

CHAPTER IV

BRAVING THE BARRIERS

The struggle of the Dalits is not suffering of the individual, but of the community as a whole. Unless change comes from within, things will not change. In their world, women are very casually stripped and molested, and men brutally attacked and murdered. Such atrocities have been going on for centuries, generation after generation. However hard they try, it will be difficult by others to understand the intensity of their sufferings. While talking about their sufferings, S.K. Paul in his article, “Dalit Literature and Dalit Poetry: A Brief Survey”, quotes a poem by Namdeo Dhasal.

This world’s socialism,

This world’s communism

And all those things of theirs,

We have put them to the test

And the implication is this –

Only our shadows can cover our own feet.(72-73)

Their every day experiences are conditioned by the prevailing social conventions, culture and tradition. They too understand that unless they help themselves, nobody else can do anything to alleviate their pain. Though caste discrimination is a menace which is plaguing the society even today, there are certain ways through which the Dalits can be empowered. Empowerment is possible through their education and unity.

The Dalits have started resisting oppression with the help of their writings. Though they have been desirous of letting the world know their plight, due to lack of proper education they could not do anything substantial in the beginning. Then people started writing about their experiences in regional languages, and in the late 20th century many of the works of Dalit writers were translated. It was during the British rule in India that the trend of translations started. The British after learning the native Indian language started translating the great works of Indian authors into English. This progressive trend was later followed by Indian authors who had learned English language. They started translating their sacred texts into English and other regional languages. They realized that the pen is mightier than the sword. As Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar said “We must stand on our own feet and fight as best as we can for our rights. So carry on your agitation and organize your forces. Power and prestige will come to you through struggle.”(n.p)

The Dalit writers started their writings based on their experiences and hence their works are stories of their own selves. Thus the literary genre of autobiography has gained importance among oppressed classes of society. Among the oppressed classes, Black women were the first to write their autobiographies and they were followed by Indian Dalit women in the 20th century. As a story of their unique selves, their autobiographies presuppose a culture in which individuality is valued and cultivated. Though the writers hail from different places and each one’s life is different from the other, they focused on the liberation of the Dalits in all their works. These writers express their culture and the tradition of their men and women, how they make their choices, form their views, take risks, look upon life as a journey filled with struggle and in general how they fashion their lives. But they will have to go further and think about their progress. Alok Mukherjee in the book *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* expresses his concern over the way

these writers have been writing about only their past and present without any vision about their future:

This is bound to affect writing. The generation that was writing forty years ago is now coming to an end. It is no longer writing. That generation's literature was concerned with past memories, past time, past history. Today's Dalit literature must think about the present times as well as the time to come. But Dalit writers do not think about the injustices taking place today; they still write about the past. Nor do they reflect on the tomorrow that is to come in their lifetime . . . But literature requires vision. And that vision should be such that it takes the common masses forwards, and makes them aware of their condition in today's context. Unless this happens, I worry that Dalit literature may become stagnant. (133)

They showed resistance towards oppression and started to write stories of the pain they suffered due to inequality. The Dalit women especially adopted writing as the medium of expression as they hoped to get worldwide support through this medium. Their writing proved to be the most convenient way for gaining support and sympathy from across the world. Dalits in contemporary times are getting the benefit of education which will enhance their outlook of life.

Papaya Lahiri points out in the article "Silence to Eloquence: Emerging Trends in Dalit Literature"

One cannot deny the fact that the Dalits are still subjected to extreme forms of social and economic exclusion, discrimination, violence, ridicule, physical and mental torture. Their attempts to assert their rights are often

met with strong resistance from the higher castes, resulting in inhuman treatment, rapes, massacres, and other atrocities. Writing became a pertinent tool for the Dalits to give vent to their emotions, feelings and opinions. At the same time it also provided them with an opportunity of being useful members of the society by their contribution to it. Poems, short stories, novels and autobiographies written by Dalit writers provided useful insight on the question of Dalit identity.(39-41)

A Dalit woman is different from other categories of women. When compared with other women, the Dalit women find themselves in economically, socially and culturally vulnerable locations. This works to aggravate the impunity with which violence is inflicted on them. Often it is their very workplace and their resistance to its caste structures that trigger violence. In the case of the Dalit women, violence is always associated with their caste positions and deeply connected to their behaviour within it. Often it is their resistance to or interrogation of caste hegemony that brings forth violence. This violence is not only meant to control them as women, but also used to strictly maintain the caste structure. Writer Iyayam's character Arokkyam hopes that things will change for the better:

Arokkyam has one main hope in coping with change: that the church will intervene in support of the old order, and appeal to the elder of the colony to keep up their caste obligations to their vannaan. The novel begins with a pilgrimage to the church of Saint Anthony, which is a journey of hope. In fact when the church intervenes much later, it is with an offer which is totally unexpected: to take the youngest son Peter away, and train him to become a priest. (iii)

Dalits want to be free from all kinds of torture and humiliation, so that they could lead their life with dignity. When it comes to women, sexual abuses and rape are rampant and it is very difficult to explain their sufferings. Due to their apprehension of things becoming publicly known, women have been bearing such things patiently and if they try to rise against those oppressors, they are suppressed because the oppressors know how to silence them. Even if they go to the police station or to the court of law, hardly do they get any justice. It is a long time struggle for them.

Prasanna Sree quotes Jawaharlal Nehru's words in the article "An Introduction to Women and Women Writing in English": "We talk of revolution – political and economic and yet the greatest revolution in a country is one that effects improvement in the status and living conditions of its women.(121)

Sivakami chooses to open her novel *The Grip of Change* with the theme of revolution in the Dalit women for it underscores the centrality of the revolution to the creation of their identity. Through the character Gowri, the social historical changes happen in the novel and the society. The welcoming change has come over her brother Sekaran also.

. . . Gowri who used to be scared to stand in front of him [her father]! She would fill her plait with flowers, hide from her father and run to school like a hunted creature she was earning her living now. Her self- confidence had grown in proportion to her independence.

Sekaran who had obeyed all his father's commands had now become an impressive young man. When Kathamuthu tried to exercise control, he was effectively silenced by his son.

