

Denied Humanity: A Study of Perumal Murugan's *Poonachi* through the lens of Dr B. R. Ambedkar

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Abstract:

This paper examines Perumal Murugan's allegory, *Poonachi: The Story of a Black Goat* (2018). This fable mirrors the socio-political ideologies of Dr B. R. Ambedkar and the experiences of the subaltern in Indian Society. The study explores themes of caste, marginalisation, voicelessness and resistance, fixing *Poonachi* as a symbolic representation. Positioning *Poonachi* as the central character, the paper explores how society marginalises her and how she struggles for autonomy, surveillance, and identity, as well as structural control. The novel portrays the ongoing struggle of marginalised communities and how Ambedkar addressed it through the concepts of dignity, freedom, and justice. In this paper, the study attempts to bridge the gap between literature and Ambedkar's social thought, exploring how literature has become an embodiment of reform and resistance.

Key Words: Subaltern, Marginalisation, Resistance, Surveillance, Humanity.

Introduction

Literature has emerged as a powerful mode to question social hierarchies, systemic injustice, and formalised oppression. Through literature, writers have initiated an interrogation of society that oppresses subalterns. Postcolonial literature has paved the way for new dimensions of writing that question power structures. By drawing on the ideological frameworks of Marxism, feminism, and postcolonialism, resistance literature has emerged. With the advent of postcolonialism in India, Dr B.R. Ambedkar's ideological framework has been applied most often to subaltern literature. The principles of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity began to influence literature. As he envisioned the Indian Constitution, he aimed to abolish inequality among the Indian population through these three principles. To express remonstrance against subjugation, subordinates have taken to resisting oppressors. Thoughts

Ambedkar have inspired many writers to critique caste-oriented hierarchies and oppression. This paper analyses Perumal Murugan's *Poonachi*, using Ambedkar's principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity, to project how the young black goat survived in the herd of White goats. By narrating the goat's subjection to control, surveillance, and exploitation, Murugan symbolises the struggles faced by the subaltern society. He also exposes structures of power, marginalisation, and social cruelty that echo Ambedkar's critique of caste society.

Unlike George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (Novella, 1945), Perumal Murugan's *Poonachi: Or the Story of a Black Goat* (2018) resembles an animal fable but also powerfully conveys the lives of the downtrodden and their traumatic survival. This research paper reinterprets *Poonachi* in light of Ambedkar's legacy, exploring how the novel reflects the challenges faced by the oppressed and their quest for livelihood and dignity in a society entrenched in caste and patriarchal norms.

Perumal Murugan, in his novel *Poonachi: Or the Story of a Black Goat*, tells the problems and difficulties faced by goats. He traces the human life through the life of a Goat *Poonachi*. The novel is a complete reflection of people in society and human nature, as well as the life of goats. In his prologue, he mentions that as he starts writing this novel, he says, "I am afraid to write about humans, I am even more afraid to write about Gods. I can write about demons. The life of demons is also familiar. Let us touch on it now. Okay, let us write about animals" (P, 9). Murugan's revelation might be a result of the aftermath of *Madhorubagan*, published in 2010. The characterisation of the elder man and the old lady who has adopted *Poonachi* symbolises the village's slavishness. Allegory of Marginalisation and Oppression moves in parallel when we put *Poonachi* and people in the village experiencing slavery equally—their fear towards other villagers and government officials displacing their subalternity.

Poonachi, the protagonist goat, is born black, small, and feeble—instantly marked as "other in the herd. Submitting herself to the oppression, fearful surveillance, and being silent to the humiliation of other goats reflects the experiences faced by the lower caste people. Her voiceless identity and longing for recognition highlight the subordinate groups' face oppression in silence. Just as Ambedkar fought to reclaim the voice of the oppressed through law, education, and public discourse, *Poonachi* subtly stages the struggle of a voiceless being attempting to survive and assert her presence in a hostile world. The black goat, *Poonachi*, is a metaphor for the marginalised and voiceless in society—be it Dalits, women, or people experiencing poverty. Her journey reflects themes of subjugation, identity, resistance, and survival. The goat's treatment—being owned, bred, and monitored—echoes human experiences of oppression in a bureaucratic and patriarchal setup.

Murugan subtly critiques state control, caste-based oppression, and gender inequality. Poonachi's silenced suffering mirrors the silenced voices of many oppressed communities. The novel also engages with Ambedkarite thought, particularly in its exploration of dignity, individual freedom, and resistance to structured inequality. The dominant political regime has structured the violence and perpetrated it against the downtrodden. As he notes this in his narration, as:

"Speak softly, sir. The regime has ears everywhere.

