

The City as a Character: Rajasreesvariya's The Daughters of Madurai as a Symbol of Tradition and Conflict

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the literary portrayal of Madurai. It goes from being a topic of colonial-era descriptive literature to a more complex setting in modern fiction that explores social and cultural conflict. In early English writing, British administrators like James Nelson wrote historical guides and travelogues about Madurai as if it were a strange and interesting historical relic. The Meenakshi Amman Temple has been made a symbol of old Dravidian culture and religious glory by these sources, which go into great detail about the city's architectural wonders. On the contrary, Madurai is a lively setting for modern writing, especially works by Indian writers who have left India to write in other countries. Rajasree Variyar's novel *The Daughters of Madurai*, for example, uses the city's history and customs to show how bad patriarchy and killing girls as babies are. This change shows that the person is moving from being interested in the city's landmarks as an outsider to being critical of the city's social rules on a personal level. This makes it a powerful symbol of both cultural continuity and change.

Keywords:

Madurai, childhood experience, past memories and modern life, as insider-outsider paradox

Objective of the paper

The primary goal of this study would be to critically examine how the image of Madurai in English literature has evolved. The study aims to establish a clear transition from viewing the city as a fixed alien object of the colonial age to one that is modern and dynamic. This paper will provide the framework for the first outsider view by researching travelogues and periodical histories about the Meenakshi Amman Temple, an architectural masterpiece from early England. It will then compare this to a close analysis of modern-day diaspora literature, specifically Rajasree Variyar's *The Daughters of Madurai*, to demonstrate how the city is currently being used as a critical context for the examination of multifaceted social problems such as patriarchy and cultural conflict. After all, the paper's goal is to present a context that this transformation represents a broader shift in literary engagement in which

Madurai is no longer viewed as a historical site, but rather as a living breathing place that can be used to illustrate the tension between its divine past and its troubled present.

Research Methodology

The proposed strategy to the research in this work will be a qualitative textual analysis, which will be conducted through attentive reading and comparison of outcomes. This paper will be organized into two main portions. To begin, a sampling of historical accounts and travelogues, including extracts from James Nelson's works, will be conducted to determine the most frequently used descriptors, metaphors, and narrative techniques to describe Madurai and the Meenakshi Amman Temple during colonialism. The second section will be a comparative study of this colonial literature and a modern novel, *The Daughters of Madurai* by Rajasree Variyar. A systematic comparison of the texts will be utilized to reveal the shift from an external description to an interior critical approach to the methodology. This method will allow the paper to argue why Madurai has become a symbol of exotic grandeur as well as a complex inhabited environment expressing the contradictions that exist in modern Indian culture.

A Critical Assessment of Madurai in English Literature.

The image of Indian cities in English literature tends to broaden much beyond geography or city building; the city takes on the role of breathing characters within the story-telling canvas. Madurai, with its gorgeous Meenakshi Amman Temple, is a well-known center of Tamil culture and spirituality, recognized for its ceremonies and lively atmosphere, as well as its extensive oral history and traditions. However, the literary portrayal of Madurai does not remain static; it evolves to include colonial period literature characterized by the gaze of the foreigner, such as James Nelson's compendious *Madura District Manual* (1868), as well as modern-day novels such as Rajasree Variyar's *The Daughters of Madurai* (2023), in which the city serves as the backdrop and battleground of conflicts central to both Indian womanhood and identity.

The literature of early English is mostly about Madurai, and it is written in the form of colonial trip writing, which combines authority and curiosity. Nelson meticulously lists the history of the city and its architecture, writing, "The city derives its name from the Tamil word Madurai... traditions carry its antiquity to extreme antiquity, a city considered holy by all South India" (Nelson, 1868, p. 1). This statement distorts the city as an object, which is locked not only by its mystical atmosphere but also by the British drive to record, quantify, and own. Nelson describes the Meenakshi Amman Temple as a vast tangle of colonnades, gopurams, and temples that tell the story of a religiously passionate race. This is a metropolis that is more temple than town, a de-interiorized show of Dravidian magnificence that pays little attention to the breathing live things that call it home.

