

## STRUGGLES OF SUBALTERN IN SIVAKAMI'S 'THE GRIP OF CHANGE'

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The term subaltern came from the writings of Antonio Gramsci who was an Italian Marxist and referred to the subordination in terms of class, caste, gender, race and culture. Gayathiri Chakraborty Spivak in her essay titled "Can Subaltern Speak" says that the subaltern cannot speak. She emphasizes the condition of women who are doubly oppressed (firstly by patriarchy secondly by colonialism). This paper analyses Sivakami's the grip of change especially the protagonist Thangam's struggle to get justice for what she has suffered. in her life by Paranjothi Udaiyar who is the land lord, belongs to upper caste. She is denied to get her husband's share of property by her husband's brother Arumadal in turn, he expects her to yield his sexual thirsty. Trusting Kathamuthu as her demi-god, she comes to him for getting justice. However, he tactics her to believe him as a savior and deceives her immeasurably. This paper analyses how she struggles in her life and also how she has been tormented in the doubly oppressed patriarchal society.

**Key Words :** Violence, Rape, Deception, Denial, Disparagement. Struggles, Victim, Caste

In post colonial theory, the term subaltern describes the lower classes and the social groups who are at the margins of a society. A subaltern is a person rendered without agency due to his or her social status. Nonetheless the literary critic Gayatri Spivak advised against too broad application of the term in 1992. Subaltern is not just a classy word for oppressed for others, for somebody who is not getting a piece of pie.... In post colonial terms, everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern. As Spivak observes, "The object of the group's investigation, in the case not even of the people as such but of the floating buffer zone of the regional elite – subaltern, is a deviation from an ideal – the people or subaltern – which is itself defined as a difference from the elite." Guha's definition of this floating buffer zone of elite – subalternity is close to Marx's well known comments of the French peasantry. "At the regional and local levels (the dominant indigenous groups)... if belonging to social strata hierarchically inferior to those of the dominant all. Indian groups acted in the interests of the latter and not in conformity to interests corresponding truly to their own social being". (Spivak 284-285).

The grip of change tells a widow's demand to get justice for what she has suffered in her life by Paranjothi Udaiyar who is the land lord, belongs to upper caste. She is denied to get her husband's share of property by her husband's brother Arumadal in turn, he expects her to yield his sexual thirsty. When she denies to his

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lustful demand, he informs her illicit contacts to Paranjothi Udaiyar's wife and brother in laws. Therefore, she is beaten thoroughly and asked to vacate the place. The skin of her thighs and knees is scored and shredded as though she has been dragged over a rough surface. Having no one in her family, she meets Kathamuthu who is the central figure whom people consider as a savior in their lower community.

When Thangam comes and informs it to Kathamuthu, she cries saying "Ayya, you are all gods to me"(7) "My saviour sami! To whom can I tell this, but you?" (6). Kathamuthu maintains a stunned silence and asks her in an authoritative tone of someone who has been elected President of panchayat council. "Where are you from? What is your caste? And your name?" (5). immediately, she replies "Sami I come from the same village... you know Kaipillai from the south street who died? I am his wife". (5). Kathamuthu wants to know what really happened so he asks her with accusing tone. She replies " my husband's relatives spread the story that I had become Parnjothi's concubine. That's why Paranjothi's wife's brothers and her brother-in-law, four men entered my house last night. They pulled me by hair and dragged me out to the street. They bit me and flogged me with a stick stout as a hand. They nearly killed me... I begged for mercy, but they wouldn't stop. They abused me and threatened me to kill if I stayed in that village any longer. They called me a whore". (6) Similarly, Subalterns who are tortured and suppressed globally in an in humanized way. For example, "Frederick Douglass is a negro and victim of assault from slave – owners, overseers, and hirers. But they are also victims of fatal and non fatal violent assaults. They survived from caste and racial assault". (pxxxv).

Kathamuthu disparages Thangam depending on his interest treating her as sub-human. However, Thangam keeps on maintaining silence. She is raped by Udayar when she works in his sugarcane field. However, she reminds silence because he is her pay master. Moreover, being a victim in this prejudiced society, she cannot speak because he measures her rice. Her husband's brother forces her for sexual intimacy but she never turns up. Kathamuthu interrupts her asking "Don't you like our chaps?"(7). Hesitating at the crudity of his remarks, she answers "Sami... I feel so ashamed". (7). He lists out the works and says "FIR has to be registered against those who beat her". (8) Before taking her to hospital, he keeps on tearing Thangam saying upper caste men may fancy her but they will not marry however she can enter into their house as she is ready to become a concubine. She slowly understands the abuses she has been subjected to. Tears rolling down her cheeks, she remains silent and feels miserable. The memories make her sob in distress.

