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Fable as a literary strategy: An allegorical reading of Perumal Murugan's select works

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Abstract

The paper aims to do an allegorical reading of Perumal Murugan's works in order to establish various meanings and interpretations. The researcher will see how Murugan's allegorical narration articulates abstract ideas with the help of certain literary elements such as plot, settings, characters, etc. The paper also focuses on how allegory as a narrative style helps writers to convey complex and controversial ideas which subsequently aids the writer's freedom of expression.

Keywords: Allegory, Fable, Interpretation, Freedom of expression, Symbols

Introduction

Perumal Murugan announced his retirement as a writer after facing threats and protests against his novel *One Part Women*. He announced his retirement on social media by posting that the author in him is dead. However, a year after the writer in Perumal Murugan was brought back to life when the Hon'ble Madras High Court gave a decision in favour of the author stating "Let the author be resurrected to what he is best at. Write" (Doshi). After being resurrected Murugan's comeback is marked by two of his recent works: *The Songs of Coward: Poems of Exile*, an anthology of poems, and the novel *Poonachi or The Story of a Black Goat* both published in 2016. In the "Preface" to the novel *Poonachi*, he expresses his fear of being misunderstood and judged by the masses. Hence, he writes "I am fearful of writing about humans; even more fearful of writing about god" (Murugan v). The controversy surrounding his novel *One Part Woman* which resulted in his self-imposed exile provided him with ample time to rethink and contemplate his writing. His resolution to write, neither on humans nor on gods marks the change in his method of writing which is evident in the novel *Poonachi or the Story of a Black Goat*. While giving an interview to *The Equator Line Magazine*, Murugan justifies his writing, by stating, "I never intend to create controversies. My only intention is to communicate through my creations. I want my work to break the social stereotype, break the stasis" (Press Trust of India). Therefore, Murugan clearly understands his role as a writer. The majority of his past works expose social problems to bring reform and his recent novel *Poonachi or The Story of a Black Goat* employs the implicit form and style of fable to achieve its goal.

Writers have used fables throughout the annals of history as a means of expressing their most intimate feelings and thoughts. The implicit nature of fables works in the direction of the author's interest in 'self-preservation'. As Rachel E. Hile in her work *Spenserian Satire: A Tradition of Indirection* writes that "... authors of potentially dangerous material sought rhetorical forms that could at once maximise the communicative function of their works while minimizing the chance that hostile readers could use their own words against them as evidence of offensive intent" (11-12). Fable being one such rhetorical form, conjoins the fictional world with the real by taking the help of literary devices like allusions, symbols and analogies. These devices help the readers to make connections between the fictional work with the real world. Extensive use of such literary devices might lead to a vivid and solid resemblance but will unfortunately "...increase the possibility of punitive and censoring retribution" (Hile 12).

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Therefore, fable is not merely a form but also a strategy, as the author shrewdly places hints and allusion for readers to discover and interpret. The method of indirect criticism in fables benefits the author as it provides a “smokescreen of deniability about criticism launched at those with the power to punish” (Hile 12). Murugan also uses this ‘smokescreen’ as a tool for redemption. As his work *Poonachi or The Story of a Black Goat* might also serve as a mode of expression for the author’s earlier troubled state of mind. His preface to the novel *Poonachi or The Story of a Black Goat*, titled “The Dormant Seed”—a reference to his troubled and impoverished state of mind—announces the awakening of his creative process of writing. To counter his deep-rooted fears and doubts, he decides to shift his subject of stories, from humans to demons and animals. Though, he refuses to write anything about animals like cows or pigs as discussing and writing about them is problematic or more precisely ‘forbidden’. It is apparent from the title, that the novel focuses on the story of a goat named Poonachi. Murugan claims that goats are “problem-free, harmless, and, above all, energetic” (Murugan v) therefore, a perfect subject to maintain the pace of the novel. After his long period of silence, Murugan’s efforts of creating the lively character of Poonachi on the page brought him enough joy and pleasure. He writes in the preface, “It was a major challenge to create her on the page and the chief impediment was the diffidence that had come to reside in me. I believed that Poonachi would be able to break it. I feel now that my faith in her was not unjustified” (Murugan v-vi) It is evident that Murugan’s strategic use of the fable genre helped him to overcome his past hesitation in writing. The character Poonachi and the story also imply Murugan’s ups and downs in his writing carrier. According to The JCB Prize for Literature’s jury panel the novel, *Poonachi*, is “a powerful modern fable”. The allegorical references to Murugan’s writing is deeply embedded in the techniques of fable used in the novel. The main character, Poonachi or the goat itself represents the writer and his writings. In an interview given to *The Quint*, Murugan recounts that, “I have raised hundreds of goats in my life. I chose the dark Poonachi from them. She resides in me...” (Balasubramanian). Hence, Poonachi, the pitch-black coloured doe resides in Murugan and her energetic nature symbolizing liveliness, reflexivity, curiosity and ambition further throws light on his intriguing writing and storytelling techniques.

