



Acculturation and Cultural Exchange in Perumal Murugan's 'The Last Cloth' and its Movie Adaptation, *Angammal*

Dr. Surabhi Muthe. S

Associate Professor, Department of English, Sree Narayana Arts and Science College, Kumarakom, Kerala, India

drsurabhimuth@gmail.com

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Abstract— The paper explores the concept of acculturation in Perumal Murugan's short story "The Last Cloth" and its movie adaptation, *Angammal*, directed by Vipin Radhakrishnan. The narrative revolves around the complex relationship between a mother and her son, highlighting the cultural tensions that arise from the clash between traditional and modern values. The mother, a village dweller, is forced by her city-bred son to adopt modern attire, specifically wearing a blouse with her saree, which symbolizes the broader theme of acculturation. Through the lens of J.W. Berry's acculturation strategies, the paper analyzes the differing approaches adopted by the mother in the story and the movie. In the short story, the mother exemplifies the "separation" strategy, resisting the change imposed by her son. In contrast, *Angammal*, the mother in the movie, embodies the "integration" strategy, embracing modernity while maintaining her autonomy and cultural identity. The analysis reveals that the conflict between the mother and son stems from their divergent acculturation strategies. While the son seeks to assimilate into modern culture, the mother strives to preserve her traditional identity. The paper highlights the importance of respecting individual choices and cultural autonomy in the process of acculturation. Ultimately, the study demonstrates how the narrative sheds light on the complexities of cultural adaptation and the significance of understanding and acknowledging the perspectives of individuals from different cultural backgrounds. The comparison between the story and the movie adaptation provides valuable insights into the nuances of acculturation and its impact on personal relationships.

Keywords— Acculturation, tradition, modernity, cultural identity, integration.

Permal Murugan, the renowned Indian Tamil writer, scholar, and literary chronicler, depicts in his stories the life of ordinary people in Tamil Nadu. Exploring themes such as caste, gender, societal norms, and cultural identity, his narratives often focus on the intricacies of human relationships and cultural adaptations. "Murugan weaves narratives that delve into the heart of societal complexities, human emotions, and the timeless struggles of ordinary lives" ("Exploring Perumal"). The tensions between tradition and modernity are best explored in the short story 'Kodithuni', translated as 'The Last Cloth' by Kavitha Muralidharan. Vipin Radhakrishnan, a

popular film director and writer, turned this story into a wonderful Tamil movie titled *Angammal*.

The paper attempts to analyse the differences brought to the character of the mother in the story and its film adaptation, focusing on the acculturation strategies explained by J.W. Berry. In this story, 'The Last Cloth', Perumal Murugan portrays the cultural shock faced by the mother when her younger son forces her to wear a blouse with sari. The writer hasn't given names to the characters. Here, the mother is a humble village dweller who rears cattle and leads a village life. Her breasts are sagging, wrinkled, and exposed. She has not worn a blouse in her



lifetime, but her city-bred son gets irritated at the thought of her mother not wearing a blouse. He forces her to put on a blouse to impress the prospective bride's family. But the notion of wearing a blouse suffocates her like the tumour growing in her breast. Finally, when the blouse is brought in she cannot wear it as the tumour has grown uncontrollably, impeding her from lifting her hands.

Vipin Radhakrishnan has brought in significant changes in the plot but has retained the original pulse of the story. He has given names to characters; the lead one, the mother, is Angammal. "The feisty, free-spirited widow, who flaunts her tattoo, drives around the village on her moped, smokes beedi, is a monster of a mother-in-law to her elder son's wife, and has a soft spot for a widower in her village" (Athira). She had embraced modern ways of living but refused to wear a blouse with sari. Her younger son Pavalam, forces her to wear a blouse, but Angammal resists it. She agreed to wear a blouse temporarily, but fought strongly against the idea of lifetime compliance. According to Naina Rathi, "Angammal takes creative strides away from Murugan's short story and does this liberty Justice" (par. 2).

Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits present the classical definition of acculturation: "acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups" (149). The western notions inflicted upon the village people through the modernisation process are the centre of conflict in the story. The blouse was never part of the costume of the village folk. Modern education and culture that crept into the village through the next generation have made the appearance of the mother without a blouse disgusting to the son. This cultural dilemma can be best understood through J.W. Berry's acculturation strategies.

Berry's acculturation model describes the orientation of immigrants towards the new society on two dimensions relating to the extent to which individuals (i) desire to preserve their ethnic culture and ii) wish to interact with the members of the majority group. As a result, there are four acculturation strategies: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. Berry projects integration as an ideal strategy where people maintain a balance between their original culture and the invading one. Here, the people retain their original culture and tradition, and at the same time value contact with the dominant culture. In assimilation, people do not preserve their original culture and identity, and completely embrace the foreign culture. Separation occurs when people totally reject interaction with the foreign group. Marginalisation is

a complex stage where people reject both the dominant and original culture (Berry 9).

The portrayal of the mother character in the story and film adaptation differs in the acculturation strategies adopted. The blouse emerges as the focal point of conflict between cultures. Naina Rathi comments, "Perhaps because a blouse was never a part of the traditional saree ensemble in the Indian subcontinent. It was western notions that demand body exposure and any possible nudity inappropriate- this adopted into our culture become another means to control and curb a woman's bodily autonomy and identity" (par. 2). The mother, in Murugan's story 'The Last Cloth' unable to bear this compulsion fails terribly, whereas Angammal, the mother in the movie version boldly fights back. One can identify significant differences in the acculturation model followed by these mothers. 'Separation' is the strategy adopted by the mother in the story, whereas integration is the strategy adopted by Angammal.

The mother in the story version remains ignorant of the dominant culture that is invading the village and leads life in a traditional way. She has never felt the need to cover her breasts and can't understand the feelings of his son, who is annoyed at the sight of his mother without a blouse. She continues to lead her life in a normal way. That's why she is shocked when the whole house and the village decide to make her wear a blouse. "The mother was stunned-she was speechless" (Murugan 183). To her the prospect of wearing a blouse was against the beliefs that she carried all these years. Even this minor change was unacceptable to her. "She imagined the blouse piece as a small knife that would cut off all her movements" (Murugan 185). So when the whole house was rejoicing over the change, she was wriggling in pain.

But Vipin Radhakrishnan has depicted the mother differently. One can easily identify the integration model adopted by Angammal. "Angammal is not in favour of tradition or against change. For instance, she is the only woman in the village who rides a motorcycle to move around" (Bengani "What is progress"). Angammal exhibits many of the modern traits like riding a moped, smoking cigarettes, openly addressing the issue of breastfeeding, wearing headphones, and even maintaining personal choices. Her vehement decision to wear the saree without a blouse, even when all the other people insisted, points to her modern outlook. This decision can be viewed as both traditional and modern, suggesting the strategy of integration as the acculturation mode. Naina Rathi comments, "How ironic that a move towards modernity is constantly cited as a reason for Angammal to cover herself? And how surprising, that this progressive act

somehow feels orthodox?"(par. 2). Her attempts at maintaining bodily autonomy are praiseworthy. But her son Pavalam finally succeeds in making her wear a blouse, making everyone believe that she has changed forever. She has agreed to wear the blouse just to impress the bride's family. She is vexed when she feels that people around her expect her to wear the blouse everyday.

J.W Berry discusses individual changes during the process of acculturation as, "The focus is on how individuals who have developed in one cultural context manage to adapt to new contexts that result from migration... the concepts of psychological acculturation and adaption are employed to refer to psychological changes and eventual outcomes that occur as a result of individuals experiencing acculturation"(6). For Pavalam, the whole village has embraced modernisation, except his mother. Elderly women have started wearing blouses, whereas the younger generation has switched over to salwar-kameez. Only her mother remains unchanged. The other progressive acts displayed by her mother remain hidden in his eyes. The whole village exhibited an acculturation model of integration through their dress pattern. But Angammal as an individual varies. She exhibits many other modern trends, except for the blouse. J.W. Berry comments, "While the general changes may be profound in the group, individuals are known to vary greatly in the degree to which they participate in these community changes" (7).

