Embodied Conflict and the Politics of Redemption: Female Subjectivity in P.Sivakami and Malsawmi Jacob's Novel

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Abstract

This paper undertakes a comparative study of P. Sivakami's The Grip of Change and Malsawmi Jacob's Zorami: A Redemption Song to examine how cultural conflict shapes female subjectivity within marginalised Indian communities. Situating both novels within Dalit and Indigenous (Mizo) contexts, the study argues that cultural conflict is not merely a thematic concern but is constitutive of the protagonists' ontological formation. Sivakami foregrounds the "double marginalisation" of Dalit women through caste hegemony and internal Dalit patriarchy, while Jacob explores the collective cultural trauma produced by insurgency, state violence, and patriarchal silence in Mizo society. Through sexual violence, both texts inscribe political domination onto the female body, rendering it a primary site of

contestation. Yet the novels also articulate modes of resistance and redemption—education, voice, spiritual healing, and cultural memory—through which fractured identities seek recovery. Together, these works assert that liberation demands confronting both external oppression and internal hierarchies.

Keywords: Dalit feminism; The Grip of Change; cultural trauma; Zorami; female body

Introduction

The Indian literary landscape has historically been dominated by voices from the centre, often obscuring the heterogeneous realities of the margins. However, the emergence of writers like P. Sivakami and Malsawmi Jacob has inaugurated a transformative phase in Indian fiction, in which the cultural conflicts of the periphery—geographic, social, and gendered—are brought into sharp relief.

P. Sivakami, the first Tamil Dalit woman to write a novel, and Malsawmi Jacob, the first Mizo author to write an English novel, represent distinct yet converging voices of resistance. While their cultural contexts differ—one rooted in a millennia-long struggle against a rigid caste hierarchy in Tamil Nadu and the other in a postcolonial struggle for ethnic sovereignty in the highlands of Mizoram—both authors utilise the novel as a discursive space to navigate the traumatic intersections of state violence, internal patriarchy, and the erosion of traditional identities.

This paper examines the cultural conflicts portrayed in Sivakami's The Grip of Change (and its sequel Author's Notes) and Jacob's Zorami: A Redemption Song. It argues that these conflicts are not mere thematic backdrops but are constitutive of the ontological foundations of their protagonists. In Sivakami's work, the conflict arises from the double marginalisation of Dalit women by upper-caste hegemonies and an internal Dalit patriarchy that replicates oppressive structures. Conversely, Jacob explores the cultural trauma of the Mizo people, caught between the assertion of a nationalist identity during the insurgency

(Rambuai) and the brutal counter-insurgency operations of the Indian state. By analysing the sociopolitical architecture of oppression, the internal fissures within their respective communities, and the trajectory towards healing, this paper posits that both authors situate the female body as the primary site of inscribed conflict and subsequent redemption.

To theorise redemption as an analytical category rather than a metaphor, this paper understands redemption not as moral absolution or narrative closure but as a processual reconstitution of subjectivity under conditions of historical injury. Redemption, in this framework, emerges at the intersection of trauma, agency, and communal re-signification. It marks neither a return to an originary wholeness nor a transcendence of violence; instead, it denotes a contingent and fragile reorientation of the self within, and not outside, structures of oppression.

Crucially, redemption operates through the body as a site where power, memory, and resistance converge. The female body, inscribed by caste and ethnic violence, becomes the medium through which trauma is both endured and renegotiated. Redemption thus involves the capacity to re-narrate bodily experience, transforming imposed meanings of shame, silence, or violation into forms of self-articulation that contest dominant epistemologies. This process is neither linear nor complete; it is marked by interruptions, relapses, and ethical ambivalence. By conceptualising redemption as embodied praxis rather than symbolic resolution, the paper resists redemptive teleologies that neutralise suffering and instead theorises redemption as an ongoing negotiation between personal healing and collective histories of violence.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative literary methodology grounded in feminist theory, Dalit studies, and trauma studies. The primary texts—P. Sivakami's The Grip of Change (along with Author's Notes) and Malsawmi Jacob's Zorami: A Redemption

Song—are subjected to close reading, with particular attention to narrative voice, representations of the female body, and the interplay between personal trauma and collective history.

