

**AUTHORIAL SELF-DISSENT: SELF-REFLEXIVITY,
REPRESENTATION, AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN P. SIVAKAMI'S
*THE GRIP OF CHANGE AND GOWRI: AUTHOR'S NOTES***

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ABSTRACT

*This article looks at P. Sivakami's *The Grip of Change* alongside *Gowri: Author's Notes* to examine the principles of representing experiences of social exclusion. Located within Dalit feminist thought, the paper argues that shared caste and gender identity does not necessarily erase differences in position between the writer and the subject of representation. Linda Hutcheon's theory of self-reflexive fiction reveals Sivakami's retrospective examination of her writing processes. Linda Alcoff's work on "speaking for others" shows the ethical dilemmas surrounding social positions and the authority to represent others. This article proposes that Sivakami moves from self-reflexivity towards a deeper sense of responsibility in representing others by subjecting her earlier writing to critical scrutiny. It calls this practice "authorial self-dissent," where an author questions an earlier representation without claiming that the later version is definitive. Sivakami thus shifts the focus from self-representation to the ethical responsibility of representing others within marginalised communities.*

Keywords: P. Sivakami, Dalit Feminism, Self-Reflexivity, Representation, Authorial Self-Dissent.

Introduction

Dalit feminism emerged from the recognition that neither mainstream Indian feminism nor dominant strands of anti-caste politics could adequately account for the specific intersectional position of Dalit women. Challapalli Swaroopa Rani observes, "For the feminist movement in India, all women are the same...the problems of upper caste women and those of Dalit women are not the same in shape or in quality.... From the day of a Dalit woman's birth, this system creates difficulties for her, piles her with humiliations under all conditions, without the least acknowledgement of her humanity". (Rani, 2024, p. 357). Conventional feminist discourse has often understood patriarchy as a common form of oppression affecting women. But such an approach neglects the ways in which gender is created through caste, class, labour, sexuality, and access to material resources. Dalit women experience patriarchy deeply shaped by caste, making the intersectionality of caste, class and gender important. In addition, anti-caste politics have not always been free from patriarchal attitudes. The combined category of the "Dalit" can itself become masculinised when the experiences of Dalit men are allowed to represent those of the community as a whole. Dalit feminism consequently intervenes in two directions simultaneously. It challenges dominant caste feminism for universalising women's experience while at the same time questioning Dalit politics that give importance to caste struggles over gender inequality. Gopal Guru's influential argument that "Dalit women talk differently" brought this problem into focus by

insisting that differences in social location affect both experience and the authority to represent it (Guru, 1995, pp 2548-2550). Sharmila Rege later developed this intervention through the idea of a Dalit feminist standpoint, emphasising that Dalit women's experiences generate important forms of situated knowledge while cautioning against reducing standpoint to biological or identitarian authenticity. (Rege, 1998, pp. WS39–WS46). Dalit feminism therefore brings caste and feminism together, showing how they interact in shaping Dalit women. It interrogates the very categories through which experience, knowledge, and political representation are organised.

The political requirement of Dalit women's self-representation cannot be separated from histories in which marginalised women have been spoken about, interpreted, and represented by dominant social groups. Writing therefore becomes an important means of regaining control over their own stories. Yet the recognition of Dalit women's right to represent themselves does not require the category “Dalit woman” to be understood as uniform. Disparities of class, education, occupation, generation, region, sexuality, and mobility are important. So is access to institutional or cultural power, which continues to operate within shared experiences of caste and gender marginalisation.

P. Sivakami's *The Grip of Change* centres on Thangam, a poor Dalit widow who is sexually exploited by an upper-caste landlord and physically abused and subsequently seeks the help of Kathamuthu, an influential Dalit leader. Although Kathamuthu takes up her case and challenges upper-caste power, the novel gradually exposes the contradictions within his own position. He is a man who opposes caste oppression but also simultaneously exercises patriarchal authority over women within his family and community. His daughter Gowri emerges as an important critical presence, questioning both her father's authority and the gender inequalities that persist within Dalit social life. The novel therefore complicates any simple opposition between an oppressive upper caste and an oppressed Dalit community by showing how caste, gender, class, and power intersect within the lives of its characters. Gowri: Author's Notes, published alongside the English translation of *The Grip of Change*, are particularly significant because Sivakami returns to the people, experiences, and circumstances that informed the earlier novel. Through Gowri's perspective and retrospective reflection, the latter text draws attention to the relationship between lived experience and its transformation into fiction. It is therefore more than a continuation of *The Grip of Change*. Rather, it becomes a reconsideration of the earlier act of writing itself. By revisiting how people and experiences were represented, Sivakami makes authorship itself a subject of the later work.

