

Intertextuality, Multiple Voices, and Ambiguity in P.Sivakami's
Author's Notes and Nawal El Saadawi's *The Fall of the Imam*

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Abstract

P. Sivakami and Nawal El Saadawi are bureaucrats-turned writers who espouse the cause of women who are victims of patriarchy and display remarkable agency and purpose in subverting the systems of oppression prevalent in their respective local settings. The protagonists of the novels selected for the study ultimately succumb to the system, but they do not give up without a fight. The novels chosen for analysis in this paper are P. Sivakami's *Author's Notes* and Nawal El Saadawi's *The Fall of the Imam*. This paper analyses the novels

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from a postmodern perspective and attempts to bring out the elements of intertextuality, multiple voices and ambiguity in these two novels.

Keywords: Intertextuality, Ambiguity, Subversion, Multiple Voices

P.Sivakami is an Indian bureaucrat turned writer and activist. She is the first Tamil Dalit woman writer to have published a novel called *Pazhaiyana Kazhithalumin* 1989. It was translated into English as *The Grip of Change* and came out in 2006. P.Sivakami's second novel *Asiriyar Kurippu* was published in Tamil in 1997. The English translation of the book came out as *Author's Notes* in 2006. *Author's Notes* was published nearly ten years after the first novel and the author goes through the painful process of dissecting her first novel. It is an excruciating process whereby the author analyses her motives and questions her portrayal of certain characters in a particular manner. The author returns to the village of her origin as an educated, financially independent single woman. The novel depicts the journey of a Dalit girl from an oppressed background to empowerment and greater understanding of the discriminatory caste system in operation in modern Tamil Nadu.

Egyptian doctor turned writer Nawal El Saadawi's Arabic novel *The Fall of the Imam* was published in 1987 and the English translation came out in 1988. Saadawi is a firebrand writer, feminist and political activist who has depicted the vicious cycle of oppression prevalent in the rural villages of Egypt that perpetually victimises and exploits women from underprivileged backgrounds. Saadawi's novel describes the sexual exploitation of women in harrowing detail and her novel *The Fall of the Imam* is a deeply disturbing novel about the powerful Imam of an Egyptian village who ruthlessly indulges in sexual exploitation of the poor women of the village and also delivers holy sermons. Both Sivakami and Nawal El Saadawi portray the patriarchal system in operation in their respective settings and use

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postmodern techniques of fantasy, repetition of events, critical self-examination and ambiguity to convey patriarchal oppression.

Brian McHale in *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodernism* says about Thomas Pynchon's landmark postmodern novel *Gravity's Rainbow* published in 1973 that, "It is notoriously difficult to read, taxing our ingenuity and interpretative resources to the utmost. We must read between the lines, fill in the gaps, link up widely dispersed details, solve puzzles, and distinguish solid clues from red herrings" (14). McHale says that in Thomas Pynchon's novel *Gravity's Rainbow* the reader slips into "characters' hallucinations and fantasies, often without knowing that we've done so until much later ; we mistake subjective realities for the outside world" (16).

All the features of the two novels mentioned by McHale are clearly evident in P.Sivakami's novel *Author's Notes* and Nawal El Saadawi's *The Fall of the Imam*. Sivakami objectively scrutinises and dissects her first novel *The Grip of Change* in her second novel *Author's Notes*. *Author's Notes* moves back and forth between the two books and there are elements of intertextuality, when she ponders over her depiction of certain characters in her first novel and tries to analyse her motives in depicting them in a particular way. She subjects the novel, her consciousness and her conscience to a rigorous analysis and then sometimes arrives at unpleasant conclusions.

