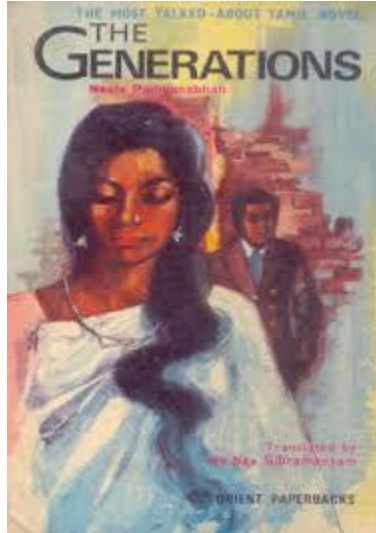


**Subjugation of Women for Generations - Portrayed in
*The Generations and in Blood Ties***

Dr. N. Sowmia Kumar, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.



Abstract

We know very well that a society cannot develop without the development of its womenfolk. Hindu scriptures also accord due respect to women and assert that God lives where women are worshipped.

The Indian society practices an extreme form of patriarchy from time immemorial. It is based on male predominance and female subordination. In such a male dominated society, women do not occupy an enviable position. With regard to the position of women in Indian history and culture, no nation is supposed to have held their women in higher esteem than the Hindus. But this notion has been proved to be a fallacy, a complete myth!

Indian society praises the wife-mother role of woman, but treats her no better than the economic and sexual property of her husband. The novels taken up for the study portray in detail how men and women are treated differently according to the prevailing social norms. The men

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oppress the women, and they are not allowed to lead their lives as they want, since men rule over them.

Women, who are oppressed, are forced to forfeit their freedom; therefore, they adjust themselves to life as the 'Other', while men can claim subjectivity for themselves. The novels deal with the treatment of women by society, including all the oppression meted out to them.

Keywords: Oppression of women, patriarchal society, gender inequality, male dominance, divorce and remarriage, dowry system

The Generations



Neela Padmanabhan

Courtesy: <http://www.pustakalibrary.in/neela-padmanabhan>

The Generations is set in the 1940's. The plot of the novel revolves around the Tamil-speaking Eranial Chettiyar community of Kanyakumari District, on the border between Tamil Nadu and Kerala. It tells the story of this community taking as its time-span almost twenty five years.

Diravi grows up essentially as a person who would rather restrain himself than blow up, in the face of the worst provocation. As he matures, he begins to ask questions that generally

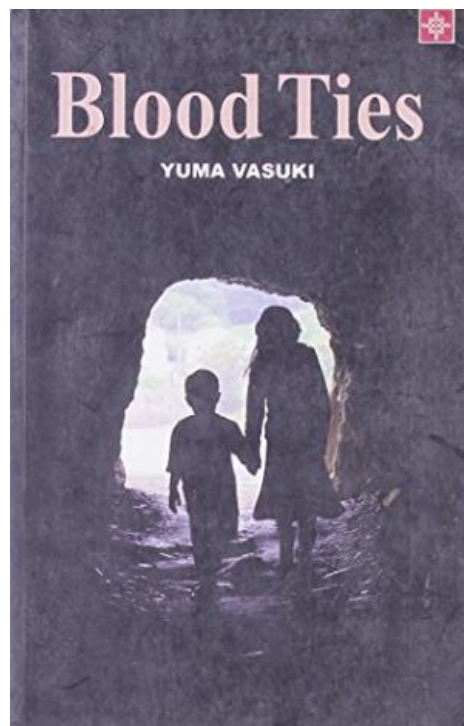
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elicit no answers from his community elders. It is clear that the apparent homogeneity and infallibility of the community voice is but a chimera. The single most important event in Diravi's life is the plight of his sister Nagammal who is condemned to a life of rejection by an impotent husband and his scheming mother. Nagu's mute grief and the community's lack of courage and power to set right a palpable wrong weighs heavily upon his mind. In this society, a barren woman is a curse and even when the doctor assures Nagu and Diravi that she is not barren, Nagu's husband, Sevantha Perumal refuses to take her back. This impels Diravi towards the bold step of planning a second marriage for his sister, which alone can comfort his heart that has been slowly turning into a dreary desert. Though the young Kuttalam is ready to marry the deserted girl, the wicked Sevantha Perumal manages to kill Kuttalam, for how can he face the society if Nagu goes around with a child in her arms sired by her new husband Kuttalam. Diravi makes the singular error of not judging the forces that work against him. He is left with no choice but to leave the village once and for all with his ageing parents and sister for a new beginning.

