

Unjustified Justice in *the Grip of Change*

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Abstract: P. Shivkami's *The Grip of Change* is the English Translation of *Pazhaiyana Kazhithalum*, the first full-length novel by P. Shivkami, an important Tamil writer and a member of the Indian Administrative Service. Shivkami is critical of the Dalit Movement and the Dalit patriarchy and yet does not become a 'caste traitor' because of her participation in search of solution. The novel is about the inter-caste sexual relations, the author sheds light on how patriarchy gets diluted on its way down the caste ladder. P. Shivkami gets success in narrating the authentic information in a terrifying way. The protagonist Kathamuthu is a charismatic Parayar leader who intervenes in the matter of Parayar woman, Thangam, beaten up by the relatives of her upper caste lover. This paper is an attempt to evaluate the dominance and suppression in the case of Thangam and her community, which is also a form of violence. Thangam, a childless widow was an agricultural labourer, was raped while working by her upper caste Landlord and she expresses nothing to anyone, which ultimately leads to repetitions. Once caught by one of the relatives of Landlord, the matter got serious. The Landlord's brothers-in-law beat her and her self-consciousness made her to approach the leader Kathamuthu who takes this matter as the caste oppression.

Keywords: Dalit, Dalit-patriarchy, dominance, class/caste, justice

Simone de Beauvoir says, "One is not born woman, but, rather, becomes one". The statement itself states the dominance of patriarchy to make a woman an object of second sex. Shivkami's novel *The Grip of Change*'s women characters are epitome of such dominance. Though born free and struggled to be the free, they are bind in prison of patriarchy. This same patriarchal dominance made them vulnerable to face violence inside and outside of the society. While showing two different strata's of society struggling for justice unjustified, Thangam and her case is discussed here through many angles like: caste angle, power relations, vulnerability of woman, prejudices, violence, woman and politics, notions, unjustified justice and triple violence in form of social, communal, and patriarchy.

P. Shivkami's *The Grip of Change* (an English translation by herself of Tamil novel *Pazhaiyana Kazhithalum*) is an unanimous expression of the youth of the oppressed community who is eagerly asking questions to patriarchal dominance. Novel starts with Thangam's story and ends with Gowri's firm decision to remain unmarried after not finding any answer to patriarchy. While reading *The Grip of Change* one can observe the beauty of narratives arising from its body-centricity. Thangam, a Dalit woman's body bears testimonies to the difficulties and violence faced by the Dalit woman. The author directly relates Thangam's body with fertility, letting her to face the triple marginalized status by the hands of social structure, power relations and patriarchy. Her character is portrayed skillfully as a subaltern Dalit widow.

The novel opens with the hysterical ranting of a Parayar woman, Thangam, who has been violently abused and beaten up by the relatives of her upper caste lover. Thangam's history is constituted by her widowhood, the harassment by her brothers-in-law when she refuses to submit them, the sexploitation by her Hindu landlord, and the assault on her by caste Hindu man and so on. Her demand for share in her husband's paternal land is refused on the ground that she is not having any children from her husband. Her fertility questioned and linked to the land. Her brothers-in-law denied giving her share in the land but try to take her advantage as a vulnerable widow. She lives alone and works as a labourer on the farms of upper caste landlord Paranjothi Udayar's who, also raped her and repeat it after founding that she is not complaining anyone. Once caught by the landlord's brother-in-law who tell it to his sister and the matter get

serious. After that Thangam faces extreme violence in the midnight by four men beating and abusing her by dragging her out of her hut with her hair. She in such condition gets the support neither from her brothers-in-law nor from any other woman or man of her community. On account of this she takes an extreme step and took the matter to Kathamuthu, a charismatic Parayar leader early morning of that same night. Kathamuthu works out the state machinery and the village caste hierarchy to achieve some sort of justice for Thangam.

