

The New Normal: A Paradoxical Overview On The Life Of Sesily As Seen In Kurumpanai C Berlin's Talaichumadukari

Dr. S.M. Sufic Varija,

Assistant Professor of English, Department of Science and Humanities (English Division), Jerusalem
College of Engineering, Chennai, Tamilnadu, 600 100.

Abstract

The literature of Nanjil landscape which represents the maritime ethnic group 'Mukkuvar' is embraced into the vast Tamil literature as Nanjil literature. Kurumpanai C Berlin's 2021 novel Talaichumadukari is an overview of the life of this land. The crucial role of talaichumadu meenachodam in the families who lost their breadwinner is vividly illustrated. Sesily's determination to feed her children after the death of her husband reflects these seafarers' woeful households. The novel discloses how the talaichumadu women are exploited wherever they go. It also explains how the plainspeople look down on them wherever and whenever they come in acquaintance with. What the plainspeople see as normal not normal in the life of these talaichumadu women until their lives are lived.

Key words: Neithal, Nanjil, talaichumadukari, meensaruvam, mukkuvachi, kachodakkari

INTRODUCTION

Having an overview of the Nanjil landscape, a land of the suppressed, marginalised and voiceless and its literature is mandate to travel along with this paper. Neithal, one of the five types of land tenures as classified in Tamil literature, speaks about the sea, the landscape related to it and its people. The literature of this maritime ethnic group¹ is embraced into the vast Tamil literature as Nanjil literature.

Kurumpanai C Berlin has various avatars that include Tamil writer, columnist, essayist, field activist, marine environmentalist, journalist, speaker and social worker. Kurumpanai is, one of the 52 coastal villages where he is born. He has published 6 novels, 6 short story collections and more than 20 articles. The publication of *Neithal Sollagarathy* (2020), which has a collection of approximately 3000 words from the coastal dialect and maritime terminology exhibits his commitment towards his language. He registers the lives and professional and environmental challenges of this population in his works. His writings are recognised and classified under folk literature in Manonmaniam Sundaranar University and the Central University of Tamilnadu. His novels include *Kadal Adi* (2017), *Selukedu* (2019), *Neevadu* (2019), *Talaichumadukari* (2021), *Maanaththuku Anji* (2021) and *Kuliyali* (2022).

DISCUSSION

Kurumpanai C Berlin's 2021 novel *Talaichumadukari* is an overview of the seafarers of the Nanjil landscape, and his protagonist Sesily is an embodiment of the widows of this ethnic group. One of the short stories titled *Jeevanaporattam* in his collection of short stories titled *Kadalukkule Kadalukkule* (2017) is later developed into a novel *Talaichumadukari*. In his foreword R.N. Joe D' Kruz, the writer and Sahitya Academi award winner writes "these talaichumadukarigal are the ambassadors of the Neithal to the plains" (*Talaichumadukari*, 14). The novelist used many dialect-specific words of this ethnic group and has enlisted 164 words along with their meaning at the end of the novel. Some of those maritime terms are used in this paper as they are indispensable.

¹ The maritime ethnic group – seafarers – lives in Kanyakumari district of Tamil Nadu and the Malabar Coast of Kerala. The seafarers live in Kanyakumari district speaks a unique dialect of Tamil and the rest speaks Malayalam. This tribal group is found densely populated in over the 52 coastal villages and scattered in the inland of Kanyakumari district. In Tamil Nadu, they are addressed only by their caste name – Mukkuvar – and treated inferior by the others, because they fall in the lower rungs based on the Indian caste system.

The novel unbolts with the unfortunate condition of Sesily's children. Valan, her four-year-old son jumps is joy that his mother will bring him apples and grapes in the evening. Till his father George was healthy the children got everything in abundance; "apples and grapes in sellum selavum"² (19). In a short period of time the family is trapped into cruel clutches of fate. The children didn't get good food as their father could not even take liquid food due to oral cancer. As her husband cannot eat anything Sesily stopped cooking thinking "why should we eat if the person who loved and nourished us the most couldn't eat" (19). So, her children have to share the food their aunt gave them often.

