

Research Article

When Modern Meets Tradition: A Middle Class Mind's Struggle in the Clutches of Technology in Perumal Murugan's Estuary

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Abstract

As the traditional and the modern lifestyle clash with the contemporary lifestyle, armed with the power of technology, it is indeed perplexing to find a middle ground between the two. The new lifestyle appears powerful enough to override the conventional, it is not so easy with the already established conservatives who are stubborn enough not to let the contemporary take its roots. Perumal Murugan, author and literary chronicler brings into limelight, how technology and urbanisation affect the middle class conventional households in his work "Kazhimugam" in Tamil which has been translated into English as *Estuary* by Nandhini Krishnan. Tradition is nothing, if not evolving. But over the past decade, there has been a sudden boom in technological advancements, making it difficult for the people to cope to with the 'changes'. The youth adapt easily just like Meghas in *Estuary* but Kumarasurar, the protagonist of the novel is resistant and scared of the new things and the evils that enter the world in the name of 'modern culture'. The novel deals with the transition of the protagonist from a depressed, anxious father to an open minded person who can adapt himself to the changing society.

Key words: *Urbanisation, Modern Culture, Technology, Evolution, Tradition*

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Introduction

Indian culture and its diverse society is a complex in nature. Its system comprises of many language groups with multiple religious faiths. It has many races and numerous castes and a lot of tribe. Indian society is a social mosaic. Though historical evidences prove to have around 4600 communities, it could be a lot more than that as it is a hard task to analyse the

groups in the second most populated country of the world. The most important thing to notice and observe is that the intricate plural society and its assortment of diverse cultures has a mild yet a strong thread of inherent unity.

The bond of the unity owes its strength to Indian culture. The culture of India is ancient as the nation emerged from the dawn of civilization. What is very significant in the culture and the society of India is its power of accommodation and the synthesis of it. Among other civilizations of the world, Indian culture is intricately beautiful. That can be observed in W.G. Hegel's remarks where he says that the Rome is the land of empire, Persia is the land of knowledge, Greece is the land of grace and India is a land of dream.

The country irrespective of being a single entity is culturally rich and fertile with countless varieties and each contributes to the society of the nation making it effervescent and vibrant as a whole. The cultures and the traditions are 5000 years old. The social fabric of the country is inclusive of diverse customs, a wide range of ethnic variations with its own social features and unique festivals. It does also consist of literature, music, dance, dress and food along with distinct food and drinks. These distinctive features chipped in to make India as a strong nation by producing philosophers, saints, sages and other social and religious thinkers. They formed the basement of the society.

Social changes are inevitable in the modern era. Changes do not have to have a complete indifference but a modification in a minute level is also a change. Sometimes a partial change could lead to a complete change in time. Humans always dreams of a better living with improved life standards and work for it. Industrialisation and urbanisation are more than just an advancement of life but also a modification in human social life. The modern lifestyle gives a new perspective towards life. There is a wide comprehensive transformation in Indian life because of the urbanisation and the advancement of technology and the ever revolutionising social media. In the recent social changes, technology and psychology plays a sturdy role in cultural change. In the urbanisation there are many man-made new belief systems that are incorporated to cope up with the changing lifestyles. The Globalisation makes western ideas as a trend and brings in a culture that is comprehensive but challenging the Indian traditions. The cultural continuity of India lies deep in the ethical values, morality and among the castes and tribe. Although there is a common cultural consciousness, Indian culture has multiple schools of thoughts. It is hybridised with various classifications: regional, local and also with comprehensive classical traditions.

Technology is mighty, dynamic and profoundly beneficial. But it can also be used as a destructive tool; technology does hold a more sinister side. Though it makes survival easier and better and far more enjoyable, it also makes total privacy virtually impossible. The power it yields equals the threat it poses. Some of the conservatives use this aspect of the technology as a justification for avoiding the use of technology. The People who are the most concerned regarding the technological progresses in today's world are parents. The Adolescents who use technology for a prolonged time are at constant peril of being exposed to the incessant grasp of technology.

