



MAN & COMMODIFICATION OF MEDIA: A READING OF SANTOSH EACHIKKANAM'S COMALA

Abstract

Media dominates every domain of human life both in public and private spheres. The influence of media is vital and inevitable in the present century but sometimes it transforms individuals into commodities. Further media is triggered by agenda setting. The live representation of personal grievances and happiness has become the emerging trend of the media. Knowingly or unknowingly we all act as tools and medium in the process of commodification. Santosh Eachikkanam's *Comala* tells the pathetic tale of one such media victim. Even after repeated telecasting of his woes over the media, his problems are more problematized and not resolved. He lost his trust in the media and finds an appropriate solution by himself.

Key Words: Media, Commodification, Agenda Setting

We live in a culture that is inundated with information and much of that information comes to us through media both directly and indirectly. The impact of mass media attracted and accelerated the public attention to a greater extent. The talk shows exploited personal problems for monetary gain. Occasionally media representations can deteriorate social problems. The principal outlines of agenda setting influence the media and the same aspect was sketched by Walter Lippmann in his 1922 classic, *Public Opinion*, which began with a chapter titled "The World Outside and Pictures in Our Heads". He noted that the news media becomes the primary source of pictures about

the larger world of public affairs. This world is a distanced world for the ordinary citizens to reach, see and comprehend. The present state of affairs is largely determined by the media dictators and results in mediated view of the world. The primacies of the media influence primacies of the public. Hence elements prominent on media agenda become dormant in public mind.

Human attitudes and behaviour are usually governed by cognition- what a person knows, thinks and believes. The agenda setting role of mass media influence the people to shift from neutral position to form an opinion. The television programmes call attention to some matters by ignoring others. The effect of agenda setting is epitomised in famous quote by Bernard Cohen saying that press "may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think but it is stunningly successful in telling readers what to think about" (13).

Jamieson and Cappella observed that media exposure has been found to alter individual's existing belief structures over time. Thus media exerts its influence on beliefs by changing and reinforcing with a constant flow of messages over the years. The new piece of information get customised into the existing belief structure. The personalized framing of pathetic stories is likely to make audience see course of problem. The commercial need for personalization of such stories make media more accessible. Grieving victims are utilized as good victims with strong emotional appeal. This in turn is followed by casting votes for such victimised

candidates.

The mass media performs dual role in its attempt to integrate and fragment society. The fragmentation argument stems from the way the digital media allow individuals to seek out special content and tailor their experiences. The critics perceive social isolation as the after effect of this fragmentation. The media fosters social isolation as individuals each pursue their own media exposure agenda. This leads to minimal public activity and less sharing of values that bind people together into unified society. Donnelly described this fragmentation of society by calling it an "autonomy generation". He described the autonomy generation as people believing that each individual is the center of all relevant values:

We are responsible only to ourselves, and we alone can decide which activities and ways of behaving have meaning for us and which do not. We live subjectively according to our own feelings with little need for outside reference...we live in the present responding to momentary perceptions, relationships and encounters. To us, what is most important is how outside events are perceived and understood by individual" (178)

In the world we live in, truth is constructed by media. In the post truth era, politics is no longer the art of the possible but of the fictive. Likewise literature is also undergoing change of meaning where narratives are constructed for selfish motives. The media monsters of the news channels conduct discussions related to various issues and one such concern is the suicide of farmers which has commodified to a greater extent.

The people are forced to believe what the media projects as true. The media exaggerates negative news and this distortion has negative consequences. The consumers of media develop hostility and contempt,

desensitization and complete avoidance of news. They remain insensitive to the media's urgency to poll votes regarding any telecasted shows or programmes. The media scholars have confirmed that their world is favourable towards negative news. This leads to telecasting worst things happening on planet but ultimately sounds irrational.

Santosh Eachikkanam tried to explain the common incidents happening around us through his critically acclaimed short story, *Comala*. This remarkable work of Malayalam literature was written in the context of the rise of suicidal tendency among the people in the post globalized world. The author foregrounds interface between the media commodification and the life of a commoner who is totally ignored in the process. *Comala* is the name of the town of the dead in Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Paramo*.

This Mexican work depicts unsympathetic mob at the suffering of a commoner. Rooted strongly in Kerala culture, Eachikkanam's work picturises Kerala as cynical, pessimistic and self centered society like the dead dwellers of the town of *Comala*. It also exposes the pretence of the news channels and dramatization of real life situation. The absurdity of the discussions fails to bring out any social change and is a powerful indicator of the superficiality of the Kerala social life.

The story takes us through the life of a middle aged man named Kundoor Viswan who becomes a debtor to Velloor Service Co-operative Bank for his childhood friend Sudhakaran. The story is relevant in the context of the rise of suicidal tendency among the people in the post globalized world. The latter did not pay a single instalment and it is now a huge financial burden for Viswan to repay it. The poor man reacted sternly to bank's decision to auction his home by displaying a notice board

in front of his home saying; "Owing to severe debt we will commit collective suicide at the stroke of midnight on 15th August" (15). Thus Viswan attracted media attention and a live conference is telecasted in the News Times participated by Bank Secretary, Madhavan Nair, Psychologist, Dr. Nanda Kumar, Officer from National Crime Record Research Bureau, Alex Punnoose and Advocate, Fathima Begum and Kundoor Viswan.

