

# Cultural Identity and Identity crisis in Perumal Murugan's novels one-part woman and Pyre

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## Abstract

Fiction by Perumal Murugan has many features that are special to his chosen setting. The cultivator's life, with its range of tasks, implements and infrastructure, is described in fascinating detail. Through his eyes, we experience the method used to clear virgin land of rocks and stones, the strategy for rearranging palm fronds on a tree for tapping toddy, and the way to cook millet over a wood fire to produce a tasty dish. Some critics have seen shades of ethnography in Murugan's work. However, unlike in ethnography, which often functions like Medusa's head, freezing the community in a set of unchanging customs and practices, Murugan uses the details imaginatively to bring the terrain and people alive, giving them dignity and legitimacy. Through close descriptions of the wealth of knowledge and skills in a farming community, the reader also becomes intimately familiar with the community's inner life and the challenges that confront it continually.

Culture in northern Kongunadu is not based solely on cultivation. Livestock and poultry are important sources of income and food for the peasant's family. In Murugan's work, we learn much about the upkeep of animals and the many riches they yield. Goat pens are shifted periodically in order to spread the benefits of their nutrient-rich droppings across the field. Like the farmhands, we pass daily between different kinds of terrains—rocky, arable and pasture lands—and infer that barnyards with cattle are normally adjacent to the house, whereas goat pens are out in the field, requiring them to be guarded at night.

Murugan's extensive body of work (10 novels, 10 works of nonfiction, several collections of poetry and short stories) has always been inspired by social issues in his community. "Resolve" addresses sex-selective abortions, "Pyre" is the story of an intercaste marriage (like Murugan's own), "The Misanthropic Bird" is about land and caste. But Murugan works his themes with a light hand; they always emanate from his characters, who are endowed with enough contradiction and mystery to keep from devolving into mouthpieces. Kali, in "One Part Woman," is a perfect example. Murugan has emerged from his trials chastened. "A censor is seated inside me now," he has said. "His constant caution that a word may be misunderstood so, or it may be interpreted thus, is a real bother. But I'm unable to shake him off."

**Key words:** *Perumal Murugan, pyre, one part woman, culture, identity, contradiction.*

## Introduction

Perumal Murugan, 47, was born into a family of marginal farmers with a small land-holding in a village near Thiruchengodu, a temple town in northern Kongunadu. His native region is at a higher altitude than the southern

districts of Coimbatore and Erode, and has a rough terrain and a rain-fed, cattle-based agriculture, mainly millet cultivation. The single largest agrarian caste group in Kongunadu are the Gounders, to which Murugan's family belongs. In a community where there are no secrets and people's view of their neighbours is consistently harsh, characters frequently seek out secret niches to hide their small treasures in, or nooks in which they may, for a night, enjoyably indulge themselves in toddy and meat, or nurse a private grief, undisturbed. Boys like Koolaiyan who forage in the woods for produce they can sell or eat must discover places where they can hide their stash. But no place is safe. When it comes to nature and man, there is no difference of time or place. One is reminded of Oscar Wilde at the close of his epistle, *De Profundis*: "...but Nature, whose sweet rains fall on unjust and just alike, will have clefts in the rocks where I may hide, and secret valleys in whose silence I may weep undisturbed ... she will cleanse me in great waters and with bitter herbs make me whole." This is how Murugan's goatherd children seek, without self-conscious articulation, safety and solace in the landscape around them.

Unable to support the family through agriculture alone, Murugan's father ran a soda shop in a cinema theatre in Thiruchengodu town. A lonely child and the only one in his extended family who was keen on education, Murugan started writing from a very early age. He wrote lyrics to children's songs, many of which were featured in a children's programme broadcast by All India Radio's Trichy station. Murugan went to college in Erode and Coimbatore, where he studied Tamil literature for both his undergraduate and post-graduate degrees. In 1988, at the age of 22, he came to Chennai to pursue his MPhil in Tamil studies at Madras University and went on to earn a PhD. Here, he came into contact with a splinter group of the Communist Party of India-Marxist Leninist, called Makkal Kalachara Kazhagam (Ma Ka Ka), then led by writer and veteran journalist Paa Jeyaprakasam. Murugan's interaction with the writers belonging to this group, along with his study of essential Marxist texts, led him to decide that his fiction would be primarily about the region and community of his origin, and the life he knew from direct experience.

