

Dalit Women's Narratives of Caste, Resistance and Empowerment in Sivakami and Gidla

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Abstract: The caste system in India has traditionally generated intricate frameworks of social inequity, exclusion, and discrimination. Dalit women within marginalised communities endure many types of oppression resulting from the interaction of caste, gender, class, and social status. This research paper conducts a comparative analysis of P. Sivakami's *The Grip of Change* and Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants* to investigate the portrayal of caste, intersectionality, and empowerment within Dalit narratives. Sivakami's work examines the lives of Dalit women inside rural caste systems, emphasising their challenges against social exploitation and patriarchal oppression. Gidla's book offers a multi-generational narrative of a Dalit Christian family and explores the persistent impact of caste despite political, social, and religious changes. This research uses Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality paradigm to examine the interplay of caste, gender, religion, and class in shaping marginalised identities. The comparative research indicates that Sivakami prioritises individual resistance and the challenge of patriarchal institutions within Dalit communities, whereas Gidla highlights education, political knowledge, and collective resistance as means to empowerment. Both writings contest prevailing narratives by amplifying marginalised realities and illustrate the function of Dalit literature in interrogating societal injustices.

Index Term: Dalit literature, caste hierarchy, intersectionality, patriarchy, gender inequality, social oppression, empowerment.

I. INTRODUCTION

The caste system has traditionally organised Indian society, establishing hierarchical divides among tribes based on birth and employment. This system relegated Dalits to the lowest tier of the social hierarchy, exposing them to isolation, discrimination, and the deprivation of fundamental human rights. The word "Dalit" denotes groups that have undergone historical oppression and social marginalisation. Despite constitutional reforms and social movements aimed at mitigating caste prejudice, Dalit groups nonetheless face societal inequities in several manifestations. Dalit women occupy a very intricate situation, since their experiences are influenced by both caste prejudice and gender-based oppression. Kimberlé Crenshaw's idea of intersectionality elucidates how several identities converge to form interconnected systems of disadvantage. Crenshaw asserts that social categories like race, gender, and class must be analysed together, since they interact to create distinct experiences of discrimination (Crenshaw 140). In India, caste and gender function concurrently, rendering Dalit women susceptible to various types of marginalisation.

Dalit literature arose as a significant literary movement that contested prevailing depictions of Indian society by articulating the views and experiences of marginalised populations. It converted literature into a vehicle for resistance, identity construction, and social consciousness. Dalit authors underscore lived experience as a significant source of knowledge and expression. P. Sivakami and Sujatha Gidla are prominent figures in this literary genre. Sivakami's *The Grip of Change* depicts the challenges faced by Dalit women through fiction, whereas Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants* provides a personal narrative of caste experiences throughout generations. *The Grip of Change* depicts the life of Thangam, a Dalit widow who endures exploitation stemming from caste and gender disparities. Sivakami elucidates how caste hierarchy and patriarchy mutually reinforce one another via Thangam's experiences. The story interrogates internal disparities among Dalit communities by highlighting the constraints of male-dominated leadership. *Ants Among Elephants* similarly chronicles the experiences of Gidla's family, who are members of the Mala Dalit caste. The narrative examines caste prejudice, religious identity, political movements, and the transformational impact of education (Gidla 15). This study conducts a comparative analysis of both texts to elucidate the mechanisms of caste discrimination and the ways in which Dalit women navigate identification, resistance, and empowerment.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To analyse the depiction of caste prejudice in *The Grip of Change* and *Ants Among Elephants*.
- To examine the significance of intersectionality in comprehending the experiences of Dalit women.
- To investigate the interplay of caste, gender, and social power dynamics.
- To examine various manifestations of empowerment as expressed via resistance, education, and political consciousness.

