

'professional caste, and take on the role

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**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

' ProfessionalMourners' is a short story written by Alagu Subramaniam, a writer originating from Sri Lanka. Subramaniam belongs to the Tamil Brahmin community of north Sri Lanka. This short story is taken from an anthology of stories titled ' The Big Girl'. It speaks of customs and traditions from his own experience. The story is narrated in the first person, and addresses several themes which include hypocrisy behind social customs, rigidity of the caste system and the treatment of women. The story is centred around four women who belong to the lower caste, and take on the role of professional mourners. Their job is to attend funerals and mourn for the deceased, irrespective of whether they had any ties with the deceased or not.

They mourn in order to create an ideal scene of a funeral. The story also features a small section of the Brahmin community i. e. the writer's family. In the story, the writer's uncle forces the people of the lower caste to attend his aunt's (the writer's grandmother) funeral.

This attitude of the writer's uncle shows the dominance of the Brahmin community over the other castes. It is also a strong indicator of the prevalence of the caste system. We also see another instance of dominance when the Master of Ceremonies (the writer's uncle) goes to where the mourners lived.

That day, the mourners had lost their mother and wanted to mourn for her. But the Master of Ceremonies forced them to attend his aunt's funeral instead, and threatened them to have them flogged by the magistrate for their ' impudence'. He went so far as to catch hold of their saris and drag them along the ground. This instance shows the poor treatment of the

Shudras (those from the lowest caste) and the poor treatment of women during the prevalence of the caste system. Yet, the story does not give out an aura of oppression of the people of the lower caste, and their derelict conditions. Indeed, it shows how the Brahmin community held power and a high status in the society, and how they used that to force their will on the others. But, the story can also be understood as a comical way to discourage such social norms.

The Master of Ceremonies receiving a reprimand is a good example. Instead of approving of his misdeeds, his friends were horrified at his cruelty, and protested against the inhuman act of the Master. This criticism made him work harder in order to make up for the reprimand. In fact, he worked so hard that he fainted and fell flat to the ground. This, indeed, is a comical way of expressing the writer's disapproval of the social norms prevailing at that time. It is clear from the narrative that the writer has not directly opposed and criticized such social norms. Instead, he has used the guests at the funeral (who criticize the Master of Ceremonies) to do so.

This clearly shows that the writer has used the elements of comic relief in order to highlight the situation. Therefore, it can be rightfully said that the story is a satire on social norms and mores.