

The Popular Themes in Tamil Short Stories of Anthology '*Peravai Kathaikal'*

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Abstract

Popular themes in Tamil short story anthology '*Peravai Kathaikal*' of Tamil Language Society, University of Malaya is a study covering themes written by local Tamil authors in Malaysia. Author brings many themes and issues into their writings through their own life experiences and the experiences of life time. With this, plantation background is highly dominant in the production short stories among short story writers. Authors also discuss themes such as the theme of love and marriage, poverty, and environmental education, school teachers, social problems such as education and promiscuity inverse, divorce, parents sacrifices in among Indians families, senior citizens and neighbourhood. The study of things that happened in the past or latest incidents in Indian society should be touched so that it becomes a real depiction of a society. Thus, the processing aspects of the theme in this anthology of Tamil short stories selected for the study of Indian society and background depict their lives. The themes in this anthology of short stories depict the flow of thought and the circumstances of the Indian community in Malaysia during 1980 to 2000.

Keywords: Tamil anthology of short stories, themes and issues, community sociology, plantation life and problems

Introduction

Every form of literature seeks to deliver a message to its readers. This message may differ across generations as authors use their literary talents to express their own experience during their particular point in time. Thus, this message is illustrated in their works through the themes and questions broached by the author. Hence, this form of discussion of the pertinent issues by the authors is available for the appreciation of their readers. In this sense, short stories are capable of giving a clear picture of the flow of thought and circumstances of a community at a particular time.

A theme can be defined to be the fundamental idea an author wishes to expound on. The expression of this theme is usually the direct extrapolation of the author's life problems as well as the views of the author himself: life experiences illustrating the relationships between mankind, man and his environment as well as men and his surroundings. According to A. Samad Said, the artist analyzes events

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and experiences with patience, right to its core. Only after he believes that there is a benefit from his experiences, will he sow his artistic seeds. Basic theme determined; specific goals are then outlined (A.Samad Said, 1996, p.37).

To attract and hold the reader's attention, the theme should give a lasting impression that will always be imprinted in the mind of the reader. Kempton K.P. supports this when he says, 'In short story writing, theme could be called the factor of permanent impression. Places may fade, details of character and action may become lost: but if the story was a good one, we remember what it meant' (1971, p. 138). So, a good writer should give great thought in coming up with a great theme for a story. The theme should ideally be able to move people, make them aware and also challenge their existing stances and principles. The development of themes in the wider community occurs as a result of media space, which was also responsible for the promotion of the short story itself.

Tamil short story anthology '*Peravai Kathaikal*' from the Tamil Language Society, University of Malaya accommodates themes depicting real life experiences of its authors in highlighting important issues affecting them throughout their lives. These themes and issues touched upon by the authors demonstrate the lives of the Indian community in the city as well as in the suburbs. The authors also recall life on the plantations in their work. In fact, the expression of certain themes is a direct link between the everyday lives of the authors and their artistic interest, sometimes even blending subtly to provide social criticism due to the circumstances of the period of time discussed in the story. Therefore, the authors who wrote in '*Peravai Kathaikal*' have produced many themes that touch the Indian community in Malaysia. Most of the short stories include twists and turns of their lives and experiences that had unfolded over time.

Poverty

On the social front, the poor occupy the lower echelons of societal hierarchy. In economic terms, poverty reflects the absence or lack of innate capabilities due to low income levels, poor levels of thought and education. JL Roach and JK Roach define poverty,

"..... As insufficiency of basic needs" (Roach JL and JK: 1972, p.230).

The short story '*Ehlikalai Vilungkum Pampukal*' (Snake Swallowing Rat) authored by K.Punniyavan illustrates how poverty caused the suicide of a young girl. In this work, Kalyani is a teenage girl who helped her father collect oil palm fruit because her father could not afford an assistant. Kalyani was also unable to go to school as her father could not afford the fees and costs of schooling. One day, Kalyani's father brought home one of his friends. Once they were both drunk, his friend took advantage off Kalyani and raped her. Kalyani eventually committed suicide as she could not bear the shame of that ordeal.

In this short story, the author blames poverty as the key reason for the collapse of Kalyani's family. Due to poverty, the poor are looked down upon and easily manipulated. Although poor people do not want to live in such a manner, the poverty that they experienced prevents them from breaking out of this vicious cycle.