Gowri constantly goaded Kanagavalli and Nagamani with talks of women's liberation. However, both women were used to bending to Kathmuthu's demands. They were happy for Gowri, but felt it was too late for them.(124-25)

Sivakami and Imayam propose to transform folkloric and local mythic language and the life style of the people who are discriminated in the society by infusing into it the language of rights. Their works reflect the radicalization through the infusion of rights discourse and alternative storytelling resistance energies to the genre of Indian fiction. They open up the genre to new experimental forms in their writings. Dalit fiction does not subvert mainstream Indian fiction by foregrounding authentic revolution of the folklore but by messily merging folklore or contesting it with the discourse of law, their rights. It also points out a revolution in contemporary literary space and successful overcoming of a space and arrangement of such discourse by varying ideological force. This is clearly depicted in *Cross Section* Sivakami's novel where Saro tries to come out of the bond of marriage to live a life of her own with Kumar.

Kumar stood a little away, under the shade of a Pavazhamalli tree. Flower kept falling in ones and twos. Their fragrance filled the surroundings. Her friend, who expected her to introduce Kumar, was disappointed.

"Come home. It's just five away," and drew Saro's hands persistently.

"Saro, let me with at the temple," saying this, Kumar stayed back. It was well-past forty minutes when she came back after having coffee. She apologized at once to Kumar for having made him wait. The bus started.

Seeing someone acquainted with her seated behind, Saro, was shocked.

Without speaking a word to Kumar, she traveled.(121)

Sivakami and Imayam carve out a social vision of hope for Dalits by emphasizing equality and justice. Sivakami as a writer encourages the Dalits to liberate themselves by forming a group. She envisions them gaining political, economic and cultural strength. Her cry is the cry of every Dalit woman and yet her aspirations, her disappointments and her responses are unique. She tells that through all the pain there is the redemptive quality of hope. It is worthwhile to make a note of what Mary Anne Weathers says regarding women's liberation. She thinks that women's liberation should be considered as a strategy for a tie-up with the entire revolutionary movement consisting of women, men and children. She points out in her article "An Argument for Black Female Liberation as a Revolutionary Force" in *A Journal of Female Liberation*.

All women suffer oppression, even white women particularly poor white women and especially Indian, Mexican, Puerto Rican, Oriental and Black-American women whose oppression is tripled. But we do have female oppression in common. This means that we can begin to talk to other women with this common factor and start building links with them and thereby build and transform the revolutionary forces we are now beginning to amass. (116)

The writers strongly believe that the time for action has come. In an interview, writer Miriam Tlali talks about her work as the art of exposition. She has shown very little respect for conventional form of literary works. Her views are quoted in the article "Narrative Strategies of Resistance: A Comparative Study of Bama's *Karukku* and Miriam Tlali's *Muriel at Metropolitan*" in the following manner,

To the philistines, the banners of Books, the critics. . .we black South African writers who are faced with the task of conscientizing our people and ourselves are the relevant audience. We are not going to write in order to qualify [qualify] into your definition of what you describe as “true art”. Our main objective is not to receive ballyhoo comments on our works. What is more important is that we should be allowed to reach our audience. Our duty is to write for our people and about them.(n.p)

Dalit women writing is an example of the new mode and praxis of articulation. It tends to be experimental as it also calls forth the undoing of the casteist and patriarchal domination and the discovering of a new language of desire and protest. Deepthi Dharmani in the article “Interesting Lines of Caste, Class and Gender: A study of Bama’s *Karukku*” quotes the words of Webster “Dalits continue to revision and refashion their religions not only to make them more intentionally and fully liberative but also to tap their transformative therapeutic potential more fully.”(52)

Sivakami’s experience as a woman writer in the society and her observation of the experiential reality of women includes issues such as girls education, wife battering, sexual exploitation and humiliation, women labour and wages, woman’s restricted movements, the burden of motherhood, all of which construct her feminist vision in the society and through that she expresses in her works the revolution of the Dalit women. She highlights the resilience, strong motivation and unfaltering spirit of women to overcome all the hurdles and survive through solidarity in the most unpatriarchal condition without male protection and man’s earning.

Dalit identity and their revolution in the changing connotations of the term ‘Dalit’ continues to refer only to the ‘Scheduled’ castes. Sivakami and Imayam might have

negated their identity as Dalit but their identity as simple Dalits is equally problematic and might be subjected to interrogation in the coming years. The major purpose of Dalit literature is to bring about a 'total revolution' in society. Dalit literature rejects the Hindu's beliefs in the Varna order with its age-old concept of Vedas and Granthas outrightly. Dalit literature denies this Hindu mentality and affirms that man himself is society and society is nothing other than human beings. Anju Bala, in the article, "Giving Voice to Voiceless: A Study of Dalit Literature" in *Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal* quotes the words of Tarachand Khandekar, a Dalit writer who talks about the state of man who is created as the crown of beings:

Man is the centrifugal force in the philosophy of Dalit Literature. Man is supreme. He is above all Gods, sacred books and science. It is a man who can make and unmake anything. Dalit Literature believes that nothing is permanent. Everything is subjected to decay. With every decay there is resurgence, new creation. It, therefore, does not accept the maxim 'Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram.' On the other hand, it proclaims that nothing is true which is not applicable for man's sublime freedom; nothing is beautiful which is not useful for beautification of mankind.(6)

After coming out of Indian Administrative Service, Sivakami happy to live with contentment and a honest mind has abundant courage and she is proud of being an independent woman, filled with the ideas of liberation of the Dalits. As an empowered woman she had been able to overcome her pain, agony and defeat with indefatigable and extraordinary mental strength. Being aware of her new responsibility at the political level she wants to create a new society where all are equal and no one should enslave others. She urges the Dalits to be bold enough to bring about the construction of the new society

for the Dalits and reveal to the society that they are all human beings with all the power and qualities necessary for human beings - common sense, a sense of honour, self-respect, wisdom, beauty and dignity. She strongly believes that perseverance, steadfastness, hard work, unity, determination, a sense of commitment and fearlessness would liberate them and equip them for the change.