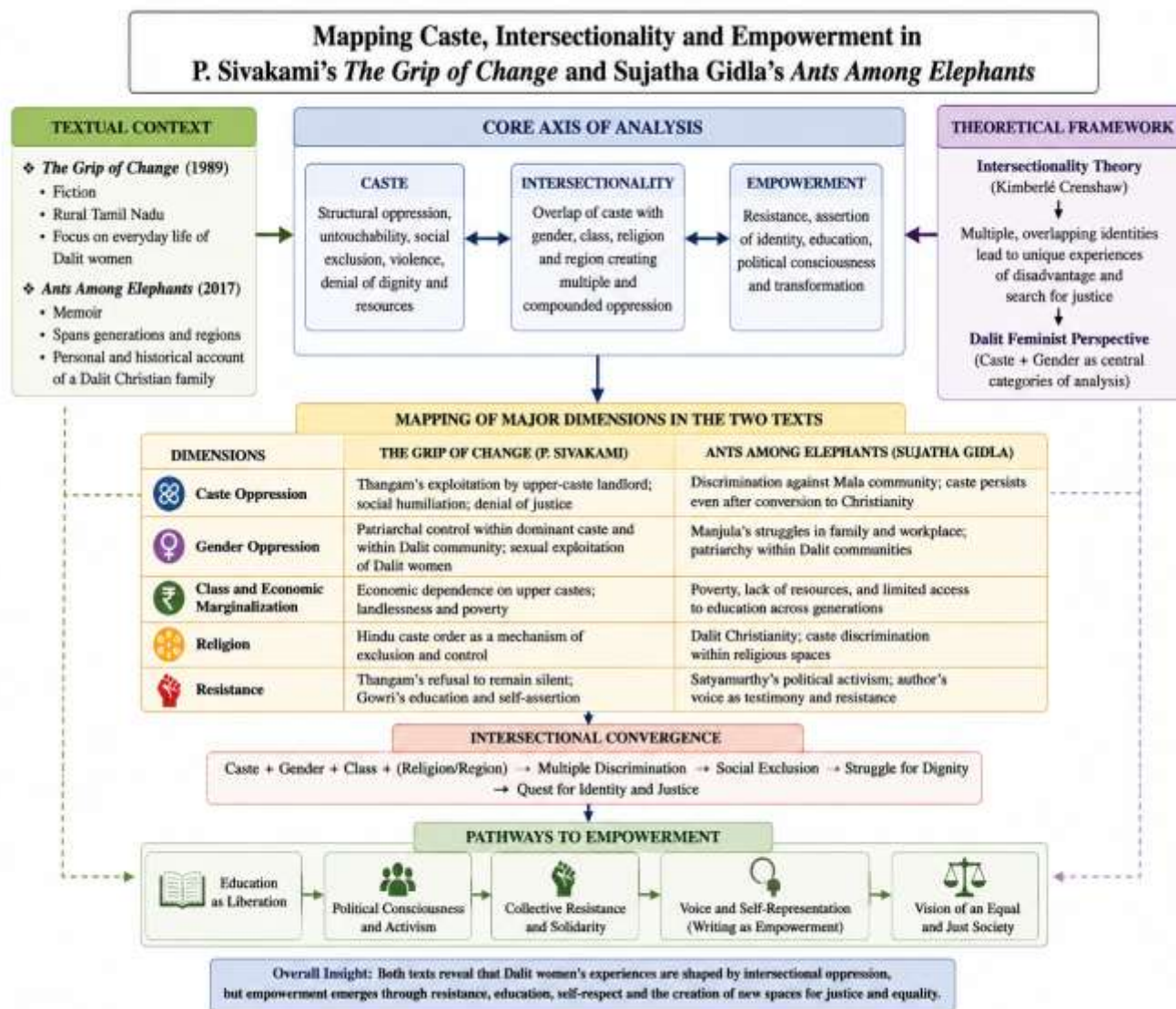


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework for Analysing Caste, Intersectionality and Empowerment in P. Sivakami's *The Grip of Change* and Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants*
Source: Created by the Researcher

III. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Current study on *The Grip of Change* underscores its significance in Dalit feminist discourse. B. Siva Priya contends that Sivakami's work reveals the "double oppression" faced by Dalit women as a result of caste and patriarchy (Siva Priya). The study highlights that Dalit women endure not just upper-caste oppression but also gender-based constraints within their own communities.

