

## **Examining Caste and Dilemma in Perumal Murugan's *Pyre***

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper attempts to analyse the depiction of a caste-based prejudiced society as well as the dilemma of the leading protagonists in the novel *Pyre*, written by Perumal Murugan, an Indian contemporary author who writes in Tamil. In *Pyre*, he weaves the themes of caste and dilemma explicitly. Kumaresan and Saroja, the protagonists of the story encounter the hostile attitude of the villagers, because of the unidentified caste of Saroja. Marayi, Kumaresan's mother too has no sympathy for Saroja. The family is excommunicated and is ordered to remain secluded from the rest of the village. This brings a catastrophic end for Saroja. The dilemma of Saroja is also evident from the onset, she is doubtful whether to stay with Kumaresan in the village or go back to her family in Tholur. This paper also discusses the weak protagonists who face the injustice and inhumane attitude of the villagers with no objection.

### **KEYWORDS**

prejudice; dilemma; excommunicated; catastrophic; injustice.

One of the well-knit novels with a beautifully interwoven plot, Perumal Murugan's *Pyre* is one of its kind. Perumal Murugan is an Indian contemporary author who writes in Tamil. He has 12 novels to his credit, out of which 5 have been translated into English. His book *Pyre* was originally published in Tamil as *Pookkuzhhi* in 2013 and later Aniruddhan Vasudevan translated it into English in 2016.

The novel *Pyre* states the travails of a couple clutched in the caste disparity prevalent in Kattuppatti, a remote village in Southern India. Kumaresan and Saroja, a newly wedded couple reached Kattuppatti, Kumaresan's village, where they were unwelcome because of the anonymous caste of Saroja. About a year ago, Kumaresan left his village to work in a

soda-making factory in the nearby town of Tholur. He chanced upon Saroja in Tholur only. It was love at first glance. They both exchanged glances in the following months and later acknowledged their love for each other. Saroja lived with his father and brother in Tholur. They had been working in a leather factory. Both Kumaresan and Saroja belonged to different castes, one higher than the other. The author had no intention to reveal their specific castes, maybe to emphasise the difference of castes than the detail. Also specifying the caste might confine the story to a particular region, and the ambiguity of caste enhances the universal appeal of the story. Neither Kumaresan nor Saroja's family would agree to the match. The couple decided to marry in a temple without seeking acceptance from

either of their families and settle in Kumaresan's village, which later proved a perilous decision.

Kumaresan's mother, Marayi, had been a widow for most of her life. She cautioned her son not to bring any girl of his choice from some other caste to her house. On seeing the unfortunate happen, she sang dirge in protest. When the couple reached home, the people in the vicinity gathered to get a glimpse of Saroja and were startled to see her radiance. Women sitting outside the hut said, "It's true. She is not dark like us, is she? She is pink like the eastern sky at dusk. Just like a film star." (Murugan 21) The fair skin of Saroja prohibited everyone from believing that she was one among them. She was an object of wonder for the entire village and women often teased her and called her an enchantress. Marayi, in anger and protest, would sit on the rock outside her hut all day, wail, beat her chest, and sing dirge. This terrified Saroja. She felt lonely and sorrowful in the new place. Marayi believed Saroja had bewitched her son and he would never come out of her enchantment. Villagers were inquisitive of Saroja's caste. Kumaresan instructed Saroja not to utter a word and rather, he would speak for her. They perpetually asked Saroja's caste to Kumaresan and he responded evasively. One of the village folks lashed out at him and claimed that he could tell by seeing the face of Saroja that she did not belong to their caste. He stressed:

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. (Murugan 12)

The couple had to face hardships to sustain themselves in the village. Kumaresan's maternal family too boycotted his marriage and even beat him.

To make both ends meet, Kumaresan planned to set up a soda-making shop in Virichipalayam, a nearby town. Meanwhile, in one of the village council meetings, Kumaresan's family was declared outcast. The family was forbidden to carry out transactions with the rest of the village. Marayi's heart sank listening to this. Being a widow, she had been living her secluded life supported by her brothers and village folks. She followed social orders and norms and now, not being part of that community anymore was arduous for her.