The media publicizes the inequalities and post the tagline; "Will Viswan and his family die or not?" (15). The personal affairs of a common man becomes the breaking news of the day and media celebrates the same with the question; "What will be the consequences if such a weird threat turns real on the 59th Independence Day of India? And who will be at fault?" (15). The media's concern is to evoke interest and anxiety of the viewers and Viswan has been asked to share family background. Knowingly or unknowingly he has become part of the dramatic situation.

His miserable life with wife and two daughters in seven and a half cent plot is now threatened by bank authorities and forces him to commit suicide. Viswan's friend Sudhakaran visited his house asking his help and echoed their teacher's words: "Helping others is an act of holiness" (15). He appreciated Viswan for his kind deed and it took three years for him to realise that he has fallen a scapegoat to his friend. He is alarmed to realise that he is turning out to be homeless.

After unfolding Viswan's life grievances, News Time focusses on the opinion of the bank secretary in this regard. Madhavan Nair states that; "we can act only under the Cooperative Bank Act" (16) and bank will immediately confiscate Viswan's house and surrounding plot. Viswan managed to pay seven thousand only but for Viswan this amount sounds heavier

and bears the sweat and toil of his wife, Radha. Born with self-dignity, Viswan considered it as greater humiliation for a man bowing before another and that too for the sake of his friend. The secretary clarifies the situation:

If we begin writing off debts on the criterion of tears, we'll have to close down the bank and stay at home. We are not responsible for the upkeep of human life. The bank's job is financial transaction. If the debt is not repaid, we will confiscate Viswan's property. (16)

With Viswan's life hanging in void, media turned to Dr. Nandakumar. In his observation, the suicidal tendency is dormant in Viswan's mind but at the same time life is pulling him back from death:

He has to commit suicide. But a fear that is greater than death is gnawing at his insides growling. The temptation of life is terrible. It drowns using the unfathomed depths of wishes and desires...If surviving this, Viswan could still continue as a debtor to the Velloor Bank or as the husband of Radha the tailor, he would kill himself. That is for sure. (17)

The doctor's attempt to persuade Viswan back to life seems unfavourable for the media. Immediately they focussed on the legal aspects and consequences of suicide through Advocate, Fathima Begum. She states that Viswan's plan of collective suicide is an offence as per section 309 of IPC.

The court has the power to punish such persons with imprisonment and fine. To the question posed by media: "Does Viswan has any other option other than to die with family?", she says Viswan's failure will results in punishment. Alex Punnoose, the officer talks about increasing suicidal rates of Kerala. He further states that this prolonged situation can convert Kerala into a state of dead like the town of dead in *Pedro Paramo* and commented on state's role in transforming Viswan into a debtor.

The Newstime again focussed on Viswan and this time he admits that his family is confronted between death and confiscation.

However he shares some lessons from his forty five years of experience. Firstly he insisted to keep an account for the things that involve money. Secondly close friends should never get involved in money transactions. Thirdly one shouldn't lend more than five thousand. Fourthly helping others without confirming one's safety is not advisable. Lastly never trust a new friend with lots of love and promises. After this media expressed gratitude to the participants of news discussion, a question is posed: "Is suicide by Viswan inevitable?" The viewers are requested to join the opinion poll by sending SMS.

Viswan is now anxiously waiting for the viewers response and believes media can help him in this regard. Surprisingly none of them casted votes for or against him. Thus unlike the usual media procedures, nothing happened in Viswan's case. The media projects this eccentric situation as a historic event for a news channel. The channel switches to another news item of much popularity and ignores Viswan thereafter. The frustrated and disappointed Viswan reads *Pedro Paramo*, the book that deals with dead. The experiences of the narrator bears close resemblances to Viswan and he realises his life is a dried up and unbearable like Comala. On the fifth day of his journey in search of his friend, Viswan found an accident victim unnoticed by passers by.

"This place is Comala...the mouth of hell," said Viswan. The young man died leaving two drops of water as debt to Viswan. When he realised that every human being is a debtor in one way or another, threat of suicide displayed in front of his house seems to be absurd.

Media exploits the personal grievances of the individual to a wider audience to increase

viewership and serve their business needs. They are least interested in resolving the underlying social problem of the individual or the society. The individual seeking attention of the media to solve their personal problems end up more dejected and isolated as they are projected as helpless. They forget to fight the situation and use their own wisdom they derived from many living experiences and place faith on the viewers to seek help to make a final decision and get thwarted as the people watching the proceedings are there purely for the entertainment value and not to influence the final say.

The media projects such personal trauma as pure drama in front of the world and moves on as soon as they find another victim with a more interesting story than the previous one. It is an individual's choice to overcome difficult situation via self-introspection or play into the hands of the media to be exploited and left destitute.

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