Dehumanizing in the Name of Caste: A Critical Study on Perumal Murugan’s Pyre

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The paper takes up the theme that is highly contested of its kind in the present scenario. Though the writer Perumal Murugan did not explicitly mention the caste of Saroja, the lady protagonist of the novel, it is otherwise a question of the readers to know ‘which caste does she belong to?’ seems to be the first hand argument. The paper is determined to find the tenuous perceptions of the lumpen human kind who gyrate holding a string. The paper also critique on the powerless characters of Murugan who do not question the injustice and inhumane attitudes of the villagers. This paper on Pyre or Pookkuzhi tries to expose the marginalized human progress situating the oppressions and dehumanization.

Keywords: Caste, Perumal Murugan, Pyre, love, Caste Violence

‘We write the surface only/I am surer of it now/Than ever before’ writes Meena Alexander, an internationally acclaimed poet, Scholar and a writer. In the similar context what Perumal Murugan did in his much acclaimed novels One Part Woman and Pyre is the same. He had just tried to open up the surface reality and deeper it goes more it smells. Murugan, came to light after his novel One Part Woman was much contested to accept and until then the star of the contemporary Tamil literature was unknown to the literary arena very much. His novels being translated into English shook the literary world with his critical acclaim and also at the same time gave a commercial success. His novels Seasons of the Palm was shortlisted for the Kiriyama Prize in 2005, One Part Woman was one of his best work was shortlisted for the Crossword Award and ILF Samanyay Bhasha Samman in 2015. And more over the novel also gave the translator Aniruddhan Vasudevan, a Sahitya Akademi Translation Award (2016) for translating the work. The book is also was long listed for the National Book Award for the Translated Literature category in 2018.

One Part Woman came out instigating much more sensation as the writer evoked the underlying hidden beauty of the culture. The author himself declared on January 2015 in his Facebook post that “Perumal Murugan the writer is dead. As he is no God, he is not going to resurrect himself. He also has no faith in rebirth. An ordinary teacher, he will live as P. Murugan. Leave him alone” after he came under the attack of the caste outfits and Hindutva. It is very much true in the words of Vaishna Roy who claims that “our literary ecosystem should have quivered with recognition when his first books emerged but conditioned as we are to reading second-hand accounts of ourselves we are mostly blind to the flames beyond our
neon-lit windows.” She finds the apt word to describe the situation of our lives, neon-lit windows. We are blind before history and when it comes to the history, how many of us know the proper history of our culture. This one small question reduces us to nothing. Many are ignorant of the happenings that are celebrated as festivals in the villages. Villages even today organize certain kind of rituals starting from birth to death and it is blind when it comes for the reason. But as for all, everything has its own reasons behind. This very theme of unveiling the hidden treasure can be seen in the works of Murugan.

His latest work Pyre is similar kind of a story laced with love, caste and rural setting. Pyre was originally translated from Tamil *Pookkuzzhi*. The author binds the story with rural setting and the caste politics behind the scene which actually revolves the story to make the readers aware of what it can create. The plot of the story is that Kumaresan meets a beautiful lady Saroja. He falls in love with her while he works at the town and as their castes does not allow them to get married with the acceptance of the both the families, they decide to marry themselves and to settle in kumaresan’s village. The writer has very much profoundly differentiated both the setting of the town and village. And to speak of the most important aspect of the novel, the caste, it is seen as a resilient force that makes the entire story vulnerable. At the same time the guardians of the caste is also seen unimaginable intolerant. The problem of caste is contemporary. The paper also focuses the power packed words of vision to live in Kumaresan and Saroja and the villagers on the other side. The very first reference when Saroja is introduced, she is introduced as a girl whose one and only trust is Kumaresan. After describing the expanse of the arid land, searing gust of wind, silence of the birds, dryness, and heat Saroja is being introduced as though “she hesitated to venture into that inhospitable space” and yet she prayed “everything should go well” (3). The mixed feeling of the women kind is explicitly shown throughout the novel. Kumaresan, throughout the novel is said to have a strong hold of his attitude and always a heart-warming words for Saroja who says “Don’t worry about things. I am here” (4). The question here is that the fear of Saroja and words of Kumaresan does have any strength to stand against the words of the villages. The novel is interlinked between love of Kumaresan, fear of Saroja and violent attitude of the villagers.

