

The Trials and Tribulations of the Marginalized in Indira Parthasarathy's *Kurutipunnal*

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Abstract

The paper studies the horrific nature of the Keezha Venmani massacre and throws light upon the character of the master mind, Kanniah Naidu. Violence inflicted upon the marginalized is also dealt with in the paper when the parallels between Festus Iyayi's novel, *Violence* and Parthasarathy's *Kurutipunnal* are drawn upon and discussed. The paper proposes to establish that man has the power to develop his innate capacities so as to achieve dignity in spite of the hurdles in the world.

Keywords: Indira Parthasarathy, *Kurutipunnal*, Marginalized, carnage, gruesome, inflict, aberration

Though most of the developing countries in the Asian and African continents gained Independence from their European colonizers in the 20th century, the marginalized citizens in these countries do not enjoy the fruits of real freedom and independence. Their freedom has been a virtual one and they are under the throngs of the elite, be it the upper caste or the economically rich or well educated or in any way the powerful people of the area. In addition to this factor, the marginalized are under the constant surveillance of the civic authorities, the bureaucracy and especially the Police force of the respective areas. Even after 72 years of Indian Independence and the fast paced development of our country in all fields it is evident that in most of the local issues, political or social, it is the marginalized people of the area, who are relatively illiterate, economically downtrodden and in turn powerless who are targeted by the police and civil authorities and umpteen number of cases have been registered against them. By such means the real culprits or perpetrators of the crime (who often belong to the powerful sections of society) are left scot-free. The marginalized accused do not know the ways and means to challenge these legal suits, are charge-sheeted, punished and end up their lives in prison. Nowadays illiterate economically poor youth of these marginalized sections are enticed to act as mercenaries and carry out some of the most gruesome murders of the recent decade in our country. In turn the real criminals are never brought before the chains of law and justice.

Suppression, violence, harassment are some of the miserable conditions the marginalized people are put up with in many developing countries especially in rural underdeveloped areas. As

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a result of the above mentioned three factors, the marginalized are tormented that they end up crippled, mentally deranged and some of them are even tortured to die in public as they had committed so called sins. Violence and harassment of the marginalized in most of the incidents happen to be perpetrated by a single person who connives many reasons and carries out the plan with the support of mercenaries or hooligans. A careful analysis of the personality of the master mind reveals that his or her psychological aberrations have triggered him up for the resultant carnage. In such cases “the doubly marginalized women” and innocent children face horrific deaths.

Indira Parthasarathy, Tamil dramatist and novelist, has discussed many social and political issues in his works. His *magnum opus Kurutippunal*, published in February 1975, reveals Parthasarathy’s commitment for social transformation and his concern for the underprivileged. It is based on the Keezha Venmani carnage of 1967 in which forty two poor Harijans including twelve innocent children and twenty six helpless women were burnt alive in a land-lord-peasant clash. Parthasarathy’s own experience at Keezha Venmani enabled him to understand the complexity in human nature. What Henry James says about the writer’s duty to “catch the colour of life” (James 1169) in the description of the locale and its people is applicable to Indira Parthasarathy’s personal experience at Keezha Venmani.

The paper studies the horrific nature of the massacre and throws light upon the character of the master mind, Kanniah Naidu. Violence inflicted upon the marginalized is also dealt with in the paper when the parallels between Festus Iyayi’s novel, *Violence* and Parthasarathy’s *Kurutippunal* are drawn upon and discussed. The paper proposes to establish that man has the power to develop his innate capacities so as to achieve dignity in spite of the hurdles in the world.

This novel is Parthasarathy’s *tour de force* and won him the Sahitya Akademi Award. It was translated into English by K.N. Subramaniam under the title, *The River of Blood*.

Parthasarathy’s *Kurutippunal* calls for more vigilance on the part of those at the forefront of the fight for social justice, political emancipation and economic prosperity. The novel portrays social and economic repression against the downtrodden. The dehumanizing attitude of the landlords is attacked vehemently through a number of incidents in the novel.

Kurutippunal depicts the miserable life of the poor people who live in a village near Tiruvarur in Tanjore district, Tamil Nadu. Gopal, who has done his doctoral research on sociology, comes to the village from Delhi to spend a few days, but stays in the village for two years. During this period, he has written only one letter to his friend, Siva who is in Delhi. In order to know what has happened to Gopal, Siva comes to the village, and finds his friend being

engaged in the revolutionary activities against the landlords. The clash is between the landlords represented by Kanniah Naidu and the poor peasants represented by Gopal, Palani, Vadivelu and Ramaiah. Parthasarathy portrays the character of Kanniah Naidu both from the social and psychological perspectives. Kanniah Naidu is impotent and this defect manifests itself in various dimensions. He wants to take revenge on nature and on fellow human beings. He makes use of the caste factor to turn the fury of the villagers against Gopal and Siva. In a moment of despair, he sets fire to the huts of the poor peasants killing a number of women and innocent children.

The content of the novel is what Frantz Fanon describes in *The Wretched of the Earth*. The endless tension between the oppressor and the oppressed, and the resultant violence is what Fanon discusses and the traumatic events in *Kurutippunal* reflect Fanon's concept of decolonization and violence.

