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Representation of Dalit female characters in Dalit and Non-Dalit writings: reading rao's *Children of God* and Sivakami's *The Grip of Change*

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Abstract

Dalit literature is the voice of oppressed community seeking justice from the centuries on the name of caste. Authors from different caste backgrounds are coming forward to participate in this budding genre of literature. The representation of Dalit characters in literature has always remained a sensitive issue. My paper would focus on the representation of Dalit characters by both, Dalit writers and non-Dalit writers. Dalit writers claim that it is necessary to have Dalit identity to be a Dalit writer as they believed that Dalit literature is 'lived literature'. Dalit writers claim that the portrayal of Dalit characters by non-Dalit writers is always negative or mere sympathetic. I will try to search out, at what extent non-Dalit writers are doing justice with Dalit characters in their work and to do so I will be comparing their characters with the characters of Dalit writers. My focus will be to compare Dalit female characters by Dalit female writer and non-dalit female writer. The major works I will be covering in this paper are, *The Grip of Change* by P. Sivakami and *Children of God* by Shanta Rameshwar Rao.

Keywords: Dalit, Representation, Caste, Sympathy, Untouchability, Empathy

1. Introduction

Dalit Literature is a literature of resistance which primarily focus on the ostracization and marginalization of oppressed communities like Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribes and other backward castes. Caste system is the harsh reality of India. Dalit literature is the voice of all oppressed communities who challenge the rigidity of caste system and demand equality. Dalit literature represents the bitter lived experiences of Dalits.

Both Dalit writers and non-Dalit writers have written about Dalit lives. There is a difference in the writings of Dalit writers and non-Dalit writers which can be captured through sympathy and empathy. In this paper I would try to explore the relationship of sympathy and empathy in Dalit literature. A Dalit critic, Neha Arora, states that "it is enough to say that any piece of literature is Dalit literature which concerns Dalits and which is inspired by the Dalit Movement" (Arora 161). Arjun Dhangle also believes the same, that it is not necessary to be a Dalit to write Dalit literature. On the other hand Sharatchandra Mukti both writes that since Dalit consciousness produces Dalit literature, therefore "an outstanding work of Dalit literature would be born only when Dalit life would present itself from the Dalit point of view" (Dangle 267). Certain Dalit writers and critics like Jai Prakash Kardam, Ghanshaym, Bhatt claim that literature written by non-Dalit writers is caste biased. They charge that non-Dalit writers cannot represent the reality as a Dalit writer can do. According to some Dalit writers, Dalit literature is writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with Dalit consciousness. Majority of Dalit writers like Jai Prakash Kardam believes that they have composed literature on the basis of lived experiences faced by them and their communities where as non-Dalit writers write with sympathetic overtones. Writers like Premchand, Bechan Sharma, Vaidehi have written on Dalit community. Premchand in *Rangbhoomi* made Surdas a central character and in Bechan Sharma's *Budhua Ki Beti*, Radha, a Dalit girl was central character. It is interesting to note that in most of the works of non-Dalit writers, Dalit protagonist fails to fight against the system and is portrayed by the author as a victim who can never bring the change. In *Godan* by Premchand, Hori, the central character dies at the end because he finds it impossible to fight with upper caste money lenders.

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Dalit writers occupy a unique position in the history of Indian literature. Many Dalit writers believe that non-Dalit writers spoil the authenticity of Dalit literature. In the words of G.A. Ghanshyam, "Dalit Literature is basically the literature written by Dalits in which they have expressed their pain and anguish. The non-Dalit writers who write about Dalits couldn't come under the category of Dalit writers because they don't represent the true Dalit consciousness" (Ghanshyam 92). Another critic also claims the same, Vandna Bhatt puts, " 'anubhava' (experience) takes precedence over 'anumana' (speculation) in writing Dalit Literature. Dalit writers are able to paint the picture of Dalit life in a balanced, realistic and critical manner" (Bhatt 119). Umed Singh also opines that non-Dalit writers can write about Dalits but they could not capture the anguish born out of the unjust social system based on caste and class inequalities" (Singh 121).