Sesily is the "lucky charm" of her family. When she was a child her three siblings were jealous of her as she was the most loved among the four. Her parents and grandparents were ready to get her whatever she liked. Michealadimai, her father proudly shares to his fellow villagers that "all the wealth has come to us [them] only after her birth" (41). All the wealth reads the materials for going into the sea to harvest fish like maram, madi, kayaru, saalavalai, katchavalai, thathuvalai, tharathuvalai, raalvalai³ (41).

The novelist explicates how casually higher education is denied for the female children of the community. Like any other female child of the community, Sesily has to drop her education with class eight as that village has only a middle school. When her request to continue her studies was denied she cried, didn't eat, didn't talk and locked herself in the room. All her tactics and tears to continue her studies in a school that is only five km far from her village gone vain. This is the only wish her parents not granted, because Sesily was beautiful and her parents were in the notion that "these days are not like ours... female children have no safety..." (42). Sesily grew up as the "number one beauty and the brilliant everyone praises" (47) in the village.

Sesily is given in marriage to George at twenty-one. George is "born in the number one rich family" of a nearby village (48). After his grandfather his father and now George is the "member of the village committee" (46) at the very young age. Being the responsible son of the family, he educated his younger brothers and sisters, got them jobs gave them in marriage too. He also settled them with their family shares. He has earned "karaimadi, saalavalai, katchavalai, thathuvali, tharathuvalai, kattumaram, palavamaram, thundamattu, thatumattu and vallam"⁴ (47) the fruits of his sweat. George's karaimadi is the bowl of elixir for the village's neglected elders who cannot go to sea and earn. He is the adored to his family and his village.

By the end of six years of their married life, George is diagnosed with oral cancer. Sesily remembered the cancer deaths in her family and the known circle, when the doctor expressed his doubt that George may have cancer. She went to the church and prayed. In her fear, though she is a Catholic Christian by birth and brought up she makes vows to the Gods and deities of other religions that include Bagavathy Amman temple in the north, Mandaikkadu Bagavathy Amman Temple, Kuzhithurai Bridge Vedic Kovil, and the Muslim mosques in Neiyaatrunkara and Balaramapuram. On their way to the Trivandrum Regional Cancer Centre in her desperateness she even "bowed at the railway station building thinking it as the gopuram of some temple" (60).

The wealth of the family is liquified for his treatment. They sold Sesily's jewels in the beginning than one by one all their fishing assets later the "land measures 30 cents they bought for their children to build homes of their won in future and so to live together in one place" (74) at last the home they lived. The doctors lost hope in his condition and prescribed painkiller which would help him the days he has, with no pain. They couldn't afford buying painkillers "an injections costs 22,000 rupees which could relieve pain for a week" (47). George and Sesily find asylum at St Antony's Chapel and pray "for a miracle to happen" (45).

The novelist being a social activist makes a reference to the hazardous and chemical emissions of the sand company established at the coastal region. He accuses that corporate company for the increasing cancer deaths. In next six months, the thirty-one-year-old George succumbed to cancer, leaving his four children, two daughters and two sons amongst whom the eldest one is in class two and his wife Sesily who is 28

² Available in plenty

³ Types of fishing vessels and fishing nets.

⁴ Types of fishing vessels and fishing nets.

years old then. During his funeral people expressed their anger against the sand company accusing it for the cause of thousands of deaths. George being an activist collecting the villagers organised meetings and protested against the sand company. They continue saying "... the sand company is still taking sand and processing it. It emits black smoke and the processed waste sand through giant pipes ... We should not leave the company ... We should shut that company down permanently" (81)

Bereaved Sesily understands the reality and the condition of her family in the next few days, and decides to "take care of her family" as she realises that the family is left with nothing. After the 30th day memorial mass she walked to her home from the cemetery with a stubborn mind. That night she tells her son who is in class two, to take care of his siblings. She says, "we have no source of income. We spent all the properties and wealth towards the treatment of your father. Now we are left with debts around the village" and adds that "we should take care of ourselves hereafter" and we should "not fall prey to the evil mouth of the people who lend us money". So, "I am going to do meenkachodam⁵ from tomorrow onwards" (21).