When the complaint is written by Gowri, daughter of Kathamuthu, Thangam gives the details saying "I belong to the Hindu scheduled caste community. I am a poor Parayar, an orphan, a widow. I earn my living by working for a daily wage. On the night of the event, I was passing along the upper caste street to attend the call of nature. At that time, Paranjothi Udaiyar's wife Kamalam... shouted, "You

Paraya bitch how dare you walk on this street? Why is the Paraya bitch walking along this street? Don't you know it is upper caste street? Go away from here" said Kamalam....I asked her again not to talk like that. But she stared at me and said, "Are you threatening me, you low caste bitch?" and picked up a thick stick and began to beat me with her brother.... All four pulled me by hair, tore my blouse, beat my breasts, dragged me along the street naked and tried to murder me..." (11-12). Kathamuthu makes this problem as caste strife. He makes himself popular respected leader of the people of Arthur and the nearby villages. He makes it his career to help people in distress like the character named Soaped Church in *The Bluest Eye*. He is a man of misanthrope but fraud. He cheats the people who come in any kind of urgent help. People depend on him because he never gives up. "he was completely unafraid of anyone or anything. Humility and restraint were non-existent words in the vocabulary of this domineering man". (15).

Kathamuthu can brighten any dull subject with his picturesque language. When he goes to the police station to lodge a complaint for Thangam, he just visits Naiker shop to have a word with casually. After his departure, Naiker teases him saying "poor fellow, he belongs to a lower caste. Can't you tell from his gross speech?" because Naiker belongs to upper caste. One day, his relative from a remote village comes to Naiker's jewellery shop to buy silver araignan for his newborn baby. He makes him standing and carefully drops the silver piece on his palm from a distance in order to avoid touching him. His attitude is perfectly matched with Mr. Yacobowski's in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. He is an old shop owner belongs whites. Attracted by the beauty of Mary John Candy, Pecola goes to buy it in his shop. On seeing Pecola, he looks down and carefully drops the candy on her palm in order to avoid touching because she is a poor ugly black girl.

Kathamuthu shows his patriarchal attitude wherever he goes. When he is at the police station to give a complaint on behalf of Thangam, he searches Subramani who is an assistant. As he doesn't find him there, he shouts at him "why are you late? You jobless fellow, how the fuck are you going to do a government job if you can't be on time? He cuts short Subramani's stammered explanation by giving a statement, "Don't give me any stories". (21) Subramani is appointed as an assistant to him. He hopes that he will get a job through him at the taluk office. Kathamuthu senses that the inspector is keen to get rid of him because he doesn't like the subject caste. Immediately, he switches tactics questioning to the inspector "tell me a place where caste doesn't exist. Just because you and I don't talk about it, doesn't mean it's not there. It will persist till you and I die". (22) He somehow convinces the inspector to take immediate action against Udaiyar. When he nods his head to take action, Kathamuthu chuckles himself and lies aloud "In all my life, I have never come across such a dutiful and straight forward officer as you". (23).

Mariamman (female deity) temple is at the center of the Puliur Cheri. During the temple festival, the upper caste men enter into Cheri and assault Thangam.

Because the temple is crowded and noisy as most of the residents assembled there. During the temple festival, “a woman was being dragged on the road. Seeing people arriving from all sides, the assailants had yelled threats at them. Then they had run out of the Cheri to the upper caste part of the village... from there they had shouted insults”. (26) This incidents can be connected with Pecola’s life experience in “The Bluest Eye”. When Pecola comes from class, the black boys circle her and sing a ballad which is made of insults.

Thangam rejects the sympathy of those who haven’t said a word to her husband’s brother when they refuse to handover her husband’s share of land. Therefore, she lives alone earning her food by toiling everyday on Udaiyar’s land. The village women never talk to her. So, she walks six kilometers from Puliur to Athur that night to reach Kathamuthu’s house. The entry of the police into the Cheri and their subsequent enquiries shocks Paranjothi. He feels to pacify her by paying some money and feels extremely annoyed with his wife and her brothers for causing such trouble. If it is on some other issue, he can use his power and money and also turns the case to his advantage. But, unfortunately this is about his shameful affair with a lower caste Parachi. “He did not fear the police, the courts, the expenditure that he might incur, and the nuisance that would follow. Only the caste concerns made him anxious the exposure of an affair with a Parachi was humiliating. He could have braved it out even if it had been a murder or a case of criminal assault. But, what a disgrace if he had to own up to a relationship with a Parachi. (31-32). [Parachi and Parayar whom considered as lower caste to upper caste like how American whites consider blacks as said in Afro-American literature].