The unity of time and place is pushed into the background and other concerns and features are foregrounded. Throughout the *Author's Notes* Sivakami constantly scrutinises her earlier novel and she keeps voicing aloud doubts about the way she has depicted certain characters and left out some of them. This raises doubts in the mind of the reader as to whether Sivakami herself is Gowri, the protagonist of *Author's Notes* and *The Grip of Change*. In *The Grip of Change* Sivakami distances herself from the narrative and it is

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presented in the form of an objective, third-person account. Sivakami's *Author's Notes* begins thus:

She was at the town mentioned in the novel, the *Grip of Change*. Time destroyed all traces of existence. Burnt bricks remained as meagre evidence of a civilization that flourished on the banks of the Indus river. Her memories had faded, she only remembered in snatches. She had come to gather information about the author of the *Grip of Change*. (131)

She wonders about the images she had depicted in the earlier novel and her cryptic comment about the civilization on the banks of the Indus river creates ambiguity. She writes in *Author's Notes* that everything looks different from how it had been portrayed in her first novel. She writes, "There had never been samandhis in the garden in the back yard mentioned in the novel" (131). She proceeds to describe her meeting with her large family and comments, "The year she wrote the novel she had twelve brothers and sisters, and in turn they had approximately two dozen children. Why were there only two siblings in the novel?" (131). Sivakami moves back and forth between *Author's Notes* and *The Grip of Change* and closely interrogates the earlier text and undertakes a frank introspection of her motives in depicting events and characters. Sivakami writes, "Pride crept on to Amma's face when they began to discuss the author of the novel, the *Grip of Change*. Her brother's wife looked at her with hatred. Or did she? How can anyone be sure?" (132). This query of the author about being unable to correctly gauge people's perceptions and attitudes creates doubts in the reader's mind. Several questions arise. Has the author been truthful in her depiction? Why has she chosen to create ambiguity about the protagonist's identity by taking over Gowri's voice in *The Grip of Change* and replacing it with her own voice in the *Author's Notes*? There are several such unanswered questions that rise to the surface while reading Sivakami's *Author's Notes*.

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The author-protagonist of *Author's Notes* goes out of her home to meet others in her village and comes across her 'periappa' called Kuttaiappan. His account of her father's brother Kalimuthuperiappan once accusing her of stealing a four-anna coin from his pocket embarrasses her. His wife had announced it to everyone. Upon hearing this the author wonders, "Is that why Gowri, the girl in the novel, had such a poor opinion of Kalimuthu 'periappa'? The novelist and the character in the novel Gowri, must be one and the same person" (134). Sivakami describes her meetings with the people on whom she had based the characters of her earlier novel and also voices her doubts and queries about her depiction of them in *The Grip of Change*. She constantly searches for her actual motive in depicting characters the way she has done. The creative process is unravelled and the reader along with the author is on shifting sands. Everything is not as it seems and Sivakami seems to be gently nudging the reader to remind them that there are no universal truths and everything is a matter of one's perspective and attitude at a particular moment.

Brian McHale has pointed out in *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodernism* with respect to Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* that our "quests for reliable knowledge run aground" (16). McHale while writing about the "tools with which postmodernism would be shaped" (21) writes about the "extreme self-consciousness about art-making, a willingness to reflect on *everything* about the process and its products" (21). Sivakami in *Author's Notes* displays this "extreme self-consciousness" while analysing her first novel *The Grip of Change* in her second novel *Author's Notes* and she reflects on the process that made her write the way she did.

There are multiple instances of intertextuality in *Author's Notes* and Sivakami weaves multiple worlds through her narrative. The conflicting versions of characters and events create many worlds within the narrative of *Author's Notes*. Sivakami constantly interrogates her motives and intentions and questions her purpose. The ever transient nature of the

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narrative creates a decentred world where there are multiple voices that give rise to multiple interpretations. Throughout the *Author's Notes*, Sivakami interrupts the creative process by expressing her inner doubts, worries and fears. She constantly prods herself, her intentions and her impulse that made her portray Kathamuthu, the influential Dalit leader of *The Grip of Change* in an unsavoury light. In *Author's Notes* her Kuttaiappan 'periappa' very fondly recalls the author-protagonist's father Kathamuthu requesting the latter to tell him stories. Sivakami writes, "In the novel, Gowri's father was never shown expressing respect to elders. In describing Kathamuthu's character, why had she paid so little attention to rudimentary truth?" (134). In this instance, doubts arise in the mind of the reader about the author's misrepresentation of Kathamuthu's character. Another query that comes up is regarding the identity of the speaker in *Author's Notes*. Are Gowri and Sivakami one and the same?