Jai Prakash Kardam, a famous Dalit activist also point out the same difference in writings of Dalits and non-Dalits. When he was asked in an interview about the difference between Dalit literature by Dalit and literature about the Dalits, he started by quoting Ramnika Gupta that "only ash knows the experience of burning" and this line clearly signifies that the authenticity of Dalit literature can only be justified by the pen of a Dalit writer (Agarwal 176).

As majority of Dalit writers believe that only they can voice their agony and sufferings in true manner, it can also be said that only a woman can present the real life of a woman. It seems necessary to have voice of a woman to speak about woman. But, in the canon of Dalit literature, the idea that only a woman can portray sufferings of a woman in true manner does not seem true. Discriminations on the basis of caste can be traced when a woman writes for a woman. It can be said that Dalit woman become more victimized in the hands of upper caste woman writer. These are the arguments which challenged the ideologies of upper caste man, upper caste woman and Dalit man. My project will focus on the notion that to be a female writer and to be a Dalit female writer is not the same. When a non-Dalit woman speaks for Dalit women is different and when a Dalit woman speaks for herself and her community is different. Only a Dalit woman can raise the voice of oppression because she has given language to her own suffering. By reason of their caste, gender and their low economic status, Dalit women remain one of the most marginalised groups and often misrepresented by upper caste male writers, Dalit male writers and upper caste woman writers. We can say that a Dalit woman is a Dalit among Dalits.

Male Dalit writers are not able to present real life of woman of their own community and they consider Dalit woman more democratic. The ideas of few writers and critics like Kancha Illaih and Gabriel Dietrich suggests that Dalit woman has more accessibility than upper caste woman. The more pity is that when a Dalit woman writes for herself male Dalit writers fail again to give them their due place as a Dalit women writer. Patriarchy exists at every level, as Gopal Guru states "Dalit male writers do not take serious note of the literary output of Dalit women and tend to be dismissive of it" (Guru 83). Therefore Dalit woman writers need to write for her own "self" because she is "different".

In this paper I would be focusing on two novels, *The Grip of Change* by P. Sivakami and *Children of God* by Shanta Rameshwar Rao. Both novels have Dalit woman as central character who are suffering from double marginalization.

The Grip of Change is written by a Dalit woman writer whereas *Children of God* is by a non-Dalit upper caste woman. Being written by woman's point of view and writing about the same idea, these novels are giving contrast to each other. The possible reason could be caste of the authors. These novels show how a Dalit woman is "different".

First I will be discussing about *Children of God*. This novel was published in 1976 but the plan of writing this novel was, as written by the author, in her mind from decades. She started writing this novel in 1954 and she took more than twenty years to pen down the real sufferings of Dalit community. This novel is based on her observations of Dalit life since her childhood. She believes that through imaginary characters she is telling the stories of thousands Dalit women and their families.

Rao has written this novel not merely as story about Dalit community and their sufferings rather it is her own story, as she states in the introduction of the novel, that when she worked at the book, she realized that it was her story of her growing up which she was struggling to tell (Rao i). So we can say that the novel is more about her vision of Dalit life and her ways of analysis of the life of Dalit communities. Rao agrees that the time has changed but she seems to believe that the issues of untouchability is so deeply rooted in Indian minds that "in spite of all the changes the central issue remained unchanged" and "it has assumed new dimensions and contours". Her novel deals with the same idea that the notion of untouchability is still prevalent.

In this paper I would try to find out how far Shanta Rameshwar Rao's *Children of God* can be consider a novel of Dalit literature and further I will be analyzing her ways of presenting Dalit characters and their life. I will also try to work on the idea of 'oneness' she claims to feel and lived, in the introduction, with the Dalit community.

Children of God is narrated by a Dalit woman, Lakshmi, an untouchable whose son was burnt alive because he was trying to enter in a Hindu temple. The novel is set in post independence era and after twenty five years of independence the situations of Dalits and their community is same.

After the scene of mourning on the death of Kittu, the novel shifts to her own childhood. She states "I too struggled in my own way to free myself from the pattern of my untouchable existence" (Rao 9). But the portrayal of her struggle by Rao seems as superficial as she is always reluctant to move forward and her main concern was the infatuation she has for a Brahmin leader named Acharya who worked for the equality by defending Gandhian agenda of Ram Rajya.