Saroja, being a girl born and brought up in a town environment everything what Kumaresan says was something new including when he speaks very fast. When he started correcting her and asking her to do things properly as he says make her to feel that she would easily get into problem.

Talking about the trust area of the paper, the caste becomes the prominent thing that is to be discussed. In the very beginning itself Kumaresan is very much aware that taking a girl from other caste would put him into trouble. It is very much seen in the words of his mother complaining him not to bring any girl of his choice who does not belong to their caste in to their home. In her words “you live in a different town. Please don’t come back here dragging
along a girl from a different caste” (7). She is very particular about dragging a girl of different caste. The caste in villages are deep rooted that it had grown into a bush that no one can stop. It is their blood that runs in their veins. It is not that easy to eradicate caste like sweeping the floor. The villages have such a custom that they cannot even tolerate a higher caste boy going with a lower caste or vice versa. This is very much brought into line by Murugan. When Kumaresan went for work and mingled himself with other people he was criticized. Kumaresan was complained to his mother Marayi about his attitudes that:

Those men are not good company, why do you let him mix with men from other castes? When we offer them water, we pour it without touching. Yet here is your son, sitting on his haunches and socializing with them, rubbing shoulders with them, and roaming around with them. What can I say? You will have to find a girl for him from one of their families now. After all, who among us would pledge our daughters in marriage to him? (39).

With Kumaresan who was growing up with his single mother all these days in a small village and had experience of fields and small cattle is ready to spread his wing in the outer world finds the town bigger than he expected. When it comes to town, the waves of caste are incredibly low compared to that of villages. Every other community people mingle in the town to make their mutual survival.

For Saroja, everything seems to be new starting from the cremating ground to the lush arid land. People were new, the surrounding was new and she did not expect that the people in the village would become so harsh to her and Kumaresan for getting married. Whatever they planned did not work out from the very beginning onwards. For instance when Kumaresan and Saroja was standing in the shade of the neem tree, she heard a voice addressed by a man to Kumaresan “what is it, Mapillai? Why are you standing here?” shook both of them. He had different kinds of question towards Kumaresan and also was keenly scrutinizing Saroja. He was very much keen in asking Kumrasean about her caste. He says “Look at that! You went away to work, but you managed to find yourself a cow!.. you have done something unexpected, bringing a girl from elsewhere. What caste?” (12). The man was adamant to accept when Kumaresan says ‘our caste only,’ he doesn’t bother to listen where he comments that

Can’t I tell by her face, this is not a face from our caste, Mapillai. Does a face that wander over fields and rocks look like this? This is the face of someone who hasn’t toiled, a body that hasn’t suffered summer’s heat. All right, tell me the truth- whatever it is…Is she from our caste? (12).

Meanwhile when Kumaresan asked his co-worker Periyasami, to find a girl himself and get settled here in the town, his response was something Kumaresan did not expect. He said “Ayyo! Looking is all I can manage. In fact, I am scared to do even that. And if I do marry a
girl here, I can never go back to my village. I’ll have to sever all ties with the people of my caste, and live here. If I dare to go back, they will poison me. Or beat to death” (44).

Pointing out Kumaresan’s attitude, throughout the novel we can find that he is of good natured man who never looks at a girl and when an old lady comments on Kumaresan, she questions Saroja that how did she happen to make Kumaresan fall for her when he was frequently approached by girls of his village. Similarly, when Saroja happens to think of Kumaresan, she too did not find any fault either with his attitude towards her or his talks. When Kumaresan is compared with Kali, the protagonist of One Part Woman, both stand equal in weight. In such a case the male protagonists of Murugan can be said as bold and lovable. Jane Wallace compares Kumaresan with Romeo who had a profound love for his Juliet and here for Saroja.