It must also be mentioned that the subject of Perumal Murugan's doctoral thesis was the novels of R Shanmugasundaram, the Kongu author of *Nagammal*. Murugan wrote and published more than a dozen short stories in Ma Ka Ka's *Manavosai* journal between 1988 and 1991. His stories were well received and established him as an important new voice in the Tamil literary milieu. (A selection of these stories was published in his 1994 collection, *Thiruchengodu*). It was at this time, while spending a lonely, two-month summer vacation in his village, in a simple hut with a thatched roof in the middle of a field, that he wrote his first novel, *Eru Veyyil* (1991), which can be loosely translated as "Rising Heat". *Eru Veyyil* was the beginning of a flourishing and important literary career during which Murugan has published six novels, four short story collections, four poetry collections and six non-fiction books mostly to do with language and literature. He has also edited half a dozen fiction and non-fiction anthologies.

**Objective:**

This paper seeks to study

1. Perumal Murugan's fiction in general
2. Cultural Identity and Identity crisis in Perumal Murugan's novels one part woman and Pyre in particular

**Pyre: The cultural and social backdrop**

Translated from his original Tamil novel Pookkuzhi, Pyre takes place mostly in a remote village called Kattuppatti. Kumaresan is a young man of the village, who goes to work in a town after living with his widowed mother for over 20 years. He finds work in a soda-making factory. In between washing used soda bottles, filling and distributing them to local shops, Kumaresan also finds his true love: a 'skinny and wiry girl' called Saroja, who lives with her widowed father.

The dark-skinned boy and fair girl exchange wedding vows in a temple and run away to his village to begin a new life. "Everything will be all right," Kumaresan assures the girl, who soon becomes a cursed omen in her new home, like a plant that has to grow on a rock. But what plant could live and grow on a rock? This is a haunting question that Murugan asks his readers, as he rips open a piece of earth and bares the faultlines below.

In the stifling heat of a godforsaken land, the images of Kumaresan, Saroja and Kattuppatti village become more than a mirage. "He has found a girl that looks like gold," comments a villager when Kumaresan arrives for the first time in the village with Saroja. Soon, these comments turn into questions, as Saroja realises that the colour of her skin isn't going to be enough to survive in Kattuppatti. "What is your caste?" everyone asks her, as clouds of hate and distrust gather above the village.

In Pyre, Murugan dissects the artificial divisions of society that become real when love is replaced by hate and innocence is trampled by blindness. The real fire in Pyre is not that consumes society, but one that can be found in Murugan's words. Like One Part Woman, a translation of Maadhorubaagan, Pyre, too, gets a headstart with Murugan's readers outside Tamil Nadu, thanks to his translator Aniruddhan Vasudevan, who communicates the story of Pyre beautifully.

As his hopes of a happy life with the support of his family wane, Kumaresan is compelled to ask why his community can't understand that he only wants peace with his love? With Pyre, Murugan places a love story at the centre of human confusion and regional literature at the centre of Indian mainstream writing.

### **Inter-caste cultural Dynamics**

Pyre is a story of every inter-caste married couple in rural India. The book keeps the readers stuck to the story by talking about the harsh realities of the society. The title Pyre creates a sense of curiosity. Perumal Murugan's Pyre is a story about Saroja and Kumaresan, a couple in love who marry each other. They belong to different castes and it eventually becomes a curse to their life. The couple bears the wrath of Kumaresan's village in the hope that things will get better.

The book highlights the struggle of inter-caste couples and how it is difficult to survive such marriages. The book revolves around the love story of the couple, how they met, how they fell in love and why they choose to elope. From a gendered lens, the book covers the struggle of protagonist Saroja since the beginning of her marriage. She had been called names, slapped and taunted every day, yet she chooses to stay silent in order to stay safe. The book also fails the Bechdel test as all the women characters talk about her husband in one form or another and their lives are written around Kumaresan.