Blood Ties



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Yuma Vasuki's *Blood Ties* (2000) is a Tamil novel which appeared under the title *Ratha Uravu* which was later translated into English by Gita Subramanian. It is a domestic novel, which portrays the everyday life of the family of three brothers, sternly presided over by their widowed mother. The story is about the family of Dinakaran which is destroyed by alcoholism and domestic violence of the most brutal kind. The story is narrated through the eyes of the six-year old *Thambi*, the story of the daily life of their family, which was filled with fear, terror and uncertainty of the children. It also brings out the domestic violence that the children experienced everyday in their house and the miserable lives of *amma*, *akka*, *thambi* and *anna* — the four hapless victims of Dinakaran's violence. Dinakaran abuses his position as head of the family, betraying his daughter and his young sons again and again, terrorising his wife. The characters of *akka*, *thambi* and *Perianna* are vividly drawn. For them, being at the receiving end of violence is perfectly normal. That is the only life they know. Matured beyond her years, one may be amazed, *akka*, who has traded her childhood for her family, tugs at our heart strings. She is tender towards her brothers whom she protects with all her fragile might and the generosity of her spirit, which extends even to her father.

We learn from the novels that the women - Nagammal and Unnamalai Achi in *The Generations*, Amma and Akka from *Blood Ties*, who live in a patriarchal society, are repressed and are denied even the basic amenities, since they are women.

First Generation Women

The treatment of women in the first generation is a period before India's Independence, the characters belonging to this period are Achi in *The Generations*, Patti in *Blood Ties*. The women belonging to this generation are older women, steeped in traditions and widows who do not have any status in society like *achi* in *The Generations*, and Patti in *Blood Ties* respectively.

In *The Generations*, Neela Padmanaban portrays the character of Unnamalai Achi as she lives in the world of the past and is ignorant of her position either in her own house or in society.

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Neela Padmanaban portrays the character of Unnamalai Achi similar to Mammachi. Achi is very traditional and she lives her life without being aware of her suppression in her own house and in society. She lives her life within the limits of her code of living and she never comes out of that limit. It is the limit derived from her ancestors, she infuses the same on every woman not only of her generation, but also transfers it to the next generation as well. She is a typical traditional, conservative woman as her life confines only,

to get up early before dawn and to sweep the street before the house, sprinkle cow dung water on it, and draw the *kolam* auspiciously before the man of the house gets up and leaves the house... (19)

She believes this is what a woman is for and she considers that she is born for none other than to serve the male of the house.

Achi is the one who instigates the marriage of Nagammal to Sevantha Perumal, she strictly adheres to the traditional norms, and transactions of the marriage like dowry and other household things. She has enormous faith in her generation's belief in superstitions and proverbs; she expects others to follow in the footsteps of the current generation. As a result of this it is not only the family of Diravi, but the entire community that suffers. In this strict adherence to the worn out values, Diravi is the worst affected victim because Achi moulds him with the stories of the past and the glories of her community right from his formative stage, which eventually impedes his progress.

Achi is too superstitious because she was brought up in such a way by her parents and community. *Achi*, being a woman steeped in tradition cannot accept Nagu's return from her husband's house and she blames it on fate as she says,

‘... What sin you committed in your last birth – who knows?
As a result of that sin you are this way now...’. (25)

This is all the outcome of her ignorance which results from being superstitious and bearing day after day the sufferings and oppressions she had been subjected to in a male dominated society.