Tormented and distressed, Marayi along with her brothers and village people conspired against Saroja. Kumaresan had gone to Virichipalayam for his soda shop setup. This lured Marayi to trap Saroja. While Saroja went to the shrubbery to relieve herself, Marayi and other men came hunting for her. Saroja sensed hustle at the edges of the bush. Her hands and legs grew numb. Saroja was in tears and sweat inside the shrubbery. When they suspected her hiding inside the bush, they blazed the entire bush. Saroja met a fatal end.

Chronicled in the third-person point of view, Murugan presents the story in a linear plot and uses a few flashbacks to give a backdrop to the present scenario. The plot is highly intact, engaging and concise. It does not let readers shift their attention and allows them to absorb it. A book titled *Pyre* is unlikely to have a happy ending. The fate of Saroja is inevitable. Murugan sets the story in rural India, specifically the remote villages of Southern India. The novel is deceptively simple and sparse, however, its epilogue leaves the readers gaped. The author skilfully paints rural life mentioning sultry climate, heat-cracked land, secluded rock, a thatched hut atop the rock, and inhospitable villagers.

The novel is written in back and forth manner, linking the past with the present. The author has kept a vivid

distinction between city and village life. Saroja was brought up in the city of Tholur, a city where everyone was welcomed. She lived in a one-room house with her father and brother. In a city, people were less bothered to inquire about someone's caste. She never had first-hand experience of such hatred. It was an unwelcoming as well as a new experience for her in Kattupatti, her husband taught her the customs, names of the regional foods and the way to deal with the people in the village. What he did not tell Saroja was the severe circumstances that they might face. He never spoke about his village, his house, his mother. Had he familiarised Saroja with this, she might have dealt with the situation in a different way.

### **Bigotry of Caste- Ridden Society**

The caste is the basic structural feature of Indian society. The present novel centres on the social issue of 'inter-caste marriage a taboo'. The novel depicts the horrible cruelty, stubbornness, intolerance and bigotry of a caste-ridden society.

In the words of the translator of *Pyre*:

This is a novel about caste and the resilient force that it is, but it is also about how strangely vulnerable caste and its guardians seem to feel in the face of love, and how it often seems to assert itself both in everyday acts of discrimination as well as in moments of most unimaginable violence. (Murugan xii)

There are several episodes in the novel where the couple is seen being humiliated. Kumaresan had nowhere to go after his hasty marriage, so he brought Saroja to his village hopeful that things would eventually settle. The villagers suspected Saroja's caste and instead of peace, violence erupted. Since the day, the

couple stepped off the bus in the village, until the disastrous end of Saroja, the couple encountered the hostile behaviour of villagers. The villagers perpetually asked Kumaresan of Saroja's caste. And were unwilling to agree that Saroja was one among them. The problem of caste is so deep-rooted that the villagers were not ready to mingle with any outsider of other castes, in this case, Saroja. They even suggested not holding the village festival in the temple in the presence of someone from another caste. One of the villagers asserted:

The point is that he has brought a girl here about whom we know nothing. The entire village bears a mark of impurity if there is a woman here whose caste or family are unknown. And if we start the festival here with this impurity in our midst, we might incur the wrath of Goddess Mariyatha. (Murugan 132)

Caste is an artificial yet vicious circle in which many Indians are trapped. Earlier, the Indian caste division was based on the occupation of an individual but later this concept developed into a horrific chain of flourished caste system. An individual of one caste considers himself superior to others. In the words of Isabel Wilkerson:

A caste system is an artificial construction, a fixed and embedded ranking of human value that sets the presumed supremacy of one group against the presumed inferiority of other groups. (Wilkerson)

In another instance, Kumaresan along with Saroja reached his maternal uncle's house. Kumaresan was beaten up by his uncles and Saroja was prohibited from entering the house. Kumaresan's grandmother came to his rescue and offered water to the couple. However, she gave water to Saroja in a tumbler and

Kumaresan in a jug, another illustration of the entrenched caste disparity prevalent in the society.