D. P. Digole analyses Thangam's experience as a Dalit widow and elucidates how the novel illustrates the interplay between caste systems and patriarchal dominance (Digole). The research emphasises that Sivakami contests conventional depictions of Dalit women by illustrating their quest for dignity and justice.

Aditya Ghosh's examination centers on corporeal politics and regulatory procedures within Dalit women's narratives. He contends that caste functions by exerting control over the bodies and identities of Dalit women (Ghosh). Kalpana Raj similarly examines power hierarchies in the story, elucidating how Sivakami embodies subaltern resistance to prevailing social institutions (Raj).

Research of *Ants Among Elephants* highlights its autobiographical importance in comprehending caste history. Gidla's memoir has been analysed as a narrative that intertwines personal experiences with broader social and political history. The narrative demonstrates that caste persists in shaping identity notwithstanding religious conversion and social mobility (Gidla 89).

While prior studies have analysed each book separately, there is a paucity of research that juxtaposes them within the integrated framework of caste, intersectionality, and empowerment. This research seeks to examine how both authors depict Dalit hardships via various literary styles.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative comparative methodology grounded in textual analysis. The primary texts selected for examination are P. Sivakami's *The Grip of Change* and Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants*. The theoretical framework of

intersectionality is utilised to investigate how caste, gender, class, and religion shape the experiences of Dalit women. Secondary sources, including scholarly articles, critical essays, and theoretical works pertaining to Dalit literature and feminist studies, are incorporated to bolster the analysis. The comparative method facilitates the identification of similarities and differences between Sivakami's fictional portrayal of caste oppression and Gidla's autobiographical account of caste experiences.

V. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

5.1 Caste Representation in P. Sivakami's *The Grip of Change*

P. Sivakami's *The Grip of Change* offers a critical analysis of caste discrimination by highlighting the quotidian experiences of Dalits in rural India. The story depicts caste not only as a social categorisation but as a framework that dictates power dynamics, economic prospects, and individual dignity. Sivakami illustrates via the figure of Thangam how Dalit women are subjected to both caste oppression and patriarchal domination. Thangam, a Dalit widow, faces significant vulnerability following her husband's demise. Her reliance on Paramjothi Udayar, an upper-caste landlord, reveals the relationship between caste and economic authority. The story illustrates how marginalised women are frequently compelled into inequitable partnerships due to economic vulnerability and social ostracism. Sivakami depicts caste discrimination as a systemic force that permeates all facets of Dalit women's existence, encompassing their physicality, work, and identity (Digole).

The exploitation endured by Thangam illustrates the functioning of caste hierarchy through social and physical violence. Her pursuit of justice following violence illustrates the challenges encountered by Dalit women in obtaining social protection. The prevailing caste hierarchies undermine her dignity, while the patriarchal framework constrains her autonomy. Nonetheless, Sivakami confuses the depiction of caste persecution by illustrating disparities within Dalit groups as well. Kathamuthu embodies Dalit leadership and defiance against upper-caste oppression; nonetheless, his handling of women reveals patriarchal perspectives. Consequently, the novel posits that emancipation from caste oppression necessitates confronting gender disparity within marginalised groups (Raj). Sivakami's intricate depiction contests the notion that caste emancipation alone may ensure equality for Dalit women. She underscores the imperative for a movement that acknowledges both caste and gender inequities.

5.2 Caste Representation in Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants*

In contrast to Sivakami's fictional story, Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants* is a memoir grounded on personal and familial events. The narrative chronicles the history of Gidla's Dalit Christian family and elucidates the enduring impact of caste on social ties across generations. The story starts with the stories of Gidla's forefathers from the Mala group, who endured social ostracism and economic persecution. Gidla illustrates that caste inequality extended beyond conventional Hindu frameworks and persisted even following religious conversion. Christianity, despite its promise of equality, did not entirely eradicate caste identity or social inequality (Gidla 30). The memoir contests the notion that modernisation and autonomy eradicated caste discrimination. Gidla elucidates how caste perpetuates disparities in access to school, employment, and social recognition through familial narratives. Her account illustrates that caste is profoundly ingrained in Indian social frameworks. K. G. Satyamurthy embodies opposition to caste oppression via political activity. His participation in revolutionary activities illustrates the connection between caste oppression and social movements. Gidla posits political consciousness as a means by which marginalised populations confront prevailing power systems (Gidla 175). Consequently, although *The Grip of Change* predominantly addresses caste discrimination in village culture, *Ants Among Elephants* broadens the discourse to encompass governmental institutions, religious contexts, and educational frameworks.

