



Servile Mourning for the Powerful: A Critical Reading of “Professional Mourners” by Alagu Subramaniam

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ABSTRACT

This is a literary study of the short story “Professional Mourners” by Alagu Subramaniam (1964). The introduction focuses on the sociological aspect of the practice of hiring professional mourners at funerals in certain parts of Sri Lanka. It is conducted in six sections, in accordance with the trajectory the story follows: 1) Exciting Element in Death; 2) Uncle’s Self-Importance as Master of Ceremonies; 3) Uncle’s Hunt for Mourners; 4) Service in Full Swing; 5) Mission Impossible; and 6) A Cacophony to Mock the Perpetrator. As the narrator is a child, all these sections attempt to establish a child’s perspective of the entire procedure the so-called “Master of Ceremonies” follows in fulfilling the requirement of hiring some mourners at the funeral of his grandmother. So, section 1) captures how a group of adults and children responds to death in the family; section 2) demonstrates how the schoolmaster turns the occasion into an opportunity for slave-driving in his assumed capacity as Master of Ceremonies; section 3) narrates how oppressively the schoolmaster treats the professional mourners; section 4) depicts how the professional mourners engage in their duty; section 5) satirises the schoolmaster’s disappointment in front of dissidents of his violation of the professional mourners’ obligation to mourn their mother; section 6) ironically presents the negative impact the mourners’ howling has on the schoolmaster. Thus, the study treats the story as a series of incidents exposing a harmful aspect of class consciousness that promotes slavery to the extent of depriving the victims of their right to satisfy their personal priorities.

INTRODUCTION

“Professional Mourners” by Alagu Subramaniam (1964) portrays an episode from a funeral in a village in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka. Although the short story fluently reads a piece of creative writing, it carefully surveys an ostentatious and meaningless tradition connected with the funeral rites of the community concerned. Subramaniam has formulated the topic for the short story capturing the core of the subject he deals with. In many parts of Sri Lanka, the deployment of professional mourners at a funeral may sound hilarious. Yet, like in India and elsewhere (Tetrault, 2022), it is a tradition of central importance to certain communities in the Northern and North-Western Provinces of Sri Lanka.

When somebody dies in a family all the survivors will naturally become mourners and, depending on the level of their emotional attachment to the diseased, they may silently cry or vociferate their lamentations. Yet they all cannot join in the long-winded howling expected to be performed inside the room where the coffin is deposited. They may be busy organizing various aspects of the funeral or they may take time to reach the location (Cabaniss, 2023). So, the affluent middle-class families in these territories deploy a group of professional mourners whose sole job is to sit by the coffin and howl, especially when an important guest arrives to pay respect to the diseased (beyondthedash.com). Their

intention is to simulate an emotional atmosphere so as to impress upon the guests that the diseased is so highly missed by a large group of people from within the family as well as from the neighbourhood (gallerycollection.com).

The professional mourners are basically women. They become professional through their creativity demonstrated in terms of integrating themselves into the atmosphere, cleverly pretending to be part of the family, wailing, and reciting panegyric statements on the diseased as if they have associated with him or her for many years, impacting the emotions of the others and getting them to join in the sobbing, crying, and howling (FlorCruz, 2016). The type of emotionalism they energetically engender into the atmosphere is however beyond the imagination of the closest relations of the diseased. One should be emotionally distant from the diseased to preserve the energy for the theatrical type of mourning required by the families.

Today the funeral organization has become a lucrative industry all over the island of Sri Lanka. On the basis of the demands their clients make, the funeral undertakers have differently-priced funeral packages with various features, and some include even a team of mourners to suit the clients they deal with (Beyond The Dash). Subramaniam covers a period some decades before when funeral undertaking evolved into a commercially appreciated service industry



like today. He appropriately adopts the voice of a juvenile to relate his experience so as to turn the narration into a consummate account of the setting. If not for that, he would not be able to satirize the custom of retaining professional mourners so effectively.