Secondary sources, including critical essays and theoretical works by scholars such as Anupama Rao, K. Santhanam, Lalremsiami, and others, are used to contextualise the novels within broader discourses on caste, indigeneity, patriarchy, and cultural trauma. The analysis foregrounds how both authors construct female subjectivity at the intersection of external structures of domination (caste and state) and internal community-based hierarchies (patriarchy, religious transformation, and cultural erosion). The methodology is interpretive rather than empirical, privileging textual analysis and theoretical engagement to illuminate the politics of embodiment and redemption in Dalit and Indigenous Indian fiction.

The Sociopolitical Architecture of Oppression: Caste Hegemony and State Violence

The primary locus of cultural conflict in the works of both Sivakami and Jacob is the external aggression of a dominant power structure—caste hegemony in the case of the former and the Indian state apparatus in the latter. Both authors depict how these external forces inscribe their power upon the bodies of women, transforming them into battlegrounds for political and social dominance.

In The Grip of Change, Sivakami exposes the raw violence of the caste system. The novel opens with the battered body of Thangam, a Dalit widow, serving as a rhetorical figure for the fraught relationship between caste, gender, and sexuality. Thangam is assaulted by upper-caste men not merely because of her gender but because her alleged sexual liaison with an upper-caste landlord, Paranjothi, threatens the sexual integrity of caste. As critics have observed, upper-caste sexual violence against Dalit women is not an exceptional transgression but an entrenched mechanism of caste power: “The upper-caste man’s sexual violence against the Dalit woman is not an aberration; it is a structural necessity that

reinforces the spatial and social boundaries of the village. The Dalit woman's body becomes the site where the upper caste asserts its dominance and the Dalit community experiences its most profound humiliation" (Santhanam 42).

The cultural conflict here is visceral; Thangam is doubly marginalised, denied human dignity by the upper-caste landlords she serves. Sivakami further complicates this violence by foregrounding its political appropriation within the Dalit community itself. As Santhanam notes, "In Sivakami's narrative, this violence is further complicated when the Dalit leadership transforms the victim's physical trauma into a political instrument, thereby silencing her individual subjectivity in favour of a collective, masculinised protest against the varna order" (42). When Thangam is assaulted, her personal trauma is thus politicised by the Dalit leader Kathamuthu to negotiate power with the upper castes, effectively displacing her sexed body with a caste body in service of a political agenda. The state machinery, represented by the police, remains complicit in this oppression, forcing the Dalits to rely on corrupt internal leadership for a semblance of justice.

Parallel to this, Malsawmi Jacob's Zorami maps the cultural trauma of the Mizo people during the Rambuai, or the troubled times, of the Mizo insurgency (1966–1986). Here, the oppressor is the Vai (Indian) state. The conflict is catalysed by the Mautam famine and the subsequent neglect by the Indian government, which fuelled the rise of the Mizo National Front (MNF). Jacob depicts the Rambuai as a period of collective trauma in which the Indian Army's counter-insurgency tactics, including the bombing of Aizawl and the forced regrouping of villages, dismantled the traditional Mizo social fabric.

Just as Thangam's body is central to Sivakami's narrative, the body of the protagonist Zorampari (Zorami) becomes a metonym for the Mizo nation in Jacob's novel. Zorami is raped by an Indian Army officer at the age of thirteen, a state-sponsored atrocity that mirrors the violation of the land itself. The rape functions as a sexual coup de grâce, a tactic employed

to demoralise the community and assert the supremacy of the Indian state over Mizo nationalist aspirations. The cultural conflict is thus embodied; Zorami experiences herself as lacerated and torn apart by a figure rendered inhuman, symbolising the intrusion of the Indian military into the Mizo homeland. In both novels, the external oppressor deploys sexual violence as a mechanism of cultural subjugation, forcing the protagonists to navigate a world in which their bodies are perceived as irreparably damaged.

