1 **Professional Mourners**

**Servile Mourning for the Powerful: A Critical**

**Reading of “**

**”**

**by AlaguSubramaniam**

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Alagu Subramaniam

’s “Professional Mourners” 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, itconveys a careful survey on an ostentatious and meaningless tradition connected with the funeral ritesof the community concerned. Subramaniam has formulated the topic for the short story capturing thecore of the subject he deals with. To many parts of Sri Lanka the deployment of professional mournersat a funeral sounds hilarious. Yet it is a tradition of central importance to certain communities in theNorthern and North-Western Provinces of Sri Lanka.When somebody dies in a family all the survivors of his or hers will naturally become mourners and,depending on the level of their emotional attachment to the diseased, they may silently cry or vociferatetheir 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. So the affluent middle-class families in these territories deploya group of professional mourners whose sole job is to sit by the coffin and howl, especially when animportant guest arrives to pay respect to the diseased. Their intention is to simulate an emotional atmosphere so as to impress upon the guest that the diseased is so highly missed by a large group of people from within the family as well as from the neighbourhood. 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 panegyrical 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. The type of emotionalism they energetically engender into theatmosphere is however beyond the imagination of the closest relations of the diseased. One has to beemotionally distant to the diseased to preserve the energy for the theatrical type of mourning requiredby the families.Today funeral organisation has become a lucrative industry all over the island of Sri Lanka. On the basisof the demands their clients make, the funeral undertakers have differently-priced funeral packageswith various features, and some include even a team of mourners to suit the clients they deal with.Subramaniam covers a period some decades before, when funeral undertaking evolved into acommercially-appreciated service industry like today. He appropriately adopts the voice of a juvenile torelate his experience so as to turn the narration into a consummate account of the setting. If not forthat, 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 thenarrator as a child caused by

his grandmother’s death

. In terms of recollections he presents the unusualchanges 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 wakens the children sleeping fast in the neighbouring

2houses. 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 thechildren. “

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.

”

 Through the excitement ofthe children, Subramaniam

achieves anticipation for something special. As his subject is “professionalmourners” it is

understood that the particular group of people employed so are supposed to play animportant 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 triflemad”, 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 suchoccasions”. He

characterizes this schoolmaster uncle as

an empty vessel in the statement, “Healways spoke rapidly and loudly”. The metaphor

of “shout” repeatedly connected with his presencereinforces his portrayal as a self-important garrulousman. Subramaniam dramatizes the man’s

loudbehaviour, 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”. The narrator’s

confession makes it clear that the mourners are a curious lot. Their dwellings are located in aremote 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 lanesand narrow winding footpaths”

 he walks through with his uncle.The location where the “Master ofCeremonies”

arrives in 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." He means that,under any circumstance, they have a strict order to work for him. The insults he applies on them, “stupidrascals” and “low-min

ded 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 workbehind and get ready to go to his place.Then the man walks on to a set of

huts much smaller than those of the fishermen’s. "That is where these

wretched women live." He sounds more vigorous before the mourners as they are much weaker thanthe fishermen. Subramaniam portrays the mourners as women, dressed in coarse saris which did notcome 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, onbended knees, continue to plead with him by all means. Utterly dissatisfied with the availability of twomourners, he asks for the others, and gets to know of two sisters among them, bereaved of theirmother. 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 shedtears of genuine sorrow on the loss of their mother instead of pretending at your place." The mediator’s

words uttered in favour of the two daughters who have lost their mother the same morning reveal thetruth 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.

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"Don't

be a silly fool…

What do you know of these things? Your father's lawyer friends are expected. His Honourthe Supreme Court Judge and the Police Magistrate are coming, and what will they think about us if we don'thave enough mourners?"

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

ity 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 afuneral.

“I'll have you flogged by the magistrate for such impudence." The man

threatens to get themprosecuted through his influential relations and punished for disobeying his command. He evenphysically 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 ahunt. He threatens them, intimidates them, insults them, disregards their grievances, and forces themout of their house, where their mother lays dead and cold waiting to be interred that afternoon. Thedeprivation the women suffer at the hand of this wicked self-important man is symbolic of the agony oftheir 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 professionalmourners through his verisimilitudinous portrayal of their performance.

They boost the “crying” carriedout “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 thevocal effect. Yet there is a subtle class distinction between the genuine mourners in the family and theprofessional mourners hired for the occasion maintained through the distance in the seating arrangedfor them on a carpet. Quite professionally, they take the lead in the choral mourning by recitingwhatever expressions they pick up from the whispering among the others. Thereby they try to achievepathos in the sentimental funeral audience. "Your grandson has come, wake up, my beloved! Yourgrandson has come, wake up, my darling!" They formulate such slogans based on the informationgathered by eavesdropping on what the others mutter among themselves. The mythical beliefs thefamily maintain about God Siva allowing the old woman a new lease of life till her favourite grandsonThampo has returned from Malaya gather weight from the emphasis the mourners lay on them duringtheir wailing. They try to engender a mystic element into the atmosphere through allusions to miraclesas such. Thus it is clear that the objectives of the deployment of professional mourners are to mystifythe life and death of the diseased, add importance to certain relations, generate pathos, create apopular image of the diseased, and make a show of the family strength. However, other thanglorification, 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 theirobligation to pay homage to their own mother, in order to cut a figure within his family clan as an ablepersonality. So vainglorious about himself, he triumphantly boasts about the pressure he exercised uponthem, too impatient to wait for the others to praise him. Nevertheless, rather than attracting him creditfrom 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

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Suddenly, to the disappointment of the “Master ofCeremonies”, everybody’s sympathy is drawn to the women. “

Many of the guests, too, offered theircondolences to the sisters, and my father, after promising to compensate them adequately, told them togo home.

” Subramaniam develops an anticlimax through the destiny of the “Master of Ceremonies”