Sivakami and Imayam are blurring the edges of the main stream by their contribution to Dalit liberation. Through the portrayal of cultural values in their fiction both writers open up their genre to new experimental forms in their writings.

Sivasankari's novel *Deception* the woman character Durga's talks about Subramania Bharati and the empowerment of women. The lines express Durga's mind when her relatives hurl accusations at her and her husband blackmails her emotionally.

“ . . . It is the duty of a woman to shun

A life shorn of dignity and self-respect

A life wallowing in dark ignorance

So proclaims the light of the virgin dawn

Long live! May she emerge victorious!

Glory to the new woman forever!

Durga felt a thrill pass through her. Filled with a strange pride, she allowed her tears

To roll down her cheeks. . . as the taxi started to move. . .”(100)

In her works Sivakami portrays powerful women characters like Gowri, Lakshmi, Saro who have the power to overcome all troubles in the society. They stand in their identity as Dalit women through the use of abusive language. Dalit women are vulnerable to exploitations from all sides. They are thrice alienated on account of their caste, class and patriarchy. Their empowerment is signified by the assertion of change paving way to revolution. Bama in her work *Harum-scarum saar* and other stories, in the story, *Chilli Powder* the woman character Pachayamma takes pride in transgressing the caste boundaries by stealing grass from the landlady, Gangamma. When she is caught stealing grass the lady expresses her anger by throwing chilli powder into her eyes. Pachayamma retaliates against her action by throwing abusive words and curses upon the landlady. Her resistance comes in the following manner,

“ . . .“chi, can you be called a woman? Throwing chilly powder in my eyes just for cutting grass that grows on its own? Is there such a harvest of fruits and vegetables here that we will come and steal them? Look at her face, swallow like a huge big gourd! And look at the shameless widow’s belly, bulging as if she is perpetually ten months pregnant! Your husband popped off after just one child because of your character, di!.” . . .“Whore-widow! May you be taken around like a corpse in procession! . . .May you have a leper’s hands! Look at the dead bitch standing there like a fat pot of grain.” . . .”(32-33)

In Bama’s novel *Sangati* , Raakkamma and Kaaliamma retaliate against domestic violence and abuse by their husband. Bama discusses the revolution of the age-old discrimination found between the girl-boy children in the patriarchal society in the following manner.

We must bring up our girls to think in these new ways from an early age. We should educate boys and girls alike, showing no difference between them as they grow into adults. We should give our girls the freedom we give our boys. If we rear our children like this from the time they are babies, women will reveal their strength. Then there will come a day when men and women will live as one with no difference between them; with equal rights. Then injustices, violence and inequalities will come to an end, and the saying will come true that 'Women can make and women can break'. I am hopeful that such a time will come soon.(123)

Sivakami's Saro and Gowri who refuse to be bound by tradition are good examples. Iyamam's work *The Begetter:Pethavan* also talks about a father who helps his daughter escape from the village bound by such discrimination.

Writer Salma in her book *The Past Midnight*, portrays the empowerment of women through her characters Firdaus, Farida, Maimoon and Nafiza who show signs of revolution through their individual will and open defiance of traditional socio-sexual norms. Nuramma's act of courage – defying the community banishment as a means of punishment in the society for the elopement of her daughter with a Hindu man makes her to raise her voice against gender injustice. Her questioning the differential sexual norms in the following manner is quoted here extensively for a better understanding of their plight.

Suddenly a feeling of freedom overcame her. It was now certain that she was to be banned from the community. She knew she could do nothing to prevent it; yet she was in a sudden frenzy to say something after all.

Liberated from all the controls she had know, as if she were bursting out of her chains, she spoke . . . ‘Ayya, all you elders and big men, so you are going to ban me from the community! Very well, let it be so. You say it was a sin for my daughter to elope with a Kafir. Is there a single man who hasn’t slept with one of our Hindu worker women? Speak out, let me hear. Let just one of you stand up; I’ll agree my daughter did wrong? Speak out, let me hear. Let just one of you stand up; I’ll agree my daughter did wrong.’ Her finger pointed all the way round the assembled crowd, leaving out no one. . . ‘It’s because I am helpless that you do this to me. Allah will pay you back for making me suffer. You are not going to get away with this wrong-doing’ . . . She stooped down and gathered the dust off the ground with both hands and threw it upwards, towards the sky.(253-254)

This process of empowerment is the result of the shift in women’s thinking in terms of analysing and questioning the status quo enhancing their confidence and self worth generating positive attitudes of change and promoting proactive stands in demanding their rights. Through the individual as well as collective acts of resistance and rebellion, women will be able to negotiate and bring about a change in the existing power relations that place them in a subordinate economic and social position.

In “Reading Resistance” Shoba Venkatesh Ghosh avers, “Women participate, too, in various oppressions. And with the instability that characterized the paradigm of gender (because of its entanglement with caste, class or religion), it is quite conceivable that a woman may in varying situations move between positions of powerlessness and power.”(74)

The revolution of the Dalit in the society embodies women's strength, courage and fortitude to fight oppression and subjugation, and question and break the traditional conventional boundaries. Through their revolution the quest for their identity and self-reliance have more control over their lives and conscious awareness about their own dignity. Their concept of empowerment becomes a significant construal of women's identity.

Sivakami and Imayam envision that Dalits would affirm their rights and take their turn at the seat of power to challenge acts of violence by upper castes on Dalits. Dalit poets use fantastic, confessional, satirical, realistic modes of writing and employ conversation. At times they also resort to sanskritised vocabulary as a political strategy: to appropriate linguistic hegemony of dominant castes and expose their hypocrisy in denying the right of learning to Dalits.