One contradictory instance may be noted in the movie itself. Anandu Suresh points out how the older generation talks about breasts openly, whereas the younger generation remains shy about discussing such topics. "In another scene, we see a group of elderly women arrive at Kalimuthu's house with neem paste to help his daughter-in-law wean her toddler girl. However, when they offer to apply it on her breasts, the younger mother visibly embarrassed, insists on doing it herself-revealing a newer form of narrow-mindedness in the newer generation" (par. 8). Here, the younger generation blindly follows the modern trend without understanding the underlying layers of identity, autonomy, and freedom. "Becoming enslaved by capitalist codes" (par. 8), youngsters like Pavalam put unwanted stress on their mothers. Pavalam and other young people tend to follow the acculturation strategy of assimilation. But they are doing it without much thought and understanding.

Pavalam is so engrossed with the idea of the blouse that he doesn't care much about the feelings of his mother. Nandini Ramnath talk about in her movie review, "Pavalam's embarrassment suggest that migration has increased his distance from his roots- his urbanization has

opened him up in some ways-as is evident from his choice of a life partner- but closed him in other ways" (par. 1). According to J.W Berry the issue of acculturation involves two aspects, "cultural maintenance" and "contact and participation" (9). Cultural maintenance involves the understanding of the importance of preserving and upholding cultural identity and characteristics. Contact and participation pertain to what extent individuals should engage with and participate in other cultural groups versus maintaining primary interaction within their cultural group.

Berry's concepts of culture shedding, culture learning and culture conflict can be best understood through the characters Angammal and Pavalam (20). Angammal has learned and adopted many things from the invading culture without shedding much of her original culture. The conflict arises in the case of the blouse because her son Pavalam has lost everything of his original culture and blindly accepted the new one. The sight of the breasts that once fed him in the past has now become disgusting to him. Pavalam's worries regarding the response of his bride's family also proves wrong. Contrary to his expectations the bride Jasmine finds the photo of Angammal, without wearing a blouse, attractive and beautiful. She respects cultural ethos and considers it quite normal. This clearly showcases the fact that in case of Pavalam, culture shedding occurred without proper culture learning. Anandu Suresh comments, "As the story of Nangeli, the Ezhava woman who protested against the caste-based oppression by cutting off her breasts, continues to resonate in the anti-caste movements symbolizing resistance and trailblazing courage, Murugan's use of the blouse as a central motif adds further depth to the narrative" (par.2). For Pavalam, the education that is supposed to widen one's perspective seems to limit him.

Acculturation is not an easy process. Many factors, like age, gender, education, and personal factors, affect cultural change. Pavalam can easily assimilate the new culture as he is young and educated. But his insistence on bringing a forceful change in the mother's attire cannot be justified. Angammal is entirely different from the mother of Perumal Murugan's original story. She is modern in every respect. Even the decision to stick to her favourite attire is also the result of modern thinking. Unfortunately, her son Pavalam fails to understand that. What Pavalam lacks here is the willingness to understand and acknowledge the identity and personality of people dearer to him. Forceful change will eventually lead to stress. The most shocking factor here is that the force is exerted not by the members of the invading culture but by

the native one. In Murugan's story, the mother is shattered, whereas in *Angammal*, she fights back.

To conclude, the mother-son conflict in Murugan's story and its movie version arises from the difference in the acculturation strategies adopted by them. In the story, a modern son has to settle the issue of clothing with his traditional mother, resulting in a wide gap between them. The mother is so alien to the changing circumstances that she is totally taken aback when forced to wear a blouse. But Angammal is an intricately woven character who has adopted the integration strategy of acculturation, which, according to Berry, is the best one. She has smoothly dived into the new culture, but the unnecessary pressure exerted by her son leads to the conflict. The bold decision to resume her way of clothing clearly showcases the value of personal choices and identity.

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