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Distilled Memories

Ratna Raman

Perumal Murugan sat back in a daze. The last few weeks had proved nightmarish. He had been preparing to write when the storm broke around him. Hordes of men had begun to accost him, yelling him down, saying he had dishonoured the women of Namakkal. This was not true. His head had begun to ache and his heart swelled up with grief, leaving him feeling sluggish. He was not a young man any more. Like his sturdy heroes, subject to the stress of living in hide bound communities, betrayed by the smallness of thought, he felt suffocated by the public censure his writing had brought upon him.

Gripped by grief and a nagging unhappiness, he opened his laptop and went on to his Facebook page. He resolved to never write again. "Perumal Murugan, the author is dead," he announced. Posting the sentence on his timeline, he closed his account with finality, making a decided exit from the virtual world.

He did not want to respond to the disbelief and shock that his readers would express. The hatred directed at him had split him into two parts, in the manner of the Ardhanareeswara that everyone worshipped at the now renovated temple, its floors gleaming with new dulcet brown granite that complemented and accentuated the deeper brown-black texture of the exquisite sculptures that stood serenely around the temple. No, today he did not have the energy to go and sit down, partaking of the quiet communion that he usually savoured. It was a long climb and he did not want to walk up to the temple in the hot sweltering weather, although the characters in his novels took on that trudge so many times.

He could have stepped out and asked Ramu to take him along in a three wheeler. They could have even shared the pillion seat and found a rider or two, which would have paid for the journey. Perhaps he should just drink some toddy. That would blunt the searing pain inside his head and the swollen discomfort he felt in his chest. His wife was away, helping their daughter with the new baby and the children had gone with her, taking a much needed break from the stress of living with the notoriety of a writer who was being hounded by people who had not even read his book.

Heading to the toddy shed, he poured himself some toddy. The astringent flavour cut into his throat and he gulped it down, feeling he was on the edge of a precipice. He reached out for some more. Today he would drink till the pain could be pushed out of his head. This was the last thought that crossed his mind before he fell into a stupor.

When he came to there were voices around him that he heard. "Is he dead?" whispered one, while another hand, gnarled and old, laid a fragrant damp cloth on his forehead. Had his wife and children returned already? he wondered, thinking that now he would be required to offer explanations for having drunk so much toddy.

"He seems to be waking up," said another voice and then the mist before his eyes cleared. He was no longer in the dimly lit toddy shed. Instead, he was surrounded by

older women he had never seen before, in what seemed like a clearing in the midst of dense foliage.

One of the women smelled of the sea and salt, and salt water fish that he did not have access to, although the fish in the pond were plump harbingers of good harvests. He could make out the outlines of three other women standing nearby. "Where am I?" he said, "and who are you? Why are you here with me? Where is my family?" The old woman smiled and resettled the damp cloth on his forehead. "Your family isn't back yet. So we brought you to our abode. Look around you, do you not recognise anything?"

There was a stretched green expanse, thickly forested and he seemed to be lying in a thicket, the trees seemed to be in flower, and fruit, and he could hear the chirping of the birds. Now he could feel the grass against his skin as it brushed the back of his legs and arms.

He struggled to sit up and focus. He seemed to be in a forest, but not very far away from his own home. Yet he was unable to see anything familiar; his cottage; the homes of his neighbours; the cows; the hens running around the barn; the long stretch of tilled land interspersed with green and brown patches, with the season's crop growing at different heights; for the colours drew entirely upon the difference between one fortnight of planting and the next. Yet he seemed rooted to the spot, as if he was not far away from where he had grown up and lived all his life.

He noticed several other women moving around in the thicket, going about their activities in an unruffled and calm manner. They were draped in exquisite fabrics, intricately woven and the cloth was light and shining, very unlike the mill spun and printed sarees worn by the women of his village. He had not seen such a profusion of fine fabric in his entire life.

"Yes," smiled the woman in gossamer green as if divining his thoughts, "They don't make this yarn anymore. The secrets of this weave have died out, and so have the secrets of the colours because power looms and chemical dyes that are cheap are in circulation." He thought of Dindigul and of the weavers who had slowly starved to death, as they could not find buyers for their chungdi sarees and nodded. Now what was left of those lovely weaving looms, set in large airy wooden homes in which men and women tied and dyed lengths of fabric to produce those sunny vibrant sarees? No weaver wore them though, because they cost so much to make. Did the weavers ever wear these sarees in times long gone? He wondered.

