

**Reflection of the Narcissistic Struggle Between Personal Life And
Professional Life in
Sa. Kandasamy's *Visaranai* Commission**

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Abstract

“Most of us spend our time on what is urgent and not enough time on what is important.”
– Stephen R. Covey

From time immemorial, writers write about the sufferings in the life of a common man. It remains an easy and favourite subject chosen for writing any kind of a literary work of art. When a work deals with the life of a common man, the reader can easily associate himself with the situations and the characters. The reader develops an intimate bond with the characters. Writers also find certain issues in the life of a commoner that they want to change. Literature serves as the best medium to bring about a change in the minds of the people. The struggle between the professional life and personal life is a very common scenario in the life of middle-class people. They fail to maintain the balance between work and life. They are extremely attentive to one, while the other is left unattended. The novel beautifully paints the love life of a conductor and a teacher. They miserably suffer by allowing their profession to intrude their personal lives and vice versa. The paper tries to probe and find whether profession or personal passion influences a common man's life more.

Keywords: Sa. Kandasamy's *Visaranai Commission* Professionalism, Narcissism, Fascism, Common Man, Work-Life Balance.

Radolph D. Pope says, “Literature is not a professional commodity; it resists becoming one more object of study. It moves you and transforms you. It is a living entity. It glows in the dark” The work-life balance of human beings has come into existence only in the modern ages. From the time of civilization, man is used to making his own food, clothing and shelter from nature. The advent of modernity in his life has brought something known as profession, which is

a purely monetary term, associated with the type of work he does for a living. The second wave of feminism has introduced this into the lives of women. After the office life has separated him from his natural way of living, man struggles to maintain the balance between the professional life and personal life. The problem gets intensified if the person has a narcissistic personality.

The study of the work-life balance has started with the onset of the creation of professions. The study has been taken into consideration only after the adversities of work-life balance and its disturbances are being felt in the modern times. Today, it is one of the areas where many researches are being conducted to find the methodologies or solutions for maintaining the balance. The objective of the study is to emphasize the importance of the influence of profession in personal life, passion in professional life and the struggle between both. Eventually, in one way or the other, one tries to dominate the other and the problem arises. Though it is the twenty first century of radical thinking human beings, the novel portrays some male chauvinistic characters, who think that these problems arise only because woman go for work.

The importance of the study is felt when people get depressed, mentally affected due to work tension and the number of divorces increase in India because one does not take the effort to know and understand the professional tensions in the workplace of the other. The people of the modern generation do not possess the quality of giving up at any cost. For them, their position and point of view is important, no matter what the other people are going through in their life. Thus, they can be said to have a narcissistic personality, which takes its origin from a Greek myth about Narcissus, a beautiful young man, who falls in love with his own reflection.

There are great writers who capture many moments of life and convert them into fantastic stories; Sa. Kandasamy is one among them. His stories convey the stories untold in the story itself and begin where they end. His purpose of story-telling is to convey all that has not been or could not be conveyed by the sounds and words in the story. He once said, “The best literature is one which transcends the barriers of time, culture, language and political ideology. It does not relate to a particular community or gender. More importantly a reader from any part of the world should be able to internalize the novel”. Literature fills all his thinking and is a corollary of all his endeavours. The novel *Visaranai Commission* was published in 1994 and it was awarded the Sahitya Akademi award in the year 1998.

The novel *Visaranai Commission* is a mild satire on the caste-creed politics in Tamil Nadu during the 1980s. Set against the backdrop of an unknown village, the novel opens with the life events of a married couple, Thangarasu and Rukmini. The plot revolves around how their professional life influences their family life, its consequences and why they are not ready to give up one another for the betterment and smooth functioning of the family. The latter part of the novel deals with how the passions and benevolence present behind the workaholic nature of the

characters help them overcome the egos of their professions and proves to the readers that at any cost humanity must not be sacrificed. Throughout the novel, there is a thread of politics interwoven with both the professional and personal life of the characters.