P. Sivakami occupies an important position in contemporary Dalit literature because her fiction brings caste oppression into constant conversation with gender, sexuality, family, and power within the Dalit community itself. *The Grip of Change* is particularly significant in this respect. While the novel exposes violence produced by caste hierarchy, it refuses to present the Dalit community as a space that is liberated from patriarchy. Through Thangam, Kathamuthu, and Gowri, Sivakami shows that caste oppression and gender domination cannot be understood as separate structures. A Dalit man may himself be subjected to caste power while exercising patriarchal authority over women. Similarly, a Dalit woman may experience caste oppression differently because her caste is inseparable from gender, sexuality, class, and material helplessness. This intersection of caste and gender has understandably occupied an important place in Sivakami's writing. Yet the relationship

between *The Grip of Change* and *Gowri: Author's Notes* raises another question that deserves closer attention. Sivakami, does not merely represent marginalised female experience. In the second part of the narrative, she revisits the ideas and circumstances that shaped her writing. The result is an unusual literary work in which self-reflexivity becomes central, and the writer can look critically at the process by which experience is transformed into fiction.

Author's Notes intends the reader to reconsider the relationship between experience and representation. An event as experienced, as remembered, and ultimately narrated may not be the same. Experience is shaped by memory, selection and interpretation before it becomes a part of literary narrative. For instance, Gowri wonders: “Was there a connection between the character Thangam in *The Grip of Change*, who had been Udayar's concubine and her periamma's relationship with Reddiyar?” (Sivakami, 2006, p. 135). By drawing attention to these processes, Sivakami raises questions not only about what is represented but also about the authority through which representation occurs. This article asks what happens when a writer represents a woman who shares a similar experience of marginalisation but occupies a different social position as the woman climbs the social ladder. This question becomes particularly important when *The Grip of Change* is read alongside *Gowri: Author's Notes*. The later work places the earlier act of fictionalisation under retrospective scrutiny.

Two theoretical frameworks provide insight into this aspect of Sivakami's writing: Linda Hutcheon's concepts of metafiction and self-reflexivity, and Linda Alcoff's analysis of “The Problem of Speaking for Others” in her eponymous essay. In *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*, Hutcheon defines metafiction as fiction that makes readers aware of the author's deliberate construction of the narrative. Rather than presenting fiction solely as a mirror of reality, metafiction emphasises the storytelling process, including the selection of events, the narrator's role, and the author's choices in transforming experience into narrative (Hutcheon, 1980). In conventional realist fiction, these processes often remain hidden, allowing readers to experience the fictional world as coherent and apparently natural. Metafiction is fiction that draws attention to the fact that it is a constructed story. Instead of allowing readers to forget that they are reading something created by an author, metafiction makes them aware of the processes involved in its production. A metafictional text may therefore have a self-conscious narrator, comment on its own storytelling, question whether a story can adequately represent reality, revise an earlier version of events, or make the authorial process itself part of the narrative. Self-reflexivity happens when a text reflects on and questions its own process of representation. A self-reflexive text not only tells a story but also prompts us to consider how and why it was told in a particular way. This idea is especially important for Sivakami because, in *Gowri: Author's Notes*, she looks back at *The Grip of Change* and encourages the reader to rethink how experiences and people were shown in the earlier work.

In her essay “The Problem of Speaking for Others”, Linda Alcoff looks at representation in a new way. She explains that a person's social position shapes how their words are received and how they share others' experiences. Therefore, she wonders if marginalised communities should speak for themselves: “The creation of women's studies and African-American studies departments was founded on this very belief: that both the study of and the advocacy for the oppressed must come to be done principally by the oppressed themselves” (Alcoff, 1991–1992, p. 7).

