

RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE CASTE-CULTURAL CONFLICTS IN PERUMAL MURUGAN'S SELECT NOVELS

G. Naveenkumar¹

PhD Research Scholar
Department of English
Thiruvalluvar University
Serkkadu, Vellore 632 115
Tamil Nadu, India.

Dr. K. Ravichandran²

Associate Professor & Guide
Department of English
Thiruvalluvar University
Serkkadu, Vellore- 632 115.
Tamil Nadu, India.

ABSTRACT

Perumal Murugan is critically acclaimed writer in Tamil language, he is famous for using the Kongu Tamil dialects in his writings. His novel *One Part Woman* got controversial among the local religious people and sent out from his native district. The select novels of Murugan's *Seasons of the Palm* and *Pyre* have been taken up for a study to bring out the study of the marginalized and their social conditions. This paper "The Caste Cultural Conflicts in Perumal Murugan's Select Novels" attempts to explore the unconditional complex nexus between upper and lower caste people in Indian socio-cultural and political view. The central aim of this paper is to bring out how the multiple characters are influenced and driven by upper-caste Hindus in Indian society. It also deals with how these laborious, landless and lower social ordered people are dehumanized at the hands of the upper-caste people at various positions. Murugan has artistically portrayed the very sensitive issue of marginalized sections in his novels. The chief characters of the novelist are from the marginalized sections of society who are poor in socio-economic, socio-political and socio-cultural aspects. Moreover, Murugan's marginalized characters are facing a larger amount of deprivations because of their caste and clan. The domineering attitude of the upper-caste stratum still continues to ill-treat, exploit, and attempt to murder them anyway.

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Keywords: Society, Culture, Caste, Inter-caste, Dalits, Honour-killing and Discrimination

Introduction:

The palm is used as a metaphor and it dominates the landscape of the novel through its characteristics. The palm is a type of tree that can withstand drought throughout the year and it can produce fruit, root, nut, juice and toddy in every season. Similarly, the Dalit children who spend most of their lives in the pastures for herding, the pastures also serve as mother for them to soothe their oppression from the Masters. The children retain a small amount of happiness, to bear the many burdens, oppressions, pains, and poverty of their families. The enjoyment such as having fun, eating nuts, birds egg, enjoying swimming at the well and playing various games. Reversely the Master house turned to be the place where hellish to obtain severe punishments and continue their restless works so that the novelist Perumal Murugan has divided the novel into three divisions 'Dust,' 'Fine Mud,' and 'Dry Earth'. Chiefly these three divisions denote the different life transformations of the Dalit children, especially the protagonist Shorty's life.

The Culture Integrates Casteism in *Seasons of The Palm*:

The novelist Murugan manages to present the rigid relationships between upper and lower caste customary traditional behaviours and the modern socio-cultural norms followed by the upper-caste authority, in which he justifies their continued existence throughout the novels *Seasons of the Palm* and *Pyre*. The upper-caste Hindus authority dictates the codes of conduct to be followed in the society, it justifies their acts of brutality and further reinforces their positions of superiority in the society. The strong-rooted Manu law in the thousands of year in the Indian soil acknowledges Dalits to obey and act upon what the Manu law recommends to retain their positions of inferiority. Prashant Chaudhry says:

The caste system created the infrastructure for the formation of social relations and interactions between different groups, people and social systems in Indian society. From the above evidence, we can conclude that the old age caste system is still perpetuating in Indian society.(62)

The novel *Seasons of the Palm* focuses on the hard lives of a group of children as lovingly drawn characters like 'Shorty', 'Tallfellow', 'Stumpleg' and 'Matchbox'. The

RESEARCH ARTICLE

protagonist Shorty who grazes the goats in Gounder's field. In the cowshed, he has to do the cleaning works and look after the cattle. Here the novelist Murugan depicts the cattle as not an asylum for Shorty but it is a torture room for him. The lower social status, poverty and lack of education keep them to serve as a slave in the hands of the upper castes. The marginalized characters in the novel are work under the bondage system in the Gounder community who are economically, socially wealthy than these Chakkili caste people. Historically the larger amount of land was owned by the Gownder caste, no other go, these marginalized set to depend on the upper-castes for their livelihood. Therefore the exploitation of the marginalized continued to suck their labour because their bondage varies according to their age group.

The pitiable condition in the society is not only the children of these marginalized sections are bonded laborers to the Gounder master but also to their parents who work for many generations. Belly's father works on the farm of the other landlord master and at the same time, her mother does household jobs for Belly's Mistress throughout the day. It is the inhuman treatment given to the poor, besides the rejection of happiness of the landless orphan, and the exploitations of the deprived and unjust social structure. The poverty of the family of Shorty makes them bonded laborers' forever. It is the duty of the men to take care of his family in the marginalized section of society. Sometimes, Tall fellow happens to clean the piss and shits of his old Master with worst abuses.

'Where the hell did you go?'

'Doing cowshed work, as you know.'

Tallfellow's tone is deliberately placid.

'Shed work! Fuck shed work!'(SOP.49)

In *Seasons of the Palm*, the sheer cruelty that surrounds the main characters serves the role of chaining their minds and adapting their beliefs. The nature of enslavement is mournfully tinted throughout the names the author bestows upon the principle characters who are denied proper names instead they are addressed by the labels such as Shorty, Belly, Tall fellow, and Matchbox. On the account of being of short physique and on account of having a big or round belly, height and so on. Although the characters who belong to the Gownder master sons such as Selvan and Mani are called proper names and addressed as 'Young Master' by the chakili children. Here the characters, lower-castes children body are the single means of sustenance. The physic plays a central part in social politics which is derived from life and directed to death, a unit that both creates and destroys. The naming of these lower-caste characters under

RESEARCH ARTICLE

their physical characteristics foregrounds the significance of the human body, both in its symbolic and literal manifestations.

