

## TRIPARTITE CROSSFIRE ON WOMEN IN ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD, AND SIVAKAMI'S THE GRIP OF CHANGE

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**Received: 23 Nov 2018**

**Accepted: 27 Nov 2018**

**Published: 06 Dec 2018**

### ABSTRACT

*The concept of race in USA and caste in India make difficult the identities of the people on lines of gender, class and family structure. In effect of this, a variant colonialism aroused by racialists, abuse the women and impoverish the men. The historical domination based on their race and caste cause a new mold of gender discrimination. Right from the days of slavery to the present, African American and Indian Dalit women have been facing the triple oppression of racism, sexism, and classism. Maya Angelou vehemently speaks the position of African American women – “caught in the tripartite crossfire of masculine prejudice, white illogical hate and Black lack of power” (Angelou 65). African American women and their writings to both their racial awareness and American identity are remarkable. Likewise, an incipient Dalit Feminism, rising in different parts of India*

**KEYWORDS:** *Racism, Sexism, Classism, Gender Identity, Triadic Marginalization*

### INTRODUCTION

Zora Neale Hurston was born on January 7, 1891, in Notasulga, Alabama, African American anthropologist, folklorist became very popular who arrested the interest of a much larger audience from late 1970 onwards; there are many books to her credit as *Mules and Men* (1935) *Moses, The Man of the Mountain* (1939) *Mule Bone* etc. One of the works discussed in this paper, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1939) is considered as the masterpiece among all of her books. It depicts the story of Janie May Crawford, who tries to live with self-reliance and to get freedom in the midst of much oppression of multiple marriages and tragedy.

Palanimuthu Sivakami, a most popular Indian writer with a strong feminine affection is the first Dalit women novelist in Tamil. Her primary concentration is on social issues by having varied experiences in life and profession. Being the first Dalit woman I.A.S officer in Tamil Nadu, with a passion to abolish the social inequalities and injustices, she occupied a space for herself and started achieving her social goals. She gave support to the empowerment of Dalit women through her writings. She has been the editor of a monthly Dalit literary journal, *Pudhiya Kodangi* and contributed to the many issues of Dalit woman, backward castes. As she faced many differences as a Dalit-feminist, she wrote her first book and got published. She once said that mainstream literature has refused her because she believed that only Dalits can write about issues concerning them and that only women can write on feminist issues. Her writings are pleasantly new, different and self-critical with daring

enough. From her first book, *The Grip of Change* to *The Taming of Women*, which is recently published, all her four books were critically approved on Dalit and feminist issues and are laid to generate moves.

The present paper is an attempt to study the quite comparable difficulties of the protagonists Janie and Thangam, their struggle to overcome, to get a hold of self-reliance in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *The grip of Change*.

Triple Oppression— racism, sexism, and classism

African American women face color discrimination from white men and also their men; and classism, being economically weak, placed them at the very lowest rank in society. They have been restricted from every favorable aspect of life because of their race and skin color. “Black women embody by their sheer physical presence two of the most hated identities in this racist/sexist country” (Lorraine Bethel 178). Her unfortunate situation does not have to end with only racism, but also she faces another kind of brutal oppression based on her gender, that is sexism. Being black and a woman she is in the double depressed situation. Apart from racism, and sexism, she is ill-treated because of her poor economic status that is classism. They were considered as least deserving in the social order as economically poor.

The patriarchal system does not only tear down the emotional peace of the females but also ruins the feministic emotions. The sufferings of Dalit woman show the clear witness in extensive abuse, brutal destructive, merciless treatment. The unbelievable incidents of their life stories reveal of physical and verbal abuse, sexual violence, and slavery to show the clear sight of their situation in society, which makes them endangered. As African American women, Indian Dalit women also face triple marginalization—economic oppression, gender subordination, and caste discrimination.

Hurston tries to show the black women’s capability even the most sympathized backdrop by referring to the economic and historical background. The protagonist Janie bears all the sufferings of three oppressive burdensome marriages, and in all three marriages, she is viewed by her husbands’ as their property and enjoyment.

Nanny, Janie’s grandmother, feels marriage is the protection for the black women from the sexual exploitation. Nanny wants Janie to marry the wealthiest black man to be protected from the sexual abuse from both white and black men. She wants Janie to know the necessity of marriage to the black women for getting the relief from the enslavement and social abuse. She says

Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it’s someplace way off in de ocean where a de black man is in power, but we don’t know nothing’ but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He picks it up because he has to, but he doesn’t tote it. He hands it to his womenfolks. De nigger women are de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. Ah been prayin’ fuh it tuh be different wid you (Hurston 21).