Nelson's treatments also reflect preconceptions of India as eternal and unchanging. Speaking on the city's government, Nelson (1868, p. 87) states that "Madurai has ever been a seat of Hindu kings and later, at the heart of Nayakan rule, its customs unchanged by the centuries" (Nelson, 1868, p. 87). According to them, Madurai is a city that is resistant to historical change, a concept that postcolonial critics such as Edward Said have challenged in *Orientalism*. Madurai is not a metropolis, but rather a shrine of rites and buildings, a religious museum cut off from the secular vibrations of civilization (Nelson, 1868, p. 267). Language like this paralyzes Madurai into the colonial archive, rendering it a dead terrain in which British ethnography might establish itself.

However, the vision of this outsider is fundamentally challenged in the works of current diasporic writers, particularly by Rajasree Variyar in *The Daughters of Madurai*. In this novel, the city no longer appears exteriorized and frozen; instead, Madurai vibrates with the fears and conflicts of contemporary Indian culture. Variyar begins her account with a heartbreaking line that foreshadows the city's eventual involvement in societal violence: "A girl is a burden. A female is a curse, as am I" (*The Daughters of Madurai*, p. 1). The city's continuity could not be explained without reference to female infanticide, a practice that was deeply rooted in the city's rituals and households.

In contrast to Nelson, Variyar's account cuts down the barrier that separates eternal reverence for tradition from the banal truths of persecution. Janani, the protagonist, experiences contradictory emotions when holding her newborn baby girl. "Janani knew, the minute the midwife placed her naked, squalling, soft-as-silk daughter in her arms, that she couldn't lose this one... her hands drew the hated little body closer. Tiny limbs moved in fitful pumps as Janani looked down into a face as round and purple as a mangosteen" (*The Daughters of Madurai*, p. 17). The city's rituals, including as prayers, festivals, and family gatherings, serve as tools for imposing silence and complicity. When Janani considers having a daughter as a curse, she experiences anxiety and violence. "It is like watering your neighbour's shrubs but not your own" (*The Daughters of Madurai*, p. 23). Madurai, which is no longer a passive reservoir of tradition, has become an active source of pain and conflict.

The city's presence in the story is both brilliant and closeted, and it stands in stark contrast to Nelson's panorama abstraction. Janani's inner turmoil is inextricably linked to her struggle to navigate Madurai's packed streets, temple yards, and market lanes. According to Varikaya, "The vibrant town of Madurai, unleashing its chorus of morning sounds, left Janani feeling both sheltered and hemmed in" (*The Daughters of Madurai*, p. 34). The physical structure, meticulously chronicled by Nelson, is here as a legacy, not as an emotional stressor. Even the Meenakshi Amman Temple becomes a place of prayer, guilt, and secret hope: "She stood before the bright gopuram, her heart heavy with longing for the warmth of a child, for the comfort of knowing she might keep this one" (*The Daughters of Madurai*, p. 55).

This shift in literary method indicates a deeper change in the location, as portrayed in Indian English fiction. Diaspora writers, such as Variyar, work in a unique stance that is rooted on tradition yet is detached and reflective, stimulating criticism. Madurai is not just a nostalgic location for them, but also an annoying environment of bargaining, mending, and, on rare occasions, rebellion. The city is made the protagonist in a modern-day play that views its history as both a burden and a resource. The memory of the lost daughters is paralleled with the memory of the city in *The Daughters of Madurai*, because they have their own memory: "An image came to her mind, burying a bundle gone cold and still in the dirt by the young coconut palm" (*The Daughters of Madurai*, p. 18). Motherhood, sorrow, and resistance are not domestic ills in general, but rather texts etched into the landscape and holy soil of Madurai.