In the same manner, we see that Patti in *Blood Ties* is also a sufferer of the male dominance during her formative years and it has dwarfed her and molded her into a person adhering to the slavish mentality. And she cannot tolerate the modern generation of girls and she always curses Vasuki; she is even of the opinion that girls should not be given more education.

Women in the Second Generation

The treatment of women in the second generation is the post independent era and the characters of this period are Nagammal in *The Generations* and Amma in *Blood Ties*. The treatment of women of the second generation is one of the most important parts of the novels, which defies patriarchy, and deals with the dominant sexual norms of the time.

There is a great need for the awakening of women socially. Without social advancement, political rights have no value. There is a visible gap between the law as it stands and the law as it operates. The need is to bridge the gap. It is one thing to declare, and another to enforce.

The same kind of treatment is also seen in *Blood Ties*, as society demands a girl child should not be educated beyond a limit. This shows the difference between the old and the modern generations' attitudes in a society regarding the notion of educating a girl child; at the same time many modern women still remain subordinate to men. Now the women insist on equality with men in all matters including education, the right to property inheritance and in the matter of securing different kinds of jobs.

Gender discrimination and the Institution of Marriage

Gender discrimination is also one of the most important themes common in the select novels and the writers have given it much importance in their respective novels.

In *The Generations* this gender discrimination arises right from the birth of a girl child. Achi asks ‘Is it Matan Pillai? Has Bhomu delivered?’ and the reply ‘Yes, she has delivered – a female’. Padmanaban explains here the condition of how a girl – child is an unwanted one, as ‘His tone implied that the female child was an unwanted addition to the family, an uninvited guest’. (15)

It is a steady trend among modern women towards increasing consciousness of their rights, seeking liberty from gender discrimination and finding an independent identity and economic independence. Women now certainly have a status in society.

The most significant social issue that the writers focus on is the theme of the institution of marriage – as in *The Generations* and the practice of dowry system in India. Marriage as an institution has sealed the fate of women down the generations, making them play a secondary or a subservient role. Instead of making women happy, it forces them to play stereotype set roles, within the family, uncomplainingly. Regarding marriage, Simone de Beauvoir rightly observes in her *Second Sex*:

The tragedy of marriage is not that it fails to assure woman regarding the promised happiness...but that it mutilates her; it dooms her to repetition and routine. (496)

When a woman is caught in the trap of marriage, she has only one way left for her to go, and that is to languish in misery. Somehow, she reveals an evident lack of trust in marriage and marital relationships. Every attempt the woman makes to redefine herself inevitably ends up in lack of communication. This leads to the theme of alienation.

In *The Generations*, we see the prosperous mercantile Chettiyar community, have fallen into poverty due to generations of adherence to expensive marriages running into several days and the dowry claims make the women a liability to their parents in particular and to society in general. Neela Padmanaban exposes how the gifts given by the parents of the brides at the time of their daughters’ weddings at a huge cost, and the dowry claims of the bridegrooms and the debts incurred as a result of it, had put the brides’ families to untold miseries.

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Neela Padmanaban being fully aware of the evils that traditional practices produce, opposes them. He advocates a simple and inexpensive marriage and declares that there should be no sex discrimination against women as both men and women are equal in every respect. To earn public sympathy for the distressed plight of such women and their families, the author through his character Nagammal, depicts women who are suffering and are tortured due to dowry claims by the men folk.

Neela Padmanaban here brings out the evils of the dowry system that prevail in society and how women are oppressed by the demand of dowry. Nagammal gets married to Sevantha Perumal because he is rich and asks for her hand. We see the mother of Sevantha Perumal asks, What dowry can you give? What wedding gifts? Jewels for how much? ... Apart from this the wedding expenses should all be borne by the girl's family. (41- 42)

The above observation brings out the many evils born of the dowry system, which if not paid, all the said things the girl should suffer from, the various tortures which might often result in death either by means of suicide or outright murder.

