
The Art of G. Nagarajan: Narration Decoding the Ethics of the Society

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ABSTRACT:

G.Nagarajan, a forerunner to all modernist Tamil writers was born in 1920s. He started writing fiction at the end of 1950s. The personality of G.Nagarajan as elaborately discussed today in the literary circles lead us to reread his writings and ponder over its effect on modern Tamil literature. The approach to him will raise certain questions regarding the role of narration that tries to decode the ethical values of a society in which he lived. When we look at his memorable fictions we come to understand that he dared to discuss uncommon characters and unusual human affairs which were very unethical and illegal in general outlook. The uniqueness of him is the ability to see the rejected aspirations of the everyday life of the marginalized people like prostitutes, drunkards and pimps. We can say that he does not stop with that and he goes beyond to release himself from the pain of examining such people through his writings. He chose a type of writing which rejected altogether the usual narration of mass culture and commercial writings. What he achieved with what he wrote only has brought him today to an important place in modern Tamil literature nearly after fifty years. This paper tries to focus on G.Nagarajan's narration that functions as a spectator in his novel 'Naalai Matrumoru Naalae' and in his short novel 'Kurathi Mudukku' to move to an unoccupied place from which he is able to give the readers certain new views on the life of the estranged characters without any fear of ethical constraints. In fact, he says through his writings that a writer has no ethical constraints when he watches keenly the rhythm of life. All the translations of the texts given here are mine.

Key words: *Modern Tamil literature, decode, marginalized, ethical constraints*

INTRODUCTION

G. Nagarajan, an important personality in designing the modern Tamil literature specifically from 1960 to 1980 is known especially for his novel '*Naalai Matrumoru Naalae*' and the short novel '*Kurathi Mudukku*'. The role of Tamil little magazines like 'Kaalām' in the year 1991 is very commendable in bringing back his writings to the knowledge of a large section of modern readers. In that little magazine '*Kurathi Mudukku*' was republished nearly after thirty years. Like that another Tamil little magazine 'Gnanaratham' brought his novel '*Naalai Matrumoru Naalae*' as a serial in 1973. In total he wrote 33 stories, few poems and some prose works. He had written prose works in English too. Some of his missing creations include a play in Tamil and a novel in English. In the beginning, as many writers are influenced by Marxism, he also was enticed by Marxist ideology and party activities. But a careful reader could identify the simultaneous presence of Marxist elements and also a kind of writing that is almost opposite to it both in theory and style in his writings. The first disappointment with life for him started with the untimely death of his first wife in a domestic accident. The last years of 1950s gave him a different shape. He involved himself with political activities by leading people in various struggles. But very soon in the beginning of 1960s, G.Nagarajan moved to a new plane of creative fiction which was against the existing norms of maintaining ethical values in the writing of his times. When he was alive, he lost hope in all systems of social institutions and wandered in search of an absolute. He then tried to bring in his writings the life of the oppressed, condemned and the forsaken people. He tried to draw our attention towards the injustice that exists at the bottom of our social structure.¹

He touched upon the hidden regions of human aspirations and controlled emotions in his fictions which include '*Naalai Matrumoru Naalae*' and '*Kurathi Mudukku*'. After that his search for an art to display life in its varied models went to all possible extensions of human existence. In that attempt he came to the point of talking about the so called outcasts in the society prostitutes, drunkards, pimps and the like. The places where one hesitates to enter and the issues which everyone wants to avoid in discussion are dealt with in his stories in a direct and daring way of story telling. He was able to write what other writers of his times did not dare to record and also about those matters which they conveniently edited to hide them from the eyes of the readers. There is no element of attachment to any particular 'ism' or theory in

them. There is no compromise in his writing style and he simply wrote what he wanted to write. And also he did not assume the positions taken by writers of today because he did not believe in them. Now a committed analysis of his narration may lead us to consider him even as one among the precursors to Post-modern writing in Tamil literature.