When Murugan explains the love affair in detail, he exclaims that both had known each other before they began to fall in love or realize that they were in love. Kumaresan did not leave away his village attitudes though he was at the town. Some instances like lying under the Indian beech tree or brushing with the neem twig openly showed that he was not accustomed to the setup of the town. When people find him brushing with neem twig they would comment him to “ask your (his) shop owner to buy you (him) a toothbrush” (70).

Certain thing that needs a focus is the change in the attitude of Kumaresan after he started to know things or prepared to work on himself. He had the courage to look at a girl, accustomed to hear music from the radio, until then he was a chap whose head was always lowered. Murugan had shown a great interest in addressing the love that brimmed between them. At one instance when Saroja was in need of a matchstick and had to ask it from Kumaresan, Murugan had managed to bring the exaggerated experience in reality particularly their internally loving sequence of the both male and female protagonist.

“Nothing could match the happiness she felt that day when she spoke to him for the first time…she felt certain that if she stayed with him, that happiness could- and would -last” (73) where these feeling/words mark the purest form of love that did not have thought of a divide based on the absurd thing called caste.

Even Saroja who is the embodiment of calmness, pretty and good looking girl raised in town could not understand what was going when she went with Kumaresan to his home after marrying. Her coyness, fair skinned beauty revealed that the body of her did not toil in the sun, only was the fact to feel that she did not belong to her caste. She had given herself in the hands of Kumaresan and believed in him that he would take care of her. Whenever her mother-in-law poked her with words partly she did not know what she was commenting and partly she could understand that it was a scolding with baseless comments. Even the villagers who did not like her did not find fault to praise her fair skin. They commented saying that “Look at this foul-
mouthed fellow’s good fortune. He has found a girl who looks like gold” (85). Even Saroja recollects an instance what her mother-in-law had said while she was to leave to herd the goats away. She pointed that “your flower-soft feet might hurt themselves walking on the rock. Be careful” (47). As said by Kumaresan she was an object of wonder for the entire village as they came and went back looking at her. On the other hand she is been teased as an enchantress Mohini who has enchanted Kumaresan to fall in for her love.

However the caste pedalled the whole village where Marayi always sing the song of dirge to express her grief that her one and only son had gone against her will and of the villagers. She also worried that she could not take a bride from their relative side. She always took changes for her loud weeping.

Kumaresan and Saroja though did not have a good welcome in his village, it was the same with his appuchi. When both of them went to Kumaresan’s ammayi and appuchi’s home uninvited his appuchi hit him claiming him to be a “ungrateful dog” (99) and he hit him several times and later came his ammayi in rescue.

When his ammayi took them inside their home, appuchi exclaimed that “Ey! Don’t take her inside. Who knows what caste she belongs to!” (99). What Kumaresan expected was different of what happened there. Ammayi who was tender to both, she also had some kind of venom of caste feeling. When she brought a jug of water, initially she handed and pulled it back to being a lead tumbler to serve water to Saroja and gave the jug to Kumaresan and she also did not take them inside their home rather made them to sit on the veranda.

Hearing the noise everybody nearby came and started to put their comments on the newly arrived couples. The words came out of the people/relatives with force and venom that lied inside for years. They were exclaiming that didn’t you could find any other girl for our caste to get married or you thought our caste girls were not fair as her. They even threatened Kumareasan to go away soon before his uncles come. They said that “you have shamed us all. If your uncles see you now, they will hack you to death” (102).

