


Unit 12

Nagammal

R. Shanmugasundaram
Translated by V. Bharathi Harishankar



12.1 Warm Up

Do you recall instances when you have really fought for acquiring something? The extent of your struggle adds value. All of us have fought with our siblings over toys, window seat in the train, etc. Families fight over property and become enemies for life. Why do humans crave for possessions? Think and Read on....

12.2 Objectives

After reading this short novel, you will be able to

- Identify the detailed sense of place in the source and the translated texts
- Examine the development of characters and plot in the novel
- Analyse language use in terms of descriptions, dialogues, and local idioms
- Explain the impact of the novel's ending

12.3 Getting Acquainted

A. The Novelist

R. Shanmugasundaram (1917-1977) belongs to the Kongu region in Tamil Nadu. He captures vividly the sights and sounds of the place. Primarily a short story writer, his first novel *Nagammal* ushered in the tradition of a realistic and regional novel in Tamil. He was the founder of the publishing house Pudhumalar Nilayam. Besides *Nagammal*, his well-known works include *Poovum Pinjum*, *Aruvadai*, *Udhaya Tharagai*, *Satti Suttadhu*, *Malini*, *Idhaya Thagam* and *Asaiyum Nesamum*.

B. The Translator

Dr. V. Bharathi Harishankar is Professor of English and Head of the Department of Women Studies at the University of Madras. She has translated indigenous poetry from Australia, Canada, and New Zealand into Tamil and has published them in magazines like *Kalachuvadu*, *Pathivukal* and *Yugamayini*. She has also translated fictional and non-fictional works from Tamil to English. She has co-edited two text cum workbooks on teaching translation published by OUP.

C. The Novel

This novel centres around Nagammal and her desire to own a piece of land. Her struggles reveal her strength as an independent woman and her weakness in choosing to align with the wrong group of people.

12.4 Nagammal–Plot Summary

Nagammal is a short novel written by R. Shanmugasundaram and was first published in 1942. It depicts the life and yearnings of an independent woman in an agrarian society in Tamil Nadu. The novel captures the different sights and sounds of Vengamedu village. Nagammal is a widow, who lives with her brother-in-law, Chinnayyan and co-sister, Ramayi. She is efficient in handling the agricultural tasks and dominates the household decisions as well. Her brother-in-law and co-sister treat her with a lot of respect and nurture her daughter, Muththaya as their own.

Nagammal's desire to own property in her name grows intense as days pass. Even though she is aware that Chinnayyan and Ramayi are responsible enough to take care of her and her daughter, owning her own piece of land becomes her magnificent obsession. In her mission to get Chinnayyan to divide the property, Nagammal is helped by Gettiappan, Mudaliar, and others, who have their vested interests. Ramayi's mother acts as a foil to Nagammal in that she also tries to dominate Chinnayyan and Ramayi. These contrasting pulls shatter the peaceful refuge of a family created by Chinnayyan and Ramayi. The novel ends with an altercation between Chinnayyan and Nagammal's men, in which Gettiappan kills Chinnayyan. The highlight of the novel is the subtle yet clear characterisation of people who inhabit its universe.

In his foreword to the first edition, K.P. Rajagopalan compares Shanmugasundaram's novel to Thomas Hardy's Wessex novels and hails him as the initiator of the Regional Novel in Tamil. In her foreword to the Kalachuvadu edition of the novel published in 2007, Ambai foregrounds the strong feminist leanings of the novel as evident in the character of Nagammal. In their reviews of the novel, Sundara Ramaswamy and Perumal Murugan, applaud the life and spirit invested in the well-rounded characters in the novel. They applaud the clear sense of identity and independence displayed by the character, Nagammal.

The novel *Nagammal* has several layers and opens several avenues for reading and interpretation. It can be read as a regional novel displaying local colour realism, a feminist text written by a male author and a novel which combines social and psychological realism. What differentiates it from other novels of its own time, is that it has effortlessly and seamlessly introduced trends in Tamil literature in the garb of a linear and simple plot construction. The protagonist Nagammal assumes proportions of a tragic and epic hero with a fatal flaw, comparable to Lady Macbeth.

Read the Tamil original re-published by Kalachuvadu under its Tamil Classical Novel Series and/or its English translation published by Oxford University Press. The translator of the novel is V. Bharathi Harishankar and the editor is Mini Krishnan.

12.5 Recap

- **Remember** the author's method of characterisation
- **Understand** the translator's choice of translation and transliteration to capture the milieu
- **Think about** the techniques used to represent the plot development
- **Create** terminologies to translate local dialect and idioms

12.6 Activities

1. Identify movies which are based on fights over property. Compare and contrast the plot development in movies and novels.

2. Do you think Nagammal is justified in fighting for her share of the property? Hold a debate in class.
3. For several centuries, women did not have rights over family property. Refer to Indian laws which changed this situation.

12.7 Practise to Perfect

1. The English translation provides a Glossary to explain the local dialect. Do you think this is an acceptable practice adopted by the translator? (200 words)

2. The climax is placed at the end of the novel. However, there are several moments in the novel that lead up to the killing of Chinnayyan. Compare the source and translated texts in terms of their depiction of the climax. (500 words)

3. From being a place, Vengamedu becomes a character by the end of the novel. Identify and describe the specific terms used by the author and translator to convey the sense of place. (200 words)

4. To what extent does Nagammal fit the description of a tragic protagonist? Substantiate with examples from the Tamil original and English translation. (500 words)