Before doing the in humanized act of raping, Paranjothi Udaiyar assures that there is no one else in the field at that time and also assures. “She was his servant. Besides, Thangam was no princess or minister’s daughter. For that matter, she did not even have a husband. There would not be a soul to rescue her if he imposed himself on her. Moreover, she was only a lower caste labourer”. (32) When Paranjothi Udaiyar uses the term a lover caste, he considers the entire people powerless. “Racism does not concern prejudices alone; it is a system of oppression, one that creates two sets of people; the powerful and the powerless”. ( Radhika) He waits until the labourers walk out of sight and then tricks to call Thangam by clapping. Immediately, she rushes towards Paranjothi Udaiyar without understanding his desire. He then instructs her “switch off the motor-pump, my hands are wet... Yesterday Ezhumalai left the hoe in the sugarcane field, go and look for it”. (33) Obeying her master’s order, she proceeds into the sugarcane field. When she goes deeper into the field, Udaiyar quietly follows her. He again instructs her “Go further; He drove her to the field so that no one could see them”. (33) Despite her protests, he overpowers her and pushes her down and rapes her. Thereafter, he makes it routine to have sex with her and slake his lust whenever possible either in the motor shed or in the field.

Kathamuthu is extremely clever and he knows many people. He has the cunning of a fox. He only changes the whole story of the case because if this case is on the caste clash, the punishment will be heavy. If any one dares to express contrary views, he turns to wild and the person is demolished literally. The policemen go to Udaiyar's house to hand him a copy of the complaint. He then understands that it is about caste related abuse and does not say anything about his relationship with Thangam so he feels a bit happy taking a long breath and requests the police to get out of this case with a bribe. Immediately, police suggests that "Why don't you lodge a counter-complaint? 'Such as?' That she had stolen a transistor and two thousand rupees in cash. Do it as soon as you can. She's in a hospital. You can plant the cash and the transistor inside her house tonight. We will manage the rest". (41-42). Udaiyar remains silent and hands one ten rupee bundle to each policeman. When the police return to Athur, Kathamuthu interrupts the police and corners to know the reason for the bundle of notes. Immediately, one of the police says, "Udaiyar is planning to register a police complaint that Thangam is a thief". (44). On hearing this, Kathamuthu gets infuriated and sends Subramani to inform it to Picha Pillai or Sellamuthu to post guards around Thangam's hut for few nights.

When Paranjothi Udaiyar fails to keep the things in Thangam's hut, he gets frightened. Community leader asks him about police visiting his house and so he gets tensed and says "The Paraya bitch who was working for me had misbehaved, so my men punished her. She went to Athur and took Kathamuthu's help to register a police complaint". (49) At first Thangam is beaten. Now they want her branded a thief. The elders from the Paraya community warn "Boys, be careful! Don't get into a quarrel with the Udaiyar on account of that worthless bitch. They're dangerous. They won't hesitate to burn down the entire Cheri" (51) Because of the effect of this conflict, Upper caste people hire workers from other villages for six and seven rupees instead of three. They pay double the amount for people from neighboring villages. If the Parayars ask for a fifty-paisa increase in their wages, they feel as their entire life will come to an end.

As the first step, the upper caste keeps the Cheri people out of work. Following this conflict, Paranjothi Udaiyar's wife Kamalam's behaviour exceeds all limits. A twelve year old boy from Cheri works as bonded labor in her house. His task is to attend the cattle. As a payment, he is given one hundred kilograms of paddy a year. Waste and spoiled food is normally dumped on him to eat. Threats and abuses are his part of life. When he finishes his chores, he sneaks through the back door and waits for his food. She contemptuously waves a broom at him saying, "Grind the cotton seeds well, or I'll grind yours!" (55). However, this boy thinks that she is joking and smiles at her innocently. Continuation of this hate violence, another in humanized incident happens that the Parayar's houses are set fire by the upper caste men. When the young men of Cheri are on their way to fight for their justice,

Police arrives. The crowd says in anger “One of our women was beaten like a dog and no one showed up that time. We reported to the tahsildar that the upper caste landowners had stopped our work. No one showed up then too. Now, our houses have been burned and as we take up our weapons these rats are here” (62).

