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**Role of Space in the Narratives of  
Bharathi Vasanthan, A People's Writer from Puducherry**

**S. Ganesan, Ph.D. Candidate**

## Celebration of Universalism through Small Places and Small Communities

### Role of Space in the Narratives of Bharathi Vasanthan, A People's Writer from Puducherry

S. Ganesan, M.A., M.Phil.

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#### Some Ancient Narrative Techniques

Ancient Tamil literature (usually called **Sangam Literature**) offers an interesting view and classification of literary works based on exterior (*puRam*) and interior (*akam*) landscapes. Poems under the *puRam* category are concerned with life outside of the family domain, whereas the *akam* poems present family life with the focus on man-woman relationship. The geographical backgrounds in which characters came alive and communicated their emotions and tales to us, were seen an essential supportive element in literature in the *akam* domain. These landscapes in *akam* literature function as signs and symbols for the moods of the characters.

#### Social and Geographical Distinctions

These geographical backgrounds in Sangam Literature did not refer to or exploit the regional or social dialects, although certain classes of people were focused upon in each geographical landscape. These included, for example, farming community in the plains, hunters' community in the hills, and fishing community in the coastal regions, etc. Professional distinctions, not the caste distinctions based on *varna*, appear to be the focus in this depiction of the interplay between geographical landscapes and the interior landscapes of the characters portrayed.

#### Novel and Geographical Backgrounds

With the emergence of novel as the chief form of both popular and "serious" literature, descriptions of geographical landscapes are used to locate the characters in the story, for example, in a village or city, street, institutions, etc., but not necessarily used as symbols and signs for what the characters felt inward or for the progress of the narrative. That characters are real is established in several ways including through the identification of the locale as well the use of regional and social dialects. "Normal" and day-to-day life is sought to be portrayed using these props.

#### Bharathi Vasanthan Prefers a Blend – Celebration of Universalism from Small Places

Bharathi Vasanthan, a skilled writer of fiction and poetry and an excellent researcher of regional history from Puducherry, exploits the Sangam technique in his novels –

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providing an elaborate description of the locale and placing his characters in the chosen locale for maximum effect. The locale and his characters form part of the story in which they (locale and characters) are totally involved in each other. He makes an interesting combination of the history of landscapes or territorial space and the characters in weaving his story.

This narrative technique is greatly exploited in his popular novel, *ManitharkaL Innamum IrukiRaarkaL* (which may be roughly translated as *Humans Are Still Around!*). He writes a simple story focusing on human values, and declares through this interesting title that high values of Humanism are still found in select and forgotten places, and, of course, among forgotten and so-called lowly social groups.

Bharathi Vasanthan has so far published ten books and has been awarded many prizes for his creative works. Bharathi Vasanthan is a very dynamic writer with zest for experimentation, and so, we can expect him to improve his own writing in many dimensions with new and varied content and techniques of narration, characterization, etc.

### Storyline

The storyline of the novel *Manithargal Innamum IrukkiraarkaL* may be presented as follows:

Anbumathi suffers from some sort of skin disease, by the name *akki*. He consults a physician and takes medicines as per the instructions of the doctor for a few days, without getting any positive effect or result. The pain is killing and unbearable as it affects greatly the joints of the bones. Later, by the guidance of his brother GaNesan, he goes to the Potters' street. There he accidentally meets his childhood friend and schoolmate Chatchithaananthan. Chatchithaananthan gives treatment for Anbumathi's pain by *writing* on his diseased parts with the soil by which the potters create pottery items. Anbumathi undergoes the treatment for a week and he frequents his friend's place to undergo the treatment.

The treatment is continued for a week and at last Anbumathi gets the relief he needs from the skin disease. Anbumathi's mother Thevaki ammaaL dies of sickness and old age. Anbumathi's brother GaNesan is portrayed as an unlovable and undutiful son, playing the role of a servant to his French National wife. GaNesan even fails to come for his mother's funeral ceremony. It is Chatchithaananthan and his mother who extend their support physically, morally and economically for the smooth conduct of the funeral ceremony of Thevaki ammaaL.

Chatchithaananthan, a Leper, is a noble soul who enjoys greatly and derives satisfaction from his profession of pottery. Visalaatchi is portrayed as a noble mother and also an Incarnation of Motherhood. Due to his bad habits and after the desertion of his wife, GaNesan becomes a drunkard and also gets affected by leprosy.

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Anbumathi forgets and forgives all his misdeeds and brings his brother to his home. He provides him with food and shelter. Chatchithaananthan comes forward to take Ganesan for consultation and treatment at the Leprosy Hospital. Towards the end of the novel, Anbumathi, with a lot of sores and scars in his life, sees that his brother has also deserted him. The novel ends with philosophical resignation.