EXCITING ELEMENT IN DEATH

Subramaniam provides an effective introduction to his short story by reviving the excitement of the narrator as a child caused by his grandmother's death. In terms of recollections, he presents the unusual changes seen in the atmosphere as entailed by this late-night incident. Death turns into an exciting social occasion by immediately attracting a large group of people into the house of the diseased. The hustle-bustle becomes so vibrant that it even awakens the children sleeping fast in the neighbouring houses. The "cries" and "the sound of drums" function as immediacies of the social occasion developing on the basis of death which is bereavement for the adults and adventure for the children (Facts & Details). "We pushed our way through the crowd to the centre of the hut in search of our mother. We were feeling afraid because it was the first funeral we had attended" (Subramaniam, 1964). Through the excitement of the children, Subramaniam achieves anticipation for something special. As his subject is "professional mourners" it is understood that the particular group of people employed so are supposed to play an important role in the narrative.

UNCLE'S SELF-IMPORTANCE AS MASTER OF CEREMONIES

The ritualization of death leads to the creation of a voluntary appointment for an enthusiastic person as "Master of Ceremonies". The narrator's uncle, "a teacher in a small school and a trifle mad", seems to have appointed himself for it in this setting, generating an element of absurdity. Subramaniam sarcastically introduces him by this designation to imply that he uses it to show off his power and prestige in a capacity as the person "in charge of all arrangements on such occasions". He characterizes his uncle who is a schoolmaster as an empty vessel in the statement, "He always spoke rapidly and loudly". The metaphor of "shout" repeatedly connected with his presence reinforces his portrayal as a self-important garrulous man. Subramaniam dramatizes the man's loud behaviour, to suit the theme of mourning in the short story.

UNCLE'S HUNT FOR MOURNERS

"I was anxious to see the mourners about whom I had heard many stories" (Subramaniam, 1964). The narrator's confession makes it clear that the mourners are a curious lot. Their dwellings are located in a remote place isolated from the rest of the community. The auditory hallucinations of "jackals" and "snakes" that occur to the narrator suggest the element of solitude dominating the "sandy lanes and narrow winding footpaths" he walks through with his uncle. The location where the "Master of Ceremonies" arrives at first is a fishing village. Capitalizing on the superior class status he holds, the man condescendingly shouts at the fishermen he meets, "Stop, stop ... Don't you know that my aunt's funeral

is to take place today? ... You should be there instead of on the seashore" (Subramaniam, 1964). He means that, under any circumstance, they have a strict order to work for him (Daniel, 1992). The insults he applies to them, "stupid rascals" and "low-minded fellows", suggest intimidation. The men's response to all this shouting and threatening implies their ungrudging servitude. "We shall be there soon." They leave all their work behind and get ready to go to his place.

Then the man walks onto a set of huts much smaller than those of the fishermen. "That is where these wretched women live" (Subramaniam, 1964). He sounds more vigorous before the mourners as they are much weaker than the fishermen. Subramaniam portrays the mourners as women, dressed in coarse saris which did not come over their shoulders or heads, wearing bangles from their wrists to their elbows and anklets that jingled as they came forward. They are basically artists in their own right.

The "Master of Ceremonies" continues to threaten them with his angry shouting. The mourners, on bended knees, continue to plead with him by all means. Utterly dissatisfied with the availability of two mourners, he asks for the others and gets to know of two sisters among them, bereaved of their mother. Disregarding their obligation to pay respect to their own mother who died the same day, he gets the others to lead the way. "Nonsense!" His response suggests he has no regard for them at all. When the two sisters report their inability to leave their own mother and cry for some outsider, the man shouts, "Impudence!" He just wants them to cry for his aunt. "It is not fair, as they will have to shed tears of genuine sorrow on the loss of their mother instead of pretending at your place" (Subramaniam, 1964). The mediator's words uttered in favour of the two daughters who have lost their mother the same morning reveal the truth about their sad plight under the command of this wicked uncle of the narrator. Yet his response does not differ at all though he uses a different term, "Insolence!"

He even reprimands the narrator for nodding approval of what the women say.

