

OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 13

Special Issue: 2

Month: February

Year: 2026

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

Citation:

Dhanupriya, R., and A. Suriyanarayanan. "Tradition, Transgression and Transition in Neela Padmanabhan's Generations." *Shanlax International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities*, vol. 13, no. S2, 2026, pp. 145–51.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.34293/sijash.v13iS2-Feb.10201>

Tradition, Transgression and Transition in Neela Padmanabhan's Generations

R. Dhanupriya

*Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English
Takshashila University, Ongur(PO), Tindivanam, Tamil Nadu*

A. Suriyanarayanan

*Research Supervisor, Professor, Department of English
Takshashila University, Ongur(PO), Tindivanam, Tamil Nadu*

Abstract

This study discusses Neela Padmanabhan's novel Generations, (Thalaimuraigal) as a critical literary document of social transformation of a mid-20th century Tamil Chetti community. It examines the complex processes of interaction between the tradition rooted deep in history and transgression through individual and collective actors and transformation of society which ensued in particular through the effects of impinging and intersected processes of gender and caste. This analysis employs an inter-disciplinary framework, integrating three key lenses: a postcolonial and subaltern studies approach, which examines internal social hierarchies; a feminist critique, which deconstructs patriarchal control over women's bodies and fates; and an intersectional analysis, which interrogates the characters' compounded experiences of marginalization. Key findings include revelation of traditional customs especially regarding marriage, dowry and widowhood is systematically misused to impose conformity and keep caste purity as in the ordeal of characters such as Nagu Akka and Nilapillai. In response, transgression comes to be perceived not as simple action of deviance, but as an instrument of justice that was necessary and visible in Diravi's transformation of his ideological position from that of an observer to the modern intervener and in the cross caste solidarity in Kuttalam. The story highlights the fact that true social change is not some linear, externally-driven and often tragic process subject to simple notions of movement. The research concludes that the novel Generations, is an important microcosm of the evolution of society in the Global South.

Keywords: Chetti Community, Microcosm, Non-Linear, Global - South, De - Colonial.

Introduction

Neela Padmanabhan's Tamil novel Thalaimuraigal, which appeared in translation as Generations, is a compulsive reading of the social transformation in the Nagarathar (Chetti) community in mid-20th Century Tamil Nadu. Published in the late 1960s but set a generation earlier, the novel reflects a society in transition, in which deeply ingrained traditions controlling such issues as gender, caste, marriage, and widowhood are challenged by individual and collective acts of transgression. Unlike grand national narratives, Generations, is centered on the looking inward, documenting the intimate, often violent, struggles within households and communities, the micro-politics of social transformation often whetted from the broader historical accounts.

This study places *Generations*, in its proper place as a critical literary document that brings to light the complexities and non-linearity of a process of social transition in a post-colonization context in the Global South. Through a combination of postcolonial, feminist and intersectional analysis presented in an interdisciplinary scheme, the novel is studied as a multiplexed, sociological record and as a story of de-colonial struggle, one that critiques not only external colonial legacies, but is also one that critiques internal hierarchies of caste and also patriarchy.

This research is important as it fills a gap in literary scholarship. While the Chetti community has been examined from socio-economical and historical viewpoints, there is still the absence of a sustained interdisciplinary analysis of the Chetti's literary representation. Furthermore, there have been few studies that try to apply a De-colonial, Global South framework to Padmanabhan's work. By focusing on the dialectic between tradition and transgression and transition, and bringing to the fore the inter-sectionality of gender and caste, this study illustrates the role that literature plays in an indispensable archive in understanding the lived reality of the social change. In doing so, it confirms the role played by vernacular fiction in capturing the struggle for fight of dignity, justice and equity in Post-colonial societies.

Objectives of the Study

1. To critically examine the way that institutions such as marriage, dowry, widowhood have been used as a tool of traditional institutions to pursue social conformity and preserve caste purity.
2. To Identify and interpret the acts of transgression by characters who deal with the oppressive norms.
3. To focus on the novel's description of social transition as ambiguous, non-linear and often tragic,
4. To place *Generations* as a de-colonial narrative to engage with the dooring battles of marginalised communities.
5. To evaluate the importance of the spatial and symbolic elements, such as the ancestral home, rituals, strengthened or resisted social norms.