In the review of its translation in *The Hindu*, Theodore S. Baskaran says,

The main protagonists are bus conductor Thangarasu and school teacher Rukmini. The childless couples' dog Tiger has a major presence in the novel and Kandasamy describes its moods and movements in a manner that would please James Thurber. Squirrels and sparrows make appearances. There is a politician in the background, a school teacher who wheels and deals and gets elected to the legislature. Kandasamy says that, after completing the novel, he realized that it was influenced by the Tamil epic *Silappadhikaram* and that he was unaware of it while writing. He sees it as a part of a literary continuum.

The narrative moves back and forth between past and present. Thangarasu walks slowly to work and thinks about his childhood, when an irate father tries to teach him football, ordinary years, running from pillar to post and settling into a job as a bus-conductor, and then marriage with Rukmini. It seems like she is tempted at several instances in her life but she is loyal to her husband. It is a dignified, pleasing portrayal and the readers are mesmerized as she transforms from being a new wife to becoming her husband's only support. The climax is like a blow and the reader is able to recognise the irony in the situation that finally befalls him.

Thangarasu is a man of unpleasant nature, working as the conductor of a bus. Despite being educated, he never shows any sign of literacy and civilisation such as decent language, good manners and hygienic life habits. He gets the job through the influence and recommendation of a local political party member. He is not in good terms with his mother and younger brother, thus lives with his wife separately. When it comes to his professional life, no one can question him, and this testifies his professional credibility. He is a kind-hearted and soft natured man, but years of his profession as a conductor have made him harsh, ill-tempered, unpleasant, obscene and filthy-mouthed.

Rukmini, a teacher and wife, wants to fulfil the role of a typical south Indian wife but the teacher in her does not allow her to be so. Thus, she argues and brings back her mother-in-law from her brother-in-law's home but soon her mother-in-law goes back to her younger son. Being a teacher, she expects order in every aspect of life, in which her husband displeases her very much. She condemns him for being careless in certain issues such as cleanliness, personal hygiene and decent vocabulary. Gender discrimination plays a pivotal role here which is unconsciously elaborated by the author. Unfortunately, Sa. Kandasamy proves to be a very dominant male chauvinist. He does not allow Rukmini to voice out her opinions and regards.

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Whereas, any woman who belongs to the 1980s, has been educated and trained to be a quality teacher will not stay quiet during certain circumstances that one comes across frequently in the novel. She prefers being the wife to being a teacher. This preference of hers contradicts the general belief that teachers, especially women teachers, are very passionate about their profession.

Virginia Woolf's *Professions for Women* speaks about the suitable choices of professions for women, in which she suggests writing novels and being a governess for children are the best. She herself being a famous novelist suggests that every woman needs financial independence which would help them in managing disastrous situations. Here, the author portrays Rukmini as a very fragile character and the irony is that on hearing the tragic news of her husband's death, she stumbles at the entrance of the house and dies. This shows that the author has been deeply influenced by the Tamil epic *Silappadhikaram*, in which the queen of Madurai throws herself at the foot of the dead king and dies. Her last statement can be possibly translated as "There is no method, way or path that can be shown as a hope of livelihood, for a woman who has lost her husband".

People belonging to the same profession can understand the situation and difficulties that could possibly arise and will cope with it. In this novel, people belonging to different professions are brought together in marriage which is also a reason for their sufferings. If Rukmini had married a teacher, he would have understood her better; she may not need to explain everything and get the permission of her husband. This is not possible in the case of Thangarasu, because female conductors are rare in Tamil Nadu Government buses. Here, the only positive fact about their marriage is that Rukmini understands his profession and passion well and manages the household without complaining. Being a teacher, she understands everything easily than a woman of any other profession.

The emergence of nuclear family is slightly hinted in the novel and it talks about its bitter complications and complexities which are seriously feared by the middle-class people. Here in the novel, the constant questioning of the people about the couple not having a child makes things worse. In order to overcome the longing for a child, Rukmini suggests rearing a pet. Finally, they decide and bring home a dog named Tiger and shower their love on the little creature. The dog also can be considered as one of the characters in the novel because the author has given importance to the dog. Tiger replaces the role of a neighbour or a companion; when Rukmini falls ill, it helps and takes care of her to the fullest.

