

## **Unveiling cultural politics in Perumal Murugan's *Pyre***

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### **Abstract**

Life is built upon literature. It emphasizes a wide range of subjects, from stories regarding the yearly popular struggle for love to human tragedies. Despite being physically written in words, these come to life in mind's imagination and in its capacity to understand the content's depth or clarity. It presents novel and unique ways for people to live their lives, which is seen as having artistic qualities and as a vital component of human existence. Literature has also supplied a completely artistic perspective on human lives and it has also made an impact on the ever-evolving society of the people and consequently contributing to the construction and regulations on the ideas of living in a co-existing society.

**Key words:** subaltern, culture, politics, history and hegemony.

The Subaltern` is a term given by Antonio Gramsci refers to specific groups in the society who are under the hegemony of the ruling elite class, subaltern classes include peasants, tribes, women, and other groups that are denied access to the hegemonic power. Historically speaking, Subaltern studies define itself as an attempt to allow people to speak. Under the subaltern studies, new kind of writings has been started. The Subalterns has been allowed to speak and share their pains, anger, sufferings, and experiences which were denied by the elitist historians and scholars. Although they were granted legal rights following colonization, the oppressed people still maintain an untouchable mentality.

Indian society considers subalternity as the general attributes of the subordination in South Asian society, where this is expressed in terms of class, caste,,age, gender and office or in an any other way. (Guha, 35)

All people have aspirations of a wealthy future when they are born. People encounter a cruel reality when they enter a society that discriminates against them based on their language, gender, caste, or religion. Numerous Indian writers have

over the years expressed the struggles of the subaltern. The Tamil novel *Pookuzhi* by Perumal Murugan, translated by Aniruddhan Vasudevan as *Pyre*. It is a powerful account of the fate of untouchable women. Though the author belongs to a dominant caste, without mincing words, he clearly delineates the violence of the repressive caste system.

In this work, the term "subaltern" refers to Saroja's sufferings as a result of her lower caste, the discrimination that separates the struggle of the lower class from that of the ruling upper class, and their still-present existence in the modern world. It's an emotive subject in culture and has been portrayed in films, but its origin remains unresolved.

Every rural Indian inter-caste married couple's story is told in *Pyre*. By discussing the unpleasant facts of society, the book keeps readers engaged in the narrative. The word *Pyre* attracts our interest. *Pyre* by Perumal Murugan tells the tale of Saroja and Kumaresan, a young couple who fall in love and get married. Their caste differences finally turn into a curse on their lives. The pair endures the fury of Kumaresan's community with the expectation that things will improve.

As a character, Saroja has always been viewed as an obedient, defence less woman who blindly followed her husband into unfamiliar territory in order to keep safe. Since the day she met her violent mother-in-law, she has never responded to her. She has scared Saroja. Because she believed her husband was already under stress, she was unable to communicate her difficulties to him effectively. She keeps quiet and puts him before herself. Additionally, when she feels oppressed and fed up with the abuses and bad behaviour of people around her, Kumaresan refuses to listen to her requests to return to her hometown.

"There's really no such thing as the 'voiceless'. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard" (Arundhati Roy). This ideology of Roy, brings out power dynamics and the marginalization in the society. In many aspects both individuals as well as a group of people were unnoticed, not because of their voices were unheard, but their voices were silenced deliberately. 'Preferably unheard' goes in parallel with the discriminations and oppressions of the society, where people in the top of the hierarchy benefits from keeping those voices muted. When someone is considered 'voiceless,' societal, political, or economic factors plays an impactful in it, rather than considering it a natural state. Realizing this creates pressure on people and society to strongly face and overcome the systematic injustices and purposeful silences that cause some voices to go unheard.

Saroja's understanding of those people was greatly impacted by the

discrimination she experienced in her youth. Subsequently, at the beginning of the story, Saroja encounters discrimination from her mother-in-law Marayi. Though her mother-in-law is a widow, she imagined a splendid existence for her son Kumaresan.

Saroja's first issue in the village was with a man by the name of Podhaaru. When he sees them approaching the village, he scrutinizes her and asks Kumaresan to which caste she belongs. Kumaresan manages to explain that it is their caste, but he refuses to accept it. Saroja is a little nervous during that chat because of the man's language, but somehow Kumaresan manages to send him away. Despite their use of village slang, which she can partially understand, Kumaresan assures her that news of their arrival will spread throughout the village before them.

You have done something unexpected, bringing a girl from elsewhere. What caste? The man said. Our caste only Kumaresan replied... Can't I tell by the face? he prodded relentlessly. This is not a face from our caste, Mapillai... All right tell me the truth whatever it is... Is she from our caste?. (Murugan 12)

People's perceptions of their discrimination in contemporary societies, where they must deal with people who favour particular castes over others in specific locations, exist in many sectors of society and stay alive to this day. This novel focus on community issues is inter-caste marriage. Saroja's challenges are also discussed, as are the difficulties and charges she endured from those who hold the belief that people should be discriminated against because of their caste.

This statement of Marayi shows her anger towards his son's action where marrying a girl whose community is unknown and according to Marayi he made a terrible sin than a murder or something. So she is showing her pain hitting his son's chest and sobbing out louder and she started harming Saroja by grabbing her hair and showing her anger this lead Saroja to a great distress and that is the moment where she encountered the marginalization first time in the village. This typical attitude of parents in India is happening till now where they want their children to get married in the same community some of them are normal with the equality but some sees the community as an important aspect. In this novel Saroja have struggles in many situations where her community is a question to all of them and revealing that only helps her to stay in the village or to run away.

