

Fractured Identities: Caste, Gender and Violence in *Poonachi: The Story of a Black Goat and One Part Woman*

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Abstract

This study analyzes Perumal Murugan's *Poonachi: The Story of a Black Goat and One Part Woman* to explore the multifaceted theme of fractured identity within the context of caste, gender, and violence in India. Murugan's novels offer a powerful lens through which to examine the complex interplay between personal and collective identities as characters navigate the oppressive forces of tradition and societal expectations. *Poonachi*, through the symbolic representation of a black goat, and *One Part Woman*, through the experiences of a marginalized woman, expose the devastating consequences of caste-based discrimination and gender inequality. Murugan's innovative narrative style and evocative symbolism provide a poignant critique of how cultural and social hierarchies shape individual experiences and identities. The precarious existence of *Poonachi*, subjected to societal whims and the vulnerabilities inherent in her animal status, mirrors the struggles faced by marginalized communities. Similarly, the female protagonist in *One Part Woman* grapples with societal pressures and expectations, highlighting the restrictions imposed on women within patriarchal structures. By examining the protagonist's struggle for agency and the reclamation of her narrative in *One Part Woman*, alongside the symbolic journey of *Poonachi*, this paper illuminates the enduring impact of historical and contemporary forms of oppression on marginalized communities in India. The research delves into the ways in which both novels challenge traditional power structures and offer a nuanced understanding of the psychological and social ramifications of marginalization.

Keywords: Caste, Hierarchy, Identity, Marginalized, Violence.

Introduction

The intricate interplay of social hierarchy, caste, and identity in Indian society profoundly shapes both individual and collective experiences. Perumal Murugan, a prominent contemporary Indian author, fearlessly delves into these complexities in his acclaimed novels *Poonachi: The Story of a Black Goat* and *One Part Woman*. Murugan's narratives transcend mere exploration of caste-based prejudice, societal norms, and existential dilemmas; they lay bare the brutal realities of oppression and resilience within a rigid social fabric. This study aims to move beyond existing literary analyses of Murugan's work, which often focuses on thematic and stylistic elements, to critically examine how his narratives illuminate the profound intersection of caste, violence, and social hierarchy in shaping cultural identity and igniting identity crises. By employing an intersectional lens, this study will delve into the multifaceted nature of oppression experienced by Murugan's characters, particularly highlighting their agency and resistance in the face of

systematic marginalization. This exploration contributes to broader discourses on social justice, equity, and the enduring legacy of caste in contemporary India, underscoring the urgent need for dismantling oppressive structures and fostering inclusive societies.

This study seeks to examine

- The portrayal of cultural identity and identity crises in Perumal Murugan's novels *Poonachi: The Story of a Black Goat* and *One Part Woman*.
- Analyze the impact of caste, violence, and social hierarchy on the characters' experiences and identities, and explore the thematic and artistic strategies employed by Murugan to handle these complex socio-cultural issues. The main inquiries that guide this analysis are as follows:
- How do Murugan's books depict the development and facilitation of cultural identity while addressing entrenched societal hierarchies?

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(Received 25th October 2024; Accepted 30th January 2025; Published 31st January 2025)

- How does the intertwining of caste, cruelty, and social isolation shape the identity crises experienced by the characters?
- Moreover, how do the narrative techniques and literary devices utilized by Murugan contribute to the exploration of these themes?

Moreover, this study goes beyond merely contributing to current discussions on social justice, equity, and the persistent grip of caste in contemporary Indian society; it underscores the potent role of literature as a lens for critical reflection and examination of entrenched cultural norms and power structures (1). While existing literature provides valuable insights into Murugan's literary techniques and thematic concerns, this study aims to address a gap in scholarship by specifically focusing on the nuanced ways his narratives illuminate the complexities of cultural identity formation and the struggle against oppressive social structures.