Everyday humans come across a lot of struggles in this competitive world. These struggles reflect themselves possibly in all art forms, while literature is more interested in converting these struggles into universalized stories which would please the readers as the characters are relatable. Here, the struggle is between the passionate, personal life of a very self-

centred person and a professional person who follows fascistic policies. The spill-over compensation theory propagates the compensation made by the experiences in both places. An unhappy worker finds happiness in spending time with his children. Whereas, a man who quarrels with his wife everyday tends to work overtime at the office where his importance is felt, his work is recognized, and his contribution is appreciated.

Narcissism is the pursuit of gratification from people or egotistic admiration of one's own attributes. It has originated from Greek mythology, where young Narcissus falls in love with his own image reflected in a pool of water. In the novel, Thangarasu, one of the protagonists, appears to be a narcissist in relation with his profession of being a bus conductor. This happens when self-confidence becomes excess, leading to self-obsession. He possesses all the traits of a narcissist. He dominates all the conversations with Rukmini.

He does not allow her to voice out her thoughts and opinions, not even her feelings and emotions. He likes to be the centre of attention; this is evident from his popularity in the workplace. He wants the other conductors to speak to him and about him, whenever he is there. He talks about himself, his problems, his exaggerated accomplishments etc.; everything has to be about him and only him. He has the habit of giving unsolicited advice to others; for instance, he gives forcible advice to his wife to prevent any kind of monetary loss from her salary when all the teachers in the school decide to give a particular amount from their salary for a function.

He detests waiting as he thinks that he deserves special treatment from the others; this makes him a perfect narcissist as he considers himself to be a step above the other people in certain aspects. His ambition knows no bounds. He dreams and desires without any boundaries or limits. He is of the competitive type; even while eating he wants to be the winner which is viewed as an act of abnormality by his wife. He does not care about the points of view of the others. He sees everything as some sort of competition. It is difficult for him to celebrate, recognise or accept and appreciate the success of others. Even his wife is not an exception. In the novel at a particular point of time, she comes and tells him with a lot of happiness and pride that everybody in the school appreciated her art but he detests the appreciation she gets for her talent. This is because in this moment someone else is the winner. He is unable to resist feeling of being inferior to his wife.

He is famous for holding grudges against others. This is evident from the incident when Sundaram, a driver and co-worker, advises him in a caring manner but he gets irritated, feels angry and starts hating Sundaram. No matter how small a criticism is, to him it feels like a huge insult. He is unable to easily get over the feeling of being insulted or abandoned. This is the reason for the change in his character in the latter part of the novel. When he comes to know that Rukmini is seriously ill, the fear of Rukmini abandoning him shakes him out of his self-absorbed world which results in a change in the attitude of our narcissistic hero, Thangarasu.

He does not accept any of his faults. Most of the time, the quarrels and fights in the family arise because of him and his filthy language. Even though he knows that he is the reason for most of the problems, he does not accept the fact and apologize for it. He thinks that accepting his mistakes will make him inferior. He refuses to be held accountable for his mistakes and bad behaviour. Instead, he puts the blame on someone else. Even in close personal relationships like that of a husband and wife, there is always a winner and a loser and he will do anything to win. He expects others to take care of his needs but refuses to do the same for anyone else. This can be known from his means of getting his job as a bus conductor with the help of a local political personality, Kathiravan. He does not want to return the favour done by him or to even feel grateful for his help. He feels like there is no need to feel grateful and return the favour. Once his needs are over, he cuts off the people from his life. He does not regret manipulating or bully others to get what he wants. There are no exceptions, not even his mother. He can be easily flattered, and he is addicted to the flattery.

The influence of professional language in the personal life is characterized by Thangarasu. The language is very crude, and a reader does not expect this kind of vocabulary to be used by a reputed author. In the name of realistic approach, the author presents the readers with lots of filth while many good things in real life remain untouched by the author. Arnold Bennett, the master of the realistic approach records, with exact details, the nature of provincial life in “Anna of the five towns”. The language is decent. Here, the protagonist Thangarasu goes to the extent of calling his wife a slut and a whore which debases the high reverence and honour given to womanhood and femininity in Tamil culture and tradition.