The character of Kanniah Naidu is highly complex because of the psychological aberrations emerging from the consciousness of deformity. Kanniah Naidu's physical appearance is described thus: "He has remained a bachelor though he is fifty years old. He has got a strong body and he looks like a thirty-year old man. His face always looks clean without a trace of hair" (*Kurutippunal* 41). In his first meeting with Kanniah Naidu, Gopal wonders how Naidu is keeping his appearance so "young and healthy" in spite of his affairs with many women in the nearby villages (*Kurutippunal* 41). It involves great irony because Kanniah Naidu is impotent. The end of the novel, which presents the climax, is a powerful event, showing a perfect combination of form and theme. Vadivelu tells Gopal how Kanniah Naidu and his men threw the helpless women and the innocent children into fire like "throwing pieces of wood in burning fire" (*Kurutippunal* 230). Vadivelu and Gopal run towards the huts of the poor peasants. They see "the flame rising like the tongue of a demon. The wind and the nearby trees made the fire spread in all directions. The poor people, who have been a prey to hunger and poverty, have now become a prey to injustice and arrogance. The helpless victims are being reduced to ashes. The agonizing cry of the poor slowly fades away in the embrace of fire" (*Kurutippunal* 230). Gopal looks at the river. It seems to him that the river is full of blood. Parthasarathy uses interior monologue here so as to reveal the gradual rise of the spirit of revolution in Gopal: "What is this? How has the river become incarnadine? Whose blood is this? How many times I have enjoyed the serene beauty of this river in moonlight! Now the same river is full of blood instead of water. Slowly and slowly increases the level of water! Blood, blood everywhere! The whole village is sinking in blood!" (*Kurutippunal* 231).

Kurutippunal has contributed immensely towards drawing attention to the exploitation existing in the social system. The portrayal of such situations of violent aggression and exploitation is a clear indication of Parthasarathy's commitment to focus on the yearnings and aspirations of the poor. While describing the sufferings of the less-privileged members of the society,

Parthasarathy strikes an optimistic note by focusing on the gradual build-up of the revolutionary activities, aiming at finding a solution to the degrading experiences of the poor. The novel ends in an optimistic note that finds its full expression in the words of Gopal who takes a firm decision to fight vehemently against the landlords: “I am going to be immersed in the river of blood that belongs to the oppressed people. All the strength of the poor peasants should come to me. I’m not a coward” (*Kurutippunal* 254).

The treatment of the theme of faith in human possibilities even in the moment of a threatening crisis in *Kurutippunal* invites comparison with Festus Iyayi’s novel, *Violence*. Iyayi portrays the sufferings of the downtrodden and emphasizes the need for the reconstruction of society. The beginning of violence shows the pathetic plight of Idemudia and his wife, Adisa: “He and his wife, Adisa were tenants in one of the low muds, but zinced houses along Owode Street. Adisa, who had been sweeping the badly cemented floor of the room dropped the broom and stretched her hand across the table which stood against the window... The broom was so short that she had to stoop substantially to sweep clean (1). The standard of living of the people in *Kurutippunal* is not better than that in *Violence*. The only difference is that *Violence* depicts discrimination on the basis of colour whereas *Kurutippunal* shows discrimination on the basis of caste. In *Violence* the exploiter class is represented by Obofun and Queen; in *Kurutippunal* by Kanniah Naidu and his relatives. Iyayi shows how the poor people suffer at the hands of powerful people when Queen denies the wages to be given to Idemudia. Queen makes Idemudia and his friends work hard in off-loading the five hundred bags of cement but is not willing to pay the money to the workers. Obofun attempts to exploit Adisa’s poverty to satisfy his sexual needs. Similarly in *Kurutippunal* the poor peasants work hard in the paddy fields but get only a little because all the fields are owned by Kanniah Naidu and his relatives. Kanniah Naidu keeps many women in the neighbouring villages as concubines in order to hide his impotency. When Vadivelu criticizes him commenting on his impotency, Kanniah Naidu takes cruel revenge on him. He subjects Vadivel and Pappathi to sexual abuse. Both *Kurutippunal* and *Violence* prove that the oppressor will not hesitate to go to any extent in taking revenge on the helpless people. *Violence* attacks the dehumanizing attitude of the exploiters who have devised the social system according to their convenience: “The type of economic and hence the political system which are operating in our country today brutalizes the individual, rapes his manhood” (*Violence*185). Iyayi puts forward his view through one of the characters in *Violence*: I feel and think it necessary that all the oppressed sections of our community ought to take up arms to overthrow the present oppressive system. The system has already proved that it operates through violence” (*Violence* 185).

Violence, according to Fanon, is a ‘cleansing force’ which liberates people from their hopelessness, inferiority complex and submissiveness and thereby restore their self-respect. It is their suffering in violence that instills hope and confidence to face any sort of difficulty and overcome it. Gopal’s firm decision towards the end of the novel is to fight for the upliftment of

the poor and the downtrodden makes the reader relate this event with Fanon's powerful lines in *The Wretched of the Earth*: "The people of the third world are in the process of shattering their chains"(34).

Kurutippunal and *Violence* have many similarities and end in an optimistic note. Both the novels portray the emergence of a revolution which will pave the way for the upliftment of the downtrodden. Both focus on the need for the preservation of human dignity.

As analysed in the opening paragraphs, subjugation of the marginalized happens in most of the third world countries, and the victims at some extent resolve to ward off the nihilistic feelings and pessimistic despair, and to muster confidence, self- respect and achieve dignity.

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