

The Paradox of ‘Patriarchal Democracy’: Seeing through the Lens of *The Grip Of Change* by PalanimuthuSivakami

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Abstract-In a country like India, patriarchy and democracy are two very viable concepts. Patriarchy meaning ‘rule of the father’ and democracy meaning ‘rule by the people’ are paradoxical terms at the very fundamental level. Patriarchy being a social concept and democracy being a political concept, both of their primary domains are also different. They Critics have given different names to patriarchy, such as ‘discreet patriarchy’, ‘overlapping patriarchy’, ‘dalit patriarchy’ in order to denote the nature of gender relations and terms of socialization. These two concepts are hardly used together in the context of Indian feminism. Though there are some Dalit critics who have postulated a new theory called patriarchal democracy in the context of Dalit bahun household or family and community setting. This paper is an attempt to understand their problematic relationship between these paradox of patriarchal democracy and it also probes into the viability of this theory in context to Dalit women in the light of Dalit feminism with reference to *The Grip of Change*, a semiautobiographical novel of PalanimuthuSivakami

Key words-patriarchy, democracy, Dalit, women, feminist, family, household, caste, society

The concepts of patriarchy and democracy are not usually discussed together because of their contrary natures. Patriarchy being an analytic concept attracted the attention of the feminist critics more than any other critics belonging to other fields. Though second wave feminists especially, feminist democratic theorists considered the concept of democracy more appropriate than patriarchy and discussed both the concepts together in view of the differences between women, but in the context of India these two concepts are rarely discussed together. The most prominent use of these paradoxical concepts has been made by Kanchalliah Shepherd in his book *Why I am not a Hindu* while arguing about the absence of the notion of ‘private’ in Dalit bahun family [1]. He emphasizes on the difference of the sufferings between non- Dalit women and Dalit women on the basis of this lack of ‘private’. This paper scrutinizes the sufferings or the real life experience of Dalit women as voiced by them to understand the viability of this paradoxical concept of ‘patriarchal democracy’ in the light of Dalit feminism with reference to *The Grip of Change (2006)*, a semi-autobiographical novel by PalanimuthuSivakami.

Patriarchy and Democracy are two contradictory concepts. Firstly these two concepts are to be understood and then one should judge whether 'patriarchal democracy' is a viable concept with respect to Dalit women or not. For a historian or for a social scientist 'patriarchy' means 'rule of the father' and particular time specific or place specific descriptive documents but for a feminist 'patriarchy' is a systematic subordination and oppression of women by men. Iliah probably does not want to be as rigid as the feminists in using the term patriarchy. He has clearly pointed out the intractable tendency of the feminists in using this term. Talking about the second concept 'democracy', it is exclusively a political concept. According to Encyclopedia Britannica, 'democracy' literally means 'rule by the people'. The term is derived from the Greek 'democratia' which was coined from *demos* ("people") and *kratos* ("rule") in the middle of the 5th century BCE to denote the political systems then existing in some Greek city-states notably Athens [2]. The postulation of a new concept 'patriarchal democracy' by the apposition of these two contradictory concepts, i.e. 'rule of father' or patriarchy and 'rule by the people' or democracy certainly needs to be probed in context to Dalit women.

The narrative of Dalit women being their first-hand experience of life depicts the crushed down condition of their life more truthfully than any other narrative. Though P. Sivakami's novel *The Grip of Change* can be read as a record of Dalit people, especially those living in rural parts being ostracized in different parts of the country, it has also been given a voice of protest to Dalit women and, there by helps to understand how much this concept of 'patriarchal democracy' is viable. The novel, based on Sivakami's own life is divided in two parts; Book I and Book II. Book I is the story of Thangam, a Dalit woman and her struggle to survive in a graded patriarchal society. Book II is the sequel of Book I where the author provides the logic for writing the first part of the novel.