"Don't be a silly fool... What do you know of these things? Your father's lawyer friends are expected. His Honour the Supreme Court Judge and the Police Magistrate are coming, and what will they think about us if we don't have enough mourners?" (Subramaniam, 1964)

The explanation he conveys at this point reveals the insignificance of this tradition. It is only an effort focused on ostentation and aggrandizement. Just because some elite members of society would come for the funeral the host intends putting up a grand show of mourners. The theatrical wailing is supposed to enhance the tragic element of death, engaging even the powerful and strong visitors in the mourning.

Claiming their indispensability at their own mother's funeral, they unsuccessfully try to have a release from the man. Yet the man does not change. They promise to come on another occasion when there is a funeral. "I'll have you flogged by the

magistrate for such impudence" (Subramaniam, 1964). The man threatens to get them prosecuted through his influential relations and punished for disobeying his command. He even physically drags them by their saris. Finally, he releases them when they assure him of their coming.

In its entirety, what the "Master of Ceremonies" does to employ the mourners at his aunt's funeral is a hunt. He threatens them, intimidates them, insults them, disregards their grievances, and forces them out of their house, where their mother lies dead and cold waiting to be interred that afternoon. The deprivation the women suffer at the hand of this wicked self-important man is symbolic of the agony of their servitude. The man acts as a feudal lord commanding his vassals.

SERVICE IN FULL SWING

Although it is prose narration, Subramaniam dramatizes the histrionic behaviour of the professional mourners through his verisimilitudinous portrayal of their performance. They boost the "crying" carried out "in groups of twos and threes" by the women relatives and friends of the dead, with a new wave of energy generated by "throwing their hands in the air", ruffling "their hair", and beating their "heads", "shoulders" and "breasts". The gestural force added to the sobbing and wailing boosts and volumes the vocal effect. Yet there is a subtle class distinction between the genuine mourners in the family and the professional mourners hired for the occasion maintained through the distance in the seating arranged for them on a carpet. Quite professionally, they take the lead in the choral mourning by reciting whatever expressions they pick up from the whispering among the others. Thereby they try to achieve pathos in the sentimental funeral audience. "Your grandson has come, wake up, my beloved! Your grandson has come, wake up, my darling!" (Subramaniam, 1964) They formulate such slogans based on the information gathered by eavesdropping on what the others mutter among themselves. The mythical beliefs the family maintain about God Siva allowing the old woman a new lease of life till her favourite grandson Thampo has returned from Malaya gather weight from the emphasis the mourners lay on them during their wailing. They try to engender a mystic element into the atmosphere through allusions to miracles as such. Thus, it is clear that the objectives of the deployment of professional mourners are to mystify the life and death of the diseased, add importance to certain relations, generate pathos, create a popular image of the diseased, and make a show of the family strength. However, other than glorification, they all do not have a rational basis in relation to the needs and wants of practical life.

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE

The "Master of Ceremonies" has forced these women, known as professional mourners, out of their obligation to pay homage to their own mother, in order to cut a figure within his family clan as an able personality. So vainglorious about himself, he triumphantly boasts about the pressure he exercised upon them, too impatient to wait for the others to praise him. Nevertheless, rather than attracting him

credit from his friends, it horrifies everybody at his cruelty. Moreover, it puts him in a terrible predicament. They force him to apologize to the two women, bereft of their mother, for the violation he caused them by drawing them from their own mother's funeral. Suddenly, to the disappointment of the "Master of Ceremonies", everybody's sympathy is drawn to the women. "Many of the guests, too, offered their condolences to the sisters, and my father, after promising to compensate them adequately, told them to go home" (Subramaniam, 1964). Subramaniam develops an anticlimax through the destiny of the "Master of Ceremonies" where he loses the credit he coveted for the mourners. The offer the women make on their own to stay and finish their job to the full reinforces the effect of the anticlimax. This adds insult to injury in the plight of the pathetic Master of Ceremonies.