### **Values of Humanity**

The theme of the novel revolves around the virtues and values of humanity. Bharathi Vasanthan writes:

This world is a special place; beyond the specialty of the world is Human Society. Without the Society, this world will become lifeless... Then this lifeless place cannot be referred to as World. If you believe that this world is noble, its nobility is kept through the actions, the gentleness and the nobility of human beings. Such people are the Divinity and the Mighty force... the Paramaathmaa... the rest in the world cannot be compared or equated on par with it...  
(MII : 72)

### **Philosophical Perspectives Cited from the Novel**

The novel abounds in philosophical insights, perspectives and outlook of the writer expressed in his unique style. Some of these passages are quoted below for reference and analysis:

Anbumathi has come to the conclusion that it is too difficult to change or refine his brother...the flowers that blossom in a tree has no marks of differences among themselves...the fruits of the same tree have the same taste, one fruit does not taste sweet and another fruit does not taste sour... the fruits of the same tree have the same taste...but the children born to the same mother differ so diversely and differ in their character and attitude...  
(MII: 37)

Another important dimension related to the physical and mental sufferings faced by people in life is reflected through the words of Anbumathi:

In the course of his treatment for his **akki**, now he feels better, but still there persists a pain inside the bone...is it illusion or real? If we possess mental courage to face and withstand the sufferings and difficulties in life, in due course of time, such difficulties will become very common and one gets familiar and accustomed to the problems...  
(MII: 95)

Yet another philosophical insight by the writer is revealed on the discussion related to the ferocious presentation and depiction of some goddesses like Kali. In this context

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the writer refers to PaathaaLa Ponniamman. The reason for the worship of such ferocious gods by our ancestors is revealed through the words of Anbumathi as,

In this world, there is nothing called beauty or ugliness. The God who has Created birds has created snakes also. The people whom we consider as ferocious are also the children of God. We should not hate them, but try to show our love to them is the lesson taught through the depiction and worship of such ferocious gods and this is the reason why our ancestors made such types of idols to be worshipped .

(MII: 128)

### **Puducherry as the Main Backdrop for the Narrative**

This novel by Bharathi Vasanthan records the cultural uniqueness of Puducherry. The novel abounds in historical imprints and references as well. The writer compares and contrasts Puducherry of the past with the present.

The period depicted in this novel is between 1950s and 2000. This sounds to be a very short period, but the choice is very significant. This period covers the dynamic and critical period of transition from being a French Colony to politically free Indian Territory.

Bharathi Vasanthan places his characters in a variety of geographical spaces within Puducherry, exploiting his understanding of the history of Puducherry which bears a unique blend of Indian and French ways of life. The locales within the city of Puducherry are linked to the story, similar to the techniques adopted in Sangam literature. (A major difference is as follows: Sangam literature does not provide for author's voice at great length, whereas modern writers, especially in Tamil, following the traditions set by various groups of reformers, insist on their voice as part of the narrative.) Sometimes streets get foregrounded and some other times events get foregrounded and on other occasions characters in the novel get prominence because of their social background.

### **Universal Values Localized**

This novel is about universal values, but the events, places and characters are locally conditioned and shaped by local history and traditions. Potters' community is prominently placed in the narrative. Some of the important characters who bring peace and understanding to suffering humanity are from this community. Traditional creativity and traditional values expressed through pottery are celebrated, linking such values and characters to universal values. Thus, pottery, a very functional and yet creative art, and the practitioners of pottery are celebrated in this interesting novel.

In addition, the contributions of the potters' community to the freedom struggle within British and French India also receive focused attention in this novel. For example, the author shows how potters secretly hid the weapons for the use of the Nationalists inside the beautiful dolls, statues and idols.

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## **Celebrating the Local**

Along with the Potters' community, the historical, social, cultural, spiritual and mythical significance related to Puducherry is also celebrated in this novel.

Whatever Holy place you visit  
In whatever Holy water you bath  
The best place like the saints living Puducherry  
No one has found yet...  
The Knowledge of Salvation also  
Is rendered to the Searchers  
Even the Siddhars who came here  
Have totally surrendered themselves...Aren't they? (MII: 50)

Bharathi Vasanthan observes that idols of all religions are kept side by side in Chachithaananthan's home. This is a scene that we notice in many places in India. Bharathi Vasanthan, however, remarks that between the gods and goddess of various religions there is perfect harmony and unity. It is only among the common men, there is disunity in the name of religion; people fight like animals in the name of religion and kill each other mercilessly and brutally.

## **Creators of Gods and Goddesses in Utter Material Poverty Conditions**

The author also shares his concern for the poverty stricken condition of such creators of gods and goddesses, the Potters who create the images of gods and goddesses through their artistic skills. The idols and the dolls created by them enter the household of the rich and the mighty, but the people who are responsible for such creations are still living in desolate huts and lead a very poverty stricken existence. Social and economic justice unfortunately eludes these communities.

## **This Novel is about Celebrating Human Lives in Small Places and Small Communities**

This novel is not a travelogue, introducing Puducherry. It is not also a history book. It is certainly not a book that describes only the social organization of a particular community. Neither is it an anthropological exposition of Puducherry life. Nor is it purely based on imagination. Readers who may have no personal knowledge and direct acquaintance with Puducherry may have some difficulty to remember all the details of places mentioned and described. And yet at the end of our reading, we marvel at the human values the novel celebrates and at the characters who take us through their lives with abundant lessons for all of us. We celebrate our lives in small places and in small communities while focusing on the need for universal human values.

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