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Another factor that compromises the effectiveness of the story is the male gaze while writing women characters or describing the affection among Kumaresan and Saroja. Overall, the book covers the issue of honor killing and casteism through different events like people getting violent, socially excluding the couple and their family, etc.

The book also captures the internalized misogyny of rural women when it comes to maintaining the existing social order. Saroja had been called slurs on a daily basis. It is usually the women who are calling her names, asking her what she did to "attract" Kumaresan, coming with the age-old "she must have cast a spell on our boy"-narrative which label women as witches and seductresses. The first woman Saroja met was her mother-in-law, Marayi and she becomes her worst nightmare.

The protagonists Kumaresan and Saroja aren't strong characters. Kumaresan listens to everything said by villagers silently most of the time. He gets beaten up, bears insults made to his wife by village folk, yet asks Saroja to never speak up. He also never informed Saroja about his life before their marriage. Where he lived, how the situation can get and what will be the conditions that Saroja might face after marriage was never told to her. The only strong thing about both of them is listening to their heart, marrying each other and standing by each other's side.

Saroja as a character has been seen as an obedient, helpless woman who followed her husband just to stay safe as she knew nothing about the new place. She never talks back to her mother-in-law who is downright abusive since the day she met her.

Saroja as a character has been seen as an obedient, helpless woman who followed her husband just to stay safe as she knew nothing about the new place. She never talks back to her mother-in-law who is downright abusive since the day she met her. Saroja is afraid of her. She couldn't express her problems with her husband clearly as she thinks he is already stressed. She prioritizes him over herself and stays mum. Kumaresan also ignores her requests for taking her back to her town when she gets suffocated and tired of the insults and misbehavior of the people around her.

### **Character foibles in Pyre**

However, in contrast with Saroja, Marayi as a character comes out as strong and unapologetic. She expresses her displeasure through anger, tears, and daily taunts. She chooses to yell, beat, murmur and shout as compared to Saroja, who suppresses her emotions. Marayi also manages to educate her son and make her basic ends meet after the death of her husband. Often, rural women are portrayed as helpless and Marayi breaks that stereotype. She also supports villagers when they promise her a solution to her problems. Yet, she is also an example of women following social norms and maintaining social order while dismissing their own children's happiness. Marayi is not a black and white character like Saroja and Kumaresan. She is grey, she loves her son yet she is furious over his inter-caste marriage.

Overall, the story is continuous with good presentation, the series of events are realistic yet has a cinematic essence to them. *Pyre* can haunt its readers for some time as the book is chilling. The book is relatable to everyone, who has married against their parents' wishes, the constant cold behavior, the lack of empathy and the feeling of being unsafe in one's own home is common for such couples. It is an eye-opener for many who believe that caste-based discrimination does not exist. The book also reflects the culture of lower caste groups and their cuisine which is usually missing from the mainstream narrative.

## One Part Woman: caste, tradition and cultural identity

Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* has become a cult phenomenon in the subcontinent, captivating Indian readers and jump-starting conversations about caste and female empowerment. Set in South India during the British colonial period but with powerful resonance to the present day, *One Part Woman* tells the story of a couple, Kali and Ponna, who are unable to conceive, much to the concern of their families—and the crowing amusement of Kali's male friends. Kali and Ponna try anything to have a child, including making offerings at different temples, atoning for past misdeeds of dead family members, and even circumambulating a mountain supposed to cure barren women, but all to no avail.

A more radical plan is required, and the annual chariot festival, a celebration of the god Maadhorubaagan, who is one part woman, one part man, may provide the answer. On the eighteenth night of the festival, the festivities culminate in a carnival, and on that night the rules of marriage are relaxed, and consensual sex between unmarried men and women is overlooked, for all men are considered gods. The festival may be the solution to Kali and Ponna's problem, but it soon threatens to drive the couple apart as much as to bring them together. Wryly amusing, fable-like, and deeply poignant, *One Part Woman* is a powerful exploration of a loving marriage strained by the expectations of others, and an attack on the rigid rules of caste and tradition that continue to constrict opportunity and happiness.