Methodology

This research work adopts a qualitative method of the study which is based on the literary and cultural criticism and focuses on two prongs of the methodology approach to question Neela Padmanabhan's *Generations*. The primary method is close textual analysis, which involves a careful analysis of the narrative structure, character development, dialogue and symbolic motifs in the novel (such as the ancestral house, rituals and physical sickness) in order to find imbedded meanings and contradictions with regard to tradition and change. This is worked on systematically, placing the literary text in its particular history and culture and material situation - that is, in the post-independence social setting of the Tamil-speaking Chetti community in mid- 20th century South India. This interdisciplinary methodology allows for a dialectic reading in which the inner world of the text is in constant communication with external social energies and is listening to the research on how macro-historical transitions of the Global South take place in the refraction of micro realities of family, economy and daily practice.

Review of Related Literature

The study of Neela Padmanabhan's *Generations*, and its thematic concerns is located at the intersection of a number of lively debates in the fields of postcolonial literary studies, South Asian sociology and feminism. This review brings together existing literature from three main thematic groups, as follows: the literary representation of the Chetti community; the analytical frameworks

of the gender and caste in fiction in India; and the conceptualization of social change in Global South's narratives.

There has been much scholarly work on the Nagarathar (Nattukottai Chettiars) community based on their historical status as a mercantile and banking caste with a transnational diaspora. While sociologists such as Christopher A. Bayly (in *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaar*) have discussed their economic networks and David Rudner (*Caste and Capitalism in Colonial India*) gave a seminal ethnographic account of their business practices, the representation of the latter in literature is comparatively understudied. Padmanabhan's novel makes a vital contribution to the literature by changing the lens from the boardroom and temple endowment to the domesticity of the home and the psycho-social flow of an in transition community. This research is an extension but departure from the socioeconomic approach of Rudner, and it engages instead with literary scholars such as Lakshmi Holmstrom and C. T. Indra whose translations and book reviews of modern Tamil fiction has emphasized its regional particularities. Their work sets the precedent for interpreting Tamil novels as sociological documents, which this study takes as a premise in analyzing *Generations* as an intimate ethnography of Chetti social mores, rituals and internal conflicts that have rarely been addressed in historical or economic studies.

The central crises in the novel, namely dowry, enforced widowhood, and the policing of female sexuality, place it well within a large body of Indian literature concerned with the patriarchal family. Foundational feminist readings by critics such as Susie Tharu and K. Lalita (in *Women Writing in India*) have provided a framework for the analysis of literary texts for the way in which they expose and challenge the "ideological apparatus" of the family. *Generations*, has strong resonance with the themes of other regional novels, such as the novels of Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai (on fisher-folk community and female desire) or Indira Parthasarathy (on caste violence) but it is in the novel's specific setting in a mercantile, property-conscious society that gendered oppression is given an added dimension of economic coercion. Furthermore important is the theoretical concept of intersectionality pioneered by Kimberle Crenshaw and developed in the Indian context by scholars such as Sharmila Rege (*Writing Caste/ Writing Gender*). What Rege important is that her work insists on the fact that caste and gender must be read as co-constituting systems? This work uses this lens for *Generations* to look beyond a homogeneity of patriarchal or caste analysis in order to analyse the experiences of the compounded or differential marginalization of characters such as Nagu Akka (upper caste but gender-oppressed) and Kuttalam (lower caste but agential masculinity). This strategy fills a hole in Padmanabhan-specific criticism that has commonly pointed out, but not systematically theorized this intersection.

