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## Intricacies of Cultural Memory Transitions: A Study Based on the Movie *Angammal*

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### Abstract

Culture is dynamic and ever evolving. While history records the tangible transformation in a society, it is literature and art that record the dynamic and evolving nature of culture. Cultural shift is often depicted through the change in perspective, attitude, and fashion. This transition is often traumatic to both the old and new generations. Literature and visual representation catch this silent but slow shift in the culture. This evolution and cultural transition may appear to be trivial, but they have a profound impact on the community. When two different cultures come into contact, one culture may assimilate into the other, or one culture may become less deemed than the other. In both cases, this transition is hard for both the old and the new generation. The movie *Angammal*, directed by Vipin Radhakrishnan pertinently portrays the impact of cultural shift and cultural cringe that evolved out of the process of modernisation.

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## Introduction

Tamil writer and historian Perumal Murugan's short story 'Kodithuni' offers insight into rural Tamil life and the complexity of cultural transitions. The story, set in 1990s rural Tamil Nadu, delves into the cultural tensions between tradition and modernity. The story revolves around a woman's resistance to societal changes symbolized through her choice of attire. The story was adapted by Vipin Radhakrishnan for his 2024 film *Angammal* and portrayed the intersection of culture and fashion in a transforming society. The Study examines and tries to prove the connection between culture and fashion and negative impact of modernisation as reflected in the memories of the protagonist, Angammal, who represents traditional customs by opting not to wear a blouse with her sari, a choice deeply embedded in her cultural identity. Her city-educated son's insistence on her adopting modern attire highlights the clash between rural traditions and urban influences.

Cultural memory theory, particularly Jan and Aleida Assmann's distinction between communicative memory and cultural memory, helps to understand how traditions, rituals, and embodied practices such as fashion preserve collective identity across generations. Pierre Nora's notion of *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory) helps to identify the clothing and costume in *Angammal* function as symbolic markers that embody histories of community and continuity in the face of cultural shift. In addition, the concept of cultural cringe, developed by A.A. Phillips, provides a lens to examine how colonial modernity and global influences generate ambivalence or shame toward indigenous cultural practices, including traditional dress. The framework also incorporates trauma studies to explore how memories of loss, dislocation, and cultural marginalization are inscribed onto fashion as a cultural expression.



Finally, modernization theories help contextualize how modernity reshapes identity and memory, often eroding traditional practices while simultaneously transforming them into reinterpreted symbols of resistance and cultural survival. Together, these theoretical perspectives enable a nuanced reading of *Angammal*, situating fashion not merely as aesthetic choice but as a site where cultural memory, trauma, and modernity converge.

The son, Pavalam, who grew up in a rural village in Tamil Nadu, was once comfortable with the traditions and customs of his culture. However, after moving to the city for higher studies and getting exposed to urban life, he internalizes a modern culture that alienates him from his roots. Pavalam begins to view the rural practices of his upbringing, including those of his mother, Angammal, as outdated and embarrassing. This internal conflict originates when he invites his fiancée, Jasmine, and her affluent Christian family to visit their village. Pavalam, anxious about how his mother's traditional attire, a sari worn without a blouse, pressures Angammal to adapt to modern standards by wearing a blouse. But at the same time, Jasmine, who was brought up in an urban culture, never felt embarrassed about her fiancé's family. She even scolds Pavalam for trying to change her mother. Unlike Pavalam, Jasmine doesn't have that trauma aroused out of the conflict between tradition and modernity. Thus, modernity has adversely affected Pavalam, who is exposed to a new cultural shift. Jasmine is the one who is born to a family that has already gone through the transition earlier.

Later, Angammal, in her sixties, reluctantly agrees to wear the blouse under her son's insistence. The decision has traumatized the old lady, a conformity that marks a deeply unsettling moment for her, symbolizing a concession to societal pressures that clash with her sense of self. When she appears in the blouse, the villagers and family members, including



her old crush with whom she exchanged glances, openly applaud her decision, considering it an act of progress and sophistication. However, rather than feeling advanced and celebrated, Angammal feels alienated and humiliated, as the act erodes a core part of her identity and cultural memory. She feels uncomfortable with the change. This moment amplifies her inner trauma, and she feels a profound sense of loss and disconnection from her true self, which is culturally shaped by her past.

