

Gowri in Sivakami's 'The Grip of Change': Unveiling the Forces of Transformation and Resistance

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Abstract

Palanimuthu Sivakami's *The Grip of Change* is a seminal work in Dalit feminist literature, exploring the intersection of caste, gender, and power through the character of Gowri. As a young Dalit woman, Gowri resists patriarchal and caste-based oppression, rejecting marriage as a tool of subjugation and embracing education as a means of empowerment. Her defiance against societal norms positions her as a transformative figure in Dalit feminism. The novel critiques patriarchal hypocrisy through her relationship with her father, Kathamuthu, whose activism is undermined by his own misogynistic practices. Sivakami foregrounds Gowri's intellectual evolution and solidarity with Dalit women, emphasizing collective resistance over passive endurance. By reclaiming her narrative in Author's Notes, Gowri disrupts dominant structures and asserts her agency. This paper examines how Gowri embodies Dalit feminist resistance, illustrating the power of education, self-determination, and collective upliftment in dismantling systemic oppression.

Keywords: *Dalit feminism, caste oppression, gender resistance, education, empowerment.*

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Introduction

Palanimuthu Sivakami's *The Grip of Change* occupies a paradigmatic place in the canon of Dalit feminist literature, offering a trenchant critique of the interlocking oppressions of caste, gender, and power. The novel interrogates the systemic exploitation and marginalization faced by Dalit women, whose identities are continuously shaped and constrained within a matrix of caste, patriarchy, and economic subjugation. At its heart is the character of Gowri, a bold and introspective young Dalit

woman whose defiance of societal norms, rejection of patriarchal institutions, and commitment to education position her as a transformative figure in Dalit feminist discourse. Gowri's journey is framed within the context of rural Tamil Nadu, where caste-based, capitalist, and patriarchal hierarchies converge to shape the lived realities of Dalit women. Unlike Nagamani and Kanagavalli, who remain trapped in oppressive marriages, Gowri asserts her autonomy by refusing to marry, symbolizing her rejection of patriarchal control. Through her resistance, Sivakami critiques marriage as an institution designed to perpetuate male dominance, particularly in Dalit households. This defiance, combined with her embrace of education and self-reliance, positions Gowri as a radical voice, redefining Dalit womanhood as a site of independence and empowerment.

The character of Gowri in Sivakami's *The Grip of Change* embodies a complex representation of Dalit resistance, challenging both caste-based subjugation and patriarchal authority. Her journey as an educated young woman determined to interrogate and disrupt oppressive traditions situates her as a symbolic and active figure in Dalit feminist discourse. Through Gowri, Sivakami foregrounds an incisive critique of interlocking structures of domination, compelling readers to engage with the nuances of caste and gender oppression from a distinctly Dalit perspective. Deepa Nair (2018) emphasises that Sivakami's works are deeply intertwined with her lived experiences, blending personal and political narratives. Her writing reflects a commitment to challenging systemic injustices faced by Dalit women, making her a trailblazer in Indian feminist literature.

Relationship between Gowri and Kathamuthu

The father-daughter dynamic between Gowri and Kathamuthu complicates the portrayal of power within the narrative. As an authoritative figure, Kathamuthu's behaviour often reflects a hypocritical manipulation of moral values for his own benefit. Gowri's keen awareness of his flaws: "He was always one to bend rules for his own good"—indicates her growing criticality toward patriarchal authority. Her internal critique, "He protects only what he controls," exposes Kathamuthu's controlling stance over women, foreshadowing Gowri's eventual rejection of his possessive worldview. In this rejection, Sivakami illustrates the nuanced power dynamics within family

structures and hints at the resilience of female agency within rigid patriarchal constructs. Scholars like Y. Supriya (2017) have noted that Gowri's intellectual and political evolution challenges entrenched patriarchy and casteism. Her character demonstrates the transformative potential of education and activism for Dalit women, suggesting that empowerment lies in challenging traditional narratives.

