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The Novels of Margaret Atwood and Perumal Murugan: A Dystopian Journey

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Abstract: Increasing state control and government-sponsored violence over human lives in modern society are making the scenario more like a social dystopia. Dystopia which once was only an imagination of an author is now taking shapes in reality. A writer's freedom becomes an easy prey to the state navigated censorship. Religious *fanatic groups* severely thrashed Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman*. The copies of his novel were burnt down, and he was made to leave his town. Things are falling apart in this modern social dystopia.

Keywords: Dystopia, Censorship, Society, *Maadhorubaagan*, Controversy

On January 21, millions came out to the streets in cities across the world for the 'women's march,' casting a shadow on Donald Trump's first full day as US president. Among the signs advocating women's rights included many with the slogans, "The Handmaid's Tale Wasn't Meant To Be a Manual" and "Make Margaret Atwood Fiction Again" (Jacobs).

Dystopia is an imaginative compilation of frightful and undesirable conditions, where human beings are denied those basic requirements which we enjoy in our daily lives. Totalitarian governments and state apparatuses control not only human lives but also thoughts and ideologies. Though a dystopian society is always explained as futuristic and far from reality, it has its very root in the history of mankind. The realization immediately came to our mind after seeing the inhuman destruction, mass killing and unavoidable massacre of world wars. People understand that if they go on this direction like this, the day is not far away when human existence will face a serious threat. Today our thoughts are shaped by the dominant ideologies, socio-political and

religious orientations. An ideal dystopian society is controlled by a rigid and totalitarian government. In our society, we face constant observation of government and its agencies, moral policing of religious groups and political propaganda. Thus even in the 21st century, we are living within a social dystopia.

Margaret Atwood, a versatile writer, and an unmatched genius was born in Ontario, Canada. She tried her hand in almost all the genres of literature. The variety of her writings showed her true caliber, whether it was poetry, short story, drawings, graphic novels or libretti. A Man Booker Prize winner, Margaret Atwood was mainly adored and critically acclaimed by the readers as well as critics for her dystopian fictions. It was this particular genre which made her a household name not only in Canada but also in the English literary world globally.

It was *The Handmaid's Tale*, published in 1985 which set the mood for a dystopian adventure. An unidentified land, called the Republic of Gilead is the place where the story begins. Offred is the main protagonist who narrates the whole incident. As Atwood herself was a radical feminist activist, her novels too bear the marks of feminine relations, problems, and other nuances. Handmaids are the class of women whose sole duty is to bear a child for their male counterparts and especially for the authority. Women are being classified according to their classes, and they are made to wear colorful clothes which signify their social positions and jobs. The commander is the supreme leader whose red eyes control and politicize the whole republic. The impact of this bleak and totalitarian government on its people can be measured through this line "The Republic of Gilead, said Aunt Lydia, knows no bounds. Gilead is within you" (Handmaid 23).

She wrote the famous *MaddAddam Trilogy* at the beginning of the 21st century. It contained 1. *Oryx and Crake* (published in 2003), 2. *The Year of the Flood* (2009) and 3. *MaddAddam* (2013). *Oryx and Crake* deal with the post-apocalyptic world where the protagonist Snowman struggles to survive among human-like creatures called Crakers. He recalls his past childhood when he used to watch ultra-violent videos of executions and pornography. He lives in a world dominated by multinational companies. Crake is his childhood friend who secretly makes a super pill called BlyssPluss for better health of his people. However, in the end, it results in disastrous effects and provokes a worldwide epidemic. Snowman has a romantic obsession for Oryx, a girl from his childhood pornographic video. Coincidentally Oryx maintains her

relations with both Snowman and Crake. After realizing this, Snowman becomes increasingly alarmed. After the epidemic which wipes out most of the world population, Snowman shoots Crake. *The Year of the Flood* is the second part of the dystopian trilogy. Here Atwood describes a religious group called God's Gardeners. The protagonist of this part, Toby works under a sadistic psychopath Blanco. As a manager, he has the reputation of sexually exploiting his female workers. He tries to assault Toby but saved by Adam One, the leader of God's Gardeners. The story of Toby is continued through *MaddAddam*. The dystopian atmosphere is so well constructed in her novels that, sometimes Margaret Atwood is called the queen of dystopia.