Untouchability is an integral part of the Hindu caste system in India. According to the Hindu social mandate formulated by brahmanas, people who are at the bottom most position of the caste order are categorized as untouchables. They are not simply a category in the caste ladder, but are literally segregated from the larger section of the society. They are considered inauspicious and polluting elements. Untouchability has a completely different and intricate take on Dalit women because untouchability evokes various notions and images of body that are marked by their caste, gender, class, age, sexual orientation and other identities [3]. Thangam, the Paraya widow is the proof that in the graded hierarchy of Hindu society women fall at the bottom most position. The power structure which exists in the society regulates women. Thangam is the example that Dalit women get regulated not only by their lower position of caste but also because they are weaker gender. Besides the protagonist of the novel other female characters are equally subject to marginalization. Unlike the upper-caste women Dalit women are seen giving their labour both at

home and outside home. Contemporary Dalit feminists addressing this issue argue that Dalit women are considered as means of both production and reproduction. This is where Iliah locates an element of democracy, which, he argues, provides Dalit women more authority over marriage and sexuality unlike non-Dalit or brahmin women. But, one should not forget to look into the other side of the coin. They are means of production by compulsion, not by choice. They contribute equally with their male counterparts to run the household but in failure get physically, emotionally and sexually assaulted.

But, in Part -1 of the novel, Thangam, a young Dalit widow is subjected to exploitation not only at the hands of upper-caste men but also at the hands of the community leader, Kathamuthu. Being a widow of her husband, Kaipillai, she has the rightful right over her husband's property. But she did not even get the legal right on her husband's land as she had no children. It gives rise to the issue of property right of Dalit women. She was not only inhumanly treated by her in laws but also maligned by them as her landlord's concubine. She becomes a "downtrodden among the downtrodden" [4]. She on the accusation of being a concubine of an upper-caste man was ejected from her husband's land only with the purpose of grabbing her land. This is not in any way a lesser crime than evicting a woman from her property by using the tactic of witch hunt. The lack of democratic power compels her take refuge to the community leader. But again, the community leader, Kathamathu her apparent saviour exploits her sexually in his supposed to be democratic household. Unfortunately, in this democracy, only the 'ruler' speaks, not the 'people'. The community public meetings are held to give justice but that is only a policy of eyewash to give it a look of democracy. The money the woman gets as a compensation of harm done to her was taken away and consumed by the leader himself. The politics of power relation is so intricate that she did not even feel the need to protest against the community leader, whereas she was seen to complain and protest when she was victimized by upper caste men and women. There is no scope of contention or debate here as claimed by democracy. In this politics of patriarchy, democracy becomes a mock-democracy. To understand this politics of patriarchy one needs to evaluate intricacy of the whole framework in terms of power relations.

The novel gives a very close picture of Dalit household. Kathamuthu, the leader, the "saviour! sami" [5] of the Dalit community who is fighting to save his community people from the exploitation and marginalization himself comes out as an exploiter and oppressor of women in his own family. The man who is safeguarding the people of his own community himself becomes an agent of the brahmanical patriarchy; he is fighting for his community but is unleashing the same patriarchal behaviour on the women. He humiliated Thangam by saying very subtly that she should have preferred community male instead of upper caste male for her cardinal desire. His crude remark has definitely an undertone of gender bias defining the sexual preference of a woman. Hearing the saga of Thangam, the first thing that strikes Kathamuthu is that

the man associated with the incident of Thangam is an upper caste man, as if the guilt would be lesser if he was a community male. The gender perspective becomes shadowed by the caste perspective in the community. He tried to project the rape as an attack on caste pride only. On the other hand, Paranjothi Udayar, the upper caste man in whose farm Thangam used to work for earning her livelihood after her husband's death took her granted as an easily available object to satisfy his sexual desire. Kathamuthu's pre-conceived notion that it was Thangam who was after upper caste men in place of the community men is very much patriarchal at its core. He says, "...why didn't you go after someone of our caste? It's because you chose that upper caste fellow, that four men could come and righteously beat you up. don't you like our chaps?"[6].