VI. INTERSECTIONALITY AND DALIT WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES

6.1 Intersectionality in *The Grip of Change*

Intersectionality is fundamental to comprehending the experiences of female characters in *The Grip of Change*. Thangam's persecution cannot be solely attributed to caste, as her identity as a woman introduces more dimensions of vulnerability. Crenshaw contends that marginalised persons frequently encounter intersecting systems of discrimination, wherein several identities converge to create distinct types of oppression (Crenshaw 140). Thangam endures discrimination due to her identity as both a Dalit and a woman. Her caste status relegates her to the periphery of society, while patriarchy constrains her autonomy and decision-making authority. Sivakami's portrayal of Thangam contradicts the conventional perception of Dalit conflicts by emphasising the significance of women in caste politics. The novel posits that Dalit liberation organisations should acknowledge women's perspectives instead of just concentrating on caste identity. The figure of Gowri offers a distinct portrayal of Dalit femininity. In contrast to Thangam, Gowri embodies education, autonomy, and self-awareness. She interrogates patriarchal norms and contemplates the emergence of a novel Dalit feminist identity (Sivakami 120).

6.2 Intersectionality in *Ants Among Elephants*

Gidla's story offers an expansive perspective on intersectionality by including caste, gender, class, and religion. Manjula's experiences illustrate the numerous obstacles encountered by Dalit women in both personal and professional realms. Despite Manjula's education and entry into the teaching profession, her caste identity persists in shaping her social status. Her experiences demonstrate that education may create possibilities but cannot entirely eradicate caste-based bias. Gidla emphasises religious intersectionality by illustrating that Dalit Christians continually face persecution even after conversion. This indicates that caste identity retains its potency across religious divides (Gidla 98). The narrative thereby enhances the comprehension of Dalit women's oppression by illustrating how many types of marginalisation connect and influence individual experiences.

VII. EMPOWERMENT AND RESISTANCE

7.1 Empowerment Amidst Transformation

In *The Grip of Change*, empowerment is depicted as a kind of resistance to oppression. Thangam's battle exemplifies the pursuit of justice and dignity in the face of societal constraints. Despite enduring exploitation, her decision to speak up becomes an act of defiance. Nonetheless, Sivakami depicts empowerment as a multifaceted process. The novel examines male-dominated perspectives within Dalit groups, illustrating that social reform necessitates a confrontation with patriarchy. The character of Kathamuthu exposes the inconsistencies within leadership frameworks that combat caste oppression while neglecting gender inequity. Gowri represents a distinct manifestation of empowerment rooted in education and autonomy. Sivakami's persona illustrates education as a tool for challenging conventional societal frameworks and forging a new identity for Dalit women.

7.2 Empowerment in Ants in the Presence of Elephants

In *Ants Among Elephants*, empowerment is intricately linked to education and political consciousness. Gidla depicts education as a formidable instrument that empowers marginalised persons to confront societal constraints. The life of Satyamurthy exemplifies political empowerment via advocacy. His involvement in revolutionary activities signifies a unified opposition to caste and economic disparities (Gidla 210). Gidla's personal path exemplifies empowerment. Her evolution from a marginalised person in India to a writer in the United States exemplifies the influence of education, migration, and self-expression. Through the narration of her familial history, she establishes a platform for Dalit voices that have traditionally been marginalised.