"Perhaps not identical pieces," she replied, "since we usually commissioned the amount of yardage that we required, but they had access to more functional versions. They could feel the same fabric against their skins that allowed them a greater measure of comfort as they went about their everyday work."

Close by, he could see a group of women involved in some community cooking. A huge pile of chopped vegetables were being pushed into a large clay pot. He noticed yellow and white pumpkins, elephant yam, sweet potato and black-eyed white and brown beans. All these were being thrown into a pot placed atop a wood fire. One of them scraped coconut out of its shell, while another whipped thick curd. Some scraped coconut was now being crushed upon on a stone with green pepper corns and cumin seeds. Another earthen pot with millets was boiling atop a fire.

A few women came in and laid out banana leaves. He was invited to eat and partook of the food hungrily, allowing the vegetable and bean stew to soak into the cooked millet. The vegetables were succulent and wellcooked and he ate contentedly, relishing the fresh flavours.

When the meal was over and the leaf plates had been collected and put into a small pit, he ventured to ask the women who they were.

The older woman smiled and said. "I am Satyavati. These are my granddaughters-in-law, Kunti and Madri and that is my favourite great –granddaughter-in-law Draupadi. Many of the women here are friends and acquaintances that we grew up with."

Perumal was in a daze. These were women from ancient legend who had always fascinated him. Whatever could they all be doing here, he wondered.

Satyvati laughed. "Yes, of course you are astounded."

He found it a little unnerving to have ready responses to what were unuttered thoughts.

"In the Mahabharata we were seldom together. That story got over a long time ago. Now we are writing out our own stories, except nobody is really listening to our stories. Yet we hope to work slowly and change lives," she continued.

Perumal felt a little affronted. He blurted out, "Nobody is listening to your stories? You were extraordinary women even in the Dwapara Yuga. I narrated stories about women in my village, drawing attention to the practice of niyog, presumed to have been in existence even in your times. However, in contemporary India, the entire state has taken umbrage. Everyone is protesting and accusing me of having brought dishonour to our women. You lived much freer lives."

This time, Madri and Kunti, who had finished clearing away everything and had sat down to listen, broke into a guffaw. "Maybe you should define what you understand by a freer life," they chorused in unison.

"Well, you could invoke the gods and have children," Perumal said, addressing, Kunti and Madri. "Nobody had a problem with that." The women exchanged a look and went off into peals of laughter.

"Yes," Satyavati took over the conversation, "that was all that women were required to do. I had a child with Parasher, a son Dwaipayana, named so, because he was conceived on a dweepa. I was forced to summon him as an old woman and plead with him to save the Kuru dynasty from dying out."

"I wanted Ambika and Ambalika to mate with him, because the kingdom needed heirs. I don't think either of my daughters-in-law liked that very much. Sons furthered the dynasties. Women's bodies supplied sons."

"However, I see no need for bolstering dynasties now, in a democratic nation? Surely women must be allowed to pursue other interests?"

"The laws frown upon polygamy and have always disapproved of polyandry. Men's minds and hearts seem to have shrunk further. Sexual mores continue to remain as

rigid and men still control women. Why, even your hero is enraged that his wife has chosen niyog, to further her desire and conceive a child.”

Perumal was forced to nod. He had never engaged with such a perspective. “I felt sorry that you were attacked,” Satyavati continued, “which is why we brought you here, to persuade you to think about new blueprints for women.”

“I don’t know whether I want to write anymore,” Perumal replied.

“Yes, I can understand your grief, but Perumal, this attempt to assuage male egos by having supernatural lovers come down and mate with their wives is now old hat.”

Perumal stared at her.

“Yes, I mean it,” she replied. “In my time it was a political stratagem. So we ensured that men of good breeding mated with the women and it was given out that these were the sons of gods, supernatural beings or extraordinary rishis. I was stuck with the running of a kingdom for a long, long time. Also, while we could select the men whom we could mate with for progeny, little other freedoms were available to us. Each one of us ensured smoothly run administrations in the kingdoms ruled by our husbands and grandsons and grand grandsons.”

Perumal nodded. The anguish over the attempts to silence his voice continued to overwhelm and drown him, yet Satyavati’s words had begun to resonate.

“I understand your anguish,” said a steely voice. Perumal turned and looked at a tall chiselled woman who stood before him: Amba, of the sinewy limbs, who had spent lifetimes transforming herself to vanquish Bhishma. How well he knew the Mahabharata!

