

Kamalampal Carittiram (The Story of Kamalampal or The Fatal Rumour) (1893-95)

Overview As a piece of fiction, *The Fatal Rumour* is complex and unlike any other early novel in an Indian language. It is a realistic novel and a comic novel as well as extended essay of social commentary and a philosophical reflection. It is a powerful indictment of society, but unlike other early novels, it is more social satire than social reform. The author prefers to parody people rather than institutions, such as child marriage or the caste system. Another distinguishing feature of the novel is its creative use of language, or languages. While the narration is in (Sanskritised) literary Tamil, the villagers use a colloquial speech that draws on proverbs, folk tales and slang. And yet the most unforgettable scenes in the novel are hugely comic, as when the village 'gossip society' convenes or when a thief is feted as a god. The novel, serialised in a monthly magazine in Madras, was the only long work of fiction published by the author, who died at the age of 26.

Story The story is set in the Brahmin quarter of a rural village and focuses on a married couple (Muttuswami and Kamalampal) and their relatives. The marriage of their daughter rakes us long-simmering jealousies between the relatives. When the rumour mill begins to turn, in the form of the Gossip Society (a formal group with officers and meetings), it leads to negative talk about Kamalampal as an incompetent mother and uncaring wife. Muttuswami refuses to listen, but doubt is planted in his heart.

Later, a thief steals animals and jewels, which results in a manhunt that Muttuswami leads and results in the capture of the culprit. Even in the trial, however, hostility emerges when Muttuswami's brother refuses to testify so that Muttuswami loses the case and is humiliated. The freed thief then takes his revenge against Muttuswami by kidnapping his son (who is later recovered). Another consequence of wagging tongues, is that Ponnammal poisons her husband (Muttuswami's brother). Having lost his brother and son (and later his wife), Muttuswami now loses his money, through embezzlement in far-away Bombay. When he returns, defeated and nearly penniless, he hears accusations of his wife's infidelity. Weakened and vulnerable, and against his first instinct, he believes the rumours and banishes his wife from their house. In the end, Muttuswami makes up with his brother (dying from poison), regains his son and learns that his wife was not unfaithful. But these resolutions come too late to avoid the deep pain at the core of the novel.

Characters

Muttuswami Muttuswami is the central character of the novel. As wealthy Brahmin businessman, he is domineering and sometimes cruel to his wife, but also compassionate and philosophical. His pride and vanity create misfortune for him and his family.

Kamalampal Kamalampal, Muttuswami's wife, is the second most important character, as the title suggests. She is virtuous though not perfect and falls prey to villages gossip. Although a woman in a deeply sexist society, she holds her own with her controlling husband. She suffers greatly through the novel, for a while losing her son and husband, but she never loses faith and is rewarded in the end.

Lakshmi Lakshmi, their daughter, represents the 'liberated' woman of the next generation. She is quick-witted and strong-willed. Her marriage is one of novel's excellent set-pieces.

Suppiramaniya Suppiramaniya is Muttuswami's younger brother, who resents his older brother's domineering style and often challenges him. In a key scene, Suppiramaniya refuses to give evidence in a court case brought by his brother. The resulting public humiliation (losing the case) deepens the animosity between the brothers.

Ponnammal Ponnammal is Suppiramaniya's wife and Muttuswami's sister-in-law. Her spiteful, mean-spirited character stands in sharp contrast to Kamalampal's virtuousness. Her unkind comments about Kamalampal start rumours that ultimately lead to the breakdown of Kamalampal's marriage. One, however, has some sympathy for her since her actions are motivated by understandable disgust at Muttuswami's pretensions.

Suppu Suppu is the village gossip, the leading officer of the 'Gossip Society.' Although her lively tongue causes hurt to many characters, she earns the author's admiration for her creative use of language, mixing slang, folk-speech and wholly original vocabulary. 'Anyone with one-tenth of Suppu's talent would definitely earn a BA,' the author writes.

Peyandi A male counterpart to Suppu is Peyandi. Like her, she is a social outcaste, a thief, in fact. And yet he is not dishonourable and only steals from those who have wronged him (or someone else) and, as the author puts it, 'only uses traditional methods of thieving and never employs a ladder.'

Themes

Language The power of the spoken and written word is highlighted throughout this novel. Female gossip creates heartbreak, but the inventive use of language by the gossips also delights its audience (and the reader). Legal language, in two separate court cases, proves decisive in the fortunes of the main characters. And, finally, the poetry of religious song is a balm for those who suffer in the novel.

Women Women have a secondary status in the Brahmin family and the wider society in this realist novel. However, they are not downtrodden or defeated. Instead, they use their intelligence and their powers of persuasion to solve problems.

Male pride At the foundation of the pain in this novel is excessive masculine pride, especially in the character of Muttuswami. Educated, reflective and often kind, he becomes enraged whenever his authority is challenged. In a sense, he is trapped in his gender role as head of the extended family: he is expected to dominate and is a failure if he does not.