Dalit identity expands beyond exploitation to assert personal and communal agency. To be Dalit is not only to be one who is exploited, but also to be one who actively works to end this exploitation. It is here that radical and revolutionary character of Dalitness emerges. Baburau Bagul states:

Dalit means one who wants to destroy the system of Varna in the society along with its complete thought base. . . Dalit means one who wants to restructure this world and life. . . Dalit means one whose hands in this age have been made intelligent and transformative and for whom all 'weapons' and 'science' have been made available.(11)

Dalit identity and ideology is oriented to liberate Dalits from an exploitative and oppressive society. They call for a radical rejection of the dominant culture system

through the conscientization and agency of Dalit individuals and communities. The movements started to empower Dalits were revolutionary in that they sought to overthrow established systems and paradigms, and they were successful in so far as they were able to disrupt the status quo and still a sense of humanity, dignity, and agency with a people living in a culture that had them to have a place in the Brahman alley but to rule the entire lane requires that their mission must be extended even farther to make that lane Dalit.

Dalit identity and ideology find themselves at important crossroads. The dominating ideologies of India – casteism, unchecked capitalism, Hindu nationalism – do not threaten to stamp out Dalit counter-ideologies as much as they threaten to co-opt and dilute it. Playing the established political games, these groups seek to temper through shallow placations and empty promises. Twenty-five years ago the symbolic renaming of institutions and land marks in honour of Ambedkar and other Dalit heroes were important victories for such movements. Such renaming still possess significance today, but Dalit movements cannot allow them to become reduced to a bargaining chip in political courtship or more importantly a compromise to demands and a compromise to demands and a compromise in ethos. The movements have come too far to be so easily satisfied and too much remains to be done to find easy satisfaction in such gestures. Meena Kandasamy, a contemporary writer talks about what Dalit literature can do?,

But when it comes to literature that seed of revolution has already been sowed and in forthcoming time people will be more aware about their rights which they were deprived from centuries.

“In the end there will be no margin, In the end there will be no centre,

In the end there will be no play,

In the end there will be a free play of playlessness

Without margin.....

Without centre.....(n.p)

Sivakami and Imayam subverted the formalist notion of style, structure and aesthetics used by the mainstream literary market by deploying Dalit vocabulary, folk idiom and spoken Tamil as against a literary, ornate, rhetorical style.

Imayam's use of Dalit language opens a Dalit's life from all angles. The variety of songs and dances of the Dalits from birth to death are intricately represented by him. Dalit women sing songs and dance to the tune of the folk songs. In the novel *Beasts of Burden* the character Arokkyam's frustration and sorrow that her son and Sahayam her daughter –in-law, wish to have nothing to do with the traditional role of the Vannaatti. Imayam's novels *Koveru Kazhudaigal* and *Arumugam* and the other works reflect the formal reference throughout the books and to the repertoire of mourning song and laments (oppari) which is the cultural heritage of the Dalit people and a necessary part of their life to reflect their painful experiences through that they are being rapidly lost in changing times.

The novel ends with a cycle of oppari songs, with its own poetic system based on punning and playing on symbols of various life styles of the Dalit people in the society like marriage and death, and with internal as well as initial rhymes, as well as oppari. The following oppari is sung by Savuri at the time of death in his village.

With money, elelo, the bow is bent

(chorus) The bow is bent

Amma, this man is of Karna's vamsam

(chorus) Of his vamsam

With cash, elelo, the bow is bent

The bow is bent

Amma, this man is of Duryodhana's vamsam

Of his vamsam

With coins, elelo, the bow is bent

The bow is bent

Amma, this man is of the Pandava's vamsam

Of their vamsam

Good money, elelo, he must give us

He must give us

All his bad deeds will come to an end

Elelo. . . (31-32)

Dalit literature represents a powerful emerging trend in the Indian literary scene. Given its overacting preoccupations with the location of Dalits in the caste-based Hindu society, and their struggles for dignity, justice and equality, this literature is by nature oppositional. With the growing translation of works by Dalit writers from various regional languages into English, Dalit literature is poised to acquire a national and an international presence as well as to pose a major challenge to the established notions of

what constitutes literature and how we read it. It has indeed created its own alternative aesthetic. The aim of Dalit literature is to protest against the established system which is based on injustice and to expose the evil and hypocrisy of the higher castes. There is an urgent need to create a separate aesthetics for Dalit literature, an aesthetics based on the real experiences of life. Anil Suresh Adagale in the article “Protest against untouchability in Dalit Poetry” quoted the poem of Mrs. Bansode’s, where she complains against the society,

We are rejecting this

Unclean, poisonous life

And to escape from these cruel curses

Will you give me

A bright and auspicious moon?

My countrymen, to your court

I have brought a complaint

Will you give me justice?”(254)

The Dalit Feminist movements in India are mainly based on the experience of oppression and discrimination. Brutal patriarchy, gender disparity and sexual violence are the main issues taken up by these movements and they are also dealt authentically in the writings of Dalit women, as they emerged to the forefront by giving expression to their experiences from women’s point of view in the discriminated society. Feminism continues to be a strong inspiration for the contemporary Dalit women writers, as they

express their individual identity through the characters of their writings. They challenge the traditional values and call upon all Dalit women to recognize their inherent powers so as to lead an authentic life.

As Dalit feminism is a new phenomenon, their strong voices are raised against social injustice. Dalit writers have a deep concern for and commitment towards humanity and hence they raise their voice against any kind of narrowness, violence, vengeance on the Dalit women and work towards the liberation of the entire community constantly in Dalit writings. In this connection, it is worthwhile to make a notice of what Joti Lanjewar, a Marathi Dalit woman writer, expresses with a roaring voice,

Begging won't get anything here

Not sympathy, not love,

A suit in court wins injustice,

Tears are of no

value,

Getting water is a struggle,

Wrapping yourself in smoke from a dead fire won't work,

You have to plant the cinder of revolt in your own body. (255)

Dalit feminist literature anticipates that all women should be respected and treated as human beings irrespective of their caste. Rebellion, revolt, anguishes and agonies are commonly found in Dalit feminist literature which craves for equality and justice, rejecting illiteracy, atrocities, suppression and sexual exploitation. They revolt against

existing conditions and express their desire to cross the hurdles of life in their writings. Sivakami's characters Gowri, Saro, Lakshmi and Imayam's characters Bhakkiyam, Dhanabhagyam also brave such barriers.