“Imagine my anguish!” Amba said to him. “I loved a man who was a coward. I was abducted by a man who couldn’t marry me or ensure that I too could be wife to his stepbrother, despite my pleas. What was my fault?”

“Do you think my sisters did not plead for me? My poor pliant sisters were killed off in the story after the royal babies were born. Dwaipayana Vyasa chose me to make an example of. Do you think I wanted to wander through the ages, dreaming of vengeance over lifetimes?”

“The world is such an absorbing place, Perumal. I wanted to put to use the knowledge of the herbs I had gleaned in my years in the mountains and forests. But Vyasa would have none of it. He said that my role was to teach women not to take impetuous steps, and so, my destiny was written out for me. I became Shikhandin, neither entirely male, or female, which are the only two sexes that the brute majority recognises. Since I had loved hastily and poorly, I was made to train to bring down a man who was in any case only following orders issued by his stepmother.”

Perumal was transfixed by Amba’s story.

“Yes,” chipped in Draupadi, carrying a thick roll as she moved towards him, her luminous electric blue saree draped over robust shoulders. “I see that you never thought of these possibilities, Perumal, but how could you? After all, you do not really know what women think, do you?”

“That is not fair,” Perumal remonstrated. “I feel the pain of my protagonists, I have tried to show the trauma face by young women who are ostracised in their marital homes and...”

“I am in no doubt about your sympathy for these women”, Draupadi interrupted, cutting him short. “Hear me through Perumal. Your anxieties are so archaic. Why do your women crave children? Why must youngwomen run away with their lovers and do very little except sit at home, hated by everyone else? Is that the only option available to them?”

“Writers need to write about change, about possibility, even about impossible visionary dreams.”

“India is already an overpopulated country. Surely women must expand their roles instead of wanting to forever bear children? Surely there is no state thrust pressure upon them to do so? There are so many things that women do and have wanted to do from times immemorial. Yet, you only envisage confined roles for them within households, where all the power is vested with someone else.”

“Surely as a writer you should envisage other roles for them and their communities.” Perumal looked at her dumbstruck. She flung open the rolled mat she was carrying. In it were arranged long samples of fabric, beautifully inked with chungdi dots in different sizes and patterns, and a range of different weaves, in varied colours.

“Do you recognise this?” Draupadi asked.

He nodded..shungdi prints, Coimbatore cottons, Chettinad checks, lovely embroidered thread borders, the symmetrical muppakam, where the fabric was divided into three equal parts...

“Yes”, she replied, “woven and tied and coloured in natural dyes obtained from turmeric and indigo plants”.

“Synthetic dyes and powerlooms have replaced a lot of this now,” remarked Murugan.

“Hmmm,” responded Draupadi, impatiently. “Have you noticed Perumal, that the handloom weavers from your state are withering away and entire communities are dying. Shouldn’t you be writing about the loss of livelihoods and skills and work towards reviving them? Surely there are stories here that you can weave?”

Perumal was silent. This was a possibility that he had been examining, around the time that he had been attacked.

“Women are not programmed to bear children,” Draupadi continued. “Look at me, I emerged fully formed out of a sacrificial fire. Vyasa made me grow up with a father and a brother, and decided that a mother was irrelevant to my life. So what if I was well versed in learning, statecraft and weapons and martial training? My destiny was to marry five brothers and bear them sons.”

“As a queen, I had great privileges, but very few choices. I was bestowed to Krishna’s friend, whom Krishna recommended strongly, although an entire swayamvara, was ostensibly organised for me. Maybe I was set up from the time of my birth? Drupada,

my foster father didn't perform the yagna because he wanted a daughter. Yet, I was just sent along, to prove perhaps that in spite of all privilege and opportunity, women can only be part of the collateral damage of wars, designed and executed by men? Had Ashwathama not killed all my sons when he did, they would have most certainly have died fighting other battles in different times."

She stopped, fingers frenziedly sifting through the fabrics that when freed from a loosely confined hold, began falling to the ground in a shimmer of kaleidoscopic colours. Watching them fall, she continued: "The Mahabharata describes me as a woman well-versed in the laws. I was trained in them, by the wisest of preceptors. Yet, when power is framed for men and women are only expected to follow rules, how can other possibilities ever take shape?"