In *Blood Ties*, Amma, at the time of her marriage was provided,

Thirty sovereign of gold jewellery ...

Every time I took the children home, he eagerly made more jewellery. (43)

What is significant is that the girl's parents give her money and gifts not only at the time of her wedding but they continue to give gifts to her husband's family throughout their life. This is further explained by Yuma Vasuki through Thambi's uncle:

'As the only daughter of the family, we sent her well-endowed with a sumptuous dowry including thirty sovereigns of gold. (108)

We come across the same situation when Nagammal was sent to her father's house by her husband on the false grounds that she is barren. Like many other societies, in Indian society also a barren woman is an anathema.

In order to hide his impotence he throws the blame on his wife, since he is a man, all the community elders are also men, and they easily believe in what he says. Even when the doctor assures them that she is not barren, Nagammal's husband Sevantha Perumal will not take her back and there is no end to a woman's sorrow.

Social systems, religious laws and legal structures have all along worked against women, making separation, divorce and single life difficult and humiliating for them. In many cases, women have no real choice but marriage, however demeaning and degrading it may be, for survival, self-respect and security. So, women who escape from stifling relationships live the rest of their lives with dignity and purpose. This is what Neela Padmanaban portrays in his novel even though the young Kuttalam is ready to marry the deserted girl. The malignant Sevantha Perumal manages to kill him, for he cannot face society if Nagammal goes around with a child in her arms sired by marrying Kuttalam. Patriarchy is an exploitative structure reinforced by governments, religions and social practices. The oppressive nature of patriarchy has its manifestation in sexism.

Through the representation of Nagammal in *The Generations*, the author encourages widow-remarriage and the need for increasing women's marriageable age and he advocates women's right to divorce. Neela Padmanaban is not satisfied with the existing system of marriages, and he aspires for a total change in the system and performance of marriage in society.

Diravi the protagonist of *The Generations* grows up essentially as a person in the face of the worst provocation. As he matures and begins to ask questions that generally elicit no answers from his community elders, it is clear that the apparent homogeneity and infallibility of the community voice is a chimera. Diravi is much affected by the plight of his sister, Nagammal's

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life, who is rejected by an impotent husband and his scheming mother. Nagammal's mute grief and the society's lack of courage and authority to set right a palpable wrong, lie heavily in his mind. He is also a witness to any number of transgressions of the accepted code of honour and civility by his community, which convinces him that social norms are observed more in their violation than observance.

Diravi finds a more humane bridegroom, than the so-called 'correct' kinsmen, in the lesser born and declared blacksheep Kuttalam. Diravi takes a bold step of planning a second marriage for his sister. Through this, he likes to change the system from within.

Vinayaka Perumal warns that Diravi's family will be excommunicated, but Diravi is firm and busies himself with the wedding preparations, as he wants his sister to marry again and start a new life.

The novelists insist on giving equal rights to women like men to inherit or possess property as that would make them economically independent. Properties of families should be equally distributed between men and women without any sex discrimination. This is common in all the novels.

The third generation deals with the oppression of Vasuki in *Blood Ties*. The treatment of this generation is to show rebellion against the patriarchal society. Modern women do not accept the age old status of being oppressed by the men folk.

Family Violence and Wife Battering

Another important oppression in *Blood Ties* is the theme of family violence. The common theme seen in the novel is the theme of wife battering.

Blood Ties is a strong protest against wife battering, which the Indian society has hitherto accepted with complacency. Domestic violence persists, as women have not protested against them. Amma in *Blood Ties* is the battered woman who must learn to bear their husband's brutality.