Several scholars have examined the portrayal of caste and marginalization in Murugan's works. For instance, Ashok Peer, in his analysis of *Poonachi*, highlights how Murugan utilizes the titular goat as an allegory for the dehumanizing experiences of Dalits within a hierarchical society (2). He also argues that the novel exposes the insidious nature of caste-based oppression, which permeates even the most intimate aspects of life. Similarly, Jiwan Kumar examines the plight of marginalized communities in literature, emphasizing the shift from narratives glorifying the elite to those centering on the lived realities of the oppressed (3). Kumar's work underscores the importance of amplifying subaltern voices and challenging dominant narratives that perpetuate social inequalities.

Furthermore, scholarship on identity formation within oppressive systems provides a crucial framework for this study. For instance, Vasti Torres and Ebelia Hernandez explore the impact of ethnic identity on self-authorship among Latino college students, highlighting the challenges faced by marginalized groups in navigating dominant academic spaces. Their research underscores the importance of recognizing and valuing diverse forms of knowledge and experience, particularly those often silenced or marginalized within traditional educational settings (4). This resonates with the experiences of Murugan's characters, who navigate a social landscape where their identities

are constantly scrutinized and policed according to rigid caste-based norms. Additionally, Paulla Ebron and Anna Tsing's exploration of "sites of dialogue" in minority writing highlights how literature can serve as a platform for challenging dominant discourses and fostering social change (5). This framework proves particularly relevant when analyzing how Murugan's characters navigate and resist oppressive structures through their actions and interactions.

While this study draws upon existing scholarship on caste, identity, and resistance, it seeks to offer a more focused analysis of how these themes converge in Murugan's *Poonachi* and *One Part Woman*. By employing an intersectional lens, this study will delve into the multifaceted nature of oppression experienced by Murugan's characters, particularly highlighting their agency and resilience in the face of systematic marginalization. This exploration aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how literature can serve as a catalyst for social change by fostering empathy, challenging dominant narratives, and empowering marginalized voices.

Methodology

Perumal Murugan's novels *Poonachi: The Story of a Black Goat* and *One Part Woman* are critically analyzed in this research work using a qualitative methodology. The study involves an in-depth examination of the texts to identify and explicate the thematic elements related to caste, violence, and social hierarchy. The primary focus is to analyze how these central themes impact the construction and negotiation of cultural identity, ultimately leading to identity crises experienced by the characters.

The research employs a multifaceted approach, drawing upon literary analysis techniques such as thematic analysis, characterization, and narrative structure to scrutinize the depiction of caste dynamics and their profound influence on individual and community identity formation. Beyond just textual analysis, the study situates Murugan's works within a broader socio-cultural context, incorporating additional scholarly materials, including academic papers, critiques, and socio-anthropological studies, to enhance the depth and nuance of the interpretations. This adaptable methodology enables a comprehensive understanding of the intricate and multifaceted issues portrayed in Murugan's novels, illuminating

their significance in the ongoing discourses surrounding caste, identity, and the transformative potential of literature. By delving deeper into the complexities of these texts, the research aims to contribute to a more holistic and empathetic engagement with the lived realities of marginalized communities, as well as the role of artistic expression in challenging and reshaping dominant narratives.

This study employs the theoretical framework of intersectionality, as articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw, to critically examine the literary works of Perumal Murugan, particularly *Poonachi: The Story of a Black Goat* and *One Part Woman*. Intersectionality provides a vital lens through which to understand how various social identities, such as caste, gender, and class, are inextricably interconnected, creating overlapping systems of oppression and privilege.

Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality highlights the unique forms of discrimination experienced by individuals who belong to multiple marginalized groups, which cannot be fully grasped through single-axis frameworks. By emphasizing the importance of examining these identities in tandem, intersectionality reveals how social hierarchies and systemic inequities operate through their intersections (6). In the context of Murugan's novels, this theoretical framework becomes an essential tool for analyzing how the intersection of caste and gender jointly shapes the characters' lived experiences, identities, and struggles. The deeply stratified nature of Indian society, entrenched in both caste-based and patriarchal norms, creates a complex web of discrimination and marginalization that determines the socio-political and personal realities of individuals. The intersection of caste and gender amplifies the oppression faced by marginalized groups, particularly women from lower-caste backgrounds, whose experiences are shaped by compounded social disadvantages.