One of the most important characteristics of Poonachi is her colour. In the story, “Her black colour was a problem” since, black goats were considered dangerous by the state. According to a lore in the story, the regime once wiped out all the black goats in the state, as it assumed them to be menacing because of their colour, which made them invisible in the dark. Therefore, only white and brown goats were found but whenever a black goat appeared out of the blue, it’s colour provoked hostility among the people. Similarly, Murugan’s writing evoke fear in the established system, as he aims to challenge it and like the outnumbered black goats, writers like Murugan are also less in number and are feared for no reason. Murugan in an interview states: “My conversation allows everyone to fit in and debate and happily talk within the space. Handful who are stereotypical make this space controversial” (Press Trust of India). Therefore, through his works Murugan creates an all-inclusive space of discourse, which is, in fact, disliked by the orthodox people who are stubbornly reluctant to shift

their ground. Later, in the novel *Poonachi*, losses her shiny black colour. Being malnourished for weeks, her colour changes to a dull matte shade, making her appear haggard and weary. The change in her hair colour from shiny black to a shade of dull black signifies the hardships she has to face while growing up. Poonachi’s poor and impoverished condition is further intensified by the discrimination she has to face as an outsider, from the nanny goats. The novel narrates a story of prejudice and discrimination, drawing a parallel between Poonachi and the writer. All together, the ever-changing attitude of the old couple and the goats towards Poonachi, can be interpreted as the discrimination Murugan himself faced during the controversy. Hence, in one of his poems “Vinodah Mirugam” (A Strange Animal), from his anthology, *The Songs of Coward: Poems of Exile* (2016), he writes: “When I enter people shut their doors and windows... they send away other guests. Someone has painted horns, fit them on my head and has turned me into a strange animal” (Swaroop). Poonachi, is also treated strangely because of her feeble and puny appearance, hence, in the story, everybody calls her a kitten instead of a goat. After getting misunderstood and accused of blasphemy by religious fundamentalists, Murugan claims, that he now has a ‘censor seated’ within him. The poem anthology *Songs of a Coward: Poems of Exile* has autobiographical elements as it were written during his two years of exile and is remarkable for using animal imagery such as dogs, crows, hens, pigs, and many more, reflecting the many states of Murugan’s mind. Being aware of the therapeutic effect of writing, he chooses to extend his use of animal imagery in the novel *Poonachi or The Story of a Black Goat*, as a smokescreen for his thoughts and opinions.

The image of goats in the novel stands out from the portrayal of human beings and other animals. Their characteristics and activities make them appear free and wild as compared to humans and other domestic animals. In the novel, when the old woman takes Poonachi for getting her registered, everybody, including the animals in the registration office behave accordingly except the goats, who continuously try to break free from their owners. Hence, the narration:

Everyone was well versed in how they were expected to behave towards the regime. They had mouth only to keep shut, hands only to bend, and bodies only to shrink before the authorities. But they had difficult time doing all this while trying to keep their goats under control (Murugan 35). The goats are remarkable for transgressing and creating disturbance for any prevailing power in the novel. On the other hand, sheep serve a contrasting figure against the portrayal of goats, as animals lacking self-esteem and confidence. Poonachi takes an instant dislike towards the flock of sheep who submissively live by keeping their heads down. According, to her “none of the sheep had their neck and foreleg bound together with a rope” as it were “only done to proud goats who are always forced to look at the ground as they walked. Goats always tried to break free of their shackle.” (61). Poonachi also muses that, the sheep’s attitude of always looking down to the ground, deprives them from experiencing natural marvels like “the trees, the moons, the stars and daylight”, making their life not worth living. She, further reflects upon their submissive nature which prevent them from realize that, “to bow is to be shackled” (61). The struggle for freedom in goats resembles Murugan’s strive for expression in a world, which is

