

SUBVERTING STEREOTYPES: A CRITICAL STUDY OF P. PADMARAJAN'S UDAKAPPOLA (1978)

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ABSTRACT--The aim of this paper is to critically analyse the 1978 Malayalam novel *Udakappola*, written by P Padmarajan. The novel follows the life and actions of people who belong to the underbelly of society. From a self-loathing pimp to a retired government officer, Padmarajan weaves a story that chronicles the everyday life of a group of people who do not conform to the stereotypes and prejudices set by society. The characters and their actions are not easily accepted by the moral sense of the general public. Through the unnamed narrator, Padmarajan unfolds the lives of these people who live on the 'other side' of the society. The paper is an attempt to study the various themes discussed by Padmarajan in the novel, and how Padmarajan successfully manages to paint an honest picture of a maligned class of society.

Key words—Padmarajan, *Udakappola*, Stereotype, Prejudice, Malayalam novel

I. INTRODUCTION

Udakappola is a Malayalam novel that explores the lives of characters from an unnamed town in Kerala. These individuals belong to the underbelly or the 'other side' of society. The characters of the novel belong to all sectors of society. From a retired ICS officer to a pimp and his clients, Padmarajan explores the lives of all those who belong to different sections and classes of the public. They are a misunderstood group of people, and are 'misfits' according to the moral standards set by humanity. With the novel *Udakappola*, the writer attempts to break away from these preconceived notions established by the social order. Padmarajan discusses serious topics like incest, marriage, death, prostitution and so forth in the novel and to a certain magnitude, tries to normalise these taboo topics.

II. OBJECTIVE

The paper attempts to critically examine and analyse the 1978 Padmarajan classic *Udakappola*. The characters that the novelist brings to life in this novel are social misfits. They are rebels and eccentrics who do not live by the rules and customs fixed by the conventional world around them. The 'other side' depicted by the novelist live by their own set of laws. For one reason or other, these characters are often susceptible to prejudices and contempt in the real world. This paper aims at exploring the characters, various themes and symbols discussed in the novel.

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Another important aspect explored in this paper is how skilfully the writer uses the unnamed narrator to describe the characters and their lives in the novel.

III. HYPOTHESIS

Udakappola, one of the finest works of Padmarajan, addresses various topics that are generally considered as crude and unrefined. He examines numerous premises and different aspects of society in this work of fiction. His characters are realistic and have depth. Almost every one of them can be found in the real world, although people seldom addresses or acknowledge them. Since they belong to the ghettos, their miserable lives are rarely discussed in writings. The author uses an unnamed narrator to communicate his story. This is a brilliant technique used by the novelist to discuss the lives of these characters without judgement and bias. Moreover, the speaker is one of them. He is not an outsider looking in. The major figures of the novel are as “filthy” and “dirty”.

The people that the novelist brings to life in this work are ‘outsiders’. They do not follow the standards set by the world around them. The main characters of the novel includes a narrator who constantly visits prostitutes, Thangal a pimp who hates his job, a lonely old man awaiting his death, and Jayakrishnan a wealthy young man who gambles and drinks his wealth away. There are also various other minor figures who contribute enormously to the plot.

IV. KARUNAKARA MENON AND HIS VULTURES

Karunakara Menon is one of the most important characters of the novel. In a word, he is a riddle. His true nature and character is never completely uncovered in the novel. The narrator first meets the old man and his giant house when he arrives there for a job interview as the secretary for the retired officer. The protagonist continually describes him as a ‘mad man’. But quite often, he appears to be the only sane person in the entire novel. In the beginning, a mystery and secrecy surrounds the old man. But the narrator manages to unravel the silences and secrets that is around his boss. Menon was once a respected and feared government official like his father. But now, he is just a sad old man who lives in a tired old mansion with his aged wife and servant. When our protagonist first met him, he gave the impression of being a strict and overbearing boss. But he quickly discovered that the old man was merely lonely. He had very few things in life to bring him any true happiness.

Menon was a rather eccentric person and had his own set of unusual habits. His eccentricities are revealed to the narrator during their first encounter itself. While the protagonist was waiting for the interview, the servant ceremoniously brings out a chair, table and two bottles of beer. This is followed by the arrival of the man of the house. As the old man sits on the chair, patiently sipping his beer, the servant carries a bag of dead rats to the big grounds that surround the house. As everyone watches, the helper throws the dead rats high into the sky and vultures swoop down from the nearby trees. The narrator realises that the helper was feeding the vultures and realises that the old man had come outside just to witness this. The entire spectacle leaves him shaken and terrified. But what unnerved him the most was Menon’s expression. The narrator alarmingly realises that the sight of the vultures devouring the dead rats brought a sort of eerie glow and happiness to the aging face.

Death is an important and recurring theme in the novel. It is a constant presence in the life of the retired officer. The presence of the vultures, which are believed to be the bringers of death in many cultures, symbolizes

death. It is likely that Menon welcomes this sight because he is waiting patiently for his own death. "In that silent evening, the cries of the vultures sounded like death." (Padmarajan 14)

Although a successful and respected government official, Menon had a tragic personal life. He had a lonely, unhappy childhood. He was never close with his parents and grew up with his sister as his only friend. The two had a very protective childhood and grew up in that large house looking out into the vast world through the windows. Menon left home and went abroad as a successful officer, leaving his sister behind. He rarely visited his home. Years later, he married a Punjabi girl against his parents' wishes, but his family life was never content. His wife suffered from periods of mental illness and during such a bout of ill health, she committed suicide by jumping out the window with their new born son. All these events left a lasting wound in the mind of the old man. He even wonders whether his wife was lucid during the moments before her suicide. Menon did not come home for years, even for his mother's funeral. When he did finally return, he married his sister Devi the very next day and again left his childhood home. This left the entire town shocked, but by the time the retired officer came home permanently with his aging wife/sister, everyone had forgotten about them.