In *One Part Woman*, Murugan explores the intertwined struggles of Ponna, a woman grappling with societal expectations and personal desires within caste-based patriarchy. Her infertility, a deeply stigmatized condition, becomes a source of public shame and personal anguish, exacerbated by her financial instability and the pressure to uphold caste norms and produce heirs. This dual burden deepens her sense of alienation,

as her body becomes a battleground for societal judgments. In *Poonachi: The Story of a Black Goat*, Murugan employs allegory to critique the entrenched hierarchies of caste and gender, with the black goat symbolizing the marginalized "other" whose experiences of exploitation, neglect, and suffering are emblematic of the compounded marginalization faced by those doubly oppressed by caste and gender.

Intersectionality enriches the analysis of these novels by providing a nuanced understanding of how caste and gender intersect to produce unique forms of oppression and resistance (7). In both works, Murugan explores the ways in which systemic inequities are internalized and contested by his characters. The weight of caste-based expectations and patriarchal norms shapes their identities, but their responses to these oppressive structures also highlight acts of resilience and agency. By focusing on these intersections, this framework not only sheds light on the lived experiences of the oppressed but also critiques the broader societal systems that perpetuate inequality.

Results and Discussion

The caste system in India, a complex social hierarchy with origins in ancient history, has profoundly shaped the nation's social fabric. While its historical development is debated, the system is often linked to the arrival of Indo-Aryan groups and the subsequent codification of social divisions in texts like the Manusmriti (8). This codification established a rigid hierarchy with Brahmins (priests and scholars) at the top, followed by Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers), Vaishyas (merchants and traders), and Shudras (laborers and servants). Outside this fourfold varna system existed the "untouchables" or Dalits, who faced severe social exclusion and discrimination (9). Though outlawed in independent India's constitution (10), the caste system continues to exert a significant influence on social relations, economic opportunities, and political dynamics. The system's historical legacy of discrimination and inequality has created deep social cleavages and continues to marginalize certain communities (11).

This historical and social context informs the central themes of Perumal Murugan's novels. His works explore the pervasive impact of caste on individual lives, highlighting the experiences of

those marginalized and oppressed by the system. The characters' struggles with social mobility, discrimination, and the denial of basic human rights reflect the ongoing realities of caste in India. By examining the intersection of caste with other social categories like gender and class (9), Murugan's novels offer a nuanced portrayal of the system's complex and enduring impact on Indian society.

Perumal Murugan's narratives, while set in rural Tamil Nadu, offer valuable insights into the dynamics of caste that resonate with urban contexts. His exploration of caste-based oppression, resilience, and the pursuit of social change remains pertinent to contemporary urban India. Caste dynamics in urban settings manifest in various forms, including residential segregation, social interactions, and economic opportunities. Research has shown that caste-based residential segregation persists in Indian cities (12), often marginalizing specific communities and limiting their access to resources and opportunities (13). This spatial segregation mirrors historical patterns and reinforces social hierarchies. Moreover, studies have shown that lower-caste communities are often relegated to specific areas (14), hindering their access to essential services and upward mobility. This urban segregation reflects the social exclusion experienced by marginalized groups in Murugan's rural narratives.

Murugan's portrayal of marginalized individuals, such as Poonachi in *Poonachi: The Story of a Black Goat*, enduring systemic exploitation, parallels the experiences of urban lower-caste populations facing discrimination and limited social mobility. The allegory of the black goat symbolizes the marginalized, whose lives are dictated by external forces, reflecting the dehumanizing effects of caste-based oppression. This resonates with the urban context where caste continues to influence social interactions and economic opportunities. Furthermore, Murugan's focus on resilience amidst adversity resonates with the experiences of urban marginalized communities. In *One Part Woman*, the protagonists' struggle against societal pressures mirrors the challenges faced by urban lower-caste individuals striving for social mobility and recognition. Studies reveal that caste identities intersect with other social factors like gender, religion, and region to shape individuals' life chances and mobility trajectories (11). This

intersectionality is evident in Murugan's work, where characters navigate multiple forms of marginalization.