It is observed that poets and authors of Dalit literature have used the power of language to express their feelings of being belittled in their surroundings. Dalit poetry thus became an academic stance of the poets who aim to change the fate of the suppressed through their writing. Anna Bhau Sathe gave a clarion call to all Dalits to change their fate in the following words:

Take a Hammer to change the world

So saying went Bhimrao!

He visualised the picture of the society which would be devoid of exploitation. Following the footprints of Ambedkar, he hopes to bring about the change for which all of them have to work together. He says,

Sitting on the chariot of unity

Let us go forward

To break the chains of class and caste

Hold to the name of Bhim!(256)

Dalit literature is designed to reveal the experiences of untouchability and Dalit protest is aimed against this pernicious system. Unrelieved suffering is the reality of the Dalit experience. Dalit poetry is a weapon for the Dalit poets against untouchability. Though the Indian Constitution has abolished slavery through law, its presence can be

seen in almost every walks of Dalit life and psyche. Dalit literature is closely associated with the hopes and aspirations of freedom of the people who have been treated as untouchables for centuries and are victims of religious, social, economic and cultural inequality.

Oppression has been used as a practice to control, exploit and abuse the less powerful group by the more powerful group to dominate, exploit and humiliate the downtrodden. The works of Imayam and Sivakami, portraying the real conditions of how these people lead their lives, are detailed documentation of the oppression and suppression of Dalit society by the upper caste people. With the spread of education in the rural areas, there began to develop a class of educated Dalit youth, who had been kept away from the local economic or political system. Sivakami and Imayam who had personally participated in the movement of Dalit labourers and who expressed themselves clearly and logically influenced the young generation. The pre-panther Dalit writings and their association with workers of the leftist movements in rural areas have given them the ability to understand the entire system. The Dalit youth took up the task of bringing all the Dalits on a single platform and mobilized them for the struggle for their civil rights and justice.

Dalits have started to raise their voices against social, economic, cultural and political oppression. The literature written by them has gone a long way in propagating the principles of equality, liberty, fraternity and compassion for the Dalits. These principles inspired the new generation of the Dalit writers. They have depicted in their works the untold miseries of human atrocities. Contemporary Dalit literature has presented a true understanding of the positions of the Dalits. For Dalits, the past has been one of violence, dispossession and death. Their writings reflect these trials of invasion

with passion and persuasiveness and provide an unparalleled view of their histories as lived experiences. The women are also bold and show their indomitable spirit. Regarding Bama and Sivakami's portrayal of women character, Arunima Ray says,

The women they portray are not at all weak, they are strong women who are intelligent and can stand up for themselves. Even after being beaten almost to death, Thangam retains the spirit to walk all the way to Kathamuthu's village to lodge a complaint against the upper-caste and rich land-lord, Paranjothi Udayar . . . Kathamuthu's both wives are not much bothered about his high-handed behaviour. They in fact, are very critical about him and snub him whenever the need arises. The writers through various examples show the spirit and strong will of Dalit women. They are witty and intelligent and through wit and humour tackle their angry husbands and enjoy their relationships. Sivakami points out that it is the young and radical people who can overhaul the social system through their awareness and a spirit of dissent. While Sivakami's woman protagonist moves beyond the confines of the caste to forge a unity of all the subjugated people, Bama's gives the call to organize a Dalit feminism to eradicate all man – woman discriminations.(62)

Sivakami's fiction foregrounds gender oppression of Dalit women within domestic space. In her fiction, women attain dignity only when they transgress social stereotypes and enter the public domain as Sivakami herself has done. In the process, women in Sivakami's fiction are able to attain only limited success, partially fulfilled aspirations. However, they are happy with such a realization of selfhood. From the perspective of a patriarchal society, Sivakami's women characters are struck with a

fractured social identity. While recognizing the fractured identity of women, Sivakami nonetheless, celebrates their indomitable will to struggle, their courage to defy and transgress and their capacity to affirm an evolved identity rather than put up with a culturally allotted one.

Sakunthala in her article “From wounds to Wonders: A Critique of P.Sivakami’s *The Grip of Change*” quotes the remarks of Meena Kandasamy, a contemporary poet who appreciates Sivakami for her writing, she says how Sivakami, through her fiction tries to bring about a change in the society.

The first Tamil novel by a Dalit woman, it evoked a great deal of discussion because it went beyond condemning caste fanatics by using fiction to describe how we were shackled, and tangled among ourselves. Instead of being the journey of her individual voice and consciousness, it was a unanimous expression of the youth of this oppressed community – eager and waiting for change. (193)

Ambedkar whose vision and mission had been the liberation of the Dalits, talked about the invaluable role writers could play in the progress of the Dalits. His suggestions are quoted by Asha Choubey in the book *Righting the Wrong: perspectives on Dalit Literature*

Through your literary creations cleanse the stated values of life and culture. Don’t have a limited objective. Transform the light of your pen so that darkness of villages is removed. Do not forget that in our country the world of the Dalits and the ignored classes is extremely large. Get to know

intimately their pain and sorrow, and try through your literature to bring progress in their lives. True humanity resides there.(6)

Sivakami's novel *The Grip of Change* not only highlights on the dual oppression or double marginalization of the Dalit women on the basis of caste and gender, but also underscore Dalit leadership and the need for the unity of Dalits as a single group to fight against the upper caste. Dominic Savio in his article "Amplified Dalit Voice in *Joothan* and *The Grip of Change*: A Comparative Study has quoted Mini Kapoor's version of the summary of *The Grip of Change* lines in the following manner, "*The Grip of Change* tells the story of a Dalit family drawn into the struggle for justice when a woman of their caste is beaten up by the relatives of her upper caste employer and lover" (93-94)

In the article on "Intersecting Lines of Caste, Class and Gender: A Study of Bama's *Karukku*" Deepti Dharmani has given the view of Helen Cixous about what women could do through their writing. "Woman must write herself. . . writing is precisely the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as the springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structure."(43)

Sivakami and Imayam discuss various forms of violent oppression unleashed on Dalits, especially the Dalit women in the society. Their novels depict how Dalit women suffer at the hands of the upper caste men as well as their own men. In Imayam's novel *Beasts of Burden* Dalit women's dual oppression on account of gender and caste are presented. At the same time the writing celebrates Dalit women's revolutionary strategies to overcome their oppression. Imayam's writing as that of Sivakami is an activist intervention. All Dalit writing is to be perceived as political writing as a strategy of

resistance to social domination. Sivakami through her writing hopes to influence Dalit women readers to shape their lives positively. Her works lay a lot of emphasis on the empowerment of Dalits through education.