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In patriarchal culture, mothers are deified and motherhood glorified in story and mythology, but real life mothers are exploited. The right way of looking at a mother is neither as an angel nor as a monster but as a human being with desires and needs as well as limitations. Patriarchal societies hold mothers responsible for the life of their children, but ironically deny them the power. It is the women alone who can comprehend this neglected issue and bring justice into mothers' lives.

In *Blood Ties* Amma, Akka, Thambi and Anna are the four hapless victims of Dinakaran's violence. Dinakaran abuses his position as head of the family, betraying his daughter and his young sons repeatedly, and terrorising his wife. The terror Dinakaran unleashes against his family is unbelievably brutal and sadistic, beyond all imagination, matched only by his emotional poverty.

From the beginning, of the story we come across the terror in the family of Dinakaran infused by him towards the family. Whenever Amma hears the horrible screech of his rustic bicycle as it approached home, Amma's fear makes her cower and hide in a corner (10). Since she gets married to him, she has never lived a happy life and in the novel there is no reference at all that Amma spoke even a single word to her husband. Dinakaran is a typical male chauvinist that he never allows women to speak, especially his wife. He considers her only as a "thing" meant for battering. Owing to his intoxication, he does not know what he is doing and at the same time, he shows his superiority that there is no one else to question him.

It is not only that Dinakaran's wife suffers from this assault but his daughter Vasuki is also a victim of battering. Whenever he beats Amma, Akka will also be the receiver and one of the incidents is when, his elder son runs away due to fear of his father, Amma goes out in search of her son. It is considered that a woman should not go out of her house without the knowledge of her husband; even if she does so, it is against the norms of the house, society, and she will be punished. When Dinakaran comes to know of his wife's actions, his

‘... mad rage exploded on them when the brass-lamp landed with a loud thud, hitting Amma in the ribs... Before Amma could stand, Appa leaped on to her and sat on her back. Her hair was entirely caught in his fist. He repeatedly banged Amma’s head on the ground.

She had no time to even shout or cry’. (140)

Akka tries to persuade her father,

Don’t beat Amma, Appa, please, Appa! Have pity on her Appa!,

Akka begged and cried, wringing her hands in supplication.

Appa spat a mouthful of liquor-mixed spittle on Akka’s face.

Akka persisted and went closer. Appa’s kick made her recoil and

she sat against the wall, bent down and holding her stomach, (140)

and we can see there is no end to this brutality.

The most significant scene follows when her husband kicks his daughter, Amma could not tolerate this, gains her strength and she

‘shakes him off and gets up in a fury. But looking back,

seeing her husband on the floor, she was beset by guilt’. (140)

This clearly shows the stereotype of conservative mother and woman in Amma.

The story emphasizes the harm of alcoholism, which destroys family and culture. It is this alcoholism, which slowly and perniciously ruins Dinakaran’s ability to think and reason, to feel any true affection.

Conclusion

Thus, the novels state the issues of gender discrimination, and the subjugation of women on various grounds. The role and idea of women depicted by the novelists give us an insight into the cultural values, changes and the concepts of tradition in Indian society. The different ways of behaviour of the women, reveal the significant cultural aspects of the society. Women express

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cultural values such as being husband–focused, family-oriented, submissive, upholding religious traditions, capable of sacrifices. Only now, they have started to protest against the exploitation and oppression in a male-dominated society.

The housewives and mothers are submissive, docile and obedient, focus on their husbands and families, like Amma in *Blood Ties* and Nagammal in *The Generations*, managing their households and having their own norms for private and public behaviour.

Women in the novels, *The Generations* and *Blood Ties* are presented as passive beings struggling against the odds of life silently. When we look at the predominant stereotypes of a housewife and mother in the novels, womanhood emerges to be a rational concept. No woman exists independently of a man or a woman’s influence. Women are always considered in relation to their husband and children. The novelist challenges this stereotype in different ways - the submissiveness and the unquestioning obedience, passivity of a woman is seriously questioned when they present modern women in their private and public behaviour, as protestors and idealists, under the influence of western and urban values.

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