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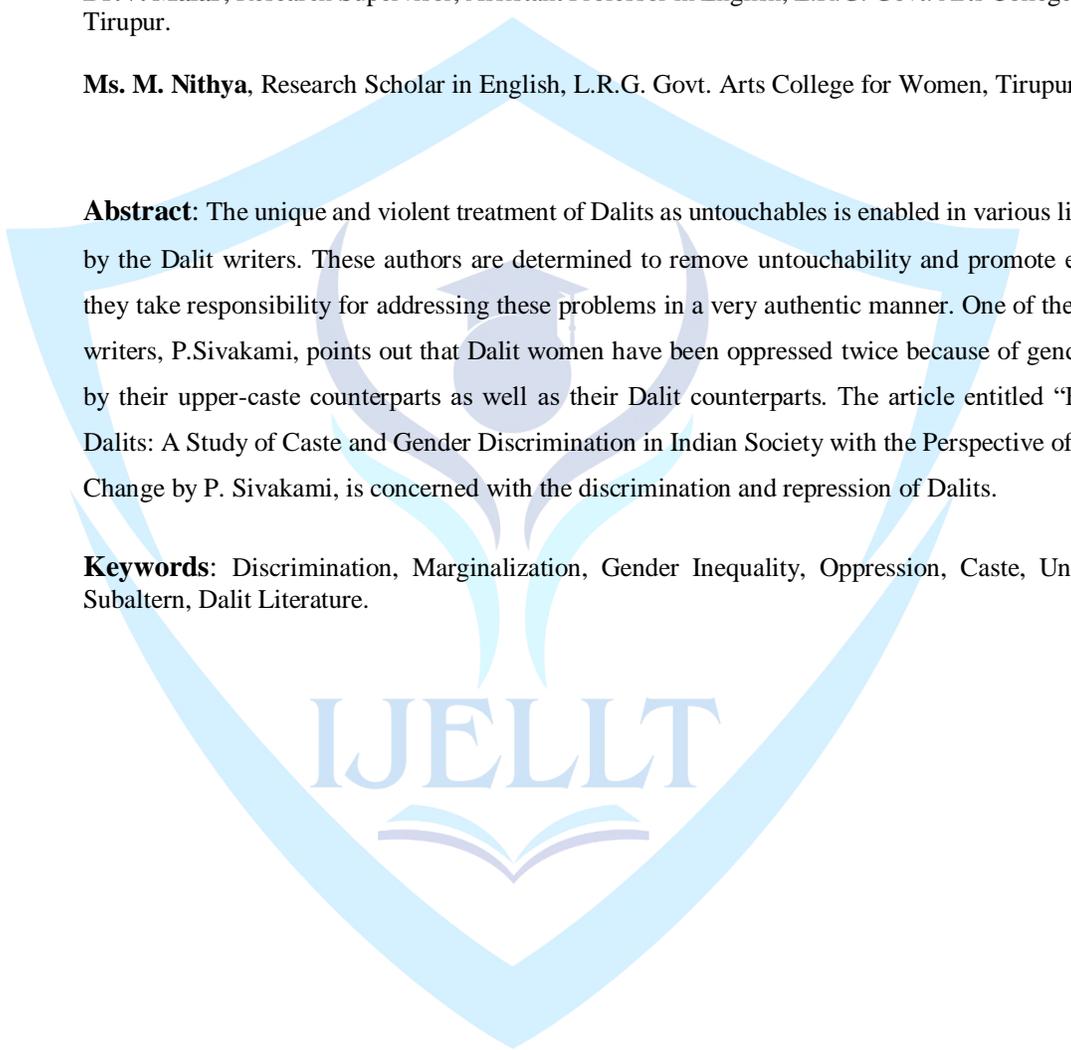
**Hardships of Dalits: A Study of Caste and Gender Discrimination in Indian Society with the Perspective of P.Sivakami's The Grip of Change**

**Dr.V. Malar**, Research Supervisor, Assistant Professor in English, L.R.G. Govt. Arts College for Women, Tirupur.

**Ms. M. Nithya**, Research Scholar in English, L.R.G. Govt. Arts College for Women, Tirupur.

**Abstract:** The unique and violent treatment of Dalits as untouchables is enabled in various literary works by the Dalit writers. These authors are determined to remove untouchability and promote equality, and they take responsibility for addressing these problems in a very authentic manner. One of the Tamil Dalit writers, P.Sivakami, points out that Dalit women have been oppressed twice because of gender and caste by their upper-caste counterparts as well as their Dalit counterparts. The article entitled "Hardships of Dalits: A Study of Caste and Gender Discrimination in Indian Society with the Perspective of The Grip of Change by P. Sivakami, is concerned with the discrimination and repression of Dalits.