The protagonist is a patriarchal male chauvinist who acts a certain way to present himself as a respectable person in the eyes of the society. Anton Chekov’s short story, “The Husband”, deals with a husband named Shalikov, a tax collector who tries to debase and disrupt the reputation of his wife as a good dancer by asking her to leave the dancing party abruptly and threatens to make a scene. Social modesty prevents her from questioning and arguing with him and makes her leave the hall feeling ashamed of her husband.

Anna Pavlovna could scarcely walk ... she was still under the influence of dancing, the music ... She asked herself why God had thus afflicted her. She felt miserable, insulted and choking with hate. She was silent, trying to think of the most offensive, biting, and venomous word she could hurl at her husband. What did he care for her words? Her bitterest enemy could not have contrived for her a more helpless position.

This is a narcissist’s action in response to not being able to digest the fame of his wife.

Thangarasu's case is similar. When Rukmini is given additional responsibilities in school as recognition of her talents and work-womanship, he makes her to drop out of those responsibilities. Here, she becomes a victim for his narcissistic attitude. When a husband wants his wife to step aside from doing something or do something for him, he gets his way by commenting on and questioning her morality. This affects her dignity. Therefore, she voluntarily yields to her husband's wishes just to avoid his harsh words. Women hesitate to go in pursuit of their dreams at the cost of their chastity being questioned by the society. Rukmini and Anna Pavlovna are not exceptions.

"Life is a stage, and when the curtain falls upon an act, it is finished and forgotten, the emptiness of such a life is beyond imagination", says Alexander Lowen about narcissists. They are self-centred, incapable of sustaining satisfying relationships, lacking psychological awareness, hypersensitive to insults, vulnerable to shame and guilt, detesting non-admirers, using others without considering the cost of doing so and unable to view the world from the perspective of other people.

As Brutus says in William Shakespeare's play *Julius Caesar*, "Not that I love Caesar less, but I love Rome more", here Rukmini may say, "Not that I love my husband less, but I love my teaching profession more". Her character can be compared to that of Miss. Lydia Languish from Sheridan's *Rivals*, who is fond of reading books in general and novels in particular. A novel is defined by the *Oxford Dictionary* as, "a fictitious prose narrative of considerable length in which characters and actions representative of real life are portrayed in a plot of more or less complexity". The representation of real life can be perfectly applied to the novel, *Visaranai Commission*. Most of the world's great literature deals with the love between a man and a woman. This novel uses plain narration and story-telling technique to present the story of the married life of a high school teacher and a bus conductor in an omniscient view.

Jane Austen says, "Life is cool, unsentimental, ironical and amused". The plot is the summary of their actual life including the emotional aspects. In *In the Milestone* and *The Waterfall*, Margaret Drabble explores the dilemma of the modern woman to whom freedom is granted in theory but withheld in practice. Rukmini, a dedicated teacher, understands this difference between theory and its practical applications and makes use of it for a better understanding of the life. Throughout the novel, the author projects Rukmini as a woman of lesser knowledge and wisdom and as a person incapable of making decisions on her own. She depends on her husband for everything. This nullifies the educational qualification and the professional and financial independence. Rukmini belongs to an era of revolution and liberation. In her *Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf brings out the image of Judith Shakespeare, the

imaginary sister of Shakespeare, who has lived and died during the Elizabethan era. “Who shall measure the heat and violence of the poet’s heart when caught a tangled in a woman’s body?”

