

How Controversial can a Fiction be to become Popular? An Anatomy of 'Contro-Pop fiction'

K. Kannan Prasad

A literary work, especially a fictional novel does not become popular and well read only because of having good content or endorsed by critics or for following the aesthetics of fiction writing or for capturing vivid imaginations of the human mind, contrary to the popular belief that is held among readers. A fictional work may become popular for various reasons like “The influence of online platforms . . . the publishing industry . . . the increase of book sales, and certain books have gained popularity due to trends on social media platforms. . . . Digital age has transformed literature consumption, making it more accessible and widespread” (Eesley) among academicians and readers but it may not be well accepted among both the categories, citing the reason that academicians and readers do not, at times, find the same book to be good in terms of writing. A researcher is then bestowed with the responsibility of finding out the intersection of these two categories, where a book becomes an object of exploration for both the academicians and common readers. A fiction that becomes popular by attracting attention through making controversial statements can be termed as a fiction that has attained popularity through controversy or Contro-Pop fiction.”Controversial books are often those that challenge societal norms and established beliefs. Their popularity stems not just from their content but from the debates they spark, drawing readers to engage with them out of curiosity or ideological alignment” (Gant). It is fictional works of the type which may be proposed as the intersection between the readership of common readers and academicians.

A fictional work need not necessarily attract the attention of an academician, since he / she/they can read deep into the fictional work. The same may be the case with readers who commonly have a reading habit on par with an academician. There could still be exemptions where a common reader may always not be consistent in his/her/their reading or the reading level could be above that of an academician. The pertinent question is to know what brings any reader to read a literary work or a fictional work.

The research article aims at exploring the anatomy of a contro-pop fiction as an attempt to understand the reading habit. Such a reading habit is not fueled completely by a desire for reading but it is a desire for pleasure. Hence an understanding of the contro-pop fiction would enable an understanding of the readership trend in 21st century. The research article will also explore the controversy that surrounded works like *Satanic Verses* (1988), *Da Vinci Code* (2003) and *Maadhorubhagan* (2019).

In the context of Tamil Nadu, *Maadhorubhagan* written by Perumal Murugan attracted attention from common readers after it became a media sensation through protests from political outfits both at the state and national level. The novel is about a married couple who are unable to bear children even after 12 years of their marriage. The social stigma surrounding the idea of being childless, especially in India is deep-rooted to social well-being of a family. Though the focus is well being of the couple, patriarchy raises concern while such a thought is imposed. The thought while imposed beyond a limit can be overwhelming. The stigma has the strength of forcing a couple to find solution to the issue at the same time push them to the verge of their existence as well. Kali and Ponna in the novel are pushed to the edge. The society which the couple hails from encourages the idea of Ponna, the wife of Kali to bypass marital customs of monogamy and advise a temporary arrangement in order to help her get pregnant. The relatives of the couple encourage Ponna into such ritual keeping aside the issue of extramarital sex. The festival of the village is cited as the means to impregnate herself through meeting men in the festival. The festival as denoted by Perumal Murugan

is referred as one conducted for this purpose, where women who are not able to get pregnant through their husbands can visit 'gods' in the festival and bear a child.

The practice is heralded by other women in her community and Ponna is forced to commit to this arrangement even though her husband does not approve of it. Perumal Murugan does not give historical evidence to the happening of such an event. Hence it becomes evident that Perumal Murugan is creating a fictional world to steer attention to the, ". . . patriarchal society alienate a couple longing to be like any other" (Kandasamy). Yet Perumal Murugan's novel set a precedent for receiving death threats in the national level. The media which covered the protests of political parties opposing the book, did not extend due focus to the rising issue of infertility among couples.

The Tamil version of the novel was released in the year 2010 by Kalachuvadu publication. The English version of the novel titled *One Part Woman* was translated by Aniruddhan Vasudevan and published in the year 2013. The novel begins generating controversy in the year 2014 onwards. "Literary controversies are a function of cultural anxieties and media amplification. Far from harming a text, they often serve as free publicity, driving curiosity and public engagement with the work" (Moran). The deduced fact is that for three years after the publication of the novel, it may have been well read among academicians. But the English translation and the protests by political outfits bring attention to the novel and common readers start desiring for a read of the novel. The controversy generated by the novel made it popular not for the nuances of the writing but for the rituals in the festival denoted in the novel, thus implying the fact that the readers were directing their attention to the novel for pleasure. "Popular fiction often intersects with cultural anxieties, reflecting and sometimes amplifying societal conflicts. These works act as mirrors to public fears, desires, and ideological divides" (Radway).