It shows his sheer disrespect for the women. The myth of democracy in terms of sexuality and marriage in Dalit household is revealed when he himself admitted that what is permissible for him is not permissible for Thangam. No one can question him according to him. But her case is different. This attitude of Kathamuthu indicates that he believes in the sexual freedom of men and sexual servility of women. Very interestingly and contrarily, the upper-caste women leading the feminist movement believe that Dalit women enjoy more sexual freedom than upper-caste women. They overlook caste as the cause of their sexual vulnerability [7]. Thangam or any other woman in Kathamuthu's household does not enjoy any authority over their sexuality or marriage. Within the household she becomes an object of sexual gratification of her savior which she probably believes is a way of paying her gratitude to her saviour, the community leader. Being a Dalit leader he never hesitates to fight for his community with manipulative actions or talks. His idea of women is no different from upper-caste men. He fights for the justice of Thangam only because she is from Dalit community otherwise no one could reason out his behaviour towards Thangam. He satisfies his carnal desire by exploiting her sexually even after having two wives. Kanagavalli, Nagamani and later Thangam are compelled by their situation to digest Kathamuthu's dominance and exploitation but his own daughter Gowri becomes the voice of protest for all kind of marginalization and subjugation.

By introducing the character of Gowri Sivakami gives voice to Dalit women scrutinizing the whole Dalit community inside and outside. She being the mouthpiece of the author very minutely explores the mechanism of Dalit family, Dalit community and the society beyond the community. This character realistically criticizes the patriarchy within the Dalit household and community as an imitation of brahmanical patriarchy. Kathamuthu and his daughter Gowri share a strange kind of relationship. Gowri brings out the vulnerability and insecurity of Dalit women, both in public life and private life and there by challenges the notion of the lack of 'private'. She, being a witness of her own father's sexual violence and dictatorial attitude loses her childhood innocence. She asks herself, "I belong to the same caste as that woman. How can I be sure that I won't be beaten black and blue like her?....terror is sleeping on a mat in my house" [8]. Gowri becomes

the symbol of “emancipatory modernity” [9]disdaining her father’s lecherousness and rudeness. He is polygamous, a drunker and a wife beater. “Kathamuthu sometimes hit Nagamani so hard that she had to lie down for days together, unable to eat or drink” [10]. She like her mother and step mother cannot digest his unjust action and behavior to others.

By exploring other unique Hindu upper caste problems, like child marriage,the novel authenticates that the patriarchy in Dalit community is just another version of brahmanical patriarchy. All the brahmanical patriarchal features, often termed as the ‘manuvadisanskriti’ are very much present in the Dalit households. Kanagavallis’ reminiscenceabout her marriage at a very early age suggests that child marriage is not only a unique problem in Hindu upper-caste family. Dalit community has internalized the brahmanical patriarchy and learns to accept male polygamy, child marriage as something very natural.Kathamuthu’s treatment of Thangam is nothing but the regeneration of that brahmanical patriarchy of which he or the whole Dalit community becomes subjected to. According to Gopal Guru Dalit men are reproducing the same mechanisms against their women which their high caste adversaries had used to dominate them [11].Like upper-caste Kamalam, Dalit Kangavalli also in this process becomes both the sufferer and upholder of brahmanical patriarchy at the same time. Naturally Dalit women are exposed to multiple forms of exploitation both at the hands of upper caste people and community people.They face both caste discrimination and gender discrimination. No where they get justice most of the time. Caste location makes them vulnerable to exploitation in public and gender location makes them vulnerable in both public and private. All three women in Kathamuthu’s household live together under the rule and dictatorship of male authority or power. The Kathamuthu household projects a democracy apparently giving women the freedom over marriage and sexuality under the shade of invisible patriarchy. He is like a lord in his family dominating each and every member of the family.The practice of discrimination in the graded system of caste society engenders the women existing at the bottom most level. There lies the importance of Dalit women’s talking differently.