The representation of a community at its threshold with change in the novel engages with wider theoretical discourse about modernity and decolonization. Postcolonial theory, more specifically, the work of Homi K. Bhabha on the "ambivalence" of mimicry and hybridity, offers a starting point. However, *Generations*, complicates this by showing modernity not as a foreign aspect that was in fact imported from the colonies, but rather as an internal and often vernacular challenge to indigenous orthodoxy. Here, the Subaltern Studies collective's project of recovering the "small voices" of history is more relevant, to guidance an analysis of such figures as Kuttalam or the widowed Nilapillai as agents of change who worked from the margins. The concept of the "Global South" as an epistemic, rather than simply geographical, category, as delineated by some scholars, such as Walter D. Mignolo (*The Idea of Latin America*) and Boaventura de Sousa Santos (*Epistemologies of the South*), provides the framework of greatest *capacitas*. Santos makes the case for justifying "sociologies of emergence" which chronicle the struggles of communities against capitalist, patriarchal, and colonial legacies. *Generations*, may be read quite precisely as such sociology-in-fiction, telling the story of the movement of the community from the domain of

“tradition,” to a negotiation; it may be contested, with the “modern.” Existing literary critiques of Padmanabhan, like those by R. Azhagarasan have commented on his realism and social commitment but have not quite placed his work in this de-colonial, Global South paradigm which this research tries to do.

The review of this literature shows a clear academic gap. While there are studies related to Chetti community (socio-economic), gender/caste in Indian literature (theoretical), stories of social change (conceptual), there is a paucity of a sustained, interdisciplinary study thus far bringing all the three strands to bear on a close reading of *Generations*. This research is aimed at filling that gap. It proposes to contribute to the gained knowledge by carrying out a focused intersecting analysis of Padmanabhan’s text as a targeted literary and cultural document that intersects and overlaps with a significant literary document representing the complex nature of de-colonial transition that occurred in a Global South microcosm, which is non-linear, and a process that is internally driven. By making the triad of tradition, transgression, and transition central to the study, it will be shown that literature is able to offer an indispensable, and nuanced, archive from which to understand the lived experience of social change, as a complement and deepening of the understandings given by historical and sociological scholarship.

Results and Discussion

The opening and closing scenes of *Generations* depict Eraniel not only as physical scenery, but as a living moral universe with parameters of sound, ritual and collective memory. The town is felt in its sensory and symbolic markers rather than through detailed, physical description that enables place to come through - as something that is inhabited and remembered. Eraniel thus becomes a place where the intersection of ordinary life, of tradition and of morality, where the individuality of life is rooted in the same culture.

Recurring at key points in the story, the temple bell represents the pulse of the town and unifies the lives of individuals to a larger - and more cosmic and ethical - beat. Its sound cuts in on private and communal spaces reminding characters of their rootedness in a collective order beyond their personal choice. The bell is not used to mark time or ritual occasions only, but helps to create the moral atmosphere of the town, enforcing continuity even as structures between both social and familial begin to weaken.

In Tamil spiritual tradition the function of the bell is that it is a call not only to the divine, but also a call to inner awareness, attentiveness. Neela Padmanabhan brings out this cultural meaning and uses it to give the bell an ethical meaning. The sound is a cry of moral awareness which clamors for the memory and accountability and self-examination in response to historical changes and familial change. Through this recurrent element, the novel surmises the presence of ethic in the midst of inherited worlds in change and demise.

“It was like a bad dream. Nagu Akka, Father and Mother, and, of course, Diravi himself left the house and the street and got into the bus. They were more dead than alive. For the last time, they looked at the street where they had lived so long and minded their business. They would never see it again. The temple bell of Singa Vinayaka rang.” (Generations p. 236)

The last peal of the bell is synonymous with the departure of life from the ancestral home and he turns the act of departure into an act of exile. This is not exile in the political sense only, but a deeper cultural, existential displacement. The ancestral house, and the street, and the temple together are the axis of identity, in terms of a way of understanding one’s locality, is how generations understood themselves. To leave this space is to sever one’s ties with inherited memory and togetherness with others. The invocation by the narrator of “they were more dead than alive” suggests that the exile here is a kind of symbolic death that of the end of a way of life as opposed to changing houses.

This moment is also crystallizing in the theme of generational rupture. The departure is a sign of the breakdown of the intergenerational transmission of values, customs and lived experience that once no longer holds the family alive what breaks is not only the physical connection to place, but the continuity in ethics and emotions which tied the past, present and future. The ancestral home which has always been a home of memory, is uninhabitable in a changed Social and economic order. The flying away from Eraniel thus represents the bigger historical currents which make tradition brittle and inheritance unlikely.