The individual creates a language of the self, which interacts with and draws upon the language of the tribe, community and finally the language of history itself. Sivakami's *The Grip of Change* opens with the hysterical ranting of a woman, Thangam, who has been violently abused. She peppers her account of beatings at the hand of upper-caste men with proverbs of self-abnegation in the novel

Imayam offers multiple voices within the ravings of the abused woman in order to foreground the Dalit condition in the novel *Arumugam*. Arumugam's anguished voice narrating her trouble is the personal one. The reference to their local god, who will, he believes, avenge her humiliation, is the mythic voice. The historical voice is subsumed into these two when Arumugam expresses the poor Dalit's inability to be bound by the society. Their voices and three contexts are set out for us: the personal, the historical-social and mythic.

The voice of scriptural, patriarchal authority speaks through the mother character in the novel *Beasts of Burden*. Arokkyam laments about their miserable life and their place in the society. The song is quoted here extensively as it describes the Dalits, their pains and the way they lead their life in the society.

Everything good in my life has gone

My strength has left me

I have no possessions left

Everything has vanished away like smoke, like

magic

I had no complaints

...

Now I'm only a shit- stained stone

What if the vannan disappears in the shit pond?

Who cares if he is washed away by the river?

I followed like a shadow

I placed my feet in the footprints of the townsfolk

Now you have blinded me, God

Why did you create me as the downtrodden of the

Downtrodden, Saint Anthony?

I did not fear life

I did not fear death

I did not even fear the grave

But now I am frightened of the people

Now I have no one to ask after me

There is no one to exchange a word with me

There is no shade where I can shelter

I have passed every hour of every day as if I were

walking through fire

I was secure in the belief that where there are

sheep, there must be a shepherd

Who is there today to belch after feasting

We all belch with fasting

As if we are yawning

How can one who is fasting shut her eyes at night?(282-83)

Dalit literature has always been used as a weapon to fight against the traditional social order, norms, way of life, hypocrisy, out-dated customs, as well as political system. Though Dalit literature is written in different languages, different geographical backgrounds, their suffering is a common condition. They seek their roots and justice by writing their personal narratives. Hence Dalits are mobilizing resistance to fight against all forms of oppressions which they have been experiencing for ages. The second generation Dalits find inspiration from the movement of blacks in the distant land of North America and their black literature.

Dalit Literature is simultaneously universal, global and local. It is universal because starting from the ages to ages, from the ancient Greek Tragedy to the present Modern times it has been raising the fundamental question: Why does Man suffer? The question has remained the same but the answers may point to different agents such as

God, Fate, Chance, Choice, Evil and Society. In the present era Dalit writers focus on victimhood, oppression, suffering and demand their dignity as human beings and their answers is 'caste'.

The prime purpose of Dalit writing is not beauty of craft or aesthetics, but realism of experience. The most significant attribute of this literature is that Dalit literature displays Dalit consciousness. Today Dalit Literature includes not only the writings about Indian suppressed people but also other groups throughout the world who are relegated to a secondary position by the honored classes. Dalit literature comes up as a consequence of or as an element of the struggle in the life of the oppressed. If verbalization is empowerment, this literature thus gives an opportunity for the voices that have been silenced or remained silent for a long time to speak out.

Some voices are mute, some others are hushed and some others are heard ineffectively and infrequently. If being heard by a huge community is empowerment, many voices settle on as unheard and less heard because of a lot of issues, causes that may be apparent or hidden. Furhana Sayeed, in the article "The Goddess English: Language of Protest and Empowerment" points out how Dalit literature in English translation contributes to the growth of English literature.

Translation of Dalit texts into English is not only an empowerment of Dalit writers but it is also definitely enrichment of literature in English. It opens a world of actual knowledge of the oppressed, their animosity, their obligation and their engagements. The translations fill up major gaps in Indian writing in English which has not been able to hold the voices of the socially and economically marginalized sections.(270)

For centuries these people have been suffering mutely. It does not mean that they were immune to the pain they have been inflicted. On the contrary, they could not resist them because they were not empowered to do so. They were denied the access to education, a weapon through which they could voice their unbearable and terrible treatment at the hands of those who were mighty as well as empowered.

Through their education the Dalit can get their empowerment and bring about a change in the society. Education and awareness of their condition would help them to express themselves. Words are used as a weapon to attack that society which is full of prejudices, judgments and injustice towards a section of the society. Dalit literature thus attacks man made barriers that divide human beings into high and low. Dalit writers like Sivakami and Imayam raised their voices to express the bitter and painful experiences of these downtrodden. It is worthwhile to make a note of what Eleanor Zelliot says about change that is long awaited.

If you were to live the life we live,

We: kicked and spat at for

Our piece of bread

You: fetch fulfillment and

name of the Lord

We: down-gutter degraders

of our heritage

You: its sole repository

Descendants of the sage

We: never have paise to scratch our arse,

You: The golden cup of offering in your bank.

Yours bodies flame in sandalwood

Ours you shovel under half twined sand

Wouldn't the world change, and fast,

If you were forced to live at last

This life that's all we've ever had?" (212)

When God has created human beings and endowed them with the light of reason, it is saddening to see how they make divisions among themselves and deprive their own fellow beings of certain rights which are meant to be experienced and enjoyed in common. In Valmiki's autobiography, *Joothan*, it is the desire of the father of the author to make his son educated, he does not want his son to receive the same treatment as he has got in his life. Valmiki's father, who struggled hard to get admission for Valmiki in school, has to face bitter comments from society,

“ ‘What is the point of sending him to school?’,

‘When has a crow become a swan?’

‘You illiterate boorish people, what do you know? Knowledge is

not gained like this.’