The concept of caste took hold of everything that happened in the village. Kumaresan was forbidden as a child to work with day labourers, for he would mix with the men of other castes and it might hinder villagers from giving their daughter to him in marriage. A villager once said to Marayi "Those men are not good company. Why do you let him mix with men from other caste?" (Murugan 39) He further stated, "You'll 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?" (Murugan 39) The village council declared them outcasts and did not allow them to perform duties in the village festival. The inevitable end of Saroja in the name of honour-killing is testimony to the fact that even in the modern era, many unfortunate individuals, who marry into other castes receive a destructive end.

### **Dilemma of Saroja**

Another important aspect that this paper intends to analyse is the dilemma of Saroja. Saroja is a coy, fair-skinned and obedient girl. Saroja entrusts Kumaresan with a better life ahead. "She had come hoping she would be happy with the man she loved." (Murugan 32) She never answers back to her mother-in-law who has been abusive to her since the day Saroja arrived at her house. Saroja reminisces her house and her life in Tholur, where she led a comparatively free life. Since the beginning of the novel, she is doubtful whether she has made the right decision to marry Kumaresan or not. She considers herself a plant that has been uprooted from a place where it once flourished. She has a notion of whether Marayi and other villagers will ever accept her. Will she be able to adjust to the new place? She always wonders, "Would its roots hold on to the earth in this

unfamiliar place? Would the soil accept this new plant?" (Murugan 122) She plays an obedient wife throughout the novel and never inquires about anything. She desires to go to Virichipalayam, a town where Kumaresan wanted to set up his soda-making shop. She felt suffocated in the village.

She was loved by her father and brother in Tholur. And now in this new environment among new people, she was grief-stricken. Except Kumaresan, she had no one to count on, no one to talk to and no one to share her grief with. She also wondered why Kumaresan did not think of the severe consequences of their marriage, and why he could not anticipate the gravity of the situation. "Why hadn't he thought of that? Why did he trust his people so much?" (Murugan 32) Whenever she faced the uncongenial behaviour of village folks, "She could not help but feel that it was a mistake on her part to have come with him without her father's and brother's knowledge." (Murugan 32)

Kumaresan, the leading male character, turns out to be a weak protagonist. He has not accustomed Saroja to the stubborn and cruel people of his village. He is beaten by his maternal uncles, humiliated by his village folks, abused and insulted by his own mother, excommunicated by the village council, and publicly insulted by his maternal uncles at a family function, yet never says a word back to any of them. However, he is a loving and committed husband. He remained firm on his decision to marry Saroja, despite facing rants and insults. He always backed Saroja whenever required. We see him as a burdened man as well, who has the burden to earn a livelihood for his family. He always questioned himself, "Have I done such a terrible thing, he wondered. Was it such a sin to get married? Can't I marry the woman I love? In what way have I wronged anyone by doing that?" (Murugan 175)

He holds a different opinion about caste:

Caste! Which caste is Soda Shop Bhai from? Wasn't he the one who offered me the job? If he hadn't done that, how could I have made some money? Which man from my caste came to my aid? (Murugan 176)

### Conclusion

The novel achieves its universality because the class or class biasedness portrayed is prevalent in every nook and corner of the world. In this modern era, the incidents of honour-killing and caste disparity are still evident. The fatal end of

Saroja is similar to what we read in newspapers every day. What Murugan emphasizes is that despite we claim to be civilized, the class and caste-conscious mindset of people is not aborted. Perumal has portrayed the venomous weapon of caste to show the reality prevalent around us.

Even in this 21<sup>st</sup> century, we witness these social evils pervading in our daily lives. The novel *Pyre* explores the plight and predicaments faced by people in Indian society and tries to liberate themselves from the shackles of caste-based prejudice and discrimination. Perumal Murugan's *Pyre* in this light is a true form of art.

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