The novel also deals with patriarchy and the violence done to Dalit women by the men of their own caste. These women of Dalit community earn wages equal to their husbands and still they face violence and beatings. Lakshmi's father beats her mother every day and she bears everything in silence believing it to be part of her destiny. But again her father's cruelty is described in very sympathetic overtones as Lakshmi says, "he was like a tiger but inside him there is fear and confusion. He spent his fury upon his wife and children" (Rao 19). Neither Lakshmi nor her mother challenge the violence done to them by their father rather there is a silent acceptance of all the evil practices. Rao describes the hungry family of Lakshmi as strange insects rather than human creatures. But they never

fought with the situations and accept the 'liquor habit' of their father as their daily routine.

There is one incident in the novel which attracts special attention. A boy was walking with his mother and just for the sake of amusement he wanted to touch Lakshmi, an untouchable. His mother scolds him but he finds that idea so experimenting that he wants to do it but this fun incident was like a sinful threat to Lakshmi and at any cost she didn't want him to touch her otherwise the boy would get polluted. She begged her not to touch, "stay back Swami, we are cleaners of human filth; we are untouchables, our touch is unclean; our shadow will bring pollution" (Rao 21). This incident focuses on a certain kind of acceptance of untouchability she faced since her childhood. She says "the anger of the caste woman seems right and natural" (Rao 22). This incident throws light on the portrayal of untouchables accepting their fate silently.

Throughout the novel, through the character of Lakshmi, Rao seems to accept all the caste based notions. Her protagonist is not a brave challenging woman rather a Dalit woman who silently accepts everything by considering it as her destiny as she puts "from destiny and one's karma I knew there was no escape" (Rao 23). Later, when she was thinking about Kittu she said. "All is fate, and no one can cheat fate or escape destiny. But to die as boy Kittu did- was it some sin he has committed in previous life? Or some fearful things that I had done in some unremembered existence" (Rao 126). Lakshmi believes since her childhood that no one of untouchables should transgress and it is a sin, she admits that her son tried to transgress so they sent her to death. In the novel, untouchables felt thankful for the leavings thrown to us on the name of religion. Main character of the novel is a silent heroine who not only finds difficult to fight rather who do not want to fight at all.

The main concern of the heroine of the novel was to keep her engaged in the thoughts of Acharya. He taught her to read and write but her main interest lies in worshipping the glorious beauty of her master. When he was on fast for the untouchable's equality, her main concern was not to uplift the society and bring change instead she was more worried for his health. She never wanted change rather she was well aware of her existence and the whole community considers their caste as fruits of sin of past lives.

The character of Boda requires special attention as he is portrayed as the one who wanted equality by breaking the chains of untouchability. He wanted to be equal; he is the only rebellious character of the novel. Kittu might be rebellious in nature but Rao didn't allow us to look at his youth life we are introduced to him when he was dead. The rebellious nature of Boda, brother of Lakshmi did not go for too long as at the end of the novel he accepts that he cannot break these chains. He admits that caste of an untouchable cannot remain hidden for long. He tried to live in the city by hiding his caste but it was of no use. When he started believing that all are equal in cities and caste system is limited to villages only and now he can start his marital life freely without taking caste in consideration, his all dreams shattered and he found himself again chained in the rope of caste system. Boda, the only rebellious character was crying to run back to his village and constantly saying to himself, "run back to be called untouchable, run back to the scavengers existence" (Rao 125).

The ending of the novel is very interesting. End of the novel focuses on the temple entry movement of Harijans led by

Gandhi. The deity was misplaced from the temple and high priest has a dream that deity is in colony of untouchables. So the priest visits to untouchable's colony to find the God. Ironically, in the end of the novel God himself appears to tell the folk that untouchables are my real children and I am their God. The priest, after hearing it went back to temple and keep on praying to the idols and chanting mantras. Does the 'surrender' made by God bring equality? The novel ends where it starts untouchables are not allowed to be equal or think about this. In the temple mantras were going on and outside Kittu was burnt alive and his mother was still questioning herself what horrible sin she or the son had committed in their past. The untouchables are depicted as submissive in Rao's novel.

The novel, *The Grip of Change*, centers on the idea of interconnectedness of both caste and gender. As she puts in the preface of the novel, "*A Grip of Change*, is a process of understanding the dynamics of caste and the 'woman' who was inextricably involved in the process" (Sivakami vii).