Another woman walked up to her. "There are plenty of us, Akka, she remarked, kneeling down to gather the lengths of fabric strewn around Draupadi. "Yes, Dusshala," Draupadi smiled. "So many sisters, mothers and daughters and the enormous groundswell of work that we have... Change however will take much longer if well-meaning writers will not help us."

"Surely, writers must change a few things around? Why are women given such few choices in the books? Why is any decision they make so fraught? Stories tend to draw Lakshman rekhas around possibilities for women. Yet, the power of creating lives rests with us. That is really the rub, isn't it? So women must be corralled and confined into reductive identities."

Perumal continued to listen, enthralled. Vibrant and charged with passionate energy, the questions she raised were far more powerful than the shabadam Subramania Bharati visualised her as uttering, thousands of years ago, in Hastinapura, in the assembly hall, where she had been dragged in, against her wishes, after Yudhishtira had lost at the game of dice.

In the twenty-first century, men and women had equal rights on paper. Yet, her beliefs and those of the women around her, continued to trouble and disturb, and like his hoary ancestors, he too could not come up with any appropriate response.

She stopped and gazed at him. "Yes," she smiled wryly. "I was not afraid to speak out, even in those times. However, I was not in charge of my script then. I would really like things to be different now."

So, she could read his thoughts as well, he realised ruefully. She was right, though. Perhaps it was time to write about how women changed lives and transformed communities.

A loud banging and yelling startled him, and he turned his head in the direction of the sound. The tin door of the toddy shed was being thumped loudly. He could now make out the shouts of his children and wife. Slowly he raised himself up and moved towards the door.

As he opened it, his wife and children burst in upon him. "Thank god, you are safe," his wife said, bursting into tears. "I shouldn't have left you here, all by yourself. It was a mistake!"

He smiled and reassured her, embracing her and hugging the children by turn. “In fact, Suguna, I feel so well now. I went to sleep with a bruised heart and a numb mind. I drank till I couldn’t drink anymore and passed out in a haze. Yet, I dreamt the most extraordinary of dreams. I was transported back into this world only because of all the banging and yelling.”

“How is our daughter and her child?”

“She is recovering now,” Suguna replied, and is delighted with all the reading material you had sent with us. “Her mother-in-law has packed lots of lodol halwa, koyzambu and plenty of bananas bunches for us.”

The mention of food made him realize that he was very hungry. “Maybe I should make some ragi kooyzu and we can have an early dinner,” he volunteered. Walking with him towards the kitchen, Suguna cast him a look of pleasant surprise. Catching that enquiring glance, he smiled wryly. “Yes, I am a different man. I am no longer perturbed by what everyone thinks about my writing. I want to write again, of things that can be. I want to write about weaving, about exquisite colours and textures. Do you think we should set up a loom in another section, closer to the house, so that it becomes easy for you to access?”

She laughed, hesitantly. She had missed her work on the loom for so many years. “I suppose, Appa and Anna could contribute their expertise and we could try our hand at weaving.”

Perumal chopped green chillies and small onions and transferred them to a small plate. Adding ragi powder to thin salted buttermilk, he lit the stove, placed the wide mouthed pan on it and began stirring deftly. When it thickened into a gruel, he would toss in the chopped onions and chillies and ladle it out into bowls and garnish it with Saroja ammal’s koyzambu.

He broke off a segment of the wobbly lodol halwa, made famously in Ramanathapuram, where his daughter now lived and popped it into his mouth. His tongue and mouth engaged in a duet, feasting upon the delicate rice and jaggery dessert. In the yard outside the cooking area, scraggly hens accompanied by their chicks, continued their leisurely explorations. Perumal felt confident about voicing new thoughts and feelings. He was even going to pen several poems.

BIO-NOTE

Dr. Ratna Raman is Associate Professor of English at Sri Venkateswara College, New Delhi. Her articles on topical issues relating to education, health and women's rights appear regularly in the national newspaper **The Chandigarh Tribune**. She is a regular contributor on significant contemporary issues since February 2010 to **Hardnews**, a monthly newsmagazine distributed in over 32 countries and is featured online as well. She also writes the blog **In the Midst of Life**. She has published short stories and articles on food and culture in **Confluence**, a newsmagazine published for South East Asia at the United Kingdom. She is also an occasional reviewer for **Biblio** and **The Book Review**. Her doctoral dissertation was on Doris Lessing. Her interests include women's writing, Twentieth-century fiction and poetry and contemporary culture.

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