As the secretary, the narrator's main task was to type down the letters that his employer dictated to him. The letters were personal in nature and helped reveal the inner thoughts of the otherwise private and cautious Menon. But the old man hardly ever mentioned his wife in these letters. They began with casual pleasantries but before long, turned intimate. He talked about his lonely childhood and his nightmares in these letters. In one particular letter, he finally mentioned Devi and talked about how frightening it is to live in this desolate old house with the sounds of various creatures running around in the attic. "For him, his wife is nothing more than a mere memory" (Padmarajan 54)

Although the narrator works for the old man for months, he only gets to meet Devi once. She was a bedridden old woman, who could not speak. She just stared at the new unfamiliar face of the narrator with both relief and fear. The next time the narrator saw her, she was merely a lifeless body. Her death was imminent and the funeral was attended by very few people. On that particular day it was the narrator's duty to feed the vultures and this further illustrated the theme of death in the novel.

As months passed, the letters that came for the old man turned into obituary notices. His wife's death and these obituaries took a toll on the old man. The narrator began to notice that the old man was turning even more silent. The narrator's job as the secretary came to an end on the day the old man received the final obituary announcement.

Prostitution is one of the oldest and most misrepresented professions in the world. Literature and cinema has often represented sex workers in a negative shade. A prostitute is labelled as a 'fallen woman' and is often represented as morally inferior and the cause for a man to fall from his moral standards. Into this prejudiced world, comes the elusive Clara. She is among the best popular and intriguing characters created by Padmarajan. She is one of the most bold and opinionated women characters found in Malayalam literature. Clara is a sex worker who comes into the profession out of her own choice. She sees this job as a path to freedom and longs for an independent life and wants to escape her unhappy home. She is never branded as a victim in the novel. The narrator is the only person who is close to her. Every time they meet, Clara recounts all the people she met and the incidents she faced during her journey. The narrator's relationship with Clara is intimate, but he never manages to fully understand her. She is always a mystery to him. Her wishes and dreams are strange and only makes sense to her. She is a

person who wants to end up alone in life. She wants to live the last days of her life in poverty, without any desires and hopes. During one their meetings, they hear the cries of a mad man, wounded by the chains on his legs. This prompts her to say, "I long to be the sores on the mad man's legs" (Padmarajan 106)

The protagonist of the novel is the 'I' who narrates the story. He is the perfect storyteller for the story that the author attempts to recount through the novel. The narrator is an unnamed male figure. His age and personal details are never revealed in the novel.

He is the voice for the "filthy" part of the society. It is through his balanced recounting that the readers get to know about the various characters that appear in the novel. The 'I' is Padmarajan himself. It is Padmarajan's own voice that is heard through the storyteller. The narration is unbiased and balanced. But at the same time he is not a detached or aloof speaker. He is directly involved in the lives of all the characters. But he is never judgemental or prejudiced. He witnesses the lives of the various 'misfits' around him but never passes any judgement or expresses any disapproval. Instead, he himself is a 'misfit'. Moreover, he is not the conventional 'hero'. He visits prostitutes frequently and one of his closest friends is a pimp. He drinks and gambles and has all the 'wrong' habits. The question that arises in in the course of the novel is why the author chooses this character as the protagonist. The writer departs from the conventional norms when it comes to his choice of characters, especially the narrator. He chooses a rather common man as his central character.

The novelist explores various kinds of relationships in the novel. The relationship between a pimp and his clients is explored with the help of characters like Thangal and his clients. Thangal is a successful pimp in the unidentified town. But he hates himself and his trade, often calling himself filthy and dirty. He hates the idea that he has to look at a woman as mere objects or bodies, rather than as individuals. He never misbehaved with any of these women and never approaches them sexually. This is just a job for him, like any other. Padmarajan is not successful in revealing much about Thangal or his background. He is an enigmatic character who knows everything about the people of the town. It was Thangal who revealed Menon's personal life to the narrator. Thangal's character perfectly represents the 'other side' of society and are very rarely discussed in popular fiction. If they are discussed, it is almost always in a negative way. But the novelist refrains from making any such judgements. He portrays Thangal just like any other character.

The relationship and bond shared between Menon and the 'I' of the novel is very poignant. After watching the frightening vultures, the narrator was hesitant to return the next day. The whole ritual had left him unsettled. But after learning about the old man's personal life and his lonesome childhood, the narrator felt an impulse to work for the lonely old man. He felt a strong sense of pity and sympathy for the two young kids who had to spend their childhood locked up inside a huge house. The narrator in a way was drawn to the old man's loneliness and wanted to know more about him. He also wanted to meet Devi, who was forced to spend years in that mansion all alone.

The story is set in an unnamed town in Kerala. To a certain degree, the setting or the town itself becomes an integral part of the story. The urban setting influences almost all the characters and their actions. The 'dirty town', as is often referred by the central character, reflects the people of the town and their exploits. The life in the town, as explained by the protagonist is 'stale'.

V. CONCLUSION

To conclude, the central intention of this paper is to study the novel *Udakappola* and analyze the many themes discussed by Padmarajan. The novel deals with many diverse topics and is set in an urban locale. The novelist normalizes various subjects that are generally drenched in stereotypes. The usually prejudiced group of people are portrayed without any judgment by the narrator. *Udakappola*, which translates to water bubbles, is symbolic of the novel's characters and their short lived lives. The characters of the novel are simple people who struggle to navigate challenges and hurdles of life, and in the end, fade away like a water bubble, anonymous and alone.

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