The novelist explains the crucial role of talaichumadu⁶ in the families of the community through Sessily's confrontations. The practices of this seafarers' community have a solution for its families that lost its breadwinner, talaichumadu. Sesily thinks about it overnight. It becomes evident that "many families entirely depend on these talaichumadu fish sales for their survival ... For numerous households, especially those who have lost their primary earner, it's the sole means of existence ... These fish sales literally provide for their three daily meals, their clothing, and even the smallest gold trinkets for their daughters." She realises that "it is not less prestigious to sell fish by carrying it on head" (88-89)

With stubborn determination she leaves home heading to the seashore early in the morning before her neighbours wake up with the "meensaruvam"⁷ (91). The sea in front of her is now new to her. Though the seafarer community is living closer to the sea "showing their faces to the sea and backs to the plains" (Thiyya, 77) the women of the community are allowed to play in the sea only in two occasions, "one is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the lent days and the second is Christmas Day" (Berlin, 2005). Now the same sea is going to pave path to feed and educate her children. The natural beauty of the sea and the vessels on it makes her mind feel light and gives her hope, which is the power of nature.

The novelist cleverly allows Sesily to come out of her overnight confrontations towards doing the meenkachodam and to find solace in the beauty of morning sea. Because the most loved and pampered Sesily is now going to be exposed to the getting ready to the harsh reality of the world. The novelist is beginning to explain the hardships the talaichumadu women face wherever they go. At this juncture the readers are expected to follow his protagonist to see the world through her eyes. Being the newest and the youngest one to do this job her first day out might be more adventurous not with amusements but with heavy hammer blows.

Selling the fish brought direct from the sea through auction, is the practise in this community. Every village has its own spot to auction. The crowd at the fish auction spot is newer and unfamiliar to Sesily. It was crowded by the talaichumadu women, and the yaavarimar⁸ (*Talaichumadukari*, 94). She feels defeated as she is thrown out of the crowd on her each attempt to take part in the auction. Later she realises that she cannot take "one pulli"⁹ (95) so asks the other talaichumadu women to take her in to share fish, as the price of the fish has "aruma vilai"¹⁰ (94). They are not willing to help her since she is new and in addition they see her as a competitor.

The novelist explains how the talaichumadu women are financially and sexually exploited in this auction spot. The women are too much worried about the competition and the price of the fish, because the 'yaavarimar' are the direct threat to them. Whether they buy it nor not sometimes they intentionally effect

⁵ Selling fish

⁶ Carrying produce on head to sell them door to door or in the markets nearby.

⁷ An aluminum vessel to carry the fish.

⁸ People who work for the fish exporting companies

⁹ A unit to measure fish that weighs approximately 120 kg

¹⁰ Very high price

in the high pricing of fish. In addition to this financial exploitation some perverts make use of this crowd to abuse the women by “touch their breasts with their elbows and rub them” (94) acting as it happened unintentionally. If at all the women could observe it as intentional then the perverts will be treated accordingly. They “would break their cheeks-jaws” (94). The women never treated them as human instincts. Sesily may have to face these may be not today but definitely in future. Need to be remembered that she was denied high school education in concern of her “safety” (42) and now she is prone to that the cruel twist of fate.

In the same spot Sesily is introduced to Porthasia, the eldest talaichumadukari¹¹ of the crowd, who “never joint ventured with other women” (95). Porthasia takes pity on Sesily and volunteers. She auctioned one *pulli* of semmeen¹² and put one equal part in Sesily’s meensaruvam. Sesily sees her as the god figure not as godsent. A random elderly man helped her to lift and place the meensaruvam on her head. She has never carried such a huge weight on her head till that day, so, she felt an agonizing sharp pain in her back neck, “she never carried this much load on her head till day” (96). She almost faints but somehow managed and starts to run to reach the bus stop along with Porthasia and others.

Sesily has to take on the next challenge that is boarding the crowded bus with her meensaruvam. The novelist shows how these talaichumadu women are discriminated and treated low because of their job. The plainspeople brand these women as dirty people. Joseph states that “talaichumadu women are not allowed in buses and kicked out” till date (83). The government bus conductor shouts at them telling not to board the bus as “officer goes, school and college students are in the bus” (*Talaichumadukari*, 97). The women are in a hurry to reach the nearby market on time. If delayed they could not sell their fish and have to face heavy loss. or else they have to face heavy loss. So, the women are ready to give the conductor an additional five rupees beyond the standard ticket and luggage fares to allow them to board the bus. Rosaary, one of the talaichumadu women tries to board the bus and falls down as the driver changed the gear and accelerated the bus. the fish scattered all over the road. On witnessing this Sesily is shocked and stands frozen there.