The Caste Cultural Rudiment in Inter-Caste Marital Life:

The development of the caste system has made several customs for women in the name of culture. This Varna system is an obstacle to women emancipation in Indian society. The casteist always believes that the sanctity of the caste kept in woman chastity, the casteist people are very much concerned about getting married in their same caste. The thousand years of caste rigidity and cultural heritage have come to clash with the twentieth century when Indian urban and towns emerging as metropolitan cities. Most of the village locality and street order is based on the caste, and no other caste people are allowed to reside at their street or locality. However, the cities and towns are exceptional to these criteria:

The caste system is very much influenced the economic structure in the Indian village. The village was essentially a food-providing unit, where each family of the craft or service caste was linked with one or more of the land owning-farmer-caste family.” (Velassery).

In *Pyre*, The customs and religions in the novel practised were merciless. The novel depicts the life horrible reality of caste cruelty and struggles of an inter-caste married couple in a rural Indian village. It also highlights the struggle of inter-caste couples and how it is difficult to survive in such marriages. Though Murugan never reveals the caste of Saroja, Kumaresan keeps on saying that she belongs to the same caste. Anyhow, the villagers never believe him because of her fair skin. Kumaresan's mother was convinced to send Kumaresan to Tholur to work in a soda shop but not to shatter the caste sanctity. This is a real thought of uneducated men and women who do not aware of the values, virtues and integrity of human society in the modern era. However, Murugan makes very ambivalent themes and uses unique conceptual tools keeping in mind the stubbornness of this caste-ridden society.

In many of the places, the protagonist Saroja remains sarcastic due to the rigid caste system by not replying to the villagers. The preoccupied fear of caste brutality heard from her father frightens her even more. Saroja's inter-caste marital life weakness her more and often sheds tear thinking of her past life with father and brother. Sometimes she thinks to go back to meet his father and brother to ask forgiveness. “She couldn't help but feel that it was her father's and brother's knowledge.” (*Pyre*.32)

The existential problems faced by Saroja reveals she is not a rebel to break the cocoons of inter-caste married life, typically it illustrates she is a common woman who is unaware of her circumstance. Moreover, she is not in a position to confront her consequences of what she

RESEARCH ARTICLE

would be going to face after the marriage, especially inter-caste marriage. The protagonist remains quiet in every state wherever she is required to raise her voice against, that openly propagandizing she is incapable of tackling the situation in her deprived conditions. Perhaps she would have rebelled against these anti-elements like caste, patriarchal domination, she could have fought against honour- killing not becoming a victim of this casteist morons hand rather ending her dream of married life. “Her dream would end now. Any moment now she would wake up and laugh t what a terrible dream it was” (Pyre.196). Murugan has vividly depicted Saroja’s character who isa helpless victim of inter-caste marriage that ransacked her life.

Murugan’s writings constantly carry the past and the present, neighboring the thin line between reality and functionality. Commonly his writing flows with ease, whether it is meticulously connecting the history and detailing the traditions of a particular locality, ritual, and capturing the character’s belief and sentiments that move from despair to joy and fear to hope. The non-dramatic narratives of his nature seized the unaffected simplicity of its linguistic expression and it is irregularly contrasted with instances of raw honesty. Even though his writings bear the marks of uncompromising realism, the work of art, representation, presentation of a thing, entity and event. This brings questions not just regarding the nature of representation but also regarding the authenticity of the narratorial voice. The apparent authenticity of a scrupulous narrative determines the validity of the meticulous vantage point of the narrator.

The versatile sensitiveness and consciousness of Murugan’s responsibilities as a writer is considered to be the most proficient writers of his generation. Apart from his deep engagement with the Kongu region and its people, he has vividly depicted all the elements of the soil. The absence of political confrontation to such supreme caste dominance is notable, chiefly in a state like Tamilnadu with its progressive politics. However the oppressed occupy their forms of resistance. The ultimate transformation of urbanization provides them more avenues to work as daily labourers and even journey across the country with the mechanized engineer to dig bore wells. It is an inquisitive absurdity that even as progressive Indians would like to eradicate the caste system, they have no understanding of their lived reality or specific caste groups in their traditional landscape. Even as these communities followed and often dispossessed by the forces of modernization, still they remain captive to the ways of the past that have continued them for centuries.

References

Murugan, Perumal. *Seasons of the Palam*. Trans. V. Geetha. Penguin Random House

RESEARCH ARTICLE

India Pvt. Ltd: New Delhi, 2017.print.

Murugan, Perumal. *Pyre*. Trans. Aniruddhan Vasudevan. Penguin Publishers:
New Delhi, 2016.print.

Chaudhry, Prashant. Caste as an Institutionalized System of Social Exclusion and
Discrimination: Some Evidence, International Journal of Gender and Women's
Studies, American Research Institute for Policy Development, 1(1); June 2013.
Print.

Velassery, Sebastian. *Casteism and Human Rights: Toward an Ontology of the
Social Order*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Academic, 2005. Print.

<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/29861389-pyre>.