REREADING HIS FICTIONS AND THE REVELATIONS

It is difficult to imagine today a personality like G.Nagarajan when we reread his fictions like '*Naalai Matrumoru Naalae*' and '*Kurathi Mudukku*'. His stories deal with the ideas of body and mind which are totally different from those which are written now by certain writers who assume themselves as demonstrating body politics. In his search to say something new, he finally reaches a world that is full of hunger, enmity, sabotage and lust. And it is a world that is not seen by the general mass and that is also the world rejected by them as something impractical, illegal and obscene. He goes behind drunkards and prostitutes to see and narrate their life style and thereby depicts the mysterious grand functioning of this world. The everyday activities of the marginalized in this world are governed by different rules and the anxiety of G.Nagarajan in knowing why and who declared those rules can be well perceived by the anxious readers. We can understand him as a personality who came to his own self from his own writings on the tragic drama of the lives of the unidentified and also from his own life. He does not interfere with the characters when he writes about their desires and disappointments; he does not speak his words for them. Even the children in his stories are doing many banned activities like selling liquor and they do without any hesitation the so-called low grade jobs like hair-cutting. By portraying this, G.Nagarajan tries to show the criminal quality of the society through the eyes of those children. When he follows the forced world of crimes, we are able to sense his creative sensibility in bringing out the counter-political quality.

In the very beginning of the novel '*Naalai Matrumoru Naalae*', he says:

“...If you had the guts to do what silly things you would have done, the bravery you would have shown if you were compelled, the diseases you would have received if you were

interested, the disgrace you would have attained if you were caught, these are his life...”
(p.13)

Thomas Woolfe is of the opinion that all is not good and beautiful in this world and eventually life is the only thing that matters. By showing what remains ugly, G.Nagarajan makes us to long for and see the beautiful. He stresses that life is more important than rules and regulations. According to him, the problem is with the way in which we live our lives. An uncommon revelation of the character Kandan is depicted in this novel. Kandan goes for hair cutting and when the boy touches him to cut his hair, Kandan suddenly gets the feeling of desire for the boy. The exchange of feelings created by the touch of the body of the boy was an extraordinary narration during his times. The beginning, the middle and the end of his stories explicitly display the traces of forlorn desires of the forlorn man. We have come across such a Kandan in our lives many times. We can ask whether we are also one such Kandan and we are hiding it safely behind our social status constructed by many things like money and power. We are moved not only towards Kandan but also towards the characters met by Kandan like Solai Pillai, Subbaiah Chettiyar and Antony. Why do they accept the life that is forced on them and why it is forced on them are the questions which go beyond the story. From this point of discussion, G.Nagarajan tries to decode the ethical values of the society.² He refers to the rejected world where there is a strong search for the other body which is actually another form of a search for a constant and grand mercy. When body is a commodity for Subbaiah Chettiyar, it is not accepted by his lover girl Irene and she acts in the opposite way to counter his considerations regarding her body. Those who are powerful in the society are always ready to crush the other when there is an opportunity and it is only hypocrisy that there is ethics in life. Lust challenges all the moral principles and human beings are trying to defend their so-called ethics in vain.

G.Nagarajan does not simply throw light on the cruel darkness of human mind but he wanders through it to discover the ostracized heroines and heroes. The art of G.Nagarajan tries to find out from within each one of us the abandoned areas of crime and lust. Kandan does not care anything in life but he wants Meena who is in a forced situation to sell her flesh. He then asks the broker Antony to find out somebody who is better than him to get her married. But at the end everyone stands as an orphan. In writing about these ways of the

world, the writer G.Nagarajan himself becomes an orphan and he wanders alone in the long streets of language. There are many ‘other’ in the novel and it speaks in the language of each one of them in recording life. His narration not only decodes the ethical understandings of the society as he watches life but also searches for grand ethics in readers. From this we recognize and understand G.Nagarajan moving into a different space in 1960s and so we consider him now as a writer who created certain aspects of Postmodernism in Tamil literature. Sundara Ramasamy, an important Tamil modernist writer rightly said that these stories were an outcome of the serious concern that Nagarajan had with his world of experience.³