Alcoff asks what it means when someone speaks for another person. She believes that factors like class, gender, education, and social power influence how we understand and present someone else's experience. Good intentions are not enough to overcome these differences. However, Alcoff does not say people should never speak for others, because staying silent can also allow inequalities to continue. She emphasises the importance of being aware of your own position and considering the impact of speaking on behalf of someone else (Alcoff, 1991–1992, pp. 24–26). Her argument is particularly useful for Sivakami because it raises an important question: Does sharing an experience of marginalisation necessarily confer on a writer the authority to represent another person whose experiences may differ from her own? Hutcheon thus helps us understand how Sivakami looks back on and questions her earlier representation, while Alcoff helps us examine the responsibility involved in representing others' experiences

By looking at these complementary viewpoints, *The Grip of Change* and *Gowri: Author's Notes* indicate that the act of self-representation does not solve the problem of representation; on the contrary, Sivakami adopts a kind of authorship that is ready to reconsider its own assumptions and limitations. The article refers to this practice as "authorial self-dissent", which is the ability of an author to critically examine a previous way of representing things without seeing the new position as final or beyond question.

Literature Review

Most research on Sivakami has focused on how her fiction explores the overlap of caste and gender, especially how Dalit women face both caste oppression and patriarchy in their communities. These studies have questioned views of Dalit politics that focus mainly on men. They also link Sivakami's work to the ideas of Gopal Guru and Sharmila Rege, who highlight the unique experiences of Dalit women and the problems with treating 'women' or 'Dalits' as single, uniform groups. In Sivakami's stories, these issues are clear in the character of Thangam, whose life is shaped by caste, gender, and her social and material situation. Researchers have also looked at embodiment, sexuality, female agency, and patriarchal power in Sivakami's writing. For example, Aditya Ghosh studies how the Dalit female body is controlled by both discipline and patriarchy. In his study, Ghosh uses Foucault's ideas of power and body politics to examine the subjugation of Dalit women. (Ghosh, 2021). Other scholars have pointed out the tension between fighting caste oppression and the ongoing gender inequality in Dalit communities. Overall, these studies show that caste and gender are key themes in *The Grip of Change*.

Critics have also noticed the unique connection between *The Grip of Change* and *Gowri: Author's Notes*. For instance, Simon (2023) examines works in terms of personal narrative, autobiography, style, and activism, and points out how Sivakami's text reflects on earlier storytelling. Sivakami's self-reflection has drawn attention from scholars. However, there is still a need to look more closely at the issue of authorial responsibility that comes from this reflection. When *Author's Notes* looks back at the choices made in *The Grip of Change*, Sivakami raises a bigger question about the right to turn another woman's experience into literature. This article explores that issue. It examines how Sivakami's later reflections on her earlier work complicate the relationship between representing herself and representing others in the same marginalised group. Linda Hutcheon's ideas about self-reflexive fiction help explain how *Author's Notes* shows the process of turning experience into narrative. Linda

Alcoff's work on speaking for others helps address ethical questions about a writer's social position and her right to represent others. This article brings together self-reflection and the ethics of representation to show how Sivakami questions her own earlier choices.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This study uses qualitative textual analysis and close reading to compare *The Grip of Change* and *Gowri: Author's Notes*. Rather than treating them as separate works, the analysis looks at how the later text revisits and reinterprets characters, experiences, memories, and narrative choices from the earlier novel. *Author's Notes* is not seen as a simple biographical appendix that explains the first book, but as a work that creates new tensions when it returns to earlier material. The work creates "authorial dissent" within the text. The analysis separates experience from representation. Events do not appear in literature exactly as they happened. Instead, memory, choices, narrative perspective, characterisation, and interpretation shape how real events become stories. This study examines moments in which the link between real or remembered experiences and their fictional versions is clear. Dalit feminist thought forms the historical and intellectual background for this analysis. Guru and Rege's work is important because it questions the idea that all "women" or all "Dalits" are the same, and instead highlights differences within shared experiences of marginalisation. With this background in place, the analysis uses two main theories. Hutcheon's ideas help explore how the two texts reflect on themselves and each other. Alcoff's perspective is then used to consider the ethics of speaking for and representing others. Each theorist's approach is discussed separately before their ideas are brought together in the conclusion.