It is worth observing that Thangam as a childless widow faces problems inside her own caste, which decides her status. When Kathamuthu have an affair with the upper caste widow Nagamani, she earns a rightful place by marriage and placed as a wife in his home. On the contrary, in the case of Thangam, Paranjothi Udayar uses her to satisfy his lust and treats her as a mistress. The caste angel discussed by P. Shivkami through this matter is associated to the question of patriarchal mindset of a Hindu man. When the matter of illicit relationship is disclosed by the society, the same man refuses to accept his relationship with Thangam. His power, pride and aggression are revealing from the following lines:

'Ungrateful whore! Even if she was hurt, she was hurt by the hand adorned with gold! A Parachi could never 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 world with my name thus polluted?' (P. Shivkami, *The Grip of Change*, p. 31)

He feels gnawed because of fear that his enemies will use his indiscretion to win votes in the next election. He would have managed the things with money and power if some other matter might have been there. Paranjothi Udayar's wife, Kamalam, who colludes and sends her brothers to beat Thangam feel nothing for Thangam as a woman. She simply imparts him to act as usual and says, 'Can't you manage the Police?' (p.34). Here, one can see that the violence on the Dalit widow is not the big matter to anyone, what matters more to everyone is the Police case, caste concern and fake pride. Kamalam, a higher caste woman and her attitude of showing no emanation towards the matter is worth observing.

Thangam's story of violence is the oldest of its kind. The power-relation between the Dalit Woman and her landlord is the age old story woven newly. While working in the fields of Paranjothi Udayar she was constantly gazed by him. He prepared himself to exploit her thinking that she was his servant. Besides, Thangam was no princess or minister's daughter and she does not even have a husband. He found her a helpless poor widow for whom no soul will turn to rescue. Therefore, he made it a routine to slake his lust whenever possible. The sexual violence she faces on very first day left her dejected forever. She had spent her three years of widowhood untouched by a man; she hated succumbing to the loathsome old man's lust. She sobbed with anger sitting alone in the field. For Thangam, there was no choice left.

Through the novel, P. Shivkami questioned the vulnerability of Dalit women. She allows her character to awake at right time and be conscious against the violence imposed upon her. Even Paranjothi Udayar is shocked by her extreme step. He always thought about Thangam as a hapless vulnerable widow whom he can buy with his small amount of money. He never expected Thangam to act to the extent of filing a Police complaint. Thangam further dares to ask Kathamuthu to go to court for her matter related to her husband's share in the land. Thangam's daring in the first matter gives her courage and inspiration to move forward.

In the novel it is clearly mention that Paranjothi Udayar drags Thangam in the relationship and she have a strong disliking towards this. The author gets success in putting an age old, biased theory that the supremacy of the male must never be challenge and the burden of proof is always lefts on the woman. Despite of all, Thangam overcomes such violence against her and her body in Udayar's case with the help of Kathamuthu. But, her mentor Kathamuthu try to use her as a third option for sex and to teach lesson to his two wives. In his very first attempt she made it clear that she have pure feelings of brother towards him though she dare not to open her eyes pervaded with shame. She remains in Kathamuthu's house where her body and money made her a dominant person in the household.

Thangam's case takes political stand in the hands of Kathamuthu who once was the president of the Panchayat union in Athur. He was a popular and respected leader for the people of Athur and nearby villages. He changed the happenings regarding to the affair between Thangam and Udayar

and violence it brought. Moreover, he is the person who brings into light the matter of casteism only. Poor Thangam when wanted to correct him get scolded by the hands of patriarchy like-

'You are such a bitch. I have changed the whole story. Don't you understand?' (P. Shivkami, *The Grip of Change*, p. 12)

Kathamuthu interferes and change Thangam's story to gain some political importance among his caste people. The Dalit woman and her dignity is not very important for him in this matter. He is the man who gets ready to handle the Thangam's matter out of the court by taking cash from Paranjothy Udayar. Unabashedly he asks Thangam for the same money on the word that he will return it whenever she needs it. Kathamuthu's intention towards her was never pure and his action in the case is not more than that of a middleman. For him she is merely an option to make his two wives jealous and have sex. Such a man's dominant and patriarchic curve of mind turns out whenever he talks with his daughter, Gowri. No wonder, he never justifies with Thangam's or anyone else's matter.