Perumal Murugan, a bright star of Tamil literary sky, recently announced his death as an author. The honor killing of a writer's consciousness had been executed and was so well executed that he took to Facebook and announced his social death. However, the question remains, can a writer ever be dead so far as his creations are concerned? Is it possible to obliterate his memory, essence, and performance altogether by someone, or by himself? A writer socializes through his writings; literature is the medium of his communication. But situation comes, when the external forces blackmail the writer to withdraw his self from the society for whose cause he dedicated his entire life. In Murugan's case, he faced censorship, legal troubles, public rage, religious fret, social sentiment and what not. Now as a reader, if we deconstruct his post, the shift in his attitude is already visible, and it problematizes his statement. The switch-over from a writer to an ordinary teacher was very shrewdly expressed, whereas, in the beginning, he used his full name but the initial only at the end. The soul of a writer completes with pen in his hand, and if removed, only the fragments remain like the 'P.' In the passages to come, we will reconstruct and relive those moments which led to the controversy and how it changed his entire life.

As a writer, his only fault was to revive a chariot festival of Karattur district of Tamil Nadu, now dead, in his novel *Maadhorubaagan (One Part Woman)*. It was an age-old traditional festival which primarily began in the month of Aani and lasted till the month of Aadi. An eighteen-day long programme, where people from different regions gathered around the temple of Ardhanareeshwara, half Shiva half Parvati in a single idol. It was not the mention of the festival in that novel that caught fire but the context of the novel, where the festival has been shown as

consensual and uninhabited sex between men and women. According to the belief, it is on "The eighth day, when the Gods come down, and the eighteenth day, when they go back up the hill" (One 95). Social community relaxed the taboos for the night only of the eighteenth day, when people freely mixed with the other sex. Local people used this opportunity to send those barren women in that festival, who fail to conceive from their conjugal life and have an extra-marital coupling that night of their own choice. Any children from that socially sanctified ritual were considered as Sami Kodutha Pillai or God-given children. In that novel the female protagonist, Ponna participated in that festival out of her crisis in life. It was this sexual permissiveness which had triggered the fury of caste groups and local Hindu fanatics. They considered it as a slur on Hindu religion and defamation of their women.

The controversy begins after the publication of the English version of his 2010 Tamil novel *Maadhorubaagan*. On January 15, 2015, an illegal and unethical peace-talk had been conducted between Murugan and the agitators by local police and was compelled to change his sincere regret to an unconditional apology. He had to withdraw all the copies of that novel and promised the publisher to compensate for their loss. After this, he declared his literary obituary on his facebook wall (Venkatachalapathy). *Maadhorubaagan* was pilloried before the Madras High Court and after a number of litigation and lawsuits, the court, on July 2016, dismissed all the charges against Murugan and gave perhaps, the best sentimental verdict for a lover of literature- "Let the author be resurrected to what he is best at. Write" (Janardhanan). This was viewed in social media and press as a remarkable victory for free speech.

His novels problematise the representation of social dystopia once again in the present context. In *One Part Woman*, the curse of childlessness, best be understood in Indian scenario; or in *Pyre*, the inter-caste marriage and later disagreement with the family are inevitable, are shown vividly. But those hands which are meant to protect, burn a woman alive in the name of honour or spread nasty rumors about a woman's character, only exaggerate and smoothen the pace of Fate. In *One Part Woman*, Kali and Ponna leave no stone unturned to have the blessings of the divine for a child only. They regularly offer Pongal to different local Gods and Goddesses, even travel distant places whenever someone suggests them a new remedy. For the time being Ponna believes that it was Kali's grandfather is bluffing on specific occasion which caused this curse upon their family. However,

belief in superstitions reaches its height, when Ponna's mother is convinced and feels it justified to send her daughter to such an exotic place, and what is more, to accompany her herself! Here Murugan makes an ethnographic study of Kongunadu region bluntly. Human relations also get ample space and shifting of favour is another stark reality. Kumaresan was mainly brought up by his uncle's family and was the center of attraction until he gets married of his own choice to a woman from a different caste. The moment he violates their rules, the hostility comes to the surface. His uncle leaves no opportunity to humiliate him even in other's reception party. Ambiguity is another characteristic of his novels. Call it his limitation or his style; he never clears specific facts and leaves them to his reader's imagination. The concluding scene of *One Part Woman* is equally ambiguous where Kali, when not finding Ponna at home, assumes that she is cheating on him, takes a rope and looks up to the branches of Portia tree and suddenly the novel ends. Now it is up to the reader to think about what will happen to Kali. Does he end his life or wait for Ponna to listen to the other part of the narrative? Likewise in *Pyre*, Murugan never reveals the real caste of Saroja. Kumaresan keeps on saying that she belongs to the same caste but nobody believes as she is a fair skin girl. Kumaresan's mother is convinced to send her only boy to Tholur where he works in a soda shop or Sathi, who joins his father's soda shop outside the cinema theatre. Outside cultivation they keep animals. Kali was much fond of his cows, gives a proper wash to them from time to time; Marayi's half of the day is spent with her goats. However, Murugan constructs very ambivalent themes and uses his tools keeping in mind the stubbornness of a caste-ridden society. From a friendly chide like "Mark my words: All this mixing might work with soda colours, but it doesn't in life" (Pyre 133), to violent threats like "Do you think you can antagonize the village and remain alive?" (Pyre 133), can be inflicted upon someone who defies the norms of their culture and religion. Whether it is spreading a false rumour to defame someone or sneer a neighbour deliberately - such antagonisms are vividly fictionalised. A couple from *One Part Woman*, Mandayan and Katthayi, who earn their bread by climbing palm trees and making Toddy, a local liquor, is impelled to leave their job as well as the village, as an ill-minded housewife starts making insinuations and even tries to pollute Katthayi's character. So if someone does something of his/her compulsion, it is either seen as an attack on the cultural community or considered as defamation on the whole community