The chauvinistic author does not forget to plot a scene where her morality is tested by tempting auscultations from a fellow teacher named Sarojini. Sarojini teacher accuses Rukmini for not using the flirtations of another teacher turned MLA, Mr. Bharathivaanan. Anyone in the place of Rukmini would fall for the words of Bharathivaanan. It is evident from the novel that Rukmini loves his Tamil speeches, his poetry and his philosophical lectures. It shows clearly that she is interested in him and more clearly that she considers Bharathivaanan a better person than Thangarasu and her own self. She does not fall for him even after holding him in such high esteem. The text offers no clue or hint about the feelings Rukmini has for Bharathivaanan. Even after becoming an MLA and a candidate for the cabinet, Bharathivaanan does not forget Rukmini and makes it a point to a visit her home without fail.

Rukmini wants to be in a nuclear family but after getting married to Thangarasu, her thoughts change. She wants her mother-in-law to live with her. This contradicts Beck-Gernsheim theory about work-life balance that says, “The nuclear family has been replaced with an expansion of the family concept, due to increased rates of divorce, and legitimized lifestyles based on co-habitation, same-sex partnerships and extended families of lineage and choice”. Rukmini is kind-hearted at home and iron-hearted at school. She possesses a dual personality. She wears a mask while in school which hides her nature, and there is no need for her to wear the mask in home. The readers are given no clue about how Bharathivaanan knows the true nature of Rukmini that remains hidden behind the mask.

Rukmini is a teacher not only for the students at school, but also for her husband, Thangarasu. She starts teaching him good habits, cleanliness, personal hygiene and decency, and how he can prevent himself from using indecent vocabulary in front of her. The reasons for some incidents narrated in the novel are not clear. It can be assumed that this teaching and pedagogical attitude of a wife towards her husband makes Thangarasu violent and atrocious at times, especially when he eats the non-vegetarian food prepared by Rukmini. This shows that even the kind of food taken by a man may cause behavioural changes.

Occupational stress which arises out of the imbalance between work and family has become a key personal and family issue in many societies. In this novel, Rukmini is wise enough to adjust by putting aside her professional life for safeguarding her personal life with Thangarasu. Rukmini being given more importance at school does not please him. He is not comfortable with the idea of a woman having more recognition than him. Even after several years of independence, women face a lot of discrimination during recruitment and also receive unfair salaries. The gender discrimination at the workplace has been treated by the Equal

Remuneration Act of 1976. Rukmini struggles to establish her professional identity amidst all the problems in her life such as lack of safety and support at workplace, lack of family support and understanding from her husband, work load, workplace adjustment, lack of administration and power at workplace.

Besides Rukmini there are certain other characters that vouch for professional quality in the novel. Anthony Saamy is the name of Bharathivaanan, a teacher who becomes a MLA and has the characteristic attitude of a chameleon. Despite his attitude, he remains loyal to his true nature. When he is a teacher, he is a perfect teacher who keeps Dr. Radhakrishnan in the forefront as a model for his students. The author's intention in bringing Dr. Radhakrishnan into the novel has a subtle irony. He uses teaching profession as a means to win the admiration of people. It is easy to gain victory when a person is admired and adored by the student community. Sarojini plays the role of instigating and stirring the emotions of Rukmini. She plays her role perfectly throughout the novel.

Gulam Mohammed Bhai, one of the drivers who work with Thangarasu, is known for his sincerity in his job. It is expressed in the author's narration when he talks about Bhai's neatly cleaned and ironed clothes. On the other hand, Thangarasu's clothes are untidy. In a particular situation, when Thangarasu is being beaten black and blue, Bhai saves him with his wisdom and effective use of words. This shows that experience gives a man the power to tackle difficult situations. Sundaram is the driver who drives the bus when police beat Thangarasu to death. It is also responsible for the death of two other innocent people but the greatest tragedy is the death of Rukmini with which the author closes the novel.

The inference one can take from the novel is that any human can sacrifice his profession for his personal life and that sometimes it is necessary to do so. The ironical yet moving death of Rukmini symbolises the fact that she dies because of the workaholic and fascistic professional attitude of Thangarasu. The society thinks that it is the duty of a woman to sacrifice her profession for the betterment of her personal life. The older generations have suffered a lot because of this attitude. The following generations must be free from this biased attitude and work-life balance stress. Charlotte Bronte says in Jane Eyre, "I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will".

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