Sivakami berates herself for analysing her novel and wonders, "If Kuttaiappan could enthusiastically narrate stories without ever questioning their premises, why did she have to try so hard to justify her work? Look at her! Here she was, analysing her novel, trying to fit all the pieces into logical patterns. To whom did she owe explanations?" (134). *Author's Notes* is a novel that abounds in postmodern features and through the narrative strategy employed by the author foregrounds and challenges patriarchal structures of oppression.

Nawal El Saadawi's writes in the Preface to her novel *The Fall of the Imam* published in 2009 about carrying the characters and the concept of this novel in her head since she was a young girl studying in school. She writes:

During the last ten years it has given me no respite. The characters stared at me while I was awake, and even when I slept. If I travelled inside my country, or abroad, they were always there, watching me wherever I went. They were there when I met the Iranian Shahbani Shiraz who told me the story of her 'little girl' raped by her jailers. There with Fatima Tag al-Sirr, the Sudanese woman, when she took me to visit the 'Association for

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People with Amputated Hands' so that I could see her boy and his companions with their hands cut off at the wrist in accordance with Shari'a. There during the three months I spent with I'tidal Mahmoud and other young Egyptian girls in a prison cell.

Nawal El Saadawi's *The Fall of the Imam* is a difficult and complex novel about a young and beautiful orphan girl Bint Allah. She claims that she is the daughter of the powerful Imam who had raped her mother. Bint Allah's claims of being the Imam's daughter anger the Imam and his cohorts and they try to do away with her. But the complexity in the novel arises when the deaths of the girl and her mother are repeatedly described, throughout the novel. Bint Allah is sentenced to be stoned to death for committing adultery. But then the Imam himself dies and the novel remains cryptically inconclusive. *The Fall of the Imam* is a perplexing novel that keeps the reader guessing about the actuality of the events and characters depicted in the book. The first chapter of the novel 'The Search Begins' begins with the protagonist, who calls herself Bint Allah or daughter of God running to save herself from her attackers. They threw something at her and she fell down. But when she turned around to look at them, "they disappeared like frightened fish" (11). Then again, in the second chapter 'They Cannot Read' Saadawi describes Bint Allah being chased by the powerful Imam, his Chief of Security and a couple of other men. All of them had hairy bodies and they carried stones or some other sharp weapons in their hands. Saadawi's next line about Bint Allah is, "This was where she had been born, and this was where she died. She would have escaped them had she not halted to fill her breast with the smell of her land" (15). The very next paragraph begins thus: "I halted at the foot of the elevated strip of land between the river and the sea, on the way from my home to the front for the first time since we were defeated in the last war and my mother was killed" (15). She proceeds to climb up the hill and calls out her sister's name, for she believes that her time would come later. The reader is left in the lurch because it is ambiguous as to what event is expected to occur in Bint

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Allah's sister's life and how the protagonist can be so sure that the said event will occur in her sibling's life. The reader is unable to understand the sequence of events and the authenticity of the action described in the novel. Moreover, the narrative slips between first person and third person narration and creates doubts about who is the speaker.

In the next paragraph in the same chapter El Saadawi writes that "She would have escaped had she not been halted by the smell of the land and the sea, bringing back her whole life in one moment" (15). This 'she' is hit by a bullet from behind and she falls to the ground, bleeding slowly and eventually dying. The only witness to her death was her dog, the birds, the cocks, the crows and the donkeys. Soon other barking dogs also joined and it was still not dawn. Then El Saadawi writes, "She was a girl on her own, all alone with her dog; her sisters were to follow later. The world was as it is today" (16). Nawal El Saadawi's novel *The Fall of the Imam* is a deeply disturbing novel that makes use of postmodern techniques to highlight the cyclical nature of oppression and exploitation. The repeated deaths of the Imam and the rape and violation of the mother and daughter duo in the novel also emphasise the prevalence of a powerful network of sexual oppression and violation that continuously preys on vulnerable women in countries across the world.

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