Saroja had to lead a life of constant fear where there were no one to support her and Marayi always took her chances to hurt her with words which mauled her. She had her perfect time when Kumaresan was not around. Murugan rightly reflects Saroja’s situation wherein she feels like:

Her life was like a plant that had been uprooted from where it had flourished and then abruptly displaced...she herself doubted that whether ‘would its root hold on to the earth in this unfamiliar place? Would the soil accept this new plant? Would the plant like the taste of the water here?’ she frightened thinking of it, concludes Murugan of Saroaj’s feeling sensing her current situation (122).
If one asks does that strength has the caste, many examples can be catered to explain how cruel a caste can play. Umpteen number of honour killing has been this unfortunate world has seen and particularly in Tamil Nadu. V Ashok Kumar writing for Deccan Cronicle under the Nation Crime, reports that “in less than three years Tamil Nadu has witnessed 81 incidents of honour killings with the ghastly murders. A Kathir, the Managing Director of the NGO, ‘Evidence’ acknowledges that “Though honour killings are on the rise, not a single case has ended up in conviction in the state as family members are involved in such murders.” Kathir also points out that most of the cases are dismissed as mere suicides. Even this claim of Kathir is supported by one of the character of Murugan, the old lady who gave a piece of advice whispering to Saroja. She rightly pointed asked her to register their marriage so that the people have to afraid to touch her. The old grandmother asking her to come near retorted that “I don’t know what caste you are from, but be very careful with these people…they might strangle you to death, and then apply some blue dye on your body and claim that you were bitten by a poisonous snake. They could do anything. Be careful” (56-57).

Kannagi and Murugesan, Gokulraj, E Illavarasan, Sankar are only a few I have named who fell prey to the caste based violence. There are umpteen many whose death slapped the faces of the so called caste beholders. This world has much more to see that even the minors are not afraid to indulge in caste based atrocities or to undertake a step of killing somebody. The very recent honour killing happened in Tirunelveli district where a thirty-two year old Shankar was hacked to death. The police report says that the prime accused was the girls’ brother who conspired with his four other classmates of 10th grade and a senior from 11th class. Apart from them two masons had supported them in carrying out the murder. The police officer exclaims that the boys had gone to attend their classes and the masons had gone to work as if nothing had happened or nothing they have did.

Yet another case to remind the cruelty of caste based violence that took in 2003 still in the hearts of the people is this case. Murugesan was fed with poison in the public view and the relatives poured poison into her ears and nose to Kannagi. It is said that the couple fell in love with each other while studying together in Annamalai University belonged to different caste wherein Kannagi, a Commerce graduate belonged to Vanniyar community and Murugesan, a graduate in Chemical engineering was from a Dalit community of Virudhachalam district.

From their very attitude it is revealed that how common the honour killing is taken. Writing to The Wire Kavitha Muralidharan comments that “A year later before – on March 13, 2016 – a surveillance camera in Udumalaipettai proved Panneerselvam, the then Chief Minister and now the Deputy Chief Minister was disastrously wrong who claimed baselessly denied that there was any Caste based honour killing in Tamil Nadu. The world witnessed the gruesome murder of V. Sankar – a Dalit engineering graduate – who was married to
Kausalya – a caste Hindu girl from Palani caught on a surveillance camera, the murder sent a shiver down Tamil Nadu’s spine that had till then remained in a denial mode about honour killings.”

It was a welcoming that a principal court in Tirupur handed a Death sentence judgement to the convicts. Yet still there are villages where strong strictures are taken to avoid inter-caste marriages. Murugan has opened up this kind of age old practices, still seen in some parts of the villages in Tamil Nadu and has obviously brought it to light.

Conclusion:

Annihilating caste can only be written in words to read, pictures to visualize and songs to hear. But in reality unless everybody feels that other is also a similar kind of them this destiny of man killing man in the name of caste will never be stopped. Every nook and corner of the world is spread with the dirtiness either of caste or class. As people utter ‘even how many Ambedkar’s come you people won’t change.’ It is true that even at this point of time where people claim to be civilized, there are still cases being reported of violent honour killing, caste-based-rape, and all other kind of Atrocities escalating to the downfall of the human. Murugan has very much perfectly used the venomous weapon, the caste and have slapped on the faces of the upholders of the caste. Throughout the novel at no place he had mentioned what caste Saroja belongs to is appreciable.

Works Cited:


