

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.