Gowri's rejection of marriage in Sivakami's work critiques the institution as a tool of patriarchal control. Unlike Nagamani and Kanagavalli, who remain trapped in oppressive marital relationships, Gowri asserts her autonomy by choosing to remain unmarried, redefining Dalit womanhood as a space for self-determination. This defiance challenges societal expectations and reflects broader Dalit feminist goals focused on dismantling patriarchal structures and empowering women through education and self-worth. Scholars like B. Mangalam (2023) have highlighted Gowri's ideological consistency, both at home and in the workplace, as emblematic of a forward-looking vision for Dalit emancipation and empowerment.

Also, when Gowri changes "zila" to "district" and "taluk" to "circle" in a complaint, Kathamuthu privately reflects, "She's smart. She'll survive." This acknowledgment of Gowri's intelligence illustrates the complex dynamics of their father-daughter relationship, where Kathamuthu's admiration coexists with his patriarchal mindset. Yet, his regressive tendencies prevail, as seen in his attempts to commodify Gowri's traits during marriage negotiations, describing her as "a bit talkative, but very smart." These efforts to confine Gowri within traditional roles expose the limitations of his support, while Gowri's fear of marriage underscores her resistance to societal norms.

Gowri serves as a stark ideological counterpoint to Kathamuthu, who embodies the contradictions of Dalit patriarchy. While Kathamuthu champions caste-based rights, his actions—such as his manipulation of Thangam and exploitation of Nagamani and Kanagavalli—reveal his deeply ingrained misogyny. Gowri, by contrast, prioritizes integrity and collective empowerment over personal gain. For instance, during a panchayat dispute, Gowri returns a pendant given to her by Kalimuthu, rejecting the opportunistic practices her father often employs. This principled stance,

juxtaposed against Kathamuthu's self-serving activism, underscores Gowri's moral authority and her commitment to authentic empowerment. Gowri's relationship with her father reflects conflicting loyalty as well, exemplified by her biting Kalimuthu during a family dispute to defend Kathamuthu, even as she critiques his patriarchal tendencies. Meena Kandasamy's observation that Gowri detests her father's manipulateness and weakness captures this dynamic (2006). Despite these flaws, both Gowri and Kathamuthu share a commitment to ending caste-based atrocities, though Gowri's vision incorporates a feminist consciousness absent in her father's activism.

Gowri resistance and empowerment

Sivakami underscores Gowri's critical perspective with lines such as, "Gowri did not want to just sit by and let things happen; she wanted to know why and how, to think about what could be done differently." Here, Gowri's unwillingness to accept her circumstances passively signals an intellectual resistance that reflects her desire to reshape the social reality around her. This desire for change evolves further in the "Author's Notes," where Gowri assumes the role of a writer. In granting her protagonist narrative agency, Sivakami disrupts conventional, male-dominated authority structures and emphasizes Gowri's reclamation of voice and narrative.

Gowri's storytelling serves as a radical re-envisioning of the events within the text, centering a Dalit feminist lens that confronts patriarchal and caste-based hierarchies. Sivakami uses Gowri's experiences to critique not only the external discrimination Dalit women face but also the internalized stigmas that complicate their journey toward empowerment. Gowri's rejection of caste-based financial aid highlights her desire to construct an identity rooted in personal integrity and self-worth, distinct from societal prejudices. This internal conflict, juxtaposed with her pride in her accomplishments as a Dalit woman, enriches her character, portraying her as someone who navigates the fine line between resistance and reconciliation with her identity.

Gowri's resistance is both external and internal, as she challenges the overt caste-based and patriarchal hierarchies surrounding her while grappling with her own doubts about caste identity and societal labels. Her decision to reject caste-based scholarships signifies a deeper yearning for self-definition, unmediated by societal biases. By assuming the role of a writer in Sivakami's Author's

Notes, Gowri becomes the architect of her narrative, a symbolic act of reclaiming agency that mirrors her broader resistance to systemic subjugation. This dual approach—questioning societal hierarchies while embracing personal empowerment—positions Gowri as a transformative figure within Dalit feminist discourse.