The white tries to toss his burdens on the black man’s shoulder, who tries to throw it over to the black woman who is “de mule of the world” (Hurston 21). When Nanny proposes Janie to marry Logan Killicks, Janie refuses her and claims a different thinking of marriage than her grandmother. She asserts a place for love, which she links with her strong sexual impulses. Janie looks for; a relationship which fulfilled and cultivated her sexual desires, not a gasping sense of safety protecting her from the white man’s racial and sexual abuses. Janie’s vision of a peer tree shows her desire for her soul mate, where she enjoys an affectionate and lovable sexual life with her beloved. She got married Logan Killicks with the suggestion of Nanny. Her first husband Logan Killicks, who is an ambitious and aspiring person, thought, he was simply getting a

domestic slave when he married Janie. Soon after their wedding, Logan killicks complaining about Janie, not taking care of household chores, later he tells Janie directly that he is planning to buy another mule, a one "all gentled up so even uh woman kin handle 'im'" (Hurston 38). Logan's clear intention of Janie that she is a mule, and he tries to make her a mule of the world. Logan undoubtedly seems to protect more his farm than his wife, thinking her mostly as a useful labor force instead of a body requiring pity and emotions. He feels that Janie is his possession as his field. Janie realizes that she is in unloving condition. She runs away with another man, Joe Clarks, is rather different from Logan, more vulgar. Initially, she thinks her peer tree vision comes true with Joe, but there appear a clear resemblance between Logan and Joe, Joe's ill-treatment towards Janie reveals how men assert their supremacy and mastery over women. Joe's possession of Janie, ties her to the mule, fulfilling Nanny's fear of Janie is becoming the mule of the world. However, the reader can get a sight of Janie beginning to struggle for her place in the society. "She got up without a word and went off for the shoes. A little war of defense for helpless things was going on inside her. People ought to have some regard for helpless things. She wanted to fight about it" (Hurston 80). He all the time abuses Janie both bodily and psychologically to show his authority. Joe is highly controlling, not allows Janie to interact even with her friends.

She has been facing many physical and mental strikes of Joe until his death. After the death of Joe, Janie marries Tea Cake, who seems to be respectable of women's thoughts. Janie seems to believe that she has found her soul mate, the one whom she desired for making her dreams come true. "He was a glance from God" (Hurston 161). He is a glimpse from God became as an ideal male partner for Janie in his behavior. Janie feels Tea Cake is a solution to her distress with men and their behavior towards her when she says that "Jody ain't never in his life picked out no color for me. De world picked out black and white for mournin', Joe didn't. So Ah wasn't wearin' it for him. (. . .) Tea Cake loves me in blue, so Ah wears it" (Hurston 170). Thus Hurston tries to show her thought to the society by projecting the bond of Janie and Tea Cake is to show that man and woman can meet on parity.

The publication of Pazhaiyana Kazhitalam, a full length semi-autobiographical Tamil novel, in 1989 brought Sivakami into the bright light of publicity as a famous Indian novelist, her self-translation of it under the title of The Grip Of Change grabbed the immense applaud of much larger viewers. It shows the unfortunate situation of an oppressed low caste Dalit woman, Thangam, who faces triple marginalization- economic exploitation, gender subordination, caste discrimination. Her plight was changed after the death of her husband and forced her to work in the field of the Landlord, Paramhothi Udayar, which made her meet critical situations of her life. Her helpless condition as a widow makes her sexually at hands to abuse by Paramjothi Udayar and harassment by her in-laws. Thangam represents all Dalit women who are oppressed by the upper caste landlords but forced to keep silence and never raise their voice. As she is childless, she is opposed to getting the property of her husband. Her in-laws used this chance to exploit her sexually. When they understood that thangam would not accept their desires, they decided to spread the story against Thangam that she had become Udayar's mistress. As a result of it, Thangam was harshly beaten by the Udayar's wife and her brothers. With the beaten body, she approached kathamuthu, a respected Dalit leader, an ex-panchayat member. Initially, Kathamuthu behaved morally for Thangam by punishing them who abused her but later he also changed as upper caste man. He stresses Thangam, she can get the justice only after surrendering herself to his desires. She was exploited by Kathamuthu, but later she got the power to gain supremacy in Kathamuthu's house and

shows her dominance over his wives.