The novel *Estuary* unveils the antagonistic feelings of a traditional middle class man in the hands of the modern technology that he comes in contact with. The cultural clash and the psychological struggle due to the advancement of the society becomes the bottom line. This is the first book of Perumal Murugan about modern life. All of his other works are about rustic life with a little or no hint of an urban setting. In the introduction, Perumal Murugan says, "Writing about a town and urban experience gave me the thrill of entering and exploring a new world." He himself declares that "Perumal Murugan the writer is dead. As he is not God, he is not going to resurrect himself; he also has no faith in rebirth. An ordinary teacher and he will live as P Murugan. Leave him alone." He then returns from his literary exile after the Madras High court cleared him from all the controversies related to his book *Madhurobagan* that is translated as *One Part Woman*. After that he wrote "Poonachi- The Story of a Black Goat" and then continued with *Estuary*. Both of these books are allegorical representations of human life. *Poonachi- The Story of a Black Goat* is about the life of a female goat from its birth till death. *Estuary* is about *Asuras*. The story is set in *Asuralogam*, the place where only *Asuras* live. After the problems he faced due to *Madhorubagan*, the author feels, it is better to not write about humans as it could turn out to be problematic. He was so fed up because of the problems he faced and thus while discussing about his novel *Estuary*, Perumal Murugan says that, "Humans have no problems, internal or external... In a world where everything is straightforward and where perfection prevails, what work does a writer have?...Therefore, I have set this novel in *Asuralokam*, and my characters are *Asuras*." This is how the novel *Estuary* was born as a very thinly veiled allegory where everything and everyone is always facing some problems. The *Asuras* are filled with greed and are never contented. The desires of the *Asuras* are fed sometimes by the misfortune of the others. They were cruel with no values and they are selfish. *Estuary* is therefore a fiction with all rough ends about a rotten land of *Asuras*. Although any interpreter can understand it is

about the world of humans and the evolving modern life. While reading the book, the reader tends to forget that it is about *Asuras* as the mentions of the concept of *Asuras* are not often in the book.

On a simpler note, *Estuary* is about a complicated relationship between the father and the son that could be related with almost every middle class father and the son. The father's anxieties towards his son's life in the evil world become the major line of the story. The life lead by today's father was entirely different from that of their son. The 80's and 90's appears to be easy with lesser evils as considered by the father's today. The idea of many fathers of a successful life is to get a great score in the school board exams and enrol in a prominent course in a major institution and get a job based on their education right after they earn their degree. This idea when comes in contact with modern approaches: choosing a career that are less pursuing or getting into a college which does not impart traditional education creates a lot of troubles for the middle class fathers. What scares them most is the rapid advancement of the technology which brings almost the entire world in the grips of the finger. What ignite the issue are the inabilities of the sons to understand their parents and their perspectives. They neglect the apprehension of their parents and are too much immersed in the modern gadgets.

Estuary describes the misery of the parents with their constant fear for the goodness of the child. The protagonist, Kumarasurar is a naïve traditional salaried middle class man with a monotonous life and considers him to be realistic. His mundane job, his housewife and his one son comprises the whole world to him. So when something goes even a little different from his plan, he gets distressed. To get a little deeper about Kumarasurar, he is a person with strong upright moral standards. He is so rigid when it comes to change. He takes decisions and makes choices that adhere to the standard aspects of the world and anything new makes his heart turbulent. He feels safe in his little comfortable bubble he created for himself. Kumarasurar is not a fan of modern technology:

It made him anxious to even look at computers. The wires that coiled around them like snakes made him tremble. He was certain that one could be electrocuted if one's arm or leg happened to graze these wires. He touched the keyboard with one hesitant finger and decided he was too old to learn how to type on this new fangled equipment. (52)

The stories that are shared to him by his friends about the misuse and mishandling of smart phones and computers increase his hatred towards modern technology. When Kumarasurar finds that his son is no longer confined to his little bubble, he is deeply anguished. But in order to make peace with his own mind and have a good relationship with his son, he must face the world straight and not run away from it.