A detailed comparative textual examination reveals that Nelson's decision to catalogue is not merely descriptive, but also cultural. The point is made when he observes that even the poorest houses are arranged in attentive rows next to the temple's shadow (Nelson, 1868, p. 231). The meaning is clear: order is sought through proximity to the sacred, and human experience is peripheral to urban planning. In contrast, Variyar literature gives life to chaos, contingency, and contradiction. When Janani and her daughter walk through the crowded city streets, she manages to avoid the crowds between the fruit

booths and the rickshaw drivers, and the temple bells both draw and repel her (The Daughters of Madurai, p. 61). The city is both repressive and salvatory. Rather, it is a completely ambiguous realm, full of both joy and violence, love and erasure.

Madurai also plays the role of tradition enforcer in the work Variyar, in which she explores the relationship between family, religion, and social pressure. When Janani's mother-in-law, Vandhana, insists on taking the baby girl away, "her words were heavy with centuries of custom and the certainty of righteousness" (The Daughters of Madurai, p. 42). Vandhana, like many others in Madurai, associates the city of glory with the ability to govern and restrain women. "Sons are seen as an investment, and daughters as a burden due to the hefty dowry that is to be paid at the wedding" (The Daughters of Madurai, p. 27).

However, Variyar's story is more than just one of misery; it is also about the possibility of resistance and change. The fact that Janani wishes to preserve her daughter and thus deviates from customary tradition becomes a struggle against the city's traditions: despite her exhaustion, Janani feels violent love for her child, leading to the realization that she is caught between traditions and her inner desire to save her child (The Daughters of Madurai, p.19). In this way, Madurai is also a location of rebelliousness, where women's rebellion is hidden in rituals but never fully suppressed.

Madurai is a dynamic character in modern fiction because of its dualistic nature of tradition and strife. In the last 30 years, urban areas have been a popular emblem in Indian English novels. In the case of Bombay in Salman Rushdie, Bombay brings to mind hybridity, and of Bangalore in Aravind Adiga, Bangalore brings to mind the violence of transformation at neoliberalism, then Madurai in The Daughters of Madurai is the contradiction of a society at a crossroads: "Madurai cannot be but the city of temples; it is also a city of lost daughters" (The Daughters of Madurai, p. 129). In this situation, the city's role is existential rather than purely cosmetic.

The transition from Nelson to Variyar can be regarded as a symptom of a more substantial shift in literary politics. Where colonial writers reduced Madurai to a shrine of belief and splendor, modern indigenous revived it as a symbol of oppression and survival. Both literary initiatives make use of the city's symbolic capital, but the latter has a direct impact on the moral and emotional lives of its residents. The city's monuments have survived, despite their controversial, multifaceted meaning that is open to reinterpretation. The episode in which Janani shares a dinner with Variyar at the temple festival, where she eats sweet rice with her fingers and recalls all the girls who will not be able to taste festival food or eat her voice in the temple colonnades, is a heartfelt example of this contestation.

This language transition can be seen in the development of grandiose descriptions into personal ones. Nelson's writing, which is filled of adjectives such as grand, old, and sacred, conveys distance and admiration. Variyar's language, in turn, is highly psychologically needy and emotionally charged: "Janani lay in anguish, her milk spilling, a poignant symbol of the motherhood that she so desperately desires at that time" (The Daughters of Madurai, p. 20). The city is a reality produced by sensation, not distance.

Conclusion

Madurai specifies a journey between the colonial object and the narrative hero. The so-called "museum of faith" has evolved into a museum of its women's bodies and hopes as depicted in *The Daughters of Madurai*. Madurai demonstrates how the past and present meet and smash, yet remains both a haven and a source of pain--a character whose presence can heal and harm at the same time. To both Indian English fiction and theoretical interest, this shift is structural: literature's ability to examine even the traditions from which it is derived. The manifestation of the lived and recounted city is both a memory and a battleground, the preservation of culture and the dire need for modernization.

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