The sub-collector arrives. Meanwhile, the tahsildar and the inspector go around the village to estimate the value of properties lost in the fire and noted owner’s name. The Panchayat meeting is arranged at Cheri. The rich upper caste men sit on the benches on one side and lower caste men and women stand about forty feet away from them. The Government officials sit on the chairs. They ask the untouchables to open the issues but they don’t because they wait for their redeemer Kathamuthu who can transform the situation and gain something productive from it. He twists the matter asking “In Athur as well as the surrounding village laborers get five to six rupees for planting paddy. And that’s only from eight in the morning to one in the afternoon. But here, laborers begin as early as seven in the morning and work till evening falls. Yet, they get only three rupees. So, Kathamuthu demands to pay a compensation of ten thousand rupees to each family and also people who work for just three rupees for long time must be paid one more rupee because the prices have gone up. When Kathamuthu concludes, the tahsildar turns to Paranjothi. Immediately, Paranjothi gets angry and said “Ten thousand rupees is too much. We can’t afford that. It’s unimaginable”(73). At last, it is finalized with families whose houses are completely destroyed should get three thousand rupees each and partially burnt gets one thousand rupees. The daily wage is increased to three rupees fifty paisa.

When the matter is about to settle down, Ramalinga Reddiar takes a vow, “Let everything settle down and we will burn down every hut in Cheri who will they complain about that?”(75). The poor coolies go back to work in the next day happily at the thought of earning an extra fifty paisa for their labor. However, their supervisors don’t allow them to leave the fields even at five in the evening. These poor coolies tolerate it because “the lower castes had learned to tolerate the intolerate”.(76) On the third day, sub-collector of Athur accompanied by tahsildar and volunteer from Red Cross Society come to Puliur for distribution of things. The sub-collector is young and new to this job. When he enters into Cheri, the tahsildar advises him against that, “Sir, you can’t step in there. It is so dirty. You will be surrounded by pigs. What about the school? Goats and stray dogs sleep on the verandah of the school”(76) Finally, the sub-collector accepts the suggestion of the tahsildar and chooses the shade of the tamarind tree as the meeting place of the upper and lower castes.

A Panchayat meeting is arranged to discuss the dispute of Thangam with Paranjothi Udaiyar. Kathamuthu leads the Panchayat along with the representatives of the Ambedkar association. A deep feeling of shame causes Thangam to shed silent tears. Kathamuthu suggests Udaiyar that “she is a widow with no children; an

orphan with no one to take care of her. It is proper that you make her part of your household” (79) Though shaken by the suggestion, he understands what Kathamuthu is driving at. He demands, “Give her ten or twenty thousand rupees in compensation. Then we’ll withdraw the petition, stating that we’ve reached a settlement”. (79) Following the hearing arguments, Paranjothi Udayar gives her ten thousand rupees.

“Women are seen merely as a symbol of virtue, love, beauty, mother, wife, bird, flower, deceit, devout woman, chaste woman, god, devi, sacred animal on one side; lies, devil, prostitute, chandali, widow, infertile, maya, lust, as wicked animals on the other. These have maligned the name of women forever. Women’s voices never echoed in history and if at all they did, they were altered according to the interests of men”. (creative forum) That night Kathamuthu asks Thangam in a concerned tone, “Are you alright now? Have you eaten?”. (80) Immediately, she gets up pulling her sari around her, “I’m alright, esaman. I’ve had some food”. (80) At first, he advises her to buy a cow or buffalo and puts the rest of the money in the bank and then asks her, “Thangam, will you lend me five thousand rupees? (81) Immediately, she tells, “Sami, the entire money is yours. Why ask me? Please take it all”. (81) She no longer wants to work for a daily wage in anybody’s farm. Therefore, she requests him to get her share of land through the Panchayat.

A few days later, Thangam’s land dispute case is taken to court so she goes with Kathamuthu to various government offices and the court. She remembers the shock of being dragged out by hair in middle of the night to be beaten up like an animal. She hates the memory of Paranjothi Udaiyar’s sexual use of her body. However, she feels happy with pride at Kathamuthu’s praise of her money for spending in his family. From which, he starts exploiting her regularly intending to have physical intimacy. Kathamuthu compels her to drink brandy saying nothing will happen. “Thangam smelled the alcohol, “Sami, I can’t drink this. I have no such habits”. Then following his first wife Kanagavalli as example, she closes her eyes and drinks brandy. After the noon meals when everyone feels drowsy, he nears her and smells her hair and tries for physical intimacy. However, she is reluctant and saying, “You are like a brother to me... a brother’ she groaned, but her eyes remained shut”(93). Finally, he keeps her as his third wife and completely swindles her money. After long struggles in her life, she completely surrenders herself to him as she does not have any other way.

This paper is written following the Spivak’s theory of Can Subaltern Speak?. Mainly the first part of the theory deals with the ethical issues. Similarly, the first part of the paper also deals with the ethical issues of Thangam in different situations based on the universal concepts as said in Spivak’s theory. However, she cannot speak and maintains silence to whatever struggles that she faces in her life.

**Note**

Sivakami's "the grip of change" is a novel at first written in Tamil. Then, it was translated into English. There are some unusual Tamil words used in this book to maintain the feel by the author. Those words and their meaning given below making the reader understand.

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