**Keywords:** Discrimination, Marginalization, Gender Inequality, Oppression, Caste, Untouchability, Subaltern, Dalit Literature.



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Dalit literature is a conscious movement of revolutionary change and a protesting organ. It is also defined by rebellion and cynicism, since it is inherently associated with the stigma of liberation by a community that, as untouchables, experiences social, economic, and cultural inequalities. The abusive and dehumanising treatment of Dalits as untouchables is evident in several literary works written by Dalit writers. And these authors dream of eliminating untouchability and achieving equity. They take on this role, believing no one else can handle such issues with the same sincerity.

P. Sivakami is among the Tamil Dalit writers who introduce the dual oppression of Dalit women that exists because of their gender and their caste. This is supported by men of the upper caste who enhance hierarchies in society, as well as Dalit men, who can also be patriarchal. The works of Sivakami are critical in revealing the nature of this two-fold struggle because they illustrate how women have distinct issues in the Dalit community, as they experience discrimination in both gender and caste issues.

However, before dedicating herself fully to literature, Sivakami was an Indian Administrative Service (I.A.S.) officer, and her educational background and ability have shown that she can perform political responsibilities better than a typical citizen. Nevertheless, her passion as a writer and the need to tell the stories and plight of her people prompted her to take the significant risk of quitting her good-paying job to become a full-time writer. This shift highlights the author's commitment to giving voice to the voiceless and towards social transformation. Besides her writing, Sivakami is a self-translator, which displays her linguistic talent and her intention not to corrupt her stories with the other. Translating her work assures her that her meaning in story-telling will be evident in different languages, so more people can engage with her words and thoughts.

In *The Grip of Change*, Sivakami interweaves the lives of women in rural areas to depict how they attempt to resist the foreclosing forces of men who strongly embrace the patriarchal doctrine. The characters in her stories usually struggle with the dilemmas they face because of their insistence on having their rights and identities recognised in a society that marginalises them.

The stories not only show the struggles of the Dalit women, but also their resilience and eagerness to overcome the patriarchal world. Sivakami presents a clear picture of the emotional and social turmoil Dalit women endure through her narration, focussing on the urgency of gender equality and social justice.

On the whole, the works of Sivakami, as related to literature and her activism on behalf of the rights of Dalit women, resonate well with the realm of Dalit literature, and she is a potent activist in her fight for equality and justice. Her writing not only adequately demonstrates the social realities her community is experiencing but also entices the readers to act and break the biases and tolerances that pervade society.

The oppression of the Dalits has existed for many decades, only to be experienced in an unending form of oppression and marginalisation. This subaltern condition is heavily imposed on power relations and economic inequalities, upheld mainly by the structures of caste. Influential people, as well as those in key positions in society, are usually placed at the centre of social structures, thereby ensuring they are the ruling groups. In contrast, the poor and the downtrodden, especially the Dalits, are put in their proper places and kept at the periphery as they are denied access to social, economic, and even cultural opportunities.

The Dalits are denied access to human rights and the provision of basic needs like food, clothing, and shelter. Social norms that determine where people should live based on their caste affiliation contribute to this deprivation. Dalits are often not allowed to reside in the locations where the members of the higher caste live, and, in effect, they are reduced to the ghettos where they live miserable lives. This forced segregation is used to promote social sub-ordination, so that Dalits can continue living in a vulnerable state of economic and social position.

Caste discrimination is very real, as depicted through the experiences of the characters in her novel *The Grip of Change: Kathamuthu, Thangam, Gowri, and others*. These characters live in a world of prejudice and bias and are faced with the societal expectation that determines their value depending on their caste.