‘Hey, if he asked a Chuhra’s progeny to sweep, what is the big deal in that.’(6)

In the school he is discriminated and oppressed, he is forced to sit apart and beaten up by the upper class students and he becomes the subject of humiliation by his teachers as well.

Valmiki as a little boy wondered how certain things when done by some people become the main subject of discrimination in books whereas when done by people like him are totally disregarded, resists against and questions the ill-treatment meted out to students even during the period of the *Mahabharata*. An episode is recorded by him in *Joothan* when he questions his teacher in the classroom, “. . . So Ashwatthama was given flour mixed in water instead of milk, but what about us who had to drink mar? How come we were never mentioned in any epic? Why didn’t an epic poet ever write a word on our lives?.” (23) So it is quite understandable that unless they write about themselves, they cannot leave anything to posterity.

Vinod Chopra in his article “Quest for identity Through Endless Struggle and Resistance: A Study of Omprakash Valmiki’s *Joothan*” quotes what Badrinarayan says,

Dalits, for acquiring social respect, use their personal narratives through which they glorify their community. The identity created through their narratives of the past by the Dalits renders instable the canons determined by Brahmanism for granting status in society, such as purity-pollution beliefs, birth-based ascription, specific caste characterization and caste hierarchy, and status ascription.(8)

Sivakami's *The Grip of Change* is about the journey of a Dalit family struggling for education and status in society. It presents the story of a Dalit family in search of Dalit dignity and identity. It depicts the oppressive and exploitative village life as well as the success of the character Gowri who has completed her education and become an empowered woman in her community.

Sivakami as a writer and activist is much concerned about the way the vicious Indian society predominantly and shamelessly humiliates, oppresses and ostracizes the subordinate castes in which the Dalit women are dreadfully crushed. Their basic human rights are suppressed even by their own men under the influence of the upper caste's whims and fancies. *The Grip of Change* is an ideal portrayal of the women who can educate, unite and agitate to claim equal rights with the men in general. Through the character of Gowri, Sivakami drives home her message that only education will prove most constructive and fruitful in the battle for human rights and dignity and to reinstate an upright status for the Dalit women in the society.

The Dalit writers are against violence and they condemn caste riots and caste wars. They want peaceful co existence and harmonious social relationships to be established among all men. Since they are aware that this is no bargain, but rightful demand for justice, equality and freedom they believe that it could be reaped easily through collective labour. They do not so much bother about the ways and means of attaining them except for the simpleton's amicable give and take. They are much concerned about the end which is happiness, and dignity for all human beings. This message of humanism is the aesthetic attraction of Dalit writing. Dalit woman has been the worst victim of the evil called caste system. The Dalit woman has been just taken as a play thing, to be played with as if she is the personal property of the people who can cheat

her, rape her, or kill her. However, she hasn't become vengeful or vindictive, but has been waiting patiently hoping for better sense to prevail. Chandrabahen Shrimali, a fiery spokesperson of the Dalit cause has penned this poem of human ideal of universal brotherhood:

'Paradise, at a stone's throw distance

With a sincere heart

And without expectation

When man will love man

The hell will no more be in sight,

The paradise will just be at a stone's throw away.

But the paradise will turn into heaven

If man remembers

That there is a man called dalit

Waiting to be loved.(n.p)

Dalit literature is the literature of explicit social commitment aimed at promoting ideas of social equality, justice and resistance to suffering, discrimination and economic exploitation. Dalit literature remains at the margin as it challenges mainstream. This literature is more realistic than romantic and is unified by the portrayal of discrimination and exploitation. Dalit writers are severely critical of the silence of the mainstream literature about surrounding social realities and their romanticisation of Indian society and

its hierarchies. Even when higher caste writers have voiced concerns about Dalit communities, they are seen as condescending in nature and aimed at blunting Dalit resistance amalgamating Dalits in mainstream society.

They, like Sivakami and Iyamam highlight Dalit anguish in their works, disagree to nurture a false smile but to rebel against this hostile system which does not allow the Dalits to lead an upright life. Dalit literature is deeply concerned with identity formation and its assertion to regain the self-confidence and self-worth of the marginalized sections of our society. Most of their creative imagination is structured around these premises. Theirs is an agenda of rebuilding society on values which promote honour and dignity, justice and equality for all.

A Dalit had to struggle for everything, right from the three basic needs of 'food' 'cloth', and 'shelter' in established society, to their rights which they can get through, their 'education', 'liberty' and 'due process of law'. Dalits even in modern society are still struggling for all the 'seven' point fundamental rights to equality, to freedom of speech and expression, to freedom of religion, right against exploitation, cultural and educational rights, to constitutional remedies and the lastly implemented one, the right to education.

There are many progressive measures taken and implemented by governments. However, great men like Jyotirao Phule, Ambedkar, Gandhi, Tagore, Netaji and Vivekananda, couldn't break down the vertical caste and class structure of Brahminic Hinduism so that a reformed single unit of horizontal nonhierarchical social system in modern India could be established. Dalits in India started a movement directed towards status improvement through social mobility. To them, true liberation occurs only when

the needs of the people are met, in particular the illiterate and impoverished masses who are central to nation building. This emphasis on the base of the socio-economic pyramid reflects the central emphasis throughout their resistive project: the need for thinking, planning, and acting from the bottom up.

As an exponent of Dalit Feminism, Sivakami has found in *The Grip of Change* the right space to articulate the travails and sufferings of Dalit women. *The Grip of Change* thus enjoys the unique recognition of being one of the first radical feminist discourses by a Tamil Dalit woman. The English translation has enabled her works to cross linguistic and regional boundaries, and reach the global readers. *The Grip of Change* is a reflection of different themes like religion, recreation, and education, etc. Through these perspectives, Sivakami presents a clear picture of the caste oppression meted out to the Dalit women not only by the upper caste society but more so within the Dalit community itself. As a feminist writer Sivakami through her works protests against all forms of oppression and relying on the strength and resilience of Dalit women, makes an appeal for change and self empowerment through education and collective action. In Sivakami's opinion, education is the only way to eradicate casteism and poverty. It is appreciable that now Dalits are awakened and enlightened through education and they are aware of their responsibilities.