Gowri's empowerment through education

Education emerges as the cornerstone of Gowri's empowerment, symbolizing her resistance to caste and patriarchal oppression. Her academic journey, culminating in her role as a teacher and doctoral scholar by the age of thirty-one, demonstrates the transformative power of knowledge as a means of both personal liberation and collective upliftment. Gowri's refusal to conform to societal expectations, such as marriage, reflects her alignment with Dalit *chetna*, emphasizing resistance, self-respect, and solidarity. A pivotal moment in Gowri's feminist awakening is her confrontation with Kathamuthu over his exploitation of Thangam. While initially feeling pity and guilt for her father's misuse of Thangam's money, Gowri's outrage peaks when Kathamuthu, intoxicated, attempts to assault Thangam. Her rebuke, "Dogs in this house! Shameless as dogs!" signifies her refusal to condone patriarchal entitlement, even within her family, and underscores her alignment with Dalit women's struggles against dual oppression by upper-caste oppressors and Dalit men.

Sivakami positions Gowri as a transformative figure in Dalit feminist discourse, exemplifying the intersection of ideology and praxis. Gowri's academic achievements not only redefine her identity beyond victimhood but also inspire other Dalit women to pursue self-reliance and question male dominance. By prioritizing education over societal expectations, Gowri becomes a symbol of empowerment, demonstrating how knowledge can dismantle entrenched hierarchies and foster collective progress. For Gowri, education is not merely a personal achievement but a radical act of resistance. Her academic accomplishments, including earning a doctorate, transcend the limitations imposed by caste and gender, enabling her to redefine her identity beyond victimhood. Sivakami portrays education as a means of equipping Dalit women with the confidence to challenge systemic

oppression, as critic Ranjana Nagar observed, reflecting the broader emancipatory goals of Dalit feminism.

Solidarity among Dalit women

Gowri's defiance of patriarchal norms reflects her commitment to fostering solidarity among Dalit women. By persistently encouraging Kanagavalli and Nagamani to embrace liberation, Gowri transcends individual struggles and emphasizes collective empowerment as a tool to dismantle the intersecting oppressions of caste and patriarchy. Sivakami portrays Gowri not as an isolated rebel but as a leader advocating for a shared vision of justice and equality within the Dalit feminist movement. Gowri represents a paradigm shift in the portrayal of Dalit women, actively confronting systemic oppression while fostering solidarity within her community. Her decision to remain unmarried is a powerful act of defiance against patriarchal expectations, particularly as she articulates her refusal to submit to traditional marital norms: she "didn't want to be tortured like her" by a man. This stance challenges her father's authority and redefines Dalit womanhood as rooted in autonomy, education, and self-determination.

As a teacher and leader, Gowri extends her impact beyond personal empowerment, becoming a beacon of resistance who embodies the core principles of Dalit feminist thought: self-reliance, education, and collective upliftment. Her assertion that she needs "a father who can respect his son-in-law" critiques patriarchal expectations both within her family and in society at large. Gowri's narrative reflects a broader vision for Dalit feminist liberation, where solidarity and resistance pave the way for systemic transformation. By addressing both caste-based and patriarchal structures, Gowri exemplifies the potential for Dalit women to transcend their marginalization. Her role as a teacher extends her impact beyond personal empowerment, as she becomes a symbol of hope for a new generation of Dalit women who seek justice, equality, and self-respect. Gowri's narrative reflects a broader vision for Dalit feminist liberation, where solidarity and resistance pave the way for systemic transformation. Gowri's interactions with Thangam, another Dalit woman, highlight her solidarity with Dalit women's suffering, despite their different experiences. Thangam's endurance in

the face of caste-based abuse and domestic violence moves Gowri deeply, prompting her to question the cost of such resilience: “What strength does it take to bear such humiliation and keep going?” Yet, Gowri’s frustration with Thangam’s silence— “Thangam’s silence made her angrier... How could she just accept it?”—reveals her rejection of passive endurance and her longing for active defiance against oppression. This inner dialogue mirrors a broader ideological stance, where Gowri’s rejection of passive acceptance speaks to an emergent Dalit feminist consciousness, one that seeks transformation rather than accommodation.