Pavalam, too, faces an internal struggle. While he desires to present his family as modern and respectable to Jasmine's family, he is also weighed down with guilt and uneasiness at forcing his mother into a role that contradicts her essence. This tautness escalates as Angammal grows increasingly distressed, leading to instants of visible anguish and withdrawal. Angammal, after enduring this turmoil, decides to reclaim her identity which can be considered as an emotional climax. She reverts to her traditional attire by abandoning the blouse which symbolises the encroachment of modernity. Angammal's bold action can be considered a symbolic act of resistance against the forces of cultural assimilation.

In this determination, Angammal finds comfort and strength in embracing her authentic self, even as she is aware that the world around her continues to change. Pavalam is left to reconcile his love for his mother with his desire for modernity, is confronted with the profound realization that true progress does not necessitate the erasure of one's cultural roots. The film poignantly captures the generational and cultural tensions between tradition and modernity, using Angammal's story as a lens to explore questions of identity, autonomy, and resilience.



There are mainly three aspects for discussion about cultural transition and fashion:

### Cultural Memory and Identity Preservation

Cultural memory, as defined by Jan Assmann, relates to the enduring, organized memory that upholds a community's identity over generations through symbols, rituals, and practices (7). Assmann, in his work "Cultural Memory and Early Civilization", distinguishes this from communicative memory, which is transient and tied to interpersonal interactions. He states that the external aspect of human memory is cultural memory. To establish a common sense of identity, it engages with institutions, society, and cultural manifestations. Unlike individual memory, cultural memory is codified and preserved through material representations, such as texts, monuments, and traditions, ensuring its endurance over time.

In *Angammal*, the protagonist's refusal to abandon the traditional practice of wearing a sari without a blouse symbolizes cultural memory entrenched in her identity. This practice, though questioned by her son, represents the memory of a rural Tamil way of life that has been transmitted through generations. Angammal's resistance to imposed modernity highlights the role of cultural memory in preserving a community's ethos against the homogenizing forces of progress. As Assmann suggests, cultural memory ensures continuity in the face of change, it gives stability to society. Angammal's choice thus embodies the resilience of cultural memory, resisting its erasure in the face of historical pressures.

Angammal's life story, characterized by her resistance and resilience, embodies the shared memory of a community facing transformation. The idea of communal memory, as put forward by Maurice Halbwachs, contends that memory is not only personal but is shaped



by the social groupings that individuals belong to. Memory is linked to cultural practices, institutions, and beliefs that assist communities in maintaining their identity. As Halbwachs states, no memory is attainable without the frameworks employed by individuals in society to recognize and recall their experiences.

Like wearing a saree without a blouse, there were so many features that were unique to the culture in India. Tattooing has been practiced in Indian culture for centuries. They are permanent body marks that symbolize clan, community, beliefs, and belonging to a particular culture. As Savitha AS mentioned in their book *The Invaluable Compendium for Dermatologists* Tattooing is a part of folk and tribal art. Each tribe had its own unique identity, often characterized by a prominent tattoo. In India, Kanbi and Warli women tattooed the forehead and cheeks, often with a tree and its leaves. Rabari women wear small motifs on the throat, chin, arms, and hands. The Konyak tribe practiced tattooing as a symbol of bravery and valour. But the practice has been stopped as society progresses (par. 7). In the movie, Angammal, the old mother tries to get her granddaughter tattooed, but her daughter-in-law doesn't let her do that. Betel chewing was another practice in Indian culture that men and women did alike. But Angammal's son tries to clean her teeth and look neat and more acceptable to the civilized or changed society.

All this has been part of a culture and has become the identity of the individual through cultural memory. These symbols have greater meaning and significance that is deeply rooted in the people of that community, and it is of utmost importance in the preservation of the culture. The movie ends mysteriously when Angammal is nowhere to be seen. She is aware of the changes that are happening to her community and the people around and she is the only



and the last one to cling to the tradition and cultural memory.

### **Cultural Cringe, Cultural Alienation, and Mimicry; The Internal Conflict in Pavalam:**

The Tamil film *Angammal* (2024) presents a nuanced portrayal of generational and cultural conflicts through the lens of its characters, particularly Pavalam, whose internal strife becomes a focal point for the narrative. His conflict with his mother reflects deeper issues of identity crisis, change in societal perception, and the pressures of modernity. This analysis employs A. A. Philips' concept of cultural cringe, Frantz Fanon's ideas on cultural alienation, and Homi Bhabha's theory of mimicry to interrogate Pavalam's psychological and cultural turmoil.