Although rooted in rural settings, Murugan's work offers valuable insights into urban caste dynamics by highlighting the enduring nature of caste-based oppression and the universal human quest for dignity and equality. His narratives underscore the importance of recognizing and addressing caste discrimination across all settings to foster a more equitable society.

Caste and Cultural Identity

Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* delves into the deeply entrenched structures of caste and their profound impact on individual and communal identities within the seemingly idyllic setting of rural Tamil Nadu. Far from being a relic of the past, Murugan demonstrates how caste permeates every aspect of social life, dictating relationships, opportunities, and even the most intimate desires. Despite the veneer of societal progress, the novel unveils the insidious ways in which deep-rooted prejudices and discrimination continue to shape lived experiences, particularly for those relegated to the margins of society (15).

Murugan masterfully portrays the suffocating pressure exerted by societal expectations through the poignant struggles of Kali and Ponna (16), a couple grappling with the stigma of childlessness. Their inability to conceive becomes a source of shame and ostracism, exposing the brutal reality of a social order that equates individual worth with adherence to rigid norms. Drawing upon the theoretical framework of "intrusive archeology of caste" (2), the novel illustrates how caste operates as an omnipresent force, constantly scrutinizing and policing individuals based on their perceived social standing. Kali and Ponna's desperate search for a solution takes them beyond the confines of their community, highlighting the pervasive reach of caste and its ability to dictate even the most personal choices. Through their experiences, Murugan compels readers to confront the uncomfortable truth that societal progress does not necessarily equate to the dismantling of deeply ingrained systems of oppression.

One Part Woman unravels the intricate web of social norms, traditions, and power dynamics that govern marital and sexual relations in a caste-ridden society. Murugan deftly illustrates how caste hierarchies intersect with gender to control

the bodies and choices of individuals, particularly women, echoing Rao's assertion that "caste is not merely a system of social stratification but a lived experience that shapes the most intimate aspects of life" (17). Kali and Ponna's yearning for a child becomes a poignant example of this intersectionality, as their desire transcends personal longing and becomes entangled with the societal imperative to maintain the "purity" of bloodlines (4).

The novel exposes the insidious ways in which cultural and religious practices, often perceived as benign or even sacred, are deployed to reinforce caste boundaries and perpetuate discrimination. The temple festival, for instance, becomes a site of both hope and manipulation, as childless couples are lured by the promise of a child while simultaneously being reminded of their societal obligations to uphold caste purity (17). This echoes Hussain's argument that "caste operates through a complex interplay of coercion and consent, often utilizing cultural and religious idioms to legitimize its oppressive structures" (18).

Murugan does not shy away from depicting the psychological toll of caste-based discrimination. Kali and Ponna's inability to conceive becomes a source of profound shame and isolation, eroding their sense of self-worth and highlighting the insidious nature of a system that thrives on the subjugation of marginalized groups. Their experiences resonate with Murugan's own assertion that "caste is a wound that never truly heals, its scars etched onto the bodies and psyches of generations" (19). Through their struggles, *One Part Woman* lays bare the pervasive and enduring legacy of caste, urging readers to confront the uncomfortable realities of a system that continues to shape lives and destinies in profound and often devastating ways.

The novel dissects the intricate and often insidious ways in which the deeply personal desire for offspring becomes entangled with the societal imperative to safeguard caste integrity and perpetuate existing hierarchies. Murugan reveals how this seemingly private aspect of life, procreation, is, in reality, a site of intense social control, particularly for marginalized communities. As Rao argues, "reproduction is not simply a biological act but a deeply social one, imbued with cultural meanings and subject to societal regulations" (17). The narrative

illuminates this dynamic through the heart-wrenching struggles of Kali and Ponna. Their inability to conceive transcends personal disappointment, evolving into a potent symbol of societal anxieties surrounding lineage, belonging, and the preservation of a rigid social order. Their quest for a child becomes a poignant reflection of the broader societal preoccupation with caste purity, highlighting how individual desires are often subsumed by the weight of collective expectations (20).