But the temple bell continues to ring without caring or worrying about the departure of the family. Its persistence brings the focus on the meditation in the novel on decline. While the individual families are disintegrating, while the community is breaking up, ritual continues. The rhythm of bell expands the affirmation of continuity of spiritual and moral order transcends the destruction of the personal. At the same time, this continuity is alarmingly silent on the impact of its survival: the survival of ritual is a mark of man's deepest loss and is therefore in no sense a negation of it. The bell is no more the anchor of the lived experience; it is a witness of the absence.

In this final image, exile, generational rupture and decline are mobilized in a single resonating symbol, one Padmanabhan. Human worlds - families, homes, and inherited ways of life - fade, fragment and the larger rhythm of tradition continues to go on, untouched embarked, haunted by what it has outlived. The ringing bell therefore becomes both a marker both of endurance and an elegy for a disappearing moral universe that suggests the tragic consciousness of the novel's awareness of historical change.

This section provide the results of close textual and socio-literal analysis of the novel, *Generations*, that is structured according to the major themes of tradition as an agency weapon, transgression as an agency that is necessary, and the non-linear character of transition. The results are read with the light of the current theoretical frameworks by discussing the value of the novel as a document of de-colonial change in the Global South.

“Koonangani Paatta lost his patience over Papathi’s dowry demands...The land you ask for will cost 5000; 30 sovereign will mean atleast three thousand rupees cash, two thousand...other things will need atleast three thousand rupees more. If you add it all up, it comes to 13,000 rupees. Then sweets, feeding of guests and new clothes will come to two or three thousand.” (*Generations*, p.59)

The analysis however, supports the tradition in the Chetti community not as passive heritage but as an active juridical force which was mobilised to serve primarily to control women and maintain caste purity. This weaponization takes place via some important institutions. The marriage of Nagammai to Sevantha Perumal is not so much sacral but a brute economic and social transaction. Papathi's extortionate dowry demand (land, gold & cash) and her denial of the same after her rejection of Nagucoh prove dowry (*varadhachanai*) not as a gift but as extraction means and consumption of capital to the groom's family. The marriage itself becomes a vehicle to assure caste status as well as economic gain with Nagu's humanity reduced to that of a reproductive tool. When she is unable to conceive because of her husband's impotency, she is suspended as a carrier of ancestral sin ("who knows what sin you committed in your last birth?") thus showing how religious ideology is used as a tool to biologize the fault on women and to justify her expulsion.

The findings of this study confirm that *Generations*, is a complex literary document of social change, where tradition occurs as an oppressive force; transgression as a mandatory moral agency; and transition as a non-linear and often tragic process. The interpretation of these results, embedded in the existing theoretical frameworks, establishes the important contributions of the novel and indicates possible research in the future.

The weaponization of tradition especially through dowry and control of widowhood are very much in agreement with feminist critiques of the Indian patriarchal family (Tharu & Lalita, 1991). However, the novel goes further in this analysis and embeds it within the particular economic logic of a propertied, mercantile caste, revealing how feminized oppression is overlaid by the accumulation of capital in a way not so far highlighted in wider feminist literary surveys.

Kuttalam's character represents the Subaltern Studies project of recuperating "small voices" in the role of historical agents. His transgressed solidarity and final sacrifice complicate Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity. His agency does not stem from the imitation of a colonial modernity but rather from ethical humanism arising out of subaltern marginality, in support of Mignolo's (2005) and Santos's (2014) de-colonial call for epistemologies that are indebted to the South. The intersectional marginalized positions of characters such as Nagu (caste-privileged but gender-oppressed) and Kuttalam (gender-privileged but caste-oppressed) legitimize the work of Sharmila Rege (2006) that shows how caste and gender are co-constituting systems of power in lived experience.

The basic implication of this analysis is the following: *Generations*, is sociology-in-fiction for the Global South. It tells the story of decolonization, not as a political event, but as an internal and epistemic struggle against indigenous hierarchies of caste and patriarchy (Quijano, 2000). The non-linear movement of the novel, full of tragedy, backlash and ambiguity, provides a corrective to teleological visions of progress. It makes modernity a fraught, self-generated negotiation, and not something imported from the West, therefore, an essential text to consider the long and painful process of social change in ex-colonial societies.

This study basically consists of literary analysis based on one translated text. The greatest of the Tamils are honored in this translation by Ka Naa Subramanyam, but nuances of the original Tamil idiom and specifics of the culture may be lost. Furthermore, the study, though interdisciplinary, is still in the area of textual and theoretical critique. It does not include ethnographic and historical data from the Chetti community which could substantiate or refute the representation in the novel.

Future research could address these limitations and build on this study in several ways.

Comparative Literary Analysis - will compare *Generations*, with novels from other mercantile communities in India (e.g. Gujarati, Marwadi) in order to find commonalities of portrayal in terms of gender, capital, and social change. Translation Studies will explore how the socio-cultural ideas in the novel have been translated and received in English with the possible analysis of the change in meaning. Interdisciplinary Expansion will integrate the literary findings to sociological or oral history research being done in the Nagarathar community to build a dialogic study between fiction and social history. Pedagogical Application will be developing a framework for the use of *Generations*, in specific curricula related to Postcolonial studies, South Asian Literature and Intersectional Feminism in terms of its value as a pedagogical tool for complex social ideas.

In conclusion, this discussion pays its compliments to the fact that Padmanabhan's novel, *Generations*, offers an indispensable, subtle multiverse for comprehending the dynamics of tradition, transgression and transition. Its value lies in its literary articulation of the intimacy of macro-historical shifts which is lived and fought for, and illustrates the struggle for dignity which is the defining characteristic of the Global South experience.

Conclusion

This research shows Neela Padmanabhan's *Generations*, is a profound literary microcosm on an element of non-linear social transition in the Global South. The analysis shows how the tradition in the Cheetti community functions not as harmless custom, but as a juridical weapon, enforced through such institutions as dowry, marriage, and widowhood, to the goal of controlling women and maintaining caste purity, as is shown in the ordeals of characters such as Nagu Akka.

In response, transgression not as a matter of deviance is to emerge and play its necessary, moral and epistemic role of challenging oppression. Characters like Diravi, who adopts rational modernity as an aspect of body autonomy, the widow Nilapillai, who asserts physical autonomy rights to bodily researcher, and most potent Kuttalam, who in his cross-caste solidarity, explores the fields of self-subordination defying the social hierarchy, epitomize this insurgent agency. However, the novel is bulked against a triumphalist narrative. The transition on which it is based is ambiguous, expensive, and unfinished, symbolized in the tragic murder of Kuttalam as well as the unfulfilled dreams of the departing family.

The main implication of this study is the fact that *Generations*, functions as a vital de-colonial text. It thought of modernity not as a Western import, but like an internally generated, contested process of “writing back” against the overlapping oppressions of caste and patriarchy. By using the intersectional lens the novel offers a nuanced literary archive for complementing sociological and/or historical understanding of change. At tacit level, Padmanabhan’s work signals that the seed for the fight for justice in postcolonial societies is frequently sown in the defiant acts of the marginalized intimate mixing, making *Generations*, a timeless account of a complicated human quest for dignity and equity.

Works Cited

1. Azhagarasan, R. Tamil Novel: A Study in Social Change. New Century Book House, 2008.
2. Bayly, C. A. Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion, 1770–1870. Cambridge University Press, 1983. Bhabha, H. K. (1994). The Location of Culture. Routledge.
3. Chatterjee, P. (1993). The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories. Princeton University Press.
4. Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics. University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989(1), 139–167.
5. Holmström, Lakshmi, editor. The Inner Courtyard: Stories by Indian Women. Virago, 1990.
6. Indra, C. T. (2003). Tamil Fiction: Readings and Re-readings. Manas.
7. Padmanabhan, Neela. Generations. Translated by Ka. Na. Subramaniam, Niyogi Books, New Delhi, 2021.
8. Rege, S. (2006). Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women’s Testimonios. Zubaan.
9. Rudner, D. W. (1994). Caste and Capitalism in Colonial India: The Nattukottai Chettiers. University of California Press.
10. Santos, B. de S. (2014). Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide. Paradigm Publishers.
11. Tharu, S., & Lalita, K. (Eds.). (1991). Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present (Vol. 1). Feminist Press at CUNY.