When the Police logged the complaint, the issue gets serious and enlarged. Now it rises from Thangam and the violence against her to the issue of workers, wages, prejudices, casteism, and revenge. But, the naïve Thangam never understands that her problem is just beginning but not the cause of troubles in Puliyaar, her village. The burning of huts of lower caste peoples is just the warning given to take back the complaint. But, the lower caste people under the skillful leadership of Kathamuthu manage the case and get at least something back in the form of compensation. The issue of low wages given by upper caste peoples to the labourer remains the same. When demanded for one more rupee in addition to old wages of three rupees as the prices are gone up; the upper caste people increase it by fifty paise only. For this increase, they have their justifying ways ready. Their violent attitude towards the matter is worth observing –

'Arunachala Reddiar, displeased over the decision to raise the wages, joined Paranjothi Udayar and ask, 'we should not have agreed to higher wages.'

'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. Shivkami, *The Grip of Change*, p. 75)

Those who went to work in fields next day planned seedlings happy at the thought of earning an extra fifty-paise for their labour. Their happiness merely lasted for few hours as their supervisors did not allow them to leave the fields even at five in the evening. With pitiful thoughts we can observe that the happiness of lower class/caste people depends on the liberalness of the upper class/caste. Which, they generally and evidently never display. This act teaches the poor people a lesson to learn the hard-core realities of the life. The author says-

'In continuance with the traditions of the society they lived in, the lower caste had learned to tolerate the intolerable.'

(P. Shivkami, *The Grip of Change*, p. 75)

The violence on lower caste people in the form of aggression is too an age-old story told in a new way. Here, no one justifies with lower caste's suppression. Upper caste people knew their ways to take their money back in every matter. When they accepted to give the twenty thousand rupees in compensation for fire, they had their own plan ready to take it back-

'We haven't given in to Kathamuthu's demands, we have only agreed to the Tahsildar's suggestions. Later we will be able to apply to the Tahsildar for permission to cut that huge banyan tree next to the school. The auction proceeds will make up for what we are paying now.' (P. Shivkami, *The Grip of Change*, p. 7575)

In addition to this, the astute Ramalinga Reddiar decided to burn every hut in the Cheri when things settled down. He proudly pronounced that whom they would complain for that future matter. It shows an internalized arrogant attitude towards Dalit community. From these entire matters one thing gets clear that violence, woman and politics are discuss side by side by the author very aptly. As the Thangam and her matter unknowingly gets the big issue and apparently living this oneaside, everyone discusses about caste and other matters. Nothing very good and

appreciating comes out for Thangam out of all these and we can see that the patriarchy wins in the end.

In the novel, assertion on caste subjected by Kathamuthu was taken for granted by everyone. His own community brutally in public mutes the new bud like Rasendran's voice down. This humiliation made him feel deflate within his own society. Moreover, the justice given to Thangam out of the court is unjustified. She deserves the right place and honour instead of ten thousand rupees. Her gullible, marginalized nature is expose and use by everyone including her own caste people. While taking her matter to Kathamuthu at the very night of the attack her demand for justice was so simple. She says-

'Sami, these hooligans who beat me up, they should be jailed for at least a day and tortured. The pain is killing me.' (P. Shivkami, *The Grip of Change*, p. 5)

The suffering she has gone through is not the concern of anyone. Thangam, after that nights experience was not able to sleep properly. No one show concern for her psychological state after that particular incident. For a childless widow such violence was like hurricane in the silent sea. She recalls it like-

'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. Shivkami, *The Grip of Change*, p. 87)

Thangam's response to this incident was much horrific. Once she used to plate her long hair, but now she no longer bothered with that. She now pinned it up without any care and covered her head with her sari. When she watched Gowri, doing her make-up for school while humming a popular song from radio, a delicate lightness spreads on her body but immediately the feelings are harden. Here, P. Shivkami showed how the marginalized Dalit woman Thangam becomes the victim of the patriarchal system of society.

All and all *The Grip of Change* creates the impression that the upper caste had handled the incident as a man-versus-woman problem, whereas the lower caste had given it the caste slant. But, Thangam, a subaltern Dalit third world woman goes on facing problem everywhere. The violence in the form of physical, emotional, psychological, and religious ways is not the matter of today. Since centuries, women, are being dominated by the hands of patriarchy. In the novel triple violence faced by Thangam is unjustified and thus the issue of grave thinking. One can clearly observe that the social structure denies her natural right, the caste Hindu community treat her as a slave and the patriarchy treats her as an inferior. At the end, reader gets a hint that the women and their role in the society are changing and so the patriarchy and their role must change. And at the end, Gowri in the novel has shown as the epitome to such change.

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