The novel revolves around the character of a lower caste Parayar woman, named Thangam. Among the Dalits she is more marginalized than other as she is a woman and moreover she is a childless widow. The novel opens where she reaches to Kathamuthu's house in the midnight for justice in badly beaten critical situation. Thangam is a widow in the novel whose relatives betrayed her after the death of her husband, so she is working in the plantation of a higher caste man named Udayar. It is his routine to exploit her sexually. She is beautiful, even her badly beaten swollen face was attractive, as described by the narrator. Thangam is mercilessly beaten up by Udayar's wife and her brother because they had doubt that Thangam is concubine of Udayar.

Sivakami has done a successful portrayal of Dalit woman; she has shown the double marginalization of a woman in Tamil society. Thangam suffered beating near to death and sexual exploitation by the people of higher caste but the people of her own caste were not the less. Initially, they also treats her badly and claimed that, "nobody would have assaulted you like that unless you have done something first" (Sivakami 6). Kathamuthu, the leader to whom she approaches for justice, tells her that her main fault is choosing a man of upper caste to enjoy physical relationship. For him, she is not a victim rather only a lady who has committed adultery. He comments on her, "Do not you like our chaps?" (Sivakami 7). Her own relatives, after the death of her husband, are looking at the chance of winning her physically. These events of the novel throw light on the double marginalization of a Dalit woman. Thangam symbolizes all Dalit women who suffer because of their gender and caste and these women are always forced to silent themselves but in the novel reverse is the case.

In the novel we not only see the brutal portrayal of Dalit community and their backdrops, unlike Rao's novel, there is also a demand of justice and equality. As the title signifies the story is about a change in the community, change in their idea to bring equality. The novel starts with her arrival to Kathamuthu's house for justice. She wants those four men to be jailed. Kathamuthu helps her in taking justice but he uses all the compensation money she gets from Udayar moreover a close reading of the text suggests that he even tried to exploit her physically. It is interesting to note that there is no acceptance of such things; they were critically challenged by Kathamuthu's daughter Gowri. The portrayal

of Gowri and her depictions of her father and her family presented a new generation who wanted change. In later part of the novel Gowri rejected all notions of Dalit patriarchy and becomes an independent educated woman.

A Grip of Change focuses on bringing equality. Sivakami worked on the idea of transgression. The community who were against Thangam supported her and helped her in achieving justice. Thus the novel ends with whole transformation of the society and a new way to look after the world.

Both novels are set in the villages of South India where caste system is still prevalent as in villages segregation on the basis of caste is more visible in comparison of metropolitan cities. Both the novels have Dalit heroines, portrayed as victim of caste. The heroine of Rao's novel is a submissive lady who never challenges the norms made by the society and accepts everything as part of her destiny whereas the heroine of Sivakami's novel is more physically brutalized and still strong to seek justice. Rao's characters in the novel seem to accept all norms of caste silently and they are helpless to bring change. They are reluctant to challenge the caste based society. On the other hand the characters portrayed by Sivakami are more challenging and determined to bring change.

Now, I will try to find out how these two novels are different from each other. The idea of inter-caste marriage a remedy to get rid of the disease of untouchability was suggested by Dr. Ambedkar in his work 'Annihilation of Caste'. As he states, "I am convinced that real remedy is inter-marriage. Fusion of blood can alone create the feeling of being kith and kin" (Ambedkar 289). In this way, for him, the feeling of alienation created by Brahmins can only be removed by inter-caste marriage. Now shifting back to the novels of this paper, in both the novels we have characters that fall in love without taking caste in consideration. It is interesting to note that in Rao's novel the character of Boda falls in love with Ganga, an upper caste girl. For even thinking in such a way he was brutally abused by Ganga's brother and Boda. In Sivakami's novel the character of Elangovan, a lower caste man falls in love with Lalitha, an upper caste girl. They did not submit to the society. They marry despite the differences in their caste. So the Dr. Ambedkar's idea of bringing equality by the fusion of blood is powerfully emerged in Sivakami's novel and in Rao's novel this idea seems impossible to achieve. Sivakami has portrayed inter-caste love relationship with emotions which ended with the marriage of the couple. In this way Sivakami's novel presents idea to change whereas Rao's novel presents the idea with shows that even after twenty five years of independence caste system remained unchanged. Inter-caste marriage was not possible in Rao's novel.