The next bus also is crowded. They board the bus not considering the conductor’s murmur. Sesily who is not used to crowds stays behind and boards the bus last. Sesily losses her balance and above to fall down on the road as the driver abruptly changes gears and accelerates the bus while she is climbing on to it. Porthasia rescues her from falling down by catching hold of her saree instantly. Otherwise, her children who lost their father thirty days before would have lost their mother too.

Sesily, the lucky charm of her family is now exposed to curse words. As the result of the unexpected incident her meensaruvam falls down on the feet of a woman in the bus and the fish is scattered. That woman instantly calls her as “thaali arutha matta”¹³ (100) and started to scold her in curse words. According to the Indian customs and beliefs seeing a widow first thing in the morning or on their way to somewhere is not a good omen. Sesily, who is never used to such words couldn’t hold her tears back and starts crying loudly because the heat of the abusive words. She is thinking of her helpless state. Nobody could comfort her or to stop her cry. Porthasia scolds the woman harshly supporting Sesily. Other talaichumadu women are also come in support of Sesily.

The novelist takes this opportunity to evidently show the mindset of the plainspeople towards this coastal ethnic group. Joseph states that the “talaichumadu women are forced to get down from the buses as they come lower community” (84). The conductor gets involved and starts talking against the talaichumadu women. Later the driver also joins along with the people in the bus. All on a sudden a man in white attire, a government official, takes full charge of the situation and addresses the women by the caste term, “this is why we should not allow these mukkuvaligala”¹⁴ in the bus” (*Talaichumadukari*, 102). He continues shouting “I will throw everything out” (102). He continues talking ill of their profession as the smelly and dirty one, without knowing the reality. He doesn’t know the fact how many families are fed and continues

¹¹ Woman who carries fish on her head and sell it door to door or in the nearby market

¹² Pink perch fish

¹³ A harsh expression refers to a widow

¹⁴ The term refers to the female population of the Mukkuvar caste.

surviving only because of this profession. As the argument gets thicker, he also makes a remark on the driver and the conductor that they are allowing these smelly women for the extra five or ten rupees they get from them.

Here the novelist refers to the constitutional protection given to the oppressed and the marginalised, The Untouchability (Offences) Act, 1955. Unfortunately, that has not reached the common population or the people it protects. All the talaichumadu women are united against him, but he refuses to acknowledge his mistake and continues shouting at them. Slowly, the college students in the bus come in rescue of the women. One among them asked the driver to drive the bus to the nearby police station to lodge a complaint against that abusive man under the “The Untouchability Act” (102). This abusive man though a government official not aware of the consequences and quarrels with the college students for supporting the women. But the driver and the conductor who are aware of this act understands the seriousness takes the man aside and explains him the consequences. If a case is registered under this act he has to suffer seven years of imprisonment in addition to loss of his government job (102).

The novelist resolves the incident hereby leaving it to the readers’ understanding and decision. In a few minutes they produce him in front of talaichumadu women. The abusive man requests to excuse him for uttering abusive words against them. He is about to touch their feet as a sign of asking forgiveness, but the women stop him and accepts his apology. Whether the women are huge hearted to forgive him instantly or they are ignorant of The Untouchability Act. Or may be another reason that the novelist tries to convey to the plainspeople that if the talaichumadu women are late to the market, they will have to bear heavy loss which may result in starvation of their children.

Then the novelist describes the sanitary condition of the workplace of the talaichumadu women, the market. Maintenance and other responsibilities of the market are given in contract by the local governing body. The men of the contractor collect hundred rupees from every talaichumadu women as “thandal”¹⁵ (107) towards the maintenance of the market. The corrupt contractor never buys cleaning substance like bleaching powder but claims the amount from the government. He instructs his men simply splash water in the fish stalls instead of deep cleaning that results in poor sanitation.

On reaching the market Porthasia paid the “thandal” (107) for both of them. The market is filled with the songs of the talaichumadu women. Some songs are their own and others are re-lyricised cine songs. Sesily knows not even a single song because “she has never been to a fish market ever before. The fish brought in must be sold before closing down the market for the day. So, the talaichumadu women, who reached earlier have already started their sales, to avoid heavy loss.