Self-Reflexivity and the Construction of Experience: Reading Sivakami through Hutcheon

Linda Hutcheon's theory of self-reflexive fiction offers a useful way to look at the connection between *The Grip of Change* and *Gowri: Author's Notes*. In *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*, (1980), Hutcheon studies fiction that highlights how it is put together. These works challenge the idea that literature just reflects reality as it is. Instead, they show that stories are shaped by choices in selection, organisation, perspective, and language.

This difference is key to Sivakami's two works. *The Grip of Change* presents issues like caste hierarchy, gendered violence, and the contradictions of patriarchal power in a marginalised community. But when *Author's Notes* revisits the events and experiences from the earlier story, it shifts how readers relate to that story. What at first seems like a fictional world that helps us understand social reality later becomes something to be interpreted in its own right.

This shift highlights the difference between an event and how it is told in a story. Experience does not turn into literature on its own. The writer remembers, chooses, arranges, interprets, and gives meaning to certain details. Characters are shaped by what the story focuses on, and events gain meaning from how they connect to each other. Political meanings come from the writer's perspective. *Author's Notes* make these steps clearer by going back to the situations that led to the first book. In one of her reflective moments, the author asks questions about forces that may have shaped her as an individual and influenced her writing: "Had the novelist's childhood been charred by the burning flames of caste? What had she seen in the

light cast by those flames? Her experiences ought to be examined and analysed”. (Sivakami, 2006, p. 139).

Hutcheon's theory helps show why looking back at the story's construction is important. When we see how the earlier story was built, we can't treat *The Grip of Change* as a direct window into Dalit women's experiences. This does not mean the novel is untrue. The author of *The Grip of Change* observes: “Nothing in the novel was untrue. But the novel was false, she felt. Characters were mixed up with events not related to them. She wanted to share her experiences, but at the same time, protect her own self and identity”. (Sivakami, 2006, p. 150). This reminds us that literary truth is shaped by how it is told. Thangam, as a character, is not the same as real experience before it is written down. This difference matters because Thangam's suffering has strong political meaning in the novel. She is vulnerable due to her caste, gender, poverty, and widowhood. But once her experience is turned into a story, it is shaped by the writer's choices. Sivakami's later self-reflection raises a difficult but important question: what does it mean to turn another woman's vulnerability into a story? The author, turning to her own fraught relationship with her father, admits that she may have villainised him more than necessary. She admits that she may have presented Thangam's story differently: “That Thangam had merely been punished for her immoral behaviour and that Kathamuthu had intervened and succeeded in blowing it up into a caste-related violence”. (Sivakami, 2006, p.155)

Here, Sivakami's self-reflection goes beyond just showing how stories are made. Hutcheon focuses on fiction's ability to reveal its own structure. But for Sivakami, showing how a story is built also has an ethical side. The story is about real lives affected by caste and gender inequality. Revealing how the story is made also reveals the writer's role in shaping someone else's experience. As a result, *Author's Notes* changes how we understand the earlier novel. It does not just add more information about *The Grip of Change*. Instead, it asks us to read it again. We can now see that character development is a matter of choice, and what the story focuses on is a decision by the writer. The writer's political views are shown to come from a specific time and personal background, not from a neutral place. This does not mean that *Author's Notes* is more truthful than the first book. Thinking that way would just swap one kind of author certainty for another. The later work is also a story, shaped by memory, looking back, and interpretation. It cannot be separate from the same shaping process that the earlier novel points out.

So, the best way to see the relationship between the two books is as a productive tension. The later book changes how we read the first one, but it does not erase it. Both books are still open to the reader, and neither can fully claim to represent the experience on its own.

This is where the idea of authorial self-dissent comes in. Sivakami creates a later point of view from which she can rethink her earlier choices. Self-dissent is not just revision, because the earlier version is not removed. The difference between the two remains clear.