MeenaKandasamy one of the famous Dalit feminist activist and writer in her article “ And one shall live in two...” in the appendix of the novel views that “Thangam’s body bears the testimony to the difficulties faced by Dalit women.....a major defining part of the novel was entirely played out on the Dalit woman Thangam’s body”[12]. Kathamuthu as a local Dalit leader and ex-panachayet member gets respect by the community people.They depend on him for any kind of injustice done to them but Kathamuthu like any Hindu upper-caste man dominates the women of the house. A close observation of his character and the other characters around him provides a realistic picture of patriarchy working within the community. Thangam’s body becomes the symbol of each of that Dalit woman surviving at the mercy of other people. Moreover, being a widow she becomes surplus in the society and the portrayal of her character gives a sense that society

permits any kind of violation on her body, anyone can get access of her body as if it is a public territory. This depiction is strongly contrasting with the idea of upper- caste women whose body is never to be infringed. Where an upper caste Hindu widow Nagamani could be brought within the family fold given the position of a wife, a Dalit widow could not be even allowed an acceptable place or social relationship though she can be consumed sexually. It clearly indicates that brahmanical patriarchy in its effort to maintain caste purity not only limits the sexuality of caste Hindu women but also restricts Dalit women from coming outside the boundary of household or family. Bhattacharya observation is worth mentioning here. He argues that often a hierarchy is created among the victimized women in a household. It can cause the re-entrenchment of patriarchy as the more privileged female member of the household may function as the surrogate and often violent agent of male hegemony and control [13].

The portrayal of all the female characters foregrounds the standpoint of Dalit feminism that like feminism, Dalitism also lacks force and focus to emancipate Dalit women from all kinds of exploitation and oppression. Whatever Kathamuthu does, it is out of concern for the community paying little heed to Thangam, as a victim. Sivakami has become critical of several Dalit customs and conventions, for example when all the members of the family including her mother were drunk Gowri abhorred their behavior saying that “People are starving for food.And here, you drink and startcrying” [14].For her drinking is nothing but a loathsome luxury. To talk about democracy in Dalit household, this is probably the only democratic behaviour the women are seen enjoying, the power of being drunk.Gowri is seen as intolerant about her father’s exploitation of Thangam and bursted out in shame and anger,” dogs! Dogs in this house! Shameless as dogs” [15].With the light of education she has been able to realize that behind the oppression and subjugation of Dalit women the twin curses of caste and gender are operative at the same time. All the three women in her life and family made her detestable regarding the institution marriage. Kathamuthu used to humiliate her in front of visitors addressing her as “donkey” and expressing zero faith regarding her education. Gowri slowly regresses herself and identifies marriage as a trap where patriarchy is at its best. She raises questions about this age old custom marriage in respect to the emancipation of Dalit women as it becomes an agent of patriarchy within the family fold. There is no trace of democracy in this patriarchal institution marriage.

To conclude,it is found that Dalit family setup is extremely patriarchal and the gender and power relation does not support the view of some Dalit critics like Iliah as more egalitarian than upper caste household.The horror of sexual harassment is evident both in family and outside the family.The oppression of Dalit women in public and private is supported by the framework of brahmanical patriarchy. Geetha argues that the oppression of Dalit women in family and society are ‘mutually influential’ [16]. The very structure of brahmanical patriarchy is built on the subordination of women as Geetha points out the freedom that women

seek for themselves could and does destabilize these institutions [16].” So, the emancipation of Dalit women becomes more intricate because their assertions are entwined with the basic structure and arrangements of Hindu society. Dalit men act as an active protocol in the sustenance of brahmanic hegemony and the logic of Dalit women being rebellious or attacker on their abusive partners or family members does not invest Dalit household with the quality of being democratic. So, ‘patriarchal democracy’ is just another dimension of brahmanic hegemony. Multitude of violence in their lives prove that inequality is very much implanted in oppressive structures of family ideology [17] which disgraces their self-respect and position in the society and at the same time cannot be democratic in the true sense of the term.

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