With the backdrop of Hindu nationalist fervour gripping India, *One Part Woman* finds a historical parallel in Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* after the infamous fatwa. The story at the book's core has been similarly overshadowed by offended sentiments and speculation surrounding the author's future. In Murugan's case, the Kongu Vellala community, backed by local Hindu rightwingers, claimed the novel showed their religious practices and their women in a bad light. A judgmental, caste-ridden, patriarchal society alienates a couple longing to be like any other. The novel, set in 1940s Tamil Nadu, is the story of Ponna and Kali, a farming couple whose happiness is marred by their inability to have a child. Ponna is a doting, obedient, subservient wife, the kind who comes running at a snap of her husband's fingers, and who only exists in the Tamil male imagination. Kali treats her with utmost affection, and has a primal, reflexive desire for her that cannot quite qualify as love. Seen by society as a "barren" woman, Ponna is insulted and excluded by the community, while Kali is goaded to take a second wife. Twelve years of childlessness are accompanied by thousands of temple visits, prayers, offerings. When nothing yields fruit, the couple are advised to participate in the festivities of a local temple: for one night the norms of society are relaxed, all men are deemed gods and women desiring children are permitted to have sex with strangers. In the leadup to its climax, the artful narrative is as frenzied as a religious festival; present and past come in and out of focus as if to the cue of loud cymbals. Summer reading – 100 best holiday books for 2019 Murugan's unsurpassed ability to capture Tamil speech lays bare the complex

organism of the society he adeptly portrays: the double entendres men use towards Kali affirm their own masculinity as much as they mock him; women employ their only freedom, the freedom of speech, to put other women in their place; and most of all, the unsparing barbs of a judgmental, caste-ridden, patriarchal society alienate a couple longing to be like any other.

Aniruddhan Vasudevan's idiomatic translation preserves the mood of the original, and serves as a constant linguistic reminder that, as readers in English, we are but visitors to this realistic pre-independence Tamil world. For a book that earned its author death threats and was burned by mobs, *One Part Woman* is a surprisingly tranquil, sensuous.

## Conclusion

Versatile, sensitive to history and conscious of his responsibilities as a writer, Murugan is considered to be the most accomplished of his generation of Tamil writers. Apart from his profound engagement with Kongunadu and its people, he is also a writer of great linguistic skill, being one of very few contemporary Tamil writers who have formally studied the language up to the post-graduate level.

Murugan describes the various dimensions of this relationship in great detail in all his novels. The absence of political resistance to such absolute caste dominance is remarkable, particularly in a state like Tamil Nadu with its brand of progressive politics. But the oppressed employ their own forms of resistance. Urbanisation provides them with more avenues to work as daily wage labourers and even travel across the country with mechanized rigs to dig borewells. As more and more Gounders are dispossessed of their land due to urbanisation or intrafamilial disputes, they are also forced to move closer to the Chakkilis in these new domains, where the age-old caste hierarchy still persists but is becoming less and less viable. Coming from an oral tradition, his people have for long constructed a world of meaning around local deities in order to feel safe and protected, and so as to keep on the right path, not just as individuals but also as communities. As a consequence, the force of myth shapes the consciousness of all his characters. Very often, in times of stress, these characters enter a reverie in which boundaries between the world of myth and their immediate reality is obliterated. The dream world of myth can potentially offer an escape from danger, whereas the real world offers none. Often forsaken by family and trapped in remote places in the dead of night, his characters draw on their fierce belief in the protective power of spirits and deities.

It is a curious paradox that even as progressive Indians would like to abolish the caste system, they have little or no understanding of the lived reality of specific caste groups in their traditional homelands. Even as these communities are stalked and often dispossessed by the forces of modernisation, they remain hostage to the ways of the past that have sustained them for centuries. Will they ever be able to enter a secular future? Perumal Murugan has at least shown us a glimpse of what our collective struggle may be about.

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