

## Caste and Gender in Padma Viswanathan's *The Toss of a Lemon*

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### Abstract

The Indian English Fiction is a significant literary domain established its unique imprint in the 21st century. Vikram Chandra, Amitav Ghosh, Aravind Adiga, Amitava Kumar, Arundhati Roy, Githa Hariharan, Kiran Desai, Karan Mahajan, Salman Rushdie, Samina Ali and many more new writers emerged as galaxy of stars producing and charting a range of innovative trends and modes. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, fiction reveals new novelistic techniques and style of narration. It witnessed variety of towering novels. The new authors tied to depict the changing panorama found in current contemporary social and political problems of India. The fiction writers of new generation ignored to represent the pan Indian life. They gave importance to regional and cultural entities and explored the same through their works. One of the examples for this trend is Padma Viswanathan's *The Toss of a Lemon* (2008). It is her first novel and received the Commonwealth Writer's Prize Best First Book Award (Canada and the Caribbean) and the PEN USA Fiction Award. The novel focuses on a single Tamil Brahmin family and its views towards issues of caste and gender. Here the author tries to express the cultural issues limited to Tamil Nadu. She conducted interview of her grandmother to write down this interesting historical novel. No doubt it is an intricately plotted historical fiction. It is like a long research conducted by Amitav Ghosh for his noted fiction *In an Antique Land*. Here Padma Viswanathan conducts research through the interview with her grandmother over a period of one year. It depicts the vicissitudes of a Tamil Brahmin family.

**KEYWORDS:** caste, gender, cultural issues, social problems and history

*The Toss of a Lemon* receives positive remarks in many reviews. *The Baltimore Sun* called *The Toss of a Lemon* as 'electrifying' novel. *Publisher's Weekly* remarked its an 'absorbing' fiction. *Canada's National Post* commented "There is a whole world here between two covers." Yann Martel is right when he remarked about this novel "A captivating novel that in relating the story of one Indian woman and her family tells the story of a changing society. Precisely and deftly written, constantly interesting, morally serious yet sympathetic--I challenge any reader to start reading this book and give up on it. It joins the company of the great novels on India." The novel is heartbreaking and exhilarating. It profoundly exhibits the prevalent customs in the past. Padma Viswanathan gives a rich and intimate image of an unknown India which many never seen. The novel is a narrative of a young girl Sivakami. It is in a way bitter life story of a Brahmin Sivakami. The protagonist Sivakami marries at the age of ten in the year 1896 to an astrologer. She became mother at the age of fourteen. Unfortunately she became a widow at the age of eighteen. She is widowed with two children. She is forced to wear white sari without blouse as it was chartered custom in Brahmin family in the nineteenth century. Apart from wearing white sari, her head is shaved completely in order to get an ugly look. She is not allowed to wear silk saris and gold ornaments. She is asked to take bath at night. She is treated as an outcaste. She lived in her room. She is in custody in that

room throughout her life of sixty years. She is not allowed to touch her children. Widow is a sign of bad omen. She is not allowed to be present in auspicious ceremonies. It is a dark story which encompasses an epic tale of caste and class systems practiced in India.

Sivakami dutifully follows customs imposed up on her. But in one of the instances, she became rebellious. She insists on a secular education for her son Vairum. He fulfills his promise in a modernizing India. Vairum rejects the caste identity that is his mother's mainstay, twisting their fates in fascinating and unbearable ways. Sivakami as a traditional Brahmin woman makes gender discrimination while providing education to her son and daughter. The novel depicts social problems, rebellion, politics and superstition. Although Sivakami may stay at home, she is hardly isolated. She remains in intimate contact with the rest. It is a true picture of the South Indian village of Cholapatti. Many ceremonies, weddings and holidays, and gossip, cooking and many local rivalries are depicted vividly. There are strict practices of purification through bathing and other rituals after contacts with lower castes. There are the typical Tamil Brahmin expressions in Sanskritised Tamil. Some young Brahmins including Vairam rebel against Brahminical exclusiveness and start mixing with non-Brahmins. Sivakami's daughter Thangam is married off casually. Her husband has the right background such as caste, horoscope but proves dissolute. Sivakami's son Vairum is in contrast skeptical of all orthodoxies. He arranges his own marriage. He eats at the homes of non-Brahmins. He is a modern man in true sense. The novel presents him as savior and Thangam's children who break custom by coming to live with their maternal grandmother. The narration suggests a story that is unfolding before our eyes, a story that might go anywhere. It allows her to follow loose threads without feeling the need to tie them all back together. Vairum's life reminds a great deal about 20th-century India. Padma Viswanathan brings out deep intricacies of the private lives of a Brahmin family as the Indian subcontinent moves through sixty years of intense social and political change. The novel explores rural and traditional Tamil Brahmin family through several generations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It reveals how the superstitions are followed. One of the examples for such superstitious activity is tossing of a lemon. At the time of Sivakami delivery, the midwife tosses a lemon. It is a practice done to announce the birth of child to the husband and other males waiting outside the room. The men note the exact timing of toss of the lemon and give it to the astrologer for writing the horoscope of the child. the narration about Hanumarathnam is based on superstitions practiced. Hanumaratnam is a healer. The interaction between Sivakami parents and Hanumarathnam displays another instance of superstition. "He puts his palms together in a friendly *namaskaram*, asks how they have been and whether they need anything specific. They shyly shake their heads, and he queries, with a penetrating squint, 'Nothing?' Sivakami is embarrassed by her parents, who are acting like impoverished peasants. They owe this man their respect, but they are Brahmins too, and literate, like him. They can hold up their heads. She's smiling to herself at his strange name: a hybrid of 'Hanuman,' the monkey god, and *rathnam*, gem. The suffix she understands; it's attached to the name of every man in the region. *But no one is named for the monkey!*" Her mother and father cast glances at each other; then her father clears his throat. "Ah, our daughter here has just entered *gurubalam*. We are about to start searching for a groom." There are debates about the larger social issues of superstitions, prejudice and blind adherence to unjust and irrational traditions.

The entire life story may be put in the following nutshell. Sivakami was born in Samanthibakkam village. She was married off to her husband's village Cholapatti. Her life was pre destined. She becomes a widow at eighteen with two kids when her astrologer-husband dies as predicted in the horoscope. She brings up her two children. She manages agricultural lands of her husband with the help of a lower caste supervisor Muchami. Later, She marries off her daughter Thangam, also at an early age to an adventurous boy named Goli. He becomes a Revenue Inspector and does some business ventures. Her son Vairam takes education in St Joseph College, Trichy. Finally he settles down in Chennai. Goli has an affair with a devdasi whose daughter becomes a film actress at the end. The novel explores caste and gender discrimination practiced in the past in India.

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