Indian Community Life in Plantations

The Indian migrant labour community who came to Malaya in the early 18th century faced horrible social problems. This labour force which was capable of a revolution, were in fact caught in the shackles of governmental power; pinned under the authority of their bosses, who acted as foremen, clerks and managers. Social problems in the plantations are very different from that of the city Indian community. Even after attaining independence, their condition showed negligible progress. They had to live in poverty and lead their lives in deprivation. Threats from bosses, drinking alcohol, gambling, and gaming were among their daily problems on the plantations. On the wayside, they remained ignorant of the true progress happening in the country.

The short story "*Eihu Pasa*" (Swamp Eighth) authored by Samyvell Thuraisamy describes the oppressive actions of the employers on the plantations. The employers think they can act according to their own wishes and their subordinates must acquiesce to their demands. In this story, the author asserts that the employers would do anything that benefits them at any given moment even though it could harm the lives of their employees. For example, the sinful lust harboured by Foreman Kuppan towards one of his teenage female workers and his subsequent action of trying to force himself upon her is clearly an example of the irresponsible behaviour shown by the employers of the plantations. However, the girl managed to overcome her shock and used her anger to retaliate against Kuppan, eventually causing his death on that swamp. Thus, this short story shows that those like Foreman Kuppan must be taught a lesson when they behave badly towards their workers. Therefore, it is evident that employer repressions against their employees had become a culture on the plantation in the early 70s and 80s, as being highlighted by the stories in this anthology.

Education

Family is an important social institution in providing children with a conducive learning environment. The foundations garnered at home will be further reinforced in schools. The encouragement and guidance of parents play an important role in the development of a child's education.

In the short story "*Oru Manatukkal Velvi*" (The Heart's Promise) tells the tale of Komathi, a 6 year-old girl, who aspires to become a lawyer. Her ambition was disrupted when her father met with an accident. As a result, the entire family was plunged into poverty. With that, her mother urged Komathi to be employed as a domestic helper. Even so, Komathi did not despair and was determined to attain her goal. After school hours, Komathi would work as a maid in the homes of a few rich people and before going to bed, Komathi would revise her academic work. After several years, Komathi successfully managed to pursue her studies at the university level, and eventually became a famous lawyer. This story seeks to convey the authors belief that education is the ladder of success for the exaltation of the individual as well as the nation. Thus, these short stories convey the message that in the modern world, education is very important in one's life.

Social Issues

Social problems are faced by every individual whether in the rural or urban community. Social issues will always a popular theme that will attract the attention of authors for as long as is human interaction. Social problems envelope all areas of human activity (Abdullah bin Tahir, 1975, p.59).

In the short story "*Manita Malarattum Neyangkal*" (Blossoming Humanity), Nirmala Perumal tells the story of child abuse in the community. She relives the actual event of abuse suffered by Balasundram's brother. Through this story, the author condemns the Indian community for being heartless.

"Children need to be educated, need to be loved properly, why abuse them? Are you inhuman?"

(*Peravai Kathaikal*, 1990, p.61).

Neighbourhood

'A close neighbour is better than a distant relative.' This parable is true in the event of a closely intertwined relationship between neighbours. However, time does change the values and characters of man. As such, the close spirit of neighbourliness is no longer considered an integral element for the well-being of society.

Many people, especially the urban population, are no longer concerned in strengthening ties with their neighbours, diminishing the neighbourliness spirit in towns. There are residents who do not even know their neighbours, residents who are unaware of child abuse happening next door and a variety of other problems. Arguably, urban communities today are only concerned with their own interests only and tend to forget the importance of close neighbours.

The short story '*Veli*' (Fence) illustrates the compromises made between two families: an Indian and a Chinese family. While the Indian family were busy with their wedding preparations, unfortunately Tan's father passed away in the house next door. The Indian family were very sad because there was a joyous celebration in their home while a sombre funeral took place in their neighbour's house. But, to maintain the wedding happiness, Tan decided to complete the funeral rites at his brother's house instead. In this short story, the author emphasizes the neighbourhood concept.

The short story '*Mugavari*' (Address) tells the tale of neighbours who do not know each other for a prolonged period of time. Muthusamy, who had retired more than 15 years ago, is very fond of reading short stories authored by Janagan. This is because Janagan's storylines seems to tell the story of Muthusamy's past life in the squatter settlements. Hence, Muthusamy harboured the wish of meeting Janagan in real life. Though he conveyed his desire to his son, Prasanth showed no interest in fulfilling it. Prasanth possessed an indifferent attitude towards his neighbours and had not interacted with his next door neighbour at all. Eventually, Muthusamy became mentally ill because he could not meet Janagan and was confined to bed. Prasanth attempted various methods to obtain Janagan's address but came up empty-handed.