Literature does not stop with the mere portrayal of suffering but also offers means to alleviate suffering. Resistance is a means to defy any kind of imposition. Generally people resist when they are in trouble; they resist to come out of their trouble or suffering. In the article "The Feminist Perspective: The Indian Situation and its Literary Manifestations" Jasbir Jain comments on men's role in patriarchal society:

Men in patriarchal societies have been deprived of a whole range of experience, of having to reach out to the other. They have looked only at themselves having reduced women to subordinate positions. Men – both socially and intellectually – can be a powerful medium of change. For instance, R. K. Narayan's novels, to give an example, reveal an ever growing awareness of the need to expand the area of a woman's freedom.(37)

English education stands as the best solution to break the literary barriers among the Dalit writers. For the concerns of the oppressed to reach the highest order, they need to be written in the language of the world outside the native lands. Dalit literature will not be an exception to the oppression bestowed on the oppressed. The literary works, to see the light of day, should open their windows to let the light fall in.

The woes of the Dalit women and their call for reforms are suppressed by this barrier. The feeble voices of the Dalit women are getting confined to the four walls of their literary circles. For the voices to grow louder, the linguistic connection between the people needs to be increased. Only then can the world get to know what the Dalit feminists are talking about. It studies the available solutions to overcome the hindrances formed by linguistic distance. This is one of the main reasons behind the suppression of the Dalit movements. Dalits, especially Dalit women, are mostly illiterate. Their woes are least heard by anyone. Even when some of the women tend to speak up, their anguish cannot be understood beyond the prescribed limits of her language circles, since the literary works of the Dalit women are mostly in the regional languages. This is the reason why it is taking ages for the Dalits to unite for a single cause. Even though the problems

and the statements are the same, the language differences require a new author to once again write a new story in the regional language of the natives to feel integrated.

Translation helps in bringing out the hidden treasures of knowledge in the literary arena. With translation alone can the world get to know the beauty of the literature that India possessed. Sivakami and Imayam are best examples to show the reach and extent to which the translated books can take them. However, stories change according to the story teller. Experiences need to be narrated not retold by an outsider. English education to all is thus the only solution to overcome the problem of linguistic distance.

Dalit literature provides the deep structure of literary representations and serves to organize the particularities of circumstance and individual identity. The marginalized, the subaltern or the Dalit struggles for survival as the reserved, oppressed and exploited part of society. The individuals or the groups are marginalized either in the name of religion, race, region, community, caste, gender, nationality or even ideology. But this relationship between the centre and margin cannot be permanent or static but only temporary and shortlived. The centre can subdue and suppress the marginalized voices, but can never silence them forever. Once they find their true voice, they come to an end to be marginalized. Dalit patriarchy is an important subject of concern in Tamil Dalit literature.

Sivakami's novel prepared the situation for a continued critique of domestic violence and abuse of Dalit women at home by Dalit men, fathers, brothers, sons, fathers-in-law, brothers-in-law, apart from sexual and occupational harassment faced by Dalit women outside their homes at the hands of upper caste men and the police. Sivakami's focus on violent exploitation of woman's body points out how the family as an

institution is embedded in the patriarchal and cruel system that is deliberately unfair to women.

Just as the anguish expressed in Dalit literature is in the nature of collective social voice, similarly, the rejection and revolt are social and collective. The Dalit consciousness in Dalit literature is the revolutionary mentality connected with struggle. It is a belief in rebellion against the caste system, recognizing the human being as its focus. Dalit consciousness is an important seed for Dalit literature. Jasbir Jain in the first chapter – “Theorizing Resistance and creativity”, of her seminal book– *Theorising Resistance: Narratives in History and Politics* says:

Resistance in art forms is an indication that society is not dying, that there has to be a constant struggle to keep alive. It acts like a fresh infusion of blood and like a constant reminder that in this sea of change, the one constant force has to be the human and all the abstractions we have pursued since our conscious register their value – the value of freedom, of emotion, of beauty, of love. That leads us to consider the creative and the aesthetic aspects.(390)

In the essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak denies a voice to subaltern or oppressed subject. She reads this as emblematic of the difficulty of recovering the voice of the oppressed subject can speak: “. . . the subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with woman as a pious term”(271-313). The issues become still more problematic if it is a transcription of the spoken word, the musings and the reminiscences of a Dalit woman. However, writers like Sivakami, Imayam and Bama, who have suffered all the iniquities, possible odds have settled the

issue. Their writings prove that the oppressed subjects can speak for themselves daring to break the shackles of the repressive power of casteistic forces. Their attempt to reconstruct the marginalized without the erasure of women succeeds in understanding and reconfiguring the importance of subalterns to history, thereby, simultaneously suggesting that they are agents as well as actors of their histories. Thus through their writings and actions they can speak and their voice cannot be ignored or neglected for a long time. In her Acknowledgement of *Sangati* Bama clarifies her stance.

My mind is crowded with many anecdotes: stories not only about the sorrows and tears of Dalit women, but also about their lively and rebellious culture, their eagerness not to let life crush or shatter them, but rather to swim vigorously against the tide . . . about their passion to live life with vitality, truth and enjoyment; about their hard labour. I wanted to shout out these stories.(xvi)

The clarification of her stance in acknowledgement of her work could definitely be attributed to the works of Sivakami and Imayam also because their works also are the outcomes of either their own experiences or their observations of the life around them.

Sivakami and Imayam with their artistic conception of lived experiences in the language of their own community prove that the voices of the Dalits, particularly the subalterns can be articulated in their own tongues. Their writings uncover the hidden and erased voices of women's history, or reinterpret events from a new perspective. They discover that the subaltern context consists in appropriating local narratives and in mapping and annexing the kaleidoscopic landscapes literally on the shoulders of native inhabitants. Their text does not simply reflect dominant ideologies, but encode the

tensions, complexities and nuances within their society. The text, context and at times subtext are interwoven into the fabric of their discourse embedded in gendered and racial constructs.