Both novels are not fixed to one generation. They narrate story of different generations and how patriarchy and caste affect their ideas of living. In Rao's novel Lakshmi's mother submits, she herself accepts the order, Boda tried but failed and Kittu tried but killed. In this way there is no ray of hope. On the other hand the generations presented by Sivakami are revolutionary in nature. Kathamuthu, the Dalit leader in spite of being, self-centred and a bit hypocrite, is against the evils of caste system and his main concern is to work for justice for lower caste people. The new generation of Sivakami's novel is more revolutionary and determined in nature. Gowri, Chandran, Lalitha, Elangovan, all want

change. Gowri, who witnesses all evil practices of caste and gender, becomes a PhD holder who does not want to marry as she has seen the sufferings of ladies in her family and does not want to be victim of patriarchy. Chandran, who has seen the sufferings and inequalities, marry with the promise that he will always keep his wife equal to him. Lalitha and Elangovan despite so many arguments over caste of each other married happily. Thus here generations are not submissive in nature instead making changes.

In Rao's novel there is a young girl, Savitri, Ganga's niece. She was injured during the riots and Boda takes care of her, but when she gets to know about the caste of Boda by her mother she starts abusing him and she is strictly told by her mother not to touch him. In this way untouchability is deeply ingrained in the minds of new generation too and thus there is no hope of revolution. Whereas, in Sivakami's novel, when Gowri was a young girl, she witnessed all the evils of patriarchy in her own house and therefore her mother did not teach her to maintain the system rather she was highly proud of her when she makes changes in the system by not submitting herself to patriarchy. Another character Chandran too, when he grew up, becomes a revolutionary leader of the union who works for the upliftment instead of submitting to the hypocrisy of the caste based society. Thus the roots of caste system are flourishing in Rao's novel and there is no hope of change whereas in Sivakami's novel those roots are spoiled and the society now demands equality.

Acharya, the reformer in the novel was a follower of Gandhi and advises Dalits to follow steps of Gandhi. Lakshmi becomes the follower of Gandhi and Acharya as she says, "I came under the spell, as if possessed by the Goddess" (Rao 152). So the author seems to follow Gandhian ideas of equality.

The role of Dr. Ambedkar is central to Dalit consciousness. Gandhian terms of bringing equality were never accepted by Dr. Ambedkar. His three major works *Mr. Gandhi and the Emancipation of the Untouchables*, 'Ranade, Gandhi and Jinnah' and *What Congress and Gandhi have done to the Untouchables* bear witness to it. He also believes that before the Swaraj, a Gandhian concept, Indians need to fight within the nation for equality (Ambedkar 305). Dr. Ambedkar was not in favour of Ram Rajya too. In his work, *Gandhism*, he states that Gandhian ideas were perpetuating hierarchy instead of equality. For him, Gandhism is nothing but another name of Hinduism. According to Dr. Ambedkar, Mr. Gandhi's anti-untouchability means that the Untouchables will be classed as Shudras and nothing more to it (Ambedkar 169). Gandhi gave new name to untouchables, 'Harijans' and the title of Rao's novel is also the same. Rao also seems to believe that untouchables are children of God and here again she seems to follow Gandhian norms. Whereas Dr. Ambedkar believes that calling untouchables as Harijan will serve no purpose in bringing equality rather it has a political implications, according to him by doing this Gandhi has "killed two birds with one stone" (Ambedkar 169). It seems that Rao's novel is obeying Gandhian ideas of equality and for Dr. Ambedkar, Gandhian agendas were only focussed on sustaining caste hierarchy in the society.

Thus, Rao's *Children of God* ends where God himself appears to call untouchables his children but that does not change the hypocrisy of the caste system whereas Sivakami's *The Grip of Change* ends with the revolution, here new generation bring changes to the society. It seems

to focus on the ideas bring by Dalit writers that only they can voice their agony and sufferings. A non-Dalit writer can only be sympathetic to Dalits. It is true that one need to have Dalit experience to write Dalit literature but at the same time we can say that sensibility is also pre-required to maintain the authenticity of a literary work. Therefore a genuine piece of Dalit literature not only required experience but also sensibility of Dalit consciousness.

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