Cultural cringe, a term coined by Australian literary critic A. A. Phillips, refers to the internalized inferiority complex individuals or societies feel when comparing their culture to another, often deemed superior. Phillips notes in his work *On Cultural Cringe*, "Cultural cringe arises when individuals or societies view their traditions and practices as inherently inferior, often seeking validation through the adoption of external standards" (Phillips 16). Pavalam's insistence on his mother particularly wearing a blouse and giving up betel chewing highlights his internalized cultural cringe. Having been exposed to urban culture during his medical education, Pavalam perceives his mother's traditional and unconventional appearance as a potential source of embarrassment. His fiancée, representing modernity, serves as a mirror reflecting his insecurities about his rural origins. In this context, Pavalam's discomfort is more about his fear of judgment from the urban society that is being built on Westernized norms. Instead of embracing his tradition along with accepting the modernity,



majority represented by Pavalam experiences cultural cringe.

Frantz Fanon's work on cultural alienation provides further insight into Pavalam's internal conflict and fragmentation of identity. Fanon observes in *Black Skin, White Masks*, "The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards" (Fanon 127). While Pavalam is not a colonized subject, his educational and professional journey positions him as a participant in a system that deems urbanity and Westernized ideals. His alienation not only distances him from his roots but also fractures his sense of self, leaving him caught between the values of his upbringing and the expectations of the modern world.

Pavalam's desire for his mother to adopt a more "respectable" appearance can be seen as an act of mimicry. As outlined in *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha describes mimicry as "a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which 'appropriates' the Other as it visualizes power" (126). By imposing urban ideals onto his mother, Pavalam attempts to align his family with the dominant societal norms he has internalized. However, this very act exposes the fragility of his position. Angammal's defiance disrupts the mimicry, underscoring its limitations and the inherent contradictions in Pavalam's worldview. His inability to fully embrace either tradition or modernity leaves him suspended in a space of uncertainty. All this illustrates a disconnect between his cultural memory and his lived memory. His urban education has distanced him from her cultural identity. The struggle between the inherited memory, which tends to be a myth or history for the second generation, and the lived memory of the second generation is inevitable. This is experienced by everyone during a transition period.



The narrative critiques the loss of cultural memory, as the son's actions threaten to cut the transmission of cultural memory to future generations. Generational shifts and external forces rupture the transmission of cultural memory. This happens because the younger generation, as it is depicted through Angammal's son and others, prioritizes modernity and progress over the blind carrying forward of cultural memory. This happens because of reinterpretation and distortion, or loss of cultural identity due to external forces. The son's inability to fully understand his mother's cultural practices and his insistence on modern norms reflect a break in the transmission of cultural memory. His urban experiences have distanced him from the traditions that shape his mother's identity and his childhood.

According to Aleida Assman, cultural memory is prone to discontinuities, where practices, symbols, and rituals are no longer actively transmitted, leading to a gap between generations. Assman highlights historical events, societal changes, or generational shifts as the reasons for this discontinuity. Angammal's son is not a rebel who wants to demolish everything that his mother believes in. He belongs to the generation that has been much influenced by a new culture. He is, like most of the people who come in contact with a new culture, "screening" the rural Tamil identity with urban norms, creating a break in the transmission of his cultural heritage. Sigmund Freud, in his 1899 paper, *Screen Memories* talks about this kind of screen memory as a metaphor for selectively reinterpreting or replacing the memories of the past, creating gaps in the transmission of authentic cultural or historical experiences. This happened due to a rupture caused by the competing pressures of modernity and cultural heritage on Angammal's son, leaving his connection to his mother's identity fractured.



## Tradition vs. Modernity: The Politics of Progress

The movie's depiction of tradition and modernity gives a fertile ground for understanding societal progress and individual autonomy. Cultural memory preserves traditions, rituals, and shared symbols that define a community. It acts as a repository for collective experiences and traumas, embedding them in practices like attire. Since society is always dynamic, we may see numerous cultural transitions throughout history. For instance, in the West Renaissance disrupted the culture, and later in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, industrialization brought drastic changes in the culture and identity of the people.

In the introduction to Pierre Nora's work, *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire*, he has observed that the rise of modernity is the reason for the decline of all forms of traditional memory in the name of reason, nature, life, originality, and scientific innovation (8). The generation gap or lack of common knowledge breaks the continuity of the cultural memory. Though the knowledge is in constant flux, the sudden disruption of the continuity has a traumatic effect on the people's memory. The transition from tradition to modernity, as depicted in *Angammal*, can be contextualized within the broader socio-economic and cultural shifts that began in the mid-20th century in India, particularly Tamil Nadu. In the movie, this transition is symbolized by the generational and ideological conflict between Angammal and her son, Pavalam.