In the short novel ‘*Kurathi Mudukku*’ he deals with the hidden and deep rooted aspirations of prostitutes. Thangam is one such character and we are asked to think about what does she want actually in this world and why it is not given to her. The clash between the purity of her desire and the dirt of her body is continuous and her aspirations remain unanswered in the void of the society which is full of unidentified demands. The reporter likes her and she too likes him when she is living with Natarajan with whom she is very much attached. That life is also not a legally arranged one. Thangam thinks that she can sleep with anyone if Natarajan asks her to do it. The reporter is unable to release her from this strange chain of love and lust. From the narration, we realize that we are also tied up with certain abstract chains in our life. It becomes almost impossible for everyone of us at one stage in life to save someone whom we like very much. The life of Thangam does not fit in any recognized social structure and she stands as a stranger in the world which is designed by family structures. At the same time we cannot consider her as a fool because she speaks in an intelligent manner in many situations. Then why is she suffering? We feel that G.Nagarajan in his unique narrative style goes very much beyond the desires of both male and female body. He wants to say strongly that ‘different’ characters are also a part and parcel this universe, this life.⁴ Rejecting them is equal to rejecting one way of living. Apart from Thangam, there are other female characters Maragadham, Shenbagam and Devayaanai. Maragadham also is cheated by her lover who takes away her chain that is earned by her by selling herself to meet her basic needs. She can give everything to others and still she is not accepted by anyone. Then what is the fate of ethics, justice, equality and human liberation? Why the love of prostitutes and orphans are

not recognized and cherished? Devayaanai is another beautiful girl spoiled by a man who is her relative. She is asked to do the flesh business and her life goes on without any disturbance from anybody who is conscious of the pain of it. When our perception is right, we can understand that those women who sell their flesh are actually wives in the heart of their hearts; they are always searching for a true love in their cruel life. The author tries to analyze the possible human relationships through the depiction of the world of the ‘different’ people that is full of insult, pain and exploitation.

In the context of discussing the ways of the world, the narrator says:

“Instead of dividing the citizens into two classes like patriots and traitors, I accepted each and every man and woman are distinct... I am not able to look at family life as something that is because of love or something that is sustained by love. I understand the inner meaning of love in a different level”(p.139).

Such a characterization was totally a new way of writing during the times of the writer G.Nagarajan.

A noted contemporary Tamil writer Jeyamohan says that those who stick to discipline are overflowing with the dream of breaking it and those who have broken the rules of discipline have experienced the pain of it; again they wish to reach the region of safety with the boundaries decided by discipline. G. Nagarajan’s short stories too look like the microcosm of his novels. The society had framed many rules and ethics to control human relationships; but the human mind knows no limits and constraints. Life seems to have no principles and ethics and the people who live in it have a lot of rules and regulations in the name of maintaining order and responsibility. The friction that arises out of this contradiction is addressed by G.Nagarajan in his fictional writings. We can say that it is out of a higher social consciousness that he possessed.

CONCLUSION

This paper attempts to reread and discuss the two famous fictional works of G. Nagarajan that bring up problems related to the commonly accepted ethical issues and the conflict between

the marginalized characters and their environment. It is based on the author's narrative that represents the idea of being 'different' in the most complex and estranged society and the aim is to seek the new aspects of the conflict between what is normal and abnormal. The variations in the behaviour of the characters in the so called ethical society raise a number of questions about the reasons for their inability to go along with others peacefully. The narrative remains as a spectator in watching what the characters are doing at specific life situations and allows the issues to evolve themselves in the mind of the readers. The close reading and critical analysis of G.Nagarajan's fictions which had a tremendous impact on the modernist Tamil writings especially after his death show us that all the conflicts in the 'unethical' or 'different' characters lead us to understand the cultural loss, identity problem and existential invalidity suffered by them. The physical abuse and cheating experienced by women in particular in the name of affection and the cruel betrayal that they come across do not give them recognition in the society. Instead, it alienates them and the nature of the alienation of the women characters demonstrates the prejudices and the operation of various forms of power in the society. Man who is believed to be all powerful does not take care of the insecurity of women for a possible peaceful coexistence. The daring approach of an important modernist Tamil writer G.Nagarajan, who was less noticed during his times, represents various perspectives and diversifications on the issues related to love, marriage and lust in the context of a socially accepted ethics and legality.

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