Murugan further underscores the pervasiveness of caste-based authority by illustrating how cultural and religious practices, often perceived as sources of solace and hope, are strategically deployed to reinforce existing power structures. The temple festival, for instance, while offering a glimmer of hope to childless couples, simultaneously serves as a stark reminder of their societal duty to produce heirs and uphold the "purity" of their lineage. This resonates with Rao's observation that "cultural and religious institutions often function as powerful instruments of social control, legitimizing and perpetuating existing hierarchies" (17). Through the trials and tribulations of Kali and Ponna, *One Part Woman* lays bare the complex and often contradictory forces that shape individual agency within a society deeply stratified by caste. Their story serves as a poignant reminder that even the most intimate aspects of life are inextricably linked to broader societal structures and power dynamics.

Similarly, In *Poonachi: The Story of a Black Goat*, Murugan masterfully wields the metaphor of a black goat to expose the brutal realities of caste, cultural identity, and social hierarchy within Indian society. Poonachi, whose very existence as a black goat challenges prevailing notions of purity and belonging, becomes a powerful lens through which to examine the lived experiences of marginalized communities (21). As Rao aptly observes, "animals, particularly those considered 'lowly' or 'impure,' often serve as potent symbols of social marginality and exclusion" (17).

Murugan deftly employs Poonachi's interactions with human characters, each representing different castes and social positions, to mirror the complex power dynamics that permeate Indian society. Poonachi's encounters with kindness, cruelty, exploitation, and indifference lay bare the precariousness of life on the margins, highlighting

the constant threat of violence and discrimination faced by those deemed "other" (21). By imbuing Poonachi with agency, emotions, and a distinct cultural identity, Murugan disrupts the dehumanizing gaze often directed at marginalized communities. This narrative strategy compels readers to confront the harsh realities of social injustice and recognize the shared humanity of all beings, regardless of their social standing (18). As Hussain argues, "allegory, when employed effectively, can pierce through ingrained prejudices and evoke empathy for those who are often denied it" (18).

The novel transcends the conventional narrative of marginalized experiences. By employing the black goat as a potent metaphor, Murugan delivers a searing critique of the enduring brutality, injustice, and dehumanization faced by those relegated to the fringes of society. Poonachi, the eponymous black goat, becomes a vessel through which Murugan explores the complexities of identity, power, and the struggle for cultural validation within a rigid and unforgiving social order (21).

Murugan utilizes Poonachi's journey to illuminate the lived realities of marginalized communities. Her experiences of social exclusion, prejudice, and the constant threat of violence mirror the systemic oppression faced by those deemed "other" due to their caste, religion, or social standing. As Kumar astutely observes, "Poonachi's blackness becomes a powerful symbol of difference, marking her as an outsider in a society obsessed with purity and hierarchy" (22). In light of this, the novel's exploration of human characters' reactions to Poonachi, ranging from indifference to outright hostility, lays bare the insidious nature of discrimination. These encounters expose how societal structures perpetuate inequality and normalize the denial of basic rights to marginalized individuals. Poonachi's experiences of fear, vulnerability, and the erosion of her sense of self underscore the profound psychological toll of systemic oppression.

Through Poonachi's struggle for survival and belonging, Murugan critiques the socioeconomic ramifications of caste-based hierarchies. By juxtaposing Poonachi's experiences with those of human characters from different castes, the novel reveals how these systems create and maintain a culture of violence, exploitation, and discrimination. As Spivak argues in her seminal

work *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, "the subaltern's voice is often silenced, their experiences rendered invisible by dominant narratives" (23). Murugan disrupts this silencing by giving voice to Poonachi, forcing readers to confront the uncomfortable realities of social injustice and recognize the urgent need for a more equitable and inclusive society.

Intersections of Caste, Violence, and Social Hierarchy

Perumal Murugan's *Poonachi: The Story of a Black Goat* and *One Part Woman* offers a searing indictment of the interwoven forces of caste, violence, and social hierarchy within the Indian landscape. Moving beyond mere exploration, Murugan meticulously dissects the lived realities of marginalized communities, revealing how caste-based prejudice, social exclusion, and systematic oppression manifest in the daily experiences of individuals.

