

FATAL RUMOR

B. R. Rajam Aiyar

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.

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.

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 village 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 Ponnamma 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.'

MUTTUSWAMI (Aiyar's novel 'Kamalampal Carittiram') Domineering

Character Contrary to what we would expect from the novel's title, this is the story of Muttuswami Aiyar, the husband of Kamalampal. He is a good example of the fatally-flawed hero. Muttuswami is a well-respected man in his Brahmin community and in the village as a whole. He is a wealthy man, a generous man and a man of considerable business acumen. An educated man, he is able to quote literary and philosophical passages from Indian texts in order to illustrate his ideas. He is an affectionate father to his daughter and (apparently) a loving husband. However, he is also a product of his time and gender. His fatal flaw is pride, his need for deference to his authority, especially from his younger brother.

Activities As a wealthy landlord, Muttuswami is often engaged in business affairs, buying and selling land. He also uses his wealth to patronise the arts, hiring singers and musicians to perform. As the head of an extended family, he has a hand in many domestic affairs, from weddings to rituals to schooling. Lastly, as a deeply religious man, he spends time reading religious texts and meditating on the meaning of life and death.

Illustrative moments

Domineering The authoritarian element in Muttuswami's character is displayed in the opening scene. In what appears as a gentle domestic setting, he awakes and immediately commands his wife to attend to his needs. When he uses a traditional but degrading term to address her, his wife objects, albeit with humour. The banter continues, but he always has the last word. In the following scene, he orders everyone around in preparation for his daughter's wedding. He orders his brother to provide the wedding clothes, his sister-in-law to supervise the cooking and two astrologers to make sure the correct day is chosen for the event.

Proud Muttuswami's Achilles heel is his pride, his pathological need to be shown deference and to maintain his high status. This is illustrated, somewhat comically, in a scene when he returns from the successful capture of a thief who has been terrorising the area for years. Having delivered the criminal into the hands of the police, he comes back to his house in an ostentatiously decorated palanquin and dressed in princely clothes, including a silver-handed cane. Basking in the adoration of the villagers, he walks up to his house like a king and then sits on his veranda and receives obeisance from well-wishers.

Angry Muttuswami is also easily angered. When his wife confides in him about the village gossip that paints her as a failed mother, Muttuswami attacks her for failing to show strength. Rather than comfort her, he is angry that she is unable to resist idle talk and show moral superiority, as he does. He insults her, calls her a 'worthless bitch' and slaps her hard on the face. As the author explains, although he loved his wife dearly, he was intolerant of even the 'merest hint of any defect that other women have.' That intolerance made him furious.

Compassionate Although proud and authoritarian, Muttuswami is capable of compassion. Not just to his ill-treated wife, but to others, too. In one moving scene, an unhappy old woman, a sort of witch-figure in the village, tries to ruin Muttuswami's daughter's wedding by hurling insults and curses at the gathering. When some of the guests attack her and knock her to the ground, Muttuswami helps her up and kindly asks her to leave.

Contemplative Muttuswami, like his creator, is also a thoughtful man, steeped in the Vedanta philosophy. In a long scene at the end of the novel, he reflects on his life, his successes and failures, and distributes his land to various people in the village, including some who have opposed him. He quotes a Hindu scripture—'We should answer good with good, but never evil with evil'—and thinks that those who caused him pain were his 'benefactors' because he learned from that pain.

Ethical Muttuswami may act unjustly in the domestic sphere, but he adheres to ethical standards and supports his family in the external world. When his younger brother, whom he dislikes, suffers a burglary, Muttuswami takes it upon himself to make sure that a good lawyer is hired, that all the documents are properly submitted and that a competent magistrate oversees the trial. In keeping with his other traits, however, he is hugely self-satisfied with having been seen to do good.

KAMALAMPAL (Aiyar's *Kamalampal Carittiram*) Virtuous

Character Kamalampal is the wife of the main character and the person whose life (*carittiram*) is noted in the title of this satirical, yet realist novel. She is the quintessential virtuous woman, who suffers yet does not become bitter and retains her devotion to her husband. Kamalampal, however, is not an automaton, a lifeless paragon of goodness. She is concerned with what others think of her and falls prey to self-doubt when gossip is spread about her limitations. She is also no wilting flower and stands up to her husband's sometimes unreasonable behaviour in ordering her around. She is quick-witted and articulate and able to reply to his words with humour and light-hearted banter. After her husband leaves her (wrongly believing her to have been unfaithful), she begins to doubt her faith in god. 'What good is it if we are virtuous?' she asks herself. 'Still, it is better to worship god than your husband. Maybe I wanted too much...the pleasure we enjoy is our true enemy.'