Subramaniam continues the caricaturing of the Master of Ceremonies by highlighting his engagement in various other activities in the house, on being told off for his foolishness. Whatever he does he wants to show the world that he is a genius. Having left the mourners, he gets hold of the drummers, ridiculing them for their inability to compete with the professional mourners and exhorting them to beat their drums faster and louder. His obsession with noise again suggests his character be "an empty vessel making the most noise". When he feels enough of the drummers, he starts doing some heavy work such as carrying bags full of rice and supplying "ceremonial necessities to the bedside of the corpse". Exhausted by the strenuous walk to the mourners' village and the laborious work in the ritual, and frustrated by the severe reprimand he has received from the family and friends, he collapses on the ground in a fainting fit. His poor physical and mental condition fails him in withstanding the shame. Everybody becomes busy in a rescue operation on him. The anticlimax emerging from his character becomes complete with the helpless state he ends up in. The role of "Master of Ceremonies" disappears and he is now an emergency patient only. "His friends assured him that there were others to help in the arrangements and asked him to rest for some time" (Subramaniam, 1964). Subramaniam manifests how wickedness is repaid in the freeze the Master of Ceremonies is compelled to make, after his recovery.

A CACOPHONY TO MOCK THE PERPETRATOR

The humour of the story reaches its climax after the collapse of the Master of Ceremonies. "The two sisters among the mourners, whose voices had till now lacked their usual intensity, rose and rent the air with their shrill cries, quite unconcerned about the fate of the Master of Ceremonies" (Subramaniam, 1964). A paradox appears in the women's rise to the importance and the Master-of-Ceremonies' fall into disgrace. "The poor will miss you, oh, you charitable one! Who is going to feed us on festival days? Your grandson has come, wake up, my beloved! Your grandson has come, wake up my darling!" (Subramaniam, 1964). The wailing brings no more joy to the man. Instead, it irritates him by poking the psychological wounds he sustained in a useless run for glory. The professional mourners, now socially elevated as volunteers and respected for their commitment to their

professional etiquette, operate with fresh energy. They systematically grab the limelight for Thampo, the favourite grandson of the diseased, by repeatedly mentioning his name in their wailing. The priest's attention to Thampo is totally the result of their work. "What fate was it that kept me away? And when I came at last, you lay unconscious on the bed and I was not even able to speak to you" (Subramaniam, 1964). His lamentation is just inspired by the professional mourners who have been repeating those words for quite some time by now. The man's professional status is duly publicized in the wailing and that brings satisfaction to the entire family while enhancing the utility value of the professional mourners.

"Why do you remain silent, mother of a great lawyer? Answer for the sake of your loved ones! Open those eyes that are shaped like a fish! Like those of Minakshi, famed goddess of Madura! Your grandson has come, wake up, my beloved! Your grandson has come, wake up, my darling!" (Subramaniam, 1964)

The end provided in this incoherent string of words depicts how the professional mourners continue their service until the cortege leaves the residence. They want the dead woman to speak, look around, wake up, and answer the questions they raise. Don't they understand that a dead person would not be able to do these? They do. Then why do they utter such requests? As Subramaniam implies it is their job and it is what society wants them to do. They remain professional mourners simply because they can act so. In this particular situation, the cacophony they produce through their wailing ironically rouses the anger of the Master of Ceremonies, without allowing to him lick his wounds.

CONCLUSION

The story is based on a childhood experience of a family situation. The narrator's uncle, who acts in his self-imposed responsibility as Master of Ceremonies at family functions, does not represent the family in its entirety. The rejection and reprimand he suffers from others in the family suggest that he is an individual only and that everybody in the family does not approve of the violation he commits by depriving the two women of their right to pay respect to their dead mother. They see injustice as injustice, no matter who commits it. However, there is room for a collective acceptance of employing professional mourners in this society. The uncle's behaviour is representative of the popular attitude to the custom, however useless it is. If not for the professional mourners, Thampo, fresh from Malaya, has no way of attracting publicity as a lawyer educated abroad. If not for

them, the others will not sustain their emotionalism and sensationalism as mourners. If not for them, the atmosphere will be dominated by silence to the distaste of the audience. If not for them, the image of the family as well as the diseased will not gather any social significance. That is why they are so indispensable in this society. The mourners' task of lamenting the death of the diseased is closely knitted together with the values of their paymasters. When show-off is so important, equally important becomes noise. Therefore, the message Alagu Subramaniam conveys is that there are silent beneficiaries of the custom.

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