caste issues primarily for his benefit.

When Thangam tries to correct Kathamuthu's distorted version of events, she faces harsh reprimand, highlighting the entrenched patriarchy: "You are such a bitch. I have changed the whole story. Don't you understand?" (p. 12). This episode illustrates the ongoing struggle for Dalit women against both external oppressors and within their supposed support systems. Through Thangam's journey, Sivakami underscores the resilience and agency of Dalit women while critiquing the pervasive and multifaceted nature of patriarchal dominance.

Kathamuthu intervenes in Thangam's case primarily to enhance his political standing within his caste community. Thangam's well-being and dignity, as a Dalit woman, take a backseat to his personal ambitions. He arranges an off-the-books settlement with Paranjothi Udayar, showing little regard for Thangam's suffering. He goes as far as asking Thangam for the same money, promising to repay her whenever she needs it. Kathamuthu's motives towards Thangam are far from honorable; he sees her as a tool to provoke jealousy among his two wives and to satisfy his own desires. His manipulative and patriarchal mindset is evident in his interactions with his daughter, Gowri, and his handling of Thangam's case. His actions portray him more as a self-serving middleman than an advocate for Thangam or others.

The situation escalates when the police file the complaint, shifting attention from Thangam's personal ordeal to broader issues like labor rights, wages, caste discrimination, and retribution. Naively, Thangam fails to grasp the wider implications of her actions, oblivious to the escalating troubles ahead. The arson of lower caste homes serves as a stark warning to retract the complaint. Yet, under Kathamuthu's shrewd leadership, the lower caste community secures some compensation, though the underlying issues persist unresolved.

The wage dispute persists. When laborers demand an extra rupee on top of their meager three-rupee wage due to rising costs, upper caste employers reluctantly agree to a mere fifty-paisa increase. Their justification for this minimal raise reeks of exploitation. Their aggressive stance is apparent in a conversation between Arunachala Reddiar and Paranjothi Udayar, where Reddiar expresses dissatisfaction with the wage hike and Udayar assures him that they will extract more labor in return: "Don't worry. We'll make them work an extra hour. When we pay more, we have the right to demand more work from them" (p. 75).

This underscores the unyielding exploitation and manipulation faced by Dalit laborers from the upper caste. Despite the slight wage increase, the oppressive dynamics remain unchanged, highlighting the deep-seated caste discrimination and economic exploitation. Kathamuthu's involvement, while initially securing some relief, ultimately reveals the intricate dynamics of power, politics, and patriarchy that perpetuate systemic injustice against Dalit women like Thangam.

Kathamuthu's assertion of caste privilege was universally acknowledged within his community. However, when Rasendran, a newcomer challenging this privilege, faced brutal public humiliation, it underscored the entrenched caste dynamics where dissent against established hierarchies is swiftly quashed.

Thangam's pursuit of justice outside the formal legal system highlights broader societal injustices. Instead of receiving rightful recognition, she is awarded a paltry sum of ten thousand rupees as compensation. Her vulnerable status as a marginalized woman makes her susceptible to exploitation, even by members of her own caste. When she appeals to Kathamuthu after the attack, her plea for justice is straightforward yet poignant: "Sami, these hooligans who beat me up, they should be jailed for at least a day and tortured. The pain is killing me" (p. 5).

Thangam's suffering is largely disregarded by those around her, with little concern shown for the profound psychological trauma she endures. For a childless widow like her, the violence she experiences feels like a storm in an otherwise calm sea. She describes her agony vividly, comparing the assault in the sugarcane field to the visceral experience of stepping on excrement along a riverbank. Her mental recovery proves elusive:

Whenever she remembered her life in Puliur, she wept. She equated the incident in the sugarcane field with the repulsive experience of stepping on shit while walking on a riverbank. She could not recover easily from the troubles she had suffered. The shock of being dragged out by her hair in the middle of the night to be beaten up like an animal had affected her mind deeply. She would gasp awake at night at the slightest sound ( p. 87).

Thangam's response to the trauma reveals the extent of her emotional devastation. Once meticulous about her appearance, she now neglects her hair, haphazardly pinning it up and covering it with her sari. Her fleeting moment of relief while observing Gowri, joyfully preparing for school and humming a tune, is swiftly replaced by the harsh reality of her situation. Sivakami adeptly portrays Thangam's transformation into a casualty of patriarchal norms deeply ingrained in society.

Through Thangam's narrative, Sivakami unveils the harsh realities confronting Dalit women, who endure not only physical violence but also the indifferent disregard of a society that marginalizes and exploits them. Thangam's quest for justice and dignity becomes a poignant symbol of resistance against entrenched caste biases and systemic injustices. Her journey underscores the resilience and ongoing struggles of Dalit women as they navigate a world that often denies them basic humanity and justice.

## References:

- Dangale, Arjun. *Poisoned Bread, Translation from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature*. Orient Blackswan. 2009. Print.
- Das, Narayan. *Dalit Literature: Contents, Trends and Concerns*. New Delhi: Centrum Press, 2014. Print.
- Dasan, M and Rajesh Karnal. *Counter and Cultural Discourse and Dalit Literature in India*. New Delhi: ABD Publishers, 2014. Print.

Massey, James. *Downtrodden: The Struggle of India's Dalits for Identity, Solidarity and Liberation*. Guneva: WCC. 1997. Print.

Michael. S. M., *Dalits in Modern India: Visions and Values*. Sage Publications. 2007. Print.

Nair Pramod. *The Politics of form in Dalit Fiction: Bama's Sangati and Shivkami's The Grip of Change*. International Journal of Gender Studies. 2011. E-Print.

Rege Sharmila, *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios*. Zubaan. 2006. Print.

Sivakami, P. *The Grip of Change*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan Private Limited, 2006. Print.