Activities Throughout the novel, Kamalampal stays within the domestic sphere, caring for her husband, her daughter and her son. She plays the *vina* and sings devotional songs. She is the ultimate mother, even providing a home for her nephew when he gets in a fight with his parents.

Illustrative moments

Happy Although she suffers as the novel progresses, in the opening scene, Kamalampal is a confident and content woman. She openly jokes with her husband about the roles of 'husband' and 'wife'. She teases him about his pretensions to being a 'raja', and when he suggests that she should give him a son, she replies that he is her son (in other words, an immature man who requires her love).

Kind When she is insulted by her sister-in-law, who is piqued by the wide praise for Kamalampal's virtue, Kamalampal does not get angry. In contrast with her irascible husband, she treated her sister-in-law with extreme kindness and spoke sweetly to her.

Reflective When her husband leaves her, Kamalampal begins to reflect on her life, analysing it for her own failures. She thinks that perhaps she enjoyed her domestic bliss too much, that the pleasure she knew was ephemeral and that she was too self-centred. As readers, we know that these self-accusations are unfounded, which makes her pain seem even greater.

Wise When she is insulted by Suppu, the village gossip, Kamalampal is wise enough not to get riled but to send her away with gentle words. On another occasion, the same village gossip makes innuendoes about her family's past, but she remains calm enough to serve her husband's guests with good food.

Discussion questions

Is Kamalampal a stereotype of the virtuous Hindu wife, as celebrated in Hindu mythology and Indian cinema? Or is she a more complex character, with negative as well as positive traits?

How should we view the ending, where Kamalampal, having been deserted by her husband, seeks spiritual salvation? Is this the action of a defeated woman? A proud woman? A self-less woman?

SUPPU (Aiyer's novel *Kamalampal Carittiram*) Malicious

Character In some ways, Suppu is the most complex character in this satirical novel about social problems in rural Tamil society at the turn of the twentieth century. On one level, she is despicable, a vicious gossip who turns husbands against wives and breaks up two marriages in the village. The author labels her the 'Commander-in-chief' of the Gossip Society. But he also says that 'she was not really a bad person. She had a generous nature and was kind, and compared to other village women, she listened to her mother-in-law. As least, she listened to her on Fridays [auspicious day] and on New Year's day.' Here, the author is playfully referring to the negative stereotype of the domineering mother-in-law and suggests that Suppu is at least a dutiful daughter-in-law, but only on certain days. She has a prodigious and dangerous memory, able to remember every detail of what happened on a particular day 15 years ago, and thus rake up old tensions and hostilities.

Activities As Commander-in-chief of the Gossip Society, Suppu presides over their weekly meetings. On other days, she operates like people in the 'Spanish Inquisition, striking up a seemingly innocent conversation and then hoarding any comments that might be likely to incriminate the person in the future.'

Illustrative moments

Malicious When Suppu sees two of Kamalampal's male relations in her house, she approaches and very skilfully hints that Kamalampal's sister-in-law has made insulting comments about her family. Without actually lying, Suppu is able to twist words in order to hurt other people. Her reason for sowing discord within Kamalampal's family is that Suppu feels rejected by that high-caste Brahmin family. Suppu feels that the too-good Kamalampal is a bit of a fraud and she intends to expose her baser nature.

Clever Suppu is also very clever and though she pretends to be illiterate is able to manipulate language to meet her own ends. When stirring up trouble, she takes care to use phrases that are appropriate to the person to whom she is attributing them. She thus mimics an untouchable, a merchant, a tribal person and a banker.

Discussion questions

The female gossip is a well-established stereotype in Western culture and literature. The appearance of Suppu, however, is probably the earliest example of this trope in an Indian novel.

Her speech presented the author with a problem that faces any writer who wishes to capture a spoken language. This problem is exacerbated in situations, such as late 19th century Tamil, where the gap between literary and spoken languages was large.