“Until the lion learns how to write; every story will glorify the hunter” (Maraire).

She highlights the importance and worth of postcolonial literature in these lines. A discussion of various experiences, such as migration, slavery, inequality, and resistance, is included in postcolonial theory. Representation, inequality, racism, gender, and geography; responses to the Master discourses of imperial Europe that shaped history, philosophy, and linguistics; and the basic speech and writing experiences that give rise to all of these.

The history of casteism in India till this era and the future, no one can say with certainty that caste will be eliminated in the near future because caste is a necessity for almost everything in society, including certain jobs and education. On the other hand, there are schemes for the lower classes, but their treatment remains unchanged. They have to do something significant before they can be respected in society. Additionally, there are some circumstances in which only members of a specific caste are supposed to perform certain occupations.

The term "cultural politics" refers to specific groups in society that are denied access to the hegemonic power of the ruling elite class, such as peasants, tribes, and women. Indian society considers subalternity as, the general attributes of the subordination in South Asian society, where this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender, and office or in any other way. Pyre, a Tamil novel by Perumal Murugan, is a powerful account of the struggles of untouchable women in India. Pyre tells the story of Saroja and Kumaresan, a young couple who fall in love and get married. Their caste differences turn into a curse on their lives, and the pair endures the fury of Kumaresan's community with the expectation that things will improve. Saroja's understanding of those people was greatly impacted by the discrimination she experienced in her youth.

It's a cruel system that separates individuals in general. In this country, women are the main victims of marriages between different castes. This search examines at how the main character, Saroja, is unaware of the caste structure that permeates many of the locations

where honour killings have taken place. Throughout the course of the novel, Kumaresan endures verbal abuse and insults directed at him because he married a woman from a different community. Even his mother, Marayi cannot able to tolerate what he did, shows her anger towards his son's actions, and she continued to criticize them both, causing her distress and marginalization for the first time in the village.

Generally, women were suppressed all around the world. But, facing discrimination as women on the basis of untouchability is like being doubly marginalized. Inter-caste marriages can be stressful for people's mental and emotional health because of the pressures they face from society, family strife, and cultural differences. When navigating cultural expectations and familial issues, they may feel alone, depressed, or anxious.

In this novel one can obviously witness, one of the problems faced by Saroja that is the dominance of casteism which prevailed throughout the entire story because of her, being born in a lower community and Kumaresan also suffered because of marrying Saroja. The village people oppressed Saroja by accusing her with filthy words and curses. The gender discrimination is also mentioned in the novel, that is where women is suppressed by men.

These discriminations can be seen even today in many fields such as education, sports and in almost every fields out there. Everyone needs to gain a status just for voicing out and to get their basic needs. The women are still oppressed in many ways compared with men. Women were considered a weaker sex, whenever compared with men. And, men have pride in that, however, it is not correct. Women are lot stronger than they appear to be both physically as well as mentally. "How deep could she have gone? Come on, let's find out. If a woman that too a girl can be so bold, then what's the use of us being men?"

There is oppression among the same gender where women suppress women as seen in this novel where Marayi suppress her daughter-in-law Saroja in many ways under the influence of casteism, that brought terrible sufferings to the protagonist where she cannot voice out for herself, as she was in a submissive state at almost every phase of the novel. Which forced her into a state of depression as she did not have support from her very own gender and attacked by words, that would greatly impact her internally. Then at the end of the novel she struggled a lot physically, when there was an attempt to murder Saroja, orchestrated by the villagers and Marayi, as pre-planned to execute her while Kumaresan is out of town.

In end of the novel Saroja suffered got intense in the final phase of the novel, where she undergoes tremendous pain physically by harming herself through the thorn bushes while escaping from the men who were chasing after her to execute her. This purely defines the terrible sense of honour killing, happening due to the prevailing casteism. Honor killings, in which a family member or members feel that a woman has brought disgrace or shame upon the family or community, usually target

women as their principal victims. Honor killings usually have their roots in patriarchal ideologies and cultural norms that place a high value on family honour and authority over the bodies and actions of women. It happens even today in some parts of India especially, in Tamil Nadu where both men and women were killed, but women were suffered to a greater extent as result of being suppressed by men.

This research is set in a cultural politics where women are viewed as being oppressed. Women suffer in society due to their marital status and line of work, particularly in marriages where they are often faced with several challenges and denied the autonomy to live the lives they choose. The protagonist of the novel experiences hardship as a result of her unwelcome visit to her husband's hometown, where she is stifled by everyone, even her mother-in-law, despite the fact that they are both women and caste is clearly given importance.

Caste cannot be abolished by inter caste dinners or stray instances of inter caste marriages, Caste is a state of mind. It is a disease of mind... A bitter thing cannot be made sweet. The taste of anything can be changed. But poison cannot be changed into nectar. (Ambedkar)

The research conclude that the class discrimination still prevails in the present society, both hidden as well as explicitly. Being in a room with one another, sitting and dining equally, alone cannot eradicate the caste system from society. It is a change that happens internally more than explicit physical changes. An individual can be plague for the society as a drop of poison could make it all worse and couldn't be reversed. One should believe that all human beings are one and equal, and every individual should have this state of mind to constitute a better society with no oppression of one over the other in the name of discrimination.

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