There is an old saying that the regime is deaf.

It is deaf only when we speak about our problems. When we talk about the regime, its ears are pretty sharp." (*Poonachi*, 66) Government officials will monitor calf births and deaths and receive reports on the number of calves born.

Additionally, they must pierce the ears of the calves; otherwise, they will not be eligible to survive in the village. Their fear of officials echoes that they have to beg for constant surveillance in the town. The anthropodenial of government officials complicates their ability to survive. This attitude of hegemony and the metaphor of continual surveillance echo Ambedkar's critique of Brahmanical hegemony and bureaucratic apathy toward the marginalised. Poonachi's fear of officials and her restricted mobility allegorise the limitations placed on Dalits in public spaces and systems of power.

Gender Disparity and Double Marginalisation

Being a female goat, Poonachi is considered less valuable than male goats. They control and monitor her body, primarily raising her for reproduction and evaluating her worth by her ability to reproduce and to produce milk. This reflection parallels women's sufferings as women's roles are institutionalised. How women, especially in rural or patriarchal societies, are often reduced to their reproductive functions. As a female and a black goat, Poonachi is doubly excluded—both for her gender and for her appearance (blackness symbolising lower caste or undesirable traits). Her voice is stifled, her autonomy denied, and she is constantly at the mercy of larger oppressive systems—just like Dalit women or other doubly oppressed groups in human society.

Perumal Murugan uses this animal fable to subtly critique how power structures, caste, patriarchy, and authoritarian governance intersect to suppress those at the margins—especially women from marginalised communities. This intersectional reading resonates deeply with Dr B. R. Ambedkar's vision for women's emancipation. As he writes, "In the declining days of the Vedic Regime, the Shudras, as well as women, had come to occupy a very low position." He further opines, "This high-flown and ingenious sophistry indicates why these institutions were honoured, but does not tell us why they were practised. My own

interpretation is that they were honoured because they were practised.” (Modern Rationalist, 16’2022)

Literature as a Subtle Form of Social Reform

He firmly believed that implementing social justice could not be achieved without addressing the systemic oppression of women. For Ambedkar, the fight against caste was incomplete without challenging patriarchy. He always emphasises that women from marginalised communities and their empowerment have played a prominent role in society's upliftment. Perumal Murugan conveys a similar thought through Poonachi's character, who confronts social hegemony in which men dominate women in the village, as seen in the goat and the old lady struggling to overcome the norms imposed on women. One thing we note is that the old lady's husband has been afraid of meeting government officials when they go for ear-piercing, and he always sends the lady for public transportation. Men resemble servility, and a woman, valiance. When we analyse this notion, though women are valiant creatures, the power structure and male chauvinism around the ambience make them silent against all odds. Murugan reveals and critiques the doubly marginalised womanhood, and he explores how the power structure suppresses female autonomy. When we align Ambedkar's ideology with Perumal Murugan's *Poonachi*, it signifies a broader approach to female empowerment that paves the way for social reform.

He emphasised that societal upliftment must include the empowerment of women, especially those from marginalised communities. In *Poonachi*, Perumal Murugan presents a subtle yet powerful critique of the intersection of gender and social control, echoing Ambedkar's concerns. The novel, when read through this lens, becomes a site for exploring how entrenched power structures continue to suppress female autonomy.

“None of the sheep had their neck and forelegs bound together with a rope. That was only done to the proud goats, who were forced to look at the ground as they walked. Goats always tried to break free of their shackles. Sheep had none, so they did not need to make the effort. If it was in your nature to bow down, why would anyone shackle you? However, these sheep were fortunate. They had no inkling that to bow was to be shackled.” (P, 91)

Conclusion: Literature as a Site of Social Reform

Perumal Murugan's *Poonachi* stands as a literary tribute to the Ambedkarite vision of an egalitarian society. The novel reads the harsh realities of complicated survival, caste and gender. When approached through the lens of Ambedkar's ideology, the story transcends the animal world into the human condition in a biased world. The paper highlights the emergent need to revisit Ambedkar's call for justice and democratic rights. Through the tragic death of a small goat, the writer projects the systematic cruelty and vulnerability of constant threat and dominance of power structures. Poonachi's death is not merely a loss,

but it is a symbolic representation of human weakness against exploitation and suppression. The novel's restrained narrative intensifies the uncomfortable social truths. Thus, *Poonachi* serves as a revolving allegory of dominance, documented lived suffering, and moral importance.

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