VIII. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Both *The Grip of Change* and *Ants Among Elephants* explore caste oppression and Dalit struggles, however their methodologies diverge due to their distinct literary styles and viewpoints. Sivakami employs fiction to depict the quotidian challenges faced by Dalit women inside rural caste systems. Her emphasis is on the interplay between caste and patriarchy, namely how women endure oppression both outside and internally inside their communities. Gidla's memoir offers a broader historical perspective by linking personal experiences to political, religious, and societal frameworks. Sivakami concentrates on personal resistance, whereas Gidla underscores the need of collective fight via education and political activism. Both works illustrate that the realities of Dalit women cannot be comprehended through a singular category. The interplay of caste, gender, class, and religion engenders intricate manifestations of marginalisation. The notion of intersectionality offers a crucial framework for comprehending these intersecting experiences. The comparison also elucidates distinct methodologies for empowerment. Sivakami advocates for empowerment via individual resistance and female consciousness, whereas Gidla underscores the need of education, political knowledge, and social mobilisation. Both books together contest prevailing societal narratives and affirm Dalit literature as a crucial vehicle for resistance, representation, and social change.

IX. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

The comparative examination of P. Sivakami's *The Grip of Change* and Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants* demonstrates that caste is a profoundly entrenched social structure affecting identity, dignity, and opportunity. Both books illustrate that Dalit experiences are inextricably linked to overarching issues of gender, class, religion, and power.

The primary conclusion of the study is that both writers depict caste as a system of systemic oppression rather than as an individual experience of prejudice. In *The Grip of Change*, Sivakami illustrates caste via the individual hardships of Thangam, whose existence epitomises the social and economic precariousness faced by Dalit women. Her subjugation by dominant caste groups illustrates the functioning of caste hierarchy through the regulation of employment, sexuality, and social standing (Digole). Likewise, Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants* depicts caste as a historical and generational phenomenon. Gidla illustrates that caste prejudice persists despite constitutional equality, independence, and religious conversion via her family's experiences (Gidla 89). The narrative discloses that caste persists inside societal institutions, such as education, religion, and politics.

The second conclusion underscores the importance of intersectionality in comprehending the challenges faced by Dalit women. Both texts illustrate that Dalit women endure many types of oppression due to the interplay between caste and gender. Thangam's plight in *The Grip of Change* illustrates the dual cost of caste discrimination and patriarchal oppression, but Gidla's tale broadens this framework by include class and religious identity.

The research further reveals that both authors confront internal patriarchy among marginalised populations. Sivakami examines the constraints of Dalit leadership via the figure of Kathamuthu, indicating that caste struggle must concurrently confront female oppression. Gidla similarly elucidates how Dalit women navigate their identities within familial and societal frameworks. The third significant finding pertains to empowerment. Both books depict empowerment as a mechanism of resistance and transformation. Sivakami emphasises personal assertiveness, self-awareness, and feminist consciousness via characters like Gowri. Gidla underscores education, political consciousness, and collective resistance as vital instruments for social advancement. Consequently, the research demonstrates that Dalit empowerment necessitates both personal activity and systemic transformation. The accounts of Sivakami and Gidla illustrate that marginalised voices must be acknowledged to attain substantive social equality.

The Grip of Change by P. Sivakami and *Ants Among Elephants* by Sujatha Gidla are notable additions to Dalit writing, depicting the intricate realities of caste oppression, gender disparity, and resistance. Despite their differing literary forms, both works contest prevailing narratives by focusing on marginalised realities. Sivakami's *The Grip of Change* offers a compelling fictional portrayal of the challenges faced by Dalit women under rural caste systems. The story illustrates how caste and patriarchy together constrain women's autonomy and dignity via Thangam's experiences. Sivakami bolsters her case by interrogating patriarchal behaviours among Dalit communities. Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants* broadens the discourse by offering a personal and historical narrative of caste prejudice over generations. The book illustrates that caste persists in shaping social identity despite religious conversion and political change. Gidla underscores education and political awareness as avenues for empowerment via her family's experiences. The comparative study demonstrates that both authors employ literature as a means of resistance. Their

research demonstrates that the experiences of Dalit women are influenced by several interwoven identities, such as caste, gender, class, and religion. The intersectionality framework elucidates these intricate experiences and underscores the necessity for inclusive methodologies in social justice. Both works ultimately enhance the overarching dialogue on equality and human dignity. They convert accounts of pain into accounts of bravery, defiance, and empowerment. Sivakami and Gidla's articles illuminate marginalised populations and foster a profound comprehension of caste and gender disparities in modern society.

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