Internal Fissures: Dalit Patriarchy and the Erasure of Indigenous Identity

While external oppression provides the macro-conflict, both authors engage in a radical critique of their own communities, revealing internal cultural conflicts that are equally damaging. Sivakami and Jacob refuse to present a monolithic or romanticised view of their societies, choosing instead to expose the internal fissures produced by patriarchy and cultural erosion.

Sivakami is credited with coining the concept of Dalit patriarchy in literary discourse. In The Grip of Change, she illustrates how Dalit men, emasculated by caste oppression outside the home, replicate these oppressive structures within the domestic sphere. The character of Kathamuthu, a charismatic Parayar leader, embodies this contradiction. While he fights for the community against upper-caste violence, he is simultaneously a tyrant within the household who exploits Thangam both sexually and financially. Sivakami argues that the Dalit woman experiences triple oppression based on caste, class, and gender. Thangam is victimised not only by the upper-caste Udayars but also by her own brothers-in-law, who view her as a surplus woman available for exploitation, and by Kathamuthu himself, who operates as a predator under the guise of a protector.

This internal critique is sharpened in Sivakami's The Taming of Women, where the protagonist Anandhayi suffers at the hands of her husband, Periyannan. Periyannan's desire for power and his womanising tendencies reveal that the seeds of corruption exist at all levels,

regardless of caste. Sivakami's narrative asserts that a lower-caste leader may exploit his own community, thereby challenging the notion of the Dalit community as a unified or homogeneous victim. As Geetha observes:

"In The Taming of Women, Sivakami dismantles the myth of a monolithic Dalit identity by exposing the patriarchal rot within the community itself. Periyannan's domestic tyranny serves as a microcosm of broader power dynamics, suggesting that the subaltern male often compensates for his external social marginalisation by enforcing a rigid, often violent, hierarchy within the domestic sphere. For Sivakami, the liberation of the Dalit community remains a fractured project as long as gendered exploitation is utilised as a tool for internal consolidation" (114).

This internal conflict thus becomes a struggle over the definition of Dalit identity itself and one that positions gender equality as a necessary precondition for caste liberation.

Similarly, Malsawmi Jacob navigates the internal cultural conflicts of Mizo society, particularly the tension between traditional Mizo identity and the transformative influence of Christianity and modernisation. Mizo society, once animistic and governed by the code of Tlawmngaihna (an altruistic ethical framework), underwent a seismic shift with the arrival of British missionaries. While Christianity facilitated literacy and fostered a unified collective identity, it also contributed to the erasure of oral cosmologies and traditional festivals such as Chapchar Kut, which the Church dismissed as heathen practices.

In Zorami, this cultural conflict manifests in the fragmentation of the community during the insurgency. The once intertwined Mizo community is fractured by suspicion and betrayal. Jacob portrays characters such as Ralkapa, a former Mizo nationalist who becomes an army informer in order to escape torture. His betrayal signifies the disintegration of the Mizo social fabric and the emergence of a cold cruelty that arises when a community turns against itself under sustained pressure. The novel further exposes the internal patriarchal

structures of Mizo society. Despite the high visibility of women in the workforce, the society remains deeply patriarchal, systematically excluding women from political decision-making. Zorami's trauma is compounded by the silence enforced by her own community, in which rape is treated as a shame to be concealed rather than a crime to be addressed. Just as Thangam is blamed for her assault in Sivakami's novel, Zorami internalises her trauma as a condition of being damaged, reflecting the internal cultural conflict surrounding female purity and honour.

Modes of Resistance and Redemption: Education, Voice, and Healing

Despite the pervasive violence, both authors employ their narratives to envision pathways towards resistance and redemption. This resistance is marked by a refusal to remain silent and by the reclamation of agency through education, voice, and spiritual healing.

In Sivakami's work, resistance is articulated through the character of Gowri, Kathamuthu's daughter and a semi-autobiographical surrogate for the author. Gowri represents a new generation of Dalit women who deploy education as a means of resisting both caste-based and patriarchal oppression. She defies the human-made boundaries imposed by her father, her caste, and her village by pursuing higher education and rejecting early marriage. Gowri's intellectual liberation enables her to critique her father's leadership and to expose the hypocrisy embedded within Dalit patriarchy.