Their narratives also cast light on personal Dalit struggles and injustices, and how far they got in life due to the strong effects of caste dynamics. Kathamuthu, for example, can represent the Buddhist aspect of the Dalit community, which struggles to make itself known and respected in a world that does not value it. Thangam and Gowri might be assumed to be different reactions of Dalit women to their oppression, as well as the fact that gender and caste coincide to multiply their problems. On the whole, Sivakami uses these characters to highlight not only the daily hardships of the caste system but also the importance of social reforms and the empowerment of disenfranchised groups.

In general, *The Grip of Change* is a compelling critique of the historical plight of the Dalits, and readers cannot help but reflect on the widespread nature of caste discrimination and its need to be addressed on a systemic level. Through its themes, the novel can contribute to a broader picture and perception of the socio-political environment in which Dalits are forced to exist and fight to defend their rights, as well as to oppose the systems that dominate them into misery.

In *The Grip of Change*, the Kathamuthu-Naicker relationship is complicated and reveals the subtleties of interactions among caste members in their society. They like to spend time together and are, in a sense, friends, but Naicker is also too conscious of his caste status, which affects his behaviour and attitudes in their friendship. This consciousness is usually expressed indirectly to assert superiority, best illustrating the caste consciousness ingrained in his personality. After someone has come to the attention of Kathamuthu's and the Naickers' comment, it is "Poor fellow, he belongs to a lower caste. Can't you tell from his gross speech?" (18)

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Naicker's implicit caste pride can be annoying to Kathamuthu, who struggles with the consequences of such actions. Kathamuthu is a Dalit, and he is exposed to the reality of social discrimination and marginalisation; therefore, the attitude of Naicker becomes especially frustrating. Although they are friends, the reminder of the caste hierarchy establishes an unseen boundary, making their interactions difficult, since Kathamuthu cannot help but feel the pressure of Naicker's attitudes towards caste and the society's expectations for their relationship.

The tension reaches a climax when someone reminds Kathamuthu that Naicker is making comments or doing certain things that make him conscious of his caste. This revelation prompts Kathamuthu to confront the problems of caste relations, which form the core of their friendship. It makes him reconsider the character of their relations and the degree to which caste affects them.

This is what brings out the novel's larger theme of caste prejudice and shows how even individual relations can be burdened by social subordination. It highlights the internal dilemma of Kathamuthu, who desires to be treated as an equal and accepted, but is constantly reminded of the limits imposed by caste. The discomfort induced by Naicker's actions underscores the importance of self-reflection on the position of people in higher castes and asks readers to think about what caste consciousness means in real life.

This becomes even worse when the relative of Kathamuthu comes to Naicker's jewellery shop to buy them a silver arignan as a present for the newborn child. On returning, the relative relives what Kathamuthu did and tells him how Naicker treated them. He unveils how Naicker would maintain a distance between himself and him, and would so carefully drop the silver piece into his palm that there would be no physical contact whatsoever. This is not a simple mistake, but it clearly shows how Naicker strongly believes in caste prejudice and notes that Dalits are highly discriminated against. This is the eye-opener that Kathamuthu develops.

The tale of the relative highlights the wrongs Dalits have had to endure, and it prompts Kathamuthu to challenge Naicker directly. The next day, he goes to Naicker's store in a state of anger and will. "Why don't you sit? What's wrong?" Naicker put his hand on Kathamuthu's shoulder. 'Why are you touching me, Naicker? Isn't it a sin if you touch me?' asked Kathamuthu provocatively". (19)

The visit to the shop by Kathamuthu is retold to mean more than an encounter; it is a protest against the injustices that caste continues to perpetrate. He is no longer willing to accept the status, which keeps him in a lowly station.

He enters the space of Naicker to establish his presence and confront society and its conventions according to which people of other castes should interact. When he is ready to meet Naicker, Kathamuthu's feelings must have been an ambivalent mixture of anxiety and disobedience. He realises that his action may lead to a clash that could prove tense, but he has to do what he has to do, no matter how poorly treated he and every Dalit are. This is a dramatic turning point that summarises the novel's overall themes: resistance, dignity, and the fight for equality against deeply rooted social bias.

