

Domestic Space as a Site of Cultural Preservation in Padma Viswanathan's *The Toss of a Lemon*

Dr .Swathy R^{1,*}

¹Guest Lecturer PG and Research Department of English Rani Anna Government College for Women, India

*Corresponding author / தொடர்பு ஆசிரியர்: Dr .Swathy R — swatradhak@gmail.com

Abstract

Padma Viswanathan's *The Toss of a Lemon* (2008) presents the household as an important site of cultural preservation, where traditions, memories, values, and social practices are transmitted across generations. Through the life of Sivakami, the novel portrays domestic space not merely as a private setting but as a living cultural environment shaped by food, ritual, clothing, marriage, widowhood, caste practices, and family relationships. Everyday domestic activities become ways of learning and preserving cultural knowledge. The kitchen, in particular, becomes a space where food practices and social customs are passed from one generation to another, while rituals and clothing communicate religious and social identity. Marriage and family relationships further reinforce cultural values and community structures. Viswanathan does not present tradition as completely fixed. Sivakami's adherence to inherited practices exists alongside her gradual responses to social change, especially through her son Vairum's education and his questioning of established beliefs. The domestic sphere therefore becomes a space where tradition is preserved, negotiated, and transformed. This paper argues that the household functions as a living cultural archive in *The Toss of a Lemon*, preserving collective memory through ordinary practices while allowing new ideas to enter family life.

Keywords / திறவுச் சொற்கள்: Domestic space; cultural preservation; cultural memory; tradition; caste; and gender.

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Padma Viswanathan's *The Toss of a Lemon* (2008) follows the life of Sivakami, a Tamil Brahmin woman whose life spans a period of significant social and cultural change in South India. Born in 1896, Sivakami enters marriage at the age of ten when Hanumarathnam, a village healer and astrologer, approaches her parents with a proposal. His horoscope predicts that he will die during his tenth year of marriage, yet the marriage takes place because of his reputation and the standing of his Brahmin family. After Hanumarathnam's death, Sivakami becomes a young widow and assumes responsibility for her children and household. Through her experiences, Viswanathan presents domestic space as more than a private setting. The household becomes a place where cultural practices are preserved through everyday life, while inherited traditions can also be questioned and transformed. Food, ritual, astrology, widowhood, education, medicine, and family relationships demonstrate that culture is transmitted within the home, but that each generation can reinterpret what it inherits.

Sivakami acquires much of her cultural knowledge through domestic life. Her understanding of food, ritual, caste, marriage, gender, and family responsibility develops through participation in everyday household practices. Rather than learning culture only through formal instruction, she learns by observing and repeating what previous generations have practiced. This process can be connected to Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus, in which cultural practices become embedded through repeated everyday actions. Cooking, observing rituals, maintaining relationships, and following expectations concerning caste and gender all

contribute to Sivakami's cultural identity. The household therefore functions as an informal space of cultural education where traditions become ordinary and are passed from one generation to another.

Food provides an important example of this cultural transmission. In the novel, cooking and eating are connected with caste, purity, ritual, and family identity. The kitchen becomes a cultural archive because methods of preparation, restrictions, and ideas about purity are preserved through repeated practice. Women play a central role in this process because cooking and household maintenance are traditionally associated with their responsibilities. At the same time, these practices can reproduce social divisions. Food restrictions may reinforce caste distinctions, while domestic expectations reinforce gender roles. Viswanathan therefore shows that preserving culture can also mean preserving the social hierarchies associated with it.

Ritual and astrology similarly preserve inherited cultural knowledge. Hanumarathnam's identity as a healer and astrologer makes astrology an important part of family life. Birth, marriage, and death are interpreted through horoscopes and ritual practices. Through these traditions, the household preserves a worldview inherited from previous generations. The same household also becomes a place where these beliefs are challenged. Vairum eventually rejects his father's astrological worldview, declaring, "Horoscopes are nothing. Less than nothing. Ashes of something long dead" (Viswanathan 213). His rejection is significant because he first learns astrology within the family before questioning it. The home therefore becomes both a space of cultural preservation and cultural transformation.

Sivakami's experience of widowhood further demonstrates how culture is expressed through the body. After Hanumarathnam's death, she shaves her head and wears a white sari associated with Brahmin widowhood. Her appearance and behaviour are transformed according to social expectations. These practices demonstrate that culture is not simply a matter of belief; it is also expressed through clothing, appearance, and everyday behaviour. At the same time, widowhood changes Sivakami's relationship with the household. After returning to her natal family, she realizes that her brothers may not make decisions in the best interests of her children. She therefore returns to her marital home and assumes responsibility for raising them. Domestic knowledge, although shaped by restrictive traditions, gives her the ability to manage her family and exercise a degree of authority.

The relationship between Sivakami and Vairum demonstrates most clearly how the household becomes a site of transformation. Although Sivakami remains deeply connected to traditional beliefs, she chooses to provide Vairum with a secular education. Her decision shows that cultural preservation does not necessarily require rejection of modernity. She attempts to maintain her family's cultural identity while preparing her son for a changing world. Vairum's education eventually contributed to his rejection of astrology and caste identity. His changing worldview creates distance between him and Sivakami, yet it develops from his experience of the traditional household. He can question inherited beliefs because he has first encountered and understood them. Sivakami therefore becomes both a transmitter of tradition and an agent of change.

The episode involving Thangam's difficult childbirth provides another example of traditional and modern knowledge meeting within the household. Sivakami initially relies on established women's knowledge and is reluctant to involve a doctor. She observes, "No one in her family has ever been seen by a doctor. She knows there are women doctors for women patients, but it's too late to get one" (Viswanathan 424). The situation reveals the gradual arrival of modern medicine into a household governed by older practices. Modern medical knowledge does not immediately replace traditional knowledge; instead, the family must negotiate between the two. The household becomes the point where wider social changes in medicine and

education enter everydayum calls her “Amma,” Sivakami responds despite the restrictions associated with widowhood.

Sivakami’s relationship with Vairum also shows how personal experience can challenge cultural restrictions. When Vairum calls her “Amma,” Sivakami responds despite the restrictions associated with widowhood. Viswanathan writes that she steps outside “because she doesn’t want to lose her son the way she lost her husband: without a word” (611). This moment demonstrates that inherited practices do not always retain the same authority throughout an individual’s life. Sivakami has followed the restrictions of widowhood for years, yet her relationship with her son causes her to reconsider them. Her decision is not simply a rejection of tradition; it shows how personal experience can alter the meaning of inherited cultural practices.

In *The Toss of a Lemon*, domestic space therefore functions as both a cultural archive and a site of transformation. Through food, ritual, astrology, widowhood, education, medicine, and family relationships, cultural knowledge is preserved and transmitted between generations. At the same time, the household provides opportunities to question and reinterpret inherited traditions. Sivakami is shaped by tradition, but she also makes choices that create possibilities for change. Viswanathan presents the home not as a space isolated from social change but as the place where cultural change is experienced most intimately. Culture survives not because it remains unchanged, but because each generation practices, negotiates, and transforms what it inherits.

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