encumbered with all kinds of censorships. Poonachi's sense of freedom and confidence serves as an inspiration for Murugan, to rejuvenate himself and also his writing. The perpetual crisis in the lives of goats, slowly withers their true exuberant nature. In the novel, goats are presented to be more drawn towards nature than being domesticated as a livestock animal. Hence, in the fifth chapter, a man standing in queue for registering his goats to the regime, opines on the surveillance of goats as quite important stating that, "if we don't keep a strict watch on them, they'll become arrogant and do anything they want. 'We were in the forest once, we'll go back there,' they'll say and run away" (Murugan 36). The close association of goats with nature is also evident in the chapter twelve of the novel where, Poonachi gets lost in the forest and wishes to permanently stay there instead of going back in the village to live with the old couple. The forest overwhelms her with the feeling of freedom and liberation for, "there were ponds to drink from as well as to swim in" and moreover "she could keep going in any direction as if through endless space" (Murugan 82). Therefore, living shackled by humans, the goats' "most intimate feelings as they have evolved through the ages, are under siege" which ultimately turns them into inert beings. The novel reveals different occasions when the goats are subjected to various tribulations simply for being true to their nature. One such instance in the novel is the castration of male goats for being sexually active and amorous. In the eleventh chapter a young buck, Kaduvayan owned by the old couple is castrated for being amorous and troublesome. The abuse and pain, which the buck has to go through while the castration process is well expressed in the lines: "Opening out the scissors sticks, the boatman placed the testicle between the two arms and pressed down. Something snapped with a loud crack. 'Beyyyaaaaa!' Kduvyayan let out a single long cry... with tears pouring out of his eyes, Kaduvayan collapsed to the ground" (Murugan 72). The sole purpose of castration is to tame the bucks, so they can easily be controlled. After the castration, Kaduvayan's behaviour changes, he becomes inert and inactive, when Poonachi tries butting him, "he did not do anything to her. Nor did he ever go after chasing after the female kids in the other herds" (Murugan 75-76). The castration not only destroys the sexual drive flowing in the young buck but also brings an end to his zestful nature. Castration can be seen as a symbol of oppression and in the case of writers like Murugan it symbolizes censorship. Hence, referring to Rushdie's quote - "effect of censorship is that in the end, it can deaden the imagination of the people" (Rushdie 39), consequently writers after losing their faculty of imagination become inert and passive like the castrated goats. One of the greatest tragedies of Poonachi and the other goats in the novel, is their incapability, of not being able to express themselves. Although, the goats continuously think and feel throughout the novel but they eventually fail to communicate between themselves and their masters. For instance, there are times when Poonachi tries to communicate with the old woman but fails to do so. The condition of Poonachi can be learnt from the following lines: "Every night Poonachi told the old woman everything that had happened that day in the pasture. Of what she recounted, the old woman would understand some things and not others" (Murugan 65). There is, in fact some understanding between Poonachi and the old woman as they share a bond of love with each other. The bond of love does

establish some understanding between the characters but most of the times, they are suffocated in their own thoughts without finding an outlet to express themselves. Murugan creates a world which lacks communication and expression and is further suppressed by the presence of the powerful and all-pervading regime. This fictional world in the novel, echoes the tribulation Murugan felt during his self-imposed literary exile which ultimately deprived him of his power to write and express. Hence, Murugan referring to the controversy writes in the "Preface" to his poem anthology *The Songs of Coward: Poems of Exile* that: "There were periods when I abstained from writing due to the exigencies of survival. Even then, thoughts would always gallop through my mind. I might or might not have had the ability to control the trajectory of my thoughts, but I've never actively wanted to control it" (Water Spilling on Every Side). Murugan's "exigencies of survival" is reflected in the character Poonachi, who remains precarious, throughout the novel. Although, even after going through many critical situations, she never loses her peculiar quality to think and contemplate. Her continuous thoughts about her existence and questions related to the purpose of her life, draws similarities with Murugan's state of mind. For Murugan, writing is similar to Poonachi's contemplation and thinking process therefore, in the "Preface" to *The Song of a Coward: Poems of Exile*, he writes: "For me writing is the habit of mind". But, unlike Murugan, Poonachi is deprived of any means to express herself which again signifies his condition during the self-imposed exile. The anthology comprises of two hundred poems which were composed by Murugan during his period of exile. The poems in the anthology reflects his most intimate and personal feelings shaped by the many fears and doubts he felt. His decision to withdraw himself from the literary field could not stop him from composing poems. Writing played a major role to relieve him from his disturbing experience of the controversy. In the "Foreword" to his anthology, Murugan recounts that even after being a full time collage teacher for almost twenty years, "writing remains my only vocation". According to him, writing remains close to his heart providing an "outlet" for his immediate "feelings and emotions" ("Water Spilling on Every Side") hence, emancipating him from the grips of his darkest fears and doubts. He also claims that writing, on many occasions has helped him as a "vehicle for recovery from any set-back" (Water Spilling on Every Side).

Therefore, when the lively and zestful Poonachi dies and turns into a "stone idol" it indicates her degradation from an animate being to an inanimate object. Poonachi's suffering increases as she passes from childhood to her adult life. The draught in the background of the novel foreshadows the impeding "dark time" bringing crisis upon Poonachi and everything that seems to be alive. Her fecundity which was earlier considered to be a boon by the old couple is perceived as a curse during the time of drought. Hence, the draught signifies the contemporary times during which Murugan's talent for writing itself became a curse for him. Referring, to his self-imposed exile, he writes: "The moment I felt that boon to be a curse, I strangled the throat of that habit" ("Water Spilling on Every Side"). The lack of rain and the struggle for life in the novel is symbolic to the writer's loss of confidence and his struggle for expression. Poonachi serves as a metaphor for Murugan's qualities as a writer and on the other hand, it also reveals his helplessness

and precarious existence in an uncertain world. Therefore, Murugan creates the character of Poonachi in his own image and through her narrates a story of personal crisis to his readers. Poonachi serves as an outlet for Murugan to express his deeply rooted doubts and emotions eventually causing him to revive.

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