Caste, patriarchy and gender

Gowri’s encounters with upper-caste individuals further reinforce her resistance to caste-based subjugation. Her reflection, “Why should I bow when I’ve done nothing wrong?” signals her defiance against caste hierarchy and her refusal to conform to expectations imposed by the dominant caste. Through Gowri’s defiance, Sivakami crafts a character who not only resists caste-based discrimination but also stands as a challenge to the Dalit community’s internalised caste and gender norms. Despite her outward defiance, Gowri grapples with internalized ambivalence toward caste identity. Her reluctance to apply for scholarships designated for Scheduled Caste students illustrates her discomfort with being publicly identified through her caste. This internal conflict underscores her effort to transcend societal labels while still confronting the harsh realities of caste oppression. Gowri’s reflection, “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?” captures her acute awareness of the precarious and vulnerable position of Dalit women, who face compounded burdens of caste and gender discrimination. Sivakami’s portrayal of Gowri advances a critical understanding of intersectionality, emphasizing how caste and gender are intertwined in perpetuating oppression. Gopal Guru’s (1995) argument in “Dalit Women Talk Differently”—that Dalit patriarchy must be critiqued alongside external caste discrimination—is reflected in Gowri’s feminist consciousness. Gowri addresses the dual forces of savarna patriarchy and internal Dalit patriarchal norms. Her acknowledgment of these interconnected structures establishes her as a transformative figure in Dalit feminist discourse.

Conclusion

Sivakami's narrative, anchored by Gowri's inner conflicts and confrontations, invites readers to re-evaluate Dalit women's unique struggles at the intersection of caste and patriarchy. Gowri's resistance to these oppressive systems, captured in reflections such as "The rules bind women more tightly than any chain," embodies a distinctly Dalit feminist perspective. This standpoint is largely absent from mainstream feminist discourse, marking Sivakami's work as a critical intervention within both Dalit and feminist literatures. Gowri's determination to confront entrenched inequalities reveals a dynamic form of Dalit feminism that interrogates and seeks to transform the rigid structures of power within both caste and gender hierarchies.

Through Gowri's resistance, introspection, and defiance, Sivakami constructs a counternarrative that challenges dominant perspectives on caste and patriarchy. Gowri's determination to confront entrenched inequalities reveals a dynamic form of Dalit feminism that interrogates and seeks to transform rigid structures of power. Her contemplative insight, "Why should change scare us when it is the only way to move forward?" symbolises her call for transformative change, positioning her as a catalyst for resistance and renewal. Gowri's journey compels readers to reflect on the enduring social injustices faced by Dalit women, encouraging a reimagining of pathways for genuine social transformation. In this manner, *The Grip of Change* emerges as a profound and subversive critique, rooted in Dalit feminist thought, and presents a literary pathway for envisioning resistance and agency. Ultimately, Gowri's trajectory toward political and social awareness positions her as a progressive Dalit feminist leader. Her ideological evolution underscores her commitment to challenging the intersecting hierarchies of caste and gender. Gowri's moral integrity, educational pursuits, and emphasis on solidarity redefine Dalit womanhood and mark her as a transformative figure in the fight for social justice. Athira S. Kumar (2022) analyses how the character of Gowri is a critical reflection of the author's own struggles and ideologies. Gowri's intellectual and personal resistance embodies a critique of patriarchal and caste structures, while her narrative agency in *Book Two: Gowri* represents a reclamation of voice.

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