In *Poonachi*, the titular black goat serves as a potent allegory for the precarious existence of those deemed inferior within a rigid caste system. Poonachi's journey, marked by constant threat, exploitation, and denied agency, mirrors the struggles of marginalized groups for basic dignity and survival. Scholar Ambedkar's seminal work on *The Annihilation of Caste* resonates deeply here, as Poonachi's very being is constantly under threat of erasure, both physically and symbolically (24). Her blackness, far from being a neutral characteristic, becomes a visible marker of her "otherness," subjecting her to a unique form of dehumanization that denies her access to even the most basic forms of care and compassion.

One Part Woman, while set against a backdrop of societal pressures surrounding childlessness, exposes the insidious ways in which patriarchal and caste-based norms intersect to oppress women. Kali and Ponna's desperate desire for a child becomes tragically entangled with the rigid social structures that dictate their worth and belonging. As Spivak famously argued, the subaltern woman often finds herself voiceless, her experiences mediated through dominant patriarchal structures (23). Kali's tragic fate embodies this silencing, highlighting the brutal consequences of a system that denies women agency and autonomy over their own bodies and destinies.

Murugan's novels transcend mere representation by delving into the *mechanisms* of oppression. He lays bare the insidious ways in which power operates through social exclusion, economic exploitation, and the constant threat of violence. The characters' strategies for navigating these structures, often marked by resilience, quiet defiance, and heartbreaking compromises, offer a testament to the human spirit's capacity for survival even in the face of overwhelming adversity. By shattering the silence surrounding caste-based oppression, Murugan compels readers to confront the brutal realities faced by marginalized communities. His works serve as a powerful call to action, urging us to dismantle the insidious structures that perpetuate inequality and deny individuals their fundamental human rights.

Internal Conflicts, Desires, and Choices

Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* and *Poonachi: The Story of a Black Goat* offer deep explorations of internal conflicts, desires, and choices, shaped by the societal pressures and personal aspirations of the protagonists. Murugan's portrayal of characters navigating the intersections of caste, gender, and socio-cultural expectations makes these struggles universally resonant while deeply rooted in the Indian social context.

In *One Part Woman*, Murugan explores the lives of Kali and Ponna, a childless couple living in rural Tamil Nadu. Their love for each other is overshadowed by the mounting societal pressure to have children, which begins to erode their bond. Kali's internal turmoil is evident as he faces the societal expectation to father children, which directly influences his social standing within the Gounder caste. The pressure to produce heirs affects his self-esteem and strains his relationship with Ponna.

Kali's conflict is expressed when he reflects on his own feelings towards parenthood, indicating that, on a personal level, he does not mind their childlessness but feels compelled to present otherwise to society. As Murugan writes, "He did not mind that they had no child. But he did not have the courage to say this to anyone. He acted like he was anxious to have one, though he really wasn't." (19). This passage reflects Kali's internal conflict while he personally does not find his life incomplete without a child, societal expectations force him to outwardly conform, creating a

disconnect between his private and public selves. This discrepancy highlights how social norms dictate personal choices, particularly in a patriarchal, caste-based society where progeny are essential for the continuation of family legacy.

Ponna's internal conflict is more intense, as the stigma of infertility is disproportionately placed on women. Murugan poignantly describes how she becomes the subject of community gossip, her identity reduced to her reproductive capacity. "They called her barren, as if that one word summed up her entire being. It didn't matter that she was hardworking or kind. The word followed her like a shadow" (19). This excerpt encapsulates how Ponna's identity is overshadowed by the label of infertility. Her emotional turmoil is compounded by the societal gaze that strips her of agency and forces her to internalize shame and blame. Ponna's struggle is not only a personal battle but a reflection of how women in patriarchal societies are often valued primarily for their ability to bear children, with other aspects of their identity relegated to insignificance.

As the narrative progresses, Kali and