In the context of the film, this shift likely began with the increasing influence of urbanization, education, and globalisation which has led to cultural exchanges that introduced new norms and values to rural communities. Pavalam, who is educated in the city, embodies



this modernizing force. His exposure to urban life, coupled with the need to conform to urban and Western-influenced cultural standards (as seen in his efforts to impress his affluent Christian in-laws), signifies the gradual erosion of rural traditions. For Angammal, who represents tradition, her attire is not just a personal choice but a symbol of her cultural memory, which is deeply rooted in the rural Tamil tradition. This practice, however, becomes a focal point of conflict, as Pavalam insists on her adopting modern attire to align with what he perceives as acceptable or progressive. This moment of conflict reveals the tension between a generation that embodies traditional practices and a younger generation striving to assimilate into modern, urbanized frameworks.

Post-independence India saw significant economic reforms, including industrialization and urbanization, which brought rural populations into contact with urban values. Traditional jobs have been replaced with industrial jobs. Increased access to education exposed the younger generation to global ideas, often creating a divide between rural, traditional upbringings and urban, modern ideals. The proliferation of mass media, cinema, and later globalized influences introduced new lifestyles, dress codes, and behavioural norms that contrasted with indigenous practices. In the film, the transition is depicted not as a linear or harmonious process but as a site of contestation. Angammal's steadfast adherence to her cultural practices highlights the resilience of tradition, while Pavalam's insistence on change underscores the pressures of assimilation. This conflict encapsulates the larger societal transition in Tamil Nadu, where modernity has historically challenged rural traditions, leading to a complex negotiation of identity, autonomy, and cultural preservation. We need both; they should nurture each other rather than clash.



Northrop Frye's *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* offers a captivating framework for interpreting the symbolic dynamics between tradition and modernity, as demonstrated in *Angammal*. Frye's examination of myth and metaphor within the Bible reveals the archetypal structures that form the foundation of human experience, providing a perspective to comprehend *Angammal*'s resistance to societal transformation. In the film, the sari worn without a blouse signifies a symbolic act of defiance deeply rooted in cultural identity, similar to the archetypal gestures Frye discusses, in which individual actions echo broader mythic patterns.

Frye notes that the language of myth is a language of metaphor, where the particular becomes universal, and the temporal takes on an eternal significance (20-37). This insight aligns with how *Angammal*'s choice transcends a mere personal preference and becomes a metaphor for the cultural resistance amidst modern pressures. Her determination echoes the universal tension between change and continuity, a theme deeply embedded in both the Bible's mythic structures and the film's narrative.

Connecting *Angammal* with Pierre Nora's concept of between memory and history, the film can be interpreted as a poignant exploration of how cultural practices serve as *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory), bridging personal and collective histories in a society undergoing transformation. Nora argues that sites of memory arise when living memory transitions into history due to shifts in cultural continuity, often triggered by modernization or globalization.

In *Angammal*, the protagonist's refusal to wear a blouse with her sari symbolizes a living memory- a practice tied to the embodied cultural identity of rural Tamil Nadu. This



tradition, however, is threatened by her son's insistence on modern attire, reflecting the historical pressures of urbanization and the erosion of indigenous customs. Nora's assertion that "memory is life, borne by living societies . . . history is the reconstruction of what is no longer" (8) resonates here: Angammal's act of resistance preserves a fading memory in the face of societal change, resisting its downgrading to mere historical artefact.

### **Conclusion:**

The film *Angammal* vividly illustrates a break in the transmission of cultural memory, where generational shifts and external pressures disrupt the transmission of cultural identity. The rupture occurs as younger generations, represented by the son and others in the movie, prioritize progress and modernity over the preservation of cultural memory. They wanted to replace the cultural memory with modernity instead of assimilating the changes.

Highlighting the fragility of cultural memory in the face of societal and generational change made *Angammal* a poignant narrative of resistance to cultural erasure. As Nora postulates modernity has created a break between memory and history, and this break has led to the break in the organic transmission of culture. "Modernity has transformed memory into history, creating a rupture where memory, once shared and lived, has become externalized and archived" (9). Dominick LaCapra in his book *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001) holds same opinion saying that Trauma creates a rupture in memory, leading to a haunted existence where the past is at once present and inaccessible. Generational shift coupled with modernity may exacerbate this and the subsequent generation may fail to grasp completely the culture of their predecessors. What do they carry forward? The memories are screened



and selectively carried forward and reinterpreted. A concept akin to Sigmund Freud's screen memory. The ego searches for memories that can serve as screens and the unpleasant ones are removed from consciousness.



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