The same sort of experience of Dalit women and their lives found in the poem 'We will Rebuild Worlds' by Meena Kandasamy but the kinds of passion/ Our passions/your crimes/ poured poison and pesticide through the ears-nose-mouth/Or hang them in public/ because of a man and a woman Dared to love/ and you wanted/to teach/other boys and other girls/the Lessons of/ hoe to /whom to/ when to/ where to /continue their caste lines. ( Kandasamy, 99)

The plight of a Dalit woman was ill-treated by the upper caste men and women as well as their men. A statement "Woman is Dalit from Beginning to End" ( Shivkumar 356). It shows women were robbed their rights and dignity. The portraiture of Thangam's life in *The Grip of Change* by P. Sivakami made a severe comment on the patriarchal system.

The narrator of this entire story is Gowri, a young girl, Kathamuthu's daughter, the voice of Sivakami, through whom she tried to awake the voiceless Dalit women who are bearing brutal harassment. She realizes the fact with the incident of her father's humiliation towards Thangam that the exploitation of women in patriarchal setup. She directly criticizes the barbarous treatment of her father imposed upon Thangam when Kathamuthu rapes Thangam, she fiercely shouts "Dogs! Dogs in this house! Shameless as Dogs!" (Sivakami 93). Sivakami's character Gowri symbolizes the signs of the rising awareness among Dalits. Being the witness of Thangam's exploitation in the hands of her father, a Dalit patriarch, she objects her early marriage, "The sufferings of my mother underwent in her marriage! I don't want to be tortured like her by some man" (Sivakami 124). This is the reason why she picks to be unmarried at 32. Gowri was called as Sivakami's daring attempt of self-observation as an ideal model of realist criticism. The characters and incidents are represented in a realistic enough to speak the reality of modern society. Thangam and Gowri's protests suggest that an opposing utterance hopefully substitutes silence and suppression. The reader can understand the capability of Sivakami in framing the piteous tale of woman's struggle to oppose and survive in a patriarchal society by narrating Thangam story and Gowri's protest.

The novel focuses on the social evils such as brutal truths, physical abuses, economic oppression on women along with a note that the essence of democratic approach to abolishing such biased attitude. Gowri declines marriage because she views marriage is the royal path to practice patriarchy which leads to gender bias. Gowri fights against casteism, capitalism, and patriarchy in rural society. The novel ends with Gowri's article wherein she focuses the urge for emerging a "strong movement that would unite with underdeveloped, poor caste and exploited. Her brother Shekharan suggests her to work with Chandran who would help her to convert her dreams into actuality. He says "it is not enough to write. He (Chandran) knows how to put into action" (Sivakami 193). Chandran and Gowri together lead for an anti-patriarchal fabric, anti-capitalist, and anti-casteism, in which Dalit can lead a life of nobility and equality. This novel is the urge of Sivakami to women to come out of both caste and gender inequity by having education and participating in social activities.

The narrator of *The Grip of Change*, Gowri had fabricated a model of a patriarch in the form of her father and flashed him. She is entirely in opposition to the theory of her father's politics and mindset to mistreat women in every possible way. She is entirely different with her modern notion of the civilized world from her father's primitive notions. Additionally, through the auto-biographical character of Gowri, Sivakami's rejection and question to the deep structures of patriarchy which restrict female empowerment and Sivakami clues that the empowerment of women is in the hands of young and educated women with a critical thinking which obtains the power of observation of their community critically.

The author of *The Grip of Change* had condemned the authority of Dalits when the Dalit movement was obtaining justification. She wanted to convey her impressions of life, but at the same time secure her self-pride and identity. Novels had to be understood in opposition to the backdrop of their times. The characters of *The Grip of Change* were confused with incidents not concerned to them. Anybody could not oneself to denounce one's ring. The theme of the novel is hugely misunderstood as the author was anxious to elevate herself as fair-minded and virtuous. Caste is still unbeatable challenge trouble all those who try to collapse it. The novel essentially concentrated on the need of combined effort of all the subjugated caste which is lacking and insufficient. The novelist feels herself as a responsible subject to find out the solution to these social challenges. Thus deserving its title *The Grip of Change* evidences the effect of 'change' even in the Dalit awareness assuming a sort of remedy for the disorders of the society.

## CONCLUSIONS

When keeping the word 'Marginalization' as the heart of any study, every word plays a vital role. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *The Grip of Change*, Hurston and Sivakami put their thoughts of marginalized women with the evident light of criticism and analysis of the society. The two novelists focused on the oppressed women in their nations and the victims of the patriarchal system of their nations. Different societies like those of the United States and India comprise comparable structures of subjugation that have devaluated significant sections of their respective populations. To stay away from such discriminations among the people, there is a need to have the interactive insight, a brotherly love which provides a platform for developing the collaboration and concern for humankind to overcome the social inequities and injustices.

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