Readers who read for pleasure can be distinctly differentiated from people who read for academic purpose as Christy Whitten describes

“Reading for pleasure refers to reading that we do of our own free will anticipating the satisfaction that we will get from the act of reading” (7). The distinct feature of a Contro-Pop Fiction can be framed as being surrounded by ideologies that either question or implant sexuality of a community. Though there have been fictional worlds that reveal ideologies of the author about sexuality, *Maadhorubhagan* can be seen as a novel which uses a dominant community from the real world as an example.

In the western world, similar examples of the sort can be seen in the controversy surrounding the novel *Da Vinci Code* written by Dan Brown. Yet again the controversy around the novel was about ideologies of the author about sexuality. The difference that could be observed between *Maadhorubhagan* and *Da Vinci Code* is that the latter involved a religion and the former involved a community. *Da Vinci Code* stepped into controversy by raising concerns on the relationship between Jesus Christ and Lady Magdalene. Dan Brown creates a fictional event out of the existing information from the religious text of Christians. The author does not claim any historical backing on the issue based on evidence, so do authors who write extensively on the topic. Yet Dan Brown’s novel was put through a lot of scrutiny especially by the broadcast media of leading universities like University of California and others (The *Da Vinci Code*: Fact or Fiction?). The difference which was seen in the controversy surrounding Dan Brown’s novel and other novels discussed in this article is that, Brown’s fictional world was initially seen as an attack but later it was debated by historians, archaeologists, and academicians at a wider level. The debate put an end to the controversy surrounding it by the claims made by historians, archaeologists, and academicians that there was no historical evidence to the claim made in the novel as did Dan Brown.

Nevertheless, the combination of media and common readers sought after these novels after the controversy under question from both the novels were revealed to the general public. Fiction can’t work without conflict. Some types of conflict work well in their own right, but are not controversial in a 21st Century context. However, introducing elements

that challenge contemporary societal norms can elevate a narrative's engagement and relevance. These novels were stripped of their complete content by the controversy and instead focused on specific content that would be sellable for the media and as a result, the academic machinery started taking it up into scrutineering it.

Apart from controversies that are sellable through Contro-Pop fiction, censorship is yet another phenomenon that contributes to the features of a novel becoming a Contro-Pop fiction. "Controversy adds another layer to literary texts, transforming them into objects of cultural discourse. Readers are drawn not just to the narrative itself but to the debates that surround it, fostering a sense of participation in larger ideological struggles" (Felski). The book generated a discussion on censorship even in western countries for it was seen as an attack on a religion. The censorship issue reignited debates on the status of western countries being progressive in thinking, at the same time for being at fault in promoting such intolerance. The volatile situation forced countries like United Kingdom and India to ban the book (India Today). The "Publishers Weekly" author Len Riggio according to Wikipedia cites that the sales of the novel *Satanic Verses* had gone up by five times while compared to the data prior to the controversy.

The politics of misinterpretation repeatedly seems to be the case that makes up for the features of contro-pop fiction. The ideologies about sexuality pertaining to a community or a religion and conservative nature of religions generating attention is the basic framework that contributes to the making of a contro-pop fiction. The controversy witnesses a short spike in terms of the sales of the novel as most media start discussing the issue. A common reader who reads for pleasure, but does not have any desire to read out of sheer love for reading, gets fixated on the controversy and enjoys the situation as spectator. The pleasure of having inside information about the controversy makes the reader to feel inclusive about the issue at the same time a fodder for social gossiping is also created.

Popular culture in the 21st century, especially pertaining to the idea of reading, is restricted to subscribing to the ideas that are mass produced. The scope for individuality may have been reduced because of it. The mass-produced ideas are largely circulated through social media and reading habits are misconstrued only at the level of convincing other consumers of social media that a person is well read. The reason behind the emergence of contro-pop fiction is largely based on this phenomenon. There are opposing views for every other view in the world. Hence a communal ideology or religious ideology would find its opposite in another corner of the world. The opposing nature is brought to proximity through social media and the tolerance that is expected becomes untenable.

In the purview of the untenability, the consumers of a fictional work and in the case of this research paper, contro-pop fiction, raise objectionable content from its dormancy due to the fact that reading habit has been utterly limited and the intellectual capacity for tolerance is arguably lost. *Maadhorubhagan*, *Da Vinci Code*, and *Satanic Verses* may not have objectionable content but a book or event mentioned in a book could possibly be broadcasted through blowing it out of proportion does raise challenges in understanding popular culture itself. One of the many challenges that contro-pop fiction poses to a study in popular culture is that, through the act of defying the writing of authors, threatening authors with their life and censoring have only made sure that the concealing of such phenomenon to increasingly contribute towards revealing of the controversy to a much larger consumer. If the controversy had not been raised in the first place, the events and rituals misconstrued by the writers would not have met the eyes and ears of the world.

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