One day, an occasion to celebrate the deeds of Janagan was held by organizers. During that event, Prasanth found out who Janagan actually was. Apparently Janagan was his neighbour when they lived in the squatter settlements which accounted to why he could illustrate Muthusamy's life in vivid detail. Prasanth felt

ashamed for not interacting directly with his next door neighbour for such a long time. Through this story, the author reiterates the importance of the neighbourlines concept for the well being of a neighbourhood and its residents.

Love

The definition of love is difficult to be coined as scholars themselves cannot explain what is exactly meant by love. Is love a feeling? Or simply a word designed to express one's instinctual response to another? Nonetheless, according to the dictionary of Dewan Bahasa, "Love is a feeling of affection for another person" (1996, p.241).

A short story that reflects the theme of love is "*Mannil Intha Kathal*" (Love on Earth) authored by M.Jayaletchumy. In this short story, Jaya's boyfriend Sutagar suffered from a road accident and consequently became handicapped. Seeing this incident, Jaya refused to marry the deformed Sutagar and married someone else instead. A few years later, Jaya was abandoned by her husband and left alone with her daughter. Unfortunately, her daughter is also physically handicapped and disabled. To care for the disabled child, Jaya tried finding a home for special children. Finally, Jaya found a home for disabled children called the 'Jaya's Orphanage'. When, Jaya got to know that the owner of the orphanage was her former lover Sutagar, Jaya became very sad and was ashamed of herself. Although Jaya left Sutagar, he still loved Jaya and even named the orphanage after her as a sign of his love for Jaya. Sutagar's character is truly commendable and exemplary in this story. Jaya profusely apologized for her mistakes and betrayal.

"Sutagar, you are not disabled. I am the one who is really handicapped, in my heart"

(Peravai Kathaikal, 1993, p.22).

This quote from Jaya shows her regret to Sutagar. In this short story, the author stresses that true love is not only attainable by a perfect body. If a person becomes disabled, it does not mean that they have to risk their true love. Fake love based on a charming face or perfect physique will not hold true in the face of adversity, unlike true love which binds two hearts into one.

Divorce

In recent years, the occurrence of divorce among Malaysians is increasing from year to year in both urban and rural areas. This increase in divorce rate is in alignment with the rapid pace of development, which has inevitably changed the lifestyle of individuals. This issue has long been discussed in all communities, but a solution has yet to be proposed though much blame has been attributed to many parties. In reality, every divorce happens as a result of several factors and not only a single reason. Nonetheless, age and occupational factors are more commonly associated with causing divorce rates in today's society. Divorce problem should actually be given more serious attention because it can cause major implications to not only the individuals involved, but also to the structure of the family, society and country at large. To illustrate this point, one can argue that

the increase in social problems among youths lately is a result of the collapse of the family unit itself in modern society.

V. Munian in the short story "*Vivakaratthu*" (Divorce) touches on the theme of divorce. Kumar filed for divorce from his wife because he couldn't get along with her parents and it had put a strain on their marital life. Hence, Kumar consulted a lawyer named Varatharajan to divorce his wife. The lawyer advised Kumar to live separately first and not apply for a divorce immediately. He added that this problem could be resolved over time. Although he could arrange for a divorce easily, Varatharajan had a noble heart. This is because Varatharajan's son and his daughter-in-law also faced the same situation in the past and filed for divorce. As a result, Varatharajan's grandchildren were neglected by their parents. To solve this issue, he requested his son and daughter-in-law to live separately in other homes. Though this experience, he advised Kumar to live separately rather than divorce outright.

In this short story, the author would like to stress that most problems can be overcome if given enough space and time to resolve itself. The author also emphasizes the importance of the family unit. The family is the primary institution within the community that is mainly responsible for educating and shaping the personality and social behavior of children. Hence, the collapse of the family unit will definitely adversely affect the lives of the individuals involved and ultimately have an impact on the larger social system of society and the country in general.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, the themes presented in the anthology '*Peravai Kathaikal*' covers various aspects of the life of the Indian community in the country. The themes analyzed can be divided into two categories. The traditional themes include the theme of love, poverty, social problems, and the problems of the plantation community. On the other hand, the current issues themes are divided into themes of neighbourhood, divorce and educational themes.

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