

# **The Twice “Broken” Selves of Dalit Women: A Study of Select Novels of M.**

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The Dalit subjectivity occupies a position of disadvantage in the highly mythologised history of India. Dalit is a word coined from the Sanskrit word ‘Dal’ meaning ‘split’ or ‘broken’. initially the word dalit was used to refer to the ‘oppressed’ in general, including women. The Dalit movement, thus considered women of even the highest castes as Dalits. The Dalit woman belongs to a unique historical category, undergoing two fold oppression- from the men of her own caste and from the higher castes.

This project raises questions of authorship and authenticity in Dalit feminist texts. The study focusses on two texts, P. Sivakami’s *The Grip of Change* and M. Mukundan’s *Oru Dalit YuvathiyudeKadanakatha*. A comparative approach with emphasis on construction of authorship in these two texts is adopted for analysis. Sivakami’s text which is autobiographical is juxtaposed with Mukundan’s work which approaches the subject from a thrice removed perspective.

The notions of ‘originality’ of the text and experience are questioned through the selection of authors. Mukundan’s novels *Oru Dalit YuvathiyudeKadana Katha* and *Pulayapattu* explore hitherto unseen vicissitudes of Dalit femininity without having these experiences first hand. P.Sivakami is a cult figure in Tamil Dalit writing with her novels exploring the subjectivity of the Dalit woman from an autobiographical perspective. Her works *The Grip Of Change* and *Author’s Notes: Gowri*, declare how the dalit woman is not spared the shackles of her caste despite being educated and employed.

Caste is an inescapable reality in most aspects of life in India. It sometimes puts on the garb of culture and mislead unsuspecting victims into a vicarious practice of caste. Chris Fuller calls this ‘ethnicization of caste’. This is the identification of caste as culture, ranging from practices like

marriage rituals to food habits. 'Caste Pride' still has positive undertones in India, oblivious of the social differentiation it creates. Thus ethnicization of caste creates an 'ethnic spectre of caste' haunting the society.

The first core chapter gives a historical perspective on the relationship between gender and caste. It also analyses works of major women writers as well as Dalit women writers. The second core chapter analyses autobiographical traditions in the west and in India. The practically non-existent genre of women's autobiography is explored in detail and Dalit women's autobiographies are studied. The difficulties faced by Dalit women in educating and expressing themselves are analysed in detail. The third core chapter is an in-depth study of the two novels selected in correspondence with the themes chosen for the project. Questions of authorship, gender and regional identity with respect to Dalit consciousness is discussed in detail.

When juxtaposed with M. Mukundan's *Oru Dalit Yuvathiyude Kadanakatha*, the *The Grip of Change* is more inward looking on the role of the author. Mukundan's text is selected on the basis of its choice of a theme and its treatment. Mukundan, a male, upper-caste author chooses to write the story of Bhagavanthi a Dalit woman and through her Vasundhara, the actor who enacts Bhagavanthi. The book is analysed from the perspective of authorship interfering with the narration of the story, a problem often encountered in Dalit literature. The author is questioning the notion of anticipating certain themes from certain authors especially women authors. To conclude, I leave the final word to the character/author herself. Sivakami writes in the Preface to *The Grip of Change*

"What have I understood?

That it is natural for me as a Dalit and a woman- factors decided by birth- to write about those factors. And thereby I firmly place myself within a circle, influencing the politics surrounding those factors" (*The Grip of Change*, 15)

Thus Dalit women's predicament can be improved only by the women themselves embracing their identity and voicing their concerns. This study is an attempt to resonate more of such voices in the margins.