Porthasia generously shares her own selling spot with Sesily against the practice at this market which dictates that the “putham kachodakkari”¹⁶ (107) must occupy the rearmost position, and the other talaichumadu women insist that. But, no one dares to question. Porthasia, who is, in fact, “the sole reason that the market existing in that town” (108). That place was not a market before. She sold fish in that spot when she began her life as a talaichumadukari and she was the only person doing so. Slowly, “people who bought fish from her started bringing their own produce, like vegetables, fruits, palm jaggery, and rice to sell there as well. The village eventually grew into a town, attracting people from nearby villages to buy fish and other goods” (108). Furthermore, “three fourth of the talaichumadu women selling fish in that market are brought in there only by Porthasia” (108).

Porthasia, who is very clear and stubborn in her deed starts explaining Sesily how to make a “kooru”¹⁷ (107). Separating the fish by their size and making three different portions; five fish for 50 rupees, five for 30 rupees and five for 20 rupees. Sesily learns this skill fast and starts selling her fish. Porthasia stays back and helps Sesily till 4:00 O’ clock even after sold all her fish earlier. Sesily keeps few fish separate to cook for her children back at home. Thus, she gains the confidence that she can run her family “without taking any help from her parents’ side and from her in-laws’ side” (112). Sesily gives 100 rupees to

¹⁵ A tax paid towards the rental for the stalls in the fish market

¹⁶ New seller

¹⁷ A small portion or quantity of fish kept on a wooden piece or on the lid of the meensaruvam to be sold

Porthasia towards the rental for her place at the market and thanked her by holding their hands together with no words. Sesily understands that selling fish is not an easy task.

She has never imagined the politics hidden behind this. If Porthasia has not volunteered she “would have faced heavy loss on the first day and ran away” (109). Along with her Sesily purchases few things for her children and rushes to the bus stop to take the 5:30 bus. While she is thinking about her children she learns from Porthasia that the “5:30 bus has just left and the next bus is only at 7:00 O’ clock”. (106)

Sesily reaches home around 8:00 at night as the 7:00 O’ clock bus was late by 30 minutes and it took thirty minutes to cross 6 km. What she saw on opening the door is heart-breaking to any mother on earth. Her children are lying around the corners fainted in hunger; sleeping or unconscious. On the very sight she puts the meensaruvam she carried all the day at the door and runs to her children hugs them close to her chest and kisses them one after the other. Her dizzy sleepy children could feel the warmth of their mother and asked for apples and grapes.

CONCLUSION

Being a realist the novelist leaves the ends open in his works that allows his readers to interpret the conclusion and leaves room for further discussion. The novelist ends with a heartbreaking statement that Sesily’s children understood that “this scene is going to continue hereafter daily” (117). Kurumpanai C Berlin leaves this message not only for Sesily’s children but to all the children whose resilient widowed mothers taking the role of a thalaichumadukari to feed and nurture their children. In addition to this the novelist ends chapter two and nine with the same lamenting expression, “Is this will be my life hereafter” (36, 96). Will this become the new normal to the family. The novelist being a realist and a member of this ethnic group analyses the lives of his fellow people not leaving any stones unturned exposing all the truths as bitter as they are to make them aware of the future of their community. He leaves the novel open for further confrontations. He has few questions to ask to his own ethnic group and to the plainspeople; should education be denied on gender basis, should the young children who lost their fathers continue to suffer, should working women have to bear sexual and financial exploitations and should people be discriminated based on their caste.

REFERENCES

- Kurumpanai C. Berlin, *Talaichumadukari*, Vaasagasalai Pathipagam, Chennai-600073, 2021.
- ..., *Kadalukkule Kadalukkule*, Mukkadal, Chennai – 600091, 2017.
- ..., *Maanathukku Anji*, Selali Pathippagam, Chennai, India. 2005
- ..., *Neithal Sollagarathy* (Neithal Dictionary), New Century Book House, Chennai-600098, 2020.
- Joseph, V, *Meenavar Thozhil Prachanaigalum Theervukalum - Kalkulam Thaluk (Kumari District)*, M.Phil (Tamil) thesis submitted to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, 2007.
- Thivya, G, *The Practices of the Fishermen of the Kanyakumari district as shown in the novel ‘Maanathukku Anji (Fear for the Reputation)’*, International Research Journal of Tamil, Vol.4, Issue. S-17, 2022.