With such experience, Sivakami eloquently demonstrates how caste discrimination can harm individuals and society. The narration of Kathamuthu, in reclaiming his dignity, is such a sad signal of how hard a battle against untouchability must be fought and of how social justice must be evaluated. It is not only a significant point that portrays Kathamuthu's internal conflict but also a pivotal point in the story, emphasising the importance of rising against oppression in any form.

The people of the upper caste do not view Dalit labourers as human beings. They have no choice but to obey the dominance of their landlords, who are of the upper caste. This type of oppression is not only done against the girls but also against the boys belonging to the Dalit population. When a Dalit boy employed by Naicker steals a few Kambu stalks to satisfy his hunger, his master punishes him by tying him to a pole, after which he is viciously lynched. After six in the evening, he is permitted to eat. Despite the mistreatment, the father of the boy sends him to work with the Naicker since they have no other options for Dalit families. They have no choice but to submit to any treatment that is administered to them by the people of the upper caste. The most critical issue that puts Dalit people in a condition of oppression is the continuous poverty of the community.

The Dalit women in India are alienated by their caste status. They are oppressed by rape and molestation as instruments to weaken their ego. They are discriminated against as women and as members of the Dalit group. In *The Grip of Change*, Sivakami puts much emphasis on matters that concern women, especially the problems of sexual abuse. Dalit women become either scared of those in the upper caste or of their own men, who mistreat them.

Until Thangam enters Kathamuthu's life, he practices bigamy, having married Nagamani and Kanagavalli, a widow. Thangam, a widow with no children, is denied the right to her husband's ancestral land. Her only hope of asserting the possession of her property is by satisfying the importance of others. Poor and deprived Thangam leaves her home and goes to work as a labourer in the plantation of a landlord in an upper caste, Paranjothi Udayar, who eventually rapes her. She tells about her experiences, "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)

Upon discovering the relationship between Udayar and Thangam, his brothers-in-law attack and beat her incessantly to the point of taking away her life. Hypocrisy of the upper class is brought out when Udayar abuses her, "Ungrateful whore! Even if she was hurt, 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)

Thangam, formerly raped and sexually abused as well as physically battered, turns to Kathamuthu to find assistance. But Kathamuthu is in favour of Thangam to serve his own interests. The money he gets paid by Udayar due to the alleged rape of Thangam is used for his expenses and the family. He takes some of the funds Thangam has loaned him and spends them all. In exchange, he gives her the essentials such as food, clothes and a place to stay. Thus, Thangam is physically, verbally, and even sexually assaulted by the patriarch of the upper caste, as well as men in her own society. The women's marginalisation is even higher because their misery is not only their low-class position, but also the oppressive patriarchal system.

Economic and societal conditions often hinder Dalits from pursuing education. But gifted ones, such as Gowri in *The Grip of Change*, ardently desire knowledge and prove their abilities, emerging from the depths of a crisis. Gowri is unlike other women of her generation and of the specific Dalit generation. She proceeded to college after completing her schooling, and she experienced unconcealed caste discrimination there.

Her classmates made insulting remarks about her caste, which made her very upset. She hated anything that reminded her of her caste, and she felt humiliated by her origin. She was even ashamed of being given a “scholarship application form for scheduled caste students from the administrative office of the college” (95). She was firm on her education even when humiliated in some instances. The theme of education as a way of alleviating the conditions of Dalits is also passed through Gowri.

To be genuinely free, the Dalits must be capable of changing their hearts. The trust is the lifeboat to get them to safer shores. They can be armed to become potent change agents within their communities by changing their own lives. They need to stop merely existing as Dalits and fully live as human beings, and plant the seeds of hope in them.

Sivakami is very active in supporting her community, and in her novels, *The Grip of Change* and *The Taming of Women*, she is deeply involved in her narration. She reveals the type of oppression which Dalits are being subjected to by people of the upper-caste. Men, women, and children are all victims of humiliation as they are forced to live on the mercy of their superiors, who underrate them. She is adding to the rude awakening they are going through by giving us a graphic picture of the extent of entrenched untouchability in their village. She effectively appeals to the Dalit population for their upliftment through her story, demonstrating the pain and struggles they face. It is an essential stepping stone to this novel, and those who have been victimised without a voice are given one.

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