Sivakami's narrative technique itself functions as a form of resistance. By appending the Author's Notes to The Grip of Change, she engages in literary resistance, deconstructing her own novel to expose the disjunctures between lived reality and fictional representation. This metafictional strategy refuses to allow the text to be consumed merely as an anthropological account of Dalit suffering; instead, it asserts the author's agency in shaping and contesting the discourse surrounding caste and gender. Sivakami thus posits education and the reclamation of voice as essential to the annihilation of caste and the empowerment

of women. Her characters emerge as tenacious figures, fighting with a persistent resolve to transform society from within.

For Malsawmi Jacob, the path to redemption is rooted less in overt political resistance than in the healing of the psyche and the reclamation of cultural memory. Zorami: A Redemption Song is not merely a political history but a quest for inner healing. Jacob suggests that political peace, exemplified by the 1986 Peace Accord, remains insufficient in the absence of emotional and spiritual restoration. The novel employs historiographic metafiction to challenge the monolithic narrative of the Indian state, offering instead multiple, fragmented representations of history that centre the Mizo experience.

The resolution in Jacob's novel emerges through divine intervention and a return to communal roots. Zorami's healing is catalysed by a spiritual epiphany—a redemptive song that enables her to move beyond trauma. This process does not signal passive acceptance but rather an active reintegration of the fractured self. As Lalremsiami argues:

"Zorami's recovery is not merely a psychological restoration but a theological and cultural homecoming that bridges the chasm between traumatic memory and communal belonging. Jacob suggests that the healing of the Mizo psyche is inextricably linked to the reclamation of indigenous epistemologies and the redemptive power of the Christian faith, which together provide a framework for articulating a fractured history. The domestic reconciliation between Zorami and Sanga thus functions as a metonym for the larger national project of Mizo hnam—a rebuilding rooted in the ethics of care and the rhythmic resilience of oral performance" (158).

The novel concludes with Zorami and her husband, Sanga, finding solace in one another, reinforcing the idea that the reconstruction of the Mizo nation must begin with the acknowledgement of shared pain, the restoration of interpersonal relationships, and the preservation of cultural memory.

Conclusion

The novels of P. Sivakami and Malsawmi Jacob function as essential documents of the Fourth World experience in India, articulating the struggles of communities that have been historically marginalised by both the state and mainstream society. Through a comparative analysis, it becomes evident that while the specificities of their conflicts differ—Sivakami grappling with the entrenched caste system and Jacob with the legacy of insurgency—their literary responses converge in significant and powerful ways.

The literary interventions of Sivakami and Jacob exemplify a Fourth World consciousness that resists the homogenising impulses of the postcolonial nation-state. By foregrounding the "double colonisation" of Dalit and Mizo subjects—oppressed both by external state structures and internal patriarchal hierarchies—these writers map a cartography of exclusion that transcends regional specificities. Their work collectively asserts that the subaltern's claim to sovereignty is predicated not only on political recognition but on the radical reclamation of cultural memory and the body from the systemic violence of mainstream Indian sociology (Rao 212).

Both authors identify the female body as the primary site upon which cultural conflicts are violently inscribed. Whether it is Thangam in Tamil Nadu or Zorami in Mizoram, the woman's body bears the burden of community honour, state violence, and patriarchal control. Yet neither author allows her protagonist to remain a passive victim. Through the figures of Gowri and Zorami, Sivakami and Jacob articulate a politics of resistance that is simultaneously personal and political. Sivakami foregrounds education and political mobilisation as strategies to dismantle the grip of caste and patriarchy, while Jacob emphasises spiritual healing and the preservation of cultural memory as necessary responses to historical trauma.

These novels enact a radical redistribution of the sensible by bringing the suppressed anger and lived experiences of marginalised communities into the public sphere. By narrating their own histories, Sivakami and Jacob challenge the hegemonic narratives of the Indian nation-state, asserting that genuine liberation can emerge only when the specific histories, traumas, and identities of Dalit and Indigenous women are acknowledged and addressed. Their works stand not merely as literary achievements but as ideological interventions aimed at social transformation, affirming that literature itself can function as a potent instrument in the struggle for dignity and justice.

Conflict of Interests: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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