Children born in the late '90s and the 21st century are known as digital natives as they master new technologies much faster. Notably, as the older ones try harder not to give in to technology and the younger ones accepting them with considerable ease, it becomes a conflict of interest between generations. Meghasurar is one such child born as the only son of Kumarasurar. He is called as Meghas which sounds trendier as suggested by his mother. Just like the name Meghas, he is also a person of trend. He is updated with all the current standards irrespective of being in a conservative family with parents who have no clue about the rapidly changing world. Meghas is a very intelligent boy with a good clarity of things around him. He is smart enough to choose what is right for him and to take advantage of his circumstances and reach good position in his modern life. He has a mind of his own. He stands by his values in a place which is culturally and morally diverse. One time when his parents are anxious about the culture of his college, he explains the situation using an example from their own locality. He says, "In the fourth house on the street, there's a drunkard. Ask about the drunkard and everyone will know. Our street is known as "Drunkard Street"...Does that mean everyone on the street is a drunkard?"(94).His clever statements make their parent at awe many times and they wonder how he grows so smart.

Meghas has a good relationship with his mother but not with his father. He unknowingly falls into complications unaware of most of the times. When Meghas tells his father about the mobile plans where people could make calls for free, Kumarasurar feels that it is fraudulent as no good businessman would be foolish enough to allow his services for free or for a lesser amount. Kumarasurar considers no one to be altruistic as people are never happy for others. They pretend to be happy only to talk ill behind their back or pour over their jealous eyes that could eventually bring harm over them. Kumarasurar, just like any other father is very concerned of his son and at times it costs his sanity. One day his colleague shows him some articles from the internet about a young man who died while taking a selfie. Kumarasurar saw many articles related to selfie deaths and that scared him while thinking what his young son is doing with his phone which has a camera. Kumarasurar also learns about the easy accessibility to porn online. Even when he is a young man, he feels

uncomfortable with pornography that he refuses to watch it with friends. But he considers the pornography that internet has now is far worse than that was available in his times. After watching out porn he had a hallucination where everyone is naked. While he is walking back home, he sees a group of women with their handbags but with no clothes waiting for the bus. The men and women who are sitting while waiting for the bus too do not have any clothes on them. He sees some people walking across him and on the sides of the road and he is shocked to find them naked too. Even in his bus ride everyone is naked including him. He feels like loosing his mind and reaches home and sees his wife naked. He then goes to a room shutting himself and washing his eyes continuously throughout the night to clean his eyes. He is also worried if Meghas watches porn. He is extremely troubled to an extent that he wakes up startled from a dream where he sees his son gets hit by a train while taking a selfie and then gets beaten up by a group of thugs and he is trapped in his mobile screen.

Kumarasurar is always worried for his son. He over thinks every situation. He also imagines possible scenarios of the worst things that could happen. He grieves thinking what if my son is in a bad company. What if he is addicted to drugs? What if something happens to him while he is clicking a selfie? What if his marks are less and he isn't awarded any seat on his merit? What if what if what ifs. But Kumarasura suffers in silence. He keeps his wife out of his worries most of the times because he does not want her to be troubled too and he wants his wife to be happy.

It is important to determine whether one views technology as an ally or an enemy. One doesn't have to treat technology as an adversary, but if one prefers to do so, one should be mindful of its powers to a remarkable extent. An equipped mind acknowledges that no one can guard himself unless one knows his opponent. So in the modernized world, some are outfitted with its power, which puts the others at a disadvantage. So learning to use them to one's advantage makes life better. Once a new technology rolls over you if you're not part of the steamroller, you're part of the road. However, if a person decides to ally with it, one should always safeguard his back. Because, the extent of trust one places in an ally should always be limited. It is an ally and not a friend.

The title *Estuary* comes accurate in two perspectives. As estuary is a place where the sea meets the river but gives each a distinct property on its own, the protagonist and the advanced modern technology seem to be very much individualistic at first and they show no chance of intermingling. But in the end they meet. They are conjoined but do not get mixed. That is the central essence to the novel. When Kumarasurar finds different view

with the help of his friend, he opens his eyes to the whole new world. Another perspective to the title is where in estuary: all the places of fear, anxiety, love and reality of a middle class life meet.

Furthermore, if one constructs a dam across an estuary attempting to isolate the two, it ultimately kills the estuarine ecosystem. The wildlife in this ecosystem loses its vitality and eventually risk death. So for a healthy community, the traditional and contemporary must operate concurrently to sustain equipoise. The most compelling argument is that when one endeavours to promote either extreme, it results in the weakening of the entire transitional community. The sense of ambivalence among young and older people due to their views on technology is one consequence of the generation gap. All things considered, it is unwise to undermine one or the other and better determine to what extent one permits technology to take root.

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