collectively. Neither self has been given importance nor the choice made by him/her. The whole family of Kumaresan is excommunicated from the village and the people stop conversing with them. These are some of the major drawbacks in Indian society, and it is a harsh truth even today, nobody can deny it.

Now, what if someone does not have children even after so many years of marriage in Indian society, the problem never remains within the four walls of the family, rather it becomes a national issue, spice of everyone's table-talk and gossip. *Maadhorubaagan*, published in 2010 and later translated by Aniruddhan Vasudevan in 2014 as *One Part Woman*, starts like any other post-marriage love story with sweet gestures and childish dramas between Kali and Ponna, who cannot live without seeing each other. However, as the reader goes deep into it, the story unravels itself. Even after twelve years of marriage, how much successful it may be, ultimately they become the centre of wrath for relatives, neighbors and the whole village. Their pain was accentuated by the taunts and loose talks of people around them. They have taken all possible measurement, prayed everywhere. Her desperation reflected when she said, "If you do not show me a way this time, the only option I have is to fall from the hilltop" (One 163). She is being humiliated by relatives in ceremonies. She dares not to go in such places and if goes by mistake such bizarre situations arise- "Chellama's brother's wife dragged her aside and said, 'you stay away' " (One 112); "That barren woman ran up and down carrying seeds. How do you expect them to grow once she has touched them?" (One 115). Even Kali faces ill words among friends, where he is being addressed as 'the impotent one.' Struggling with the outer world, defending the second marriage proposal, Kali is horrified when his mother has asked him to send Ponna to the chariot festival- "Women were terrible creatures. Mother tells his son, 'send your wife to another man'. The other woman is ready to take her own daughter to it. And Ponna says, 'I will if you are fine with it'" (One 117). In Pyre, Kumaresan and Saroja decide to marry with the uncertainty whether their respective families would approve it or not. Both of them are hopeful and head towards Kumaresan's village. However, neither they nor the reader could have ever imagined what horror is waiting for them. His crestfallen mother wails out, "he has thrown fire on me. If he had been killed in a road accident somewhere, I would have written it off as my destiny... But now he has given me a reason to weep for the rest of my life!" (Pyre 16). Saroja faces the same

wrath but more nastily, "What did you do to bewitch my son? How many men have you done this too?" (Pyre 16). The villagers never digest this unforgivable crime so easily. They keep on coming to Kumaresan's place and humiliate both of them. But it is more painful for Saroja because she is the one who leaves her home and now depends completely upon Kumaresan. The barren hill like Hardy's Egdon Heath constantly haunts Saroja. Kumaresan is the only oasis where he can rest upon. But like Murugan's other heroes, Kumaresan too is helpless before the FATE and situation. He finds it difficult to handle singlehandedly his mother's taunt, relatives' wrath and society's punishment. Like every married couple, they too have dreams. He has plans to start his soda shop and rents a room to start the business. But everything is scattered when villagers decide to excommunicate their family, and their uncle's family turns out to be the most inhuman ones. But they do not remain contented so far but done the ugliest act in the name of saving their culture. While Kumaresan is away, almost the whole village gathers there to kill Saroja. Fearlessly they boast, "If he comes back and starts objecting, perhaps we should take care of him too" (Pyre 195). Out of fear she takes refuge in a bush and hopes to survive until someone gives the monstrous idea- " Why don't we set fire to the bush?... If we set fire from all sides, she will get steamed like a potato inside. Do it." (Pyre 195)

Dystopia has a very long and rich history. From as early as Defoe up to present time, writers tried to warn us from a horrific future through such kind of writings. We should consider these novels as social satires where it has been explicitly shown that if we still act thoughtlessly, misuse the powers of science and technology; we will get a future just like *1994* and *Fahrenheit 451*. Whether it is Atwood's fiction in the near future or Murugan's social dystopia in the present situation, exploitation of human relations, destruction of civilization and only the death of humanity come out of it.

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