This structure matters because it splits the idea of authorial authority. The author is no longer seen as a single unchanging mind whose views remain the same over time. The person who wrote *The Grip of Change* and the person who later looks back on it are in different times and have different perspectives.

Speaking for Another: Sivakami and Alcoff's Ethics of Positionality

Linda Alcoff's "The Problem of Speaking for Others" moves the focus from how representation is formally constructed to its ethical impact. (Alcoff 1991). Alcoff questions the idea that we can judge speaking for others only by the speaker's intentions. Instead, she argues that representation depends on the speaker's social position and the effects their words have. The main issue is not just whether the speaker wants to help, but how power differences shape the act of speaking itself (Alcoff, 1991–1992, pp. 5–32)

This issue appears in *The Grip of Change* through Thangam's relationship with Kathamuthu. Kathamuthu has political and social power that Thangam lacks. Because of his position, he can step in to help her and turn her personal experience of injustice into a complaint that can be addressed by larger groups or institutions. His involvement can therefore be helpful.

However, Sivakami does not present this role as perfect. While Kathamuthu opposes caste domination, he still holds patriarchal power over the women of his household. The narrator tells us: "Gowri, leaning against the wall, kept her eyes on her short-tempered father. She was scared of him... She never brought any of her friends home... She was always afraid that even he would fly into a rage for no reason in front of her friends". (Sivakami, 2006, p. 9).

This problem becomes more complex when we look at Gowri. Gowri is not an outsider to the world she describes. She shares the same caste and gender as the women around her and is closely linked to their family and social lives. Still, having the same identity does not erase differences in position. Gowri's education, age, background, and language skills set her apart from Thangam. She is close to Thangam but not the same. This is where Alcoff's ideas are useful. The important question is not just whether someone is inside or outside the group they represent, but what power and knowledge differences exist even among people who seem to share an identity. "Gowri was plucking flowers from the jasmine creeper covering the compound wall. She kept stealing glances at Thangam. '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?'" (Sivakami, 2006, p. 14)

In fact, the difference between being represented by others and representing oneself is still very important. Alcoff does not solve this problem by telling people to stay silent. Choosing not to speak for others can also have political effects, especially when powerful voices already dominate. The ethical challenge is to pay attention to who is speaking and what their words do, rather than assuming we can avoid representation entirely. This is why authenticity by itself is not enough to judge ethical representation. Authenticity usually asks if the writer has real, lived experience with the community they write about. Sivakami does have this kind of closeness. However, being close does not mean fully understanding someone else's experience. A more helpful idea is accountability and those she represents. It recognises that representation might be needed for political reasons, even if it is not ethically perfect. The narrator asks: "Does the novel reflect her desire to seek answers for the numerous questions generated by life? Or does it reflect an arrogance that constricts life within her narrow understanding and limited knowledge? Does her work have literary merit?" (Sivakami, 2006, p. 181)

Conclusion

When we read *The Grip of Change* alongside Gowri: Author's Notes we see how Sivakami's approach to representation grows in ways that go beyond just caste and gender intersectionality. Both works focus on the oppression of Dalit women, but putting them together raises new questions. Sivakami eventually examines how turning marginalised experiences into literature is itself a complex act. Hutcheon helps explain why this shift matters. Author's Notes shows the choices, memories, interpretations, and constructions behind the earlier story. The question of representation becomes important here. Representation can help a marginalised person gain political power, but it can also shift the power to interpret her story to someone else. Gowri's role makes things even more complex because she is both an insider and a mediator. She shares caste and gender with Thangam, which brings her closer, but differences in education, age, experience, and cultural authority still set them apart.

These two texts challenge the usual story in marginalised literature, where the goal is to move from being represented by others to speaking for oneself. This is where the idea of authorial self-dissent becomes helpful. It means that an author can later question the ideas behind her earlier work. This is more than just being self-aware or making changes. The original version stays alongside the new one, so the disagreement is kept within the author's own writing. The question of accountability becomes important. Her text shows that authorial self-dissent is not about getting rid of authority, but about making it open to ongoing criticism. In this way, the ethical value of Sivakami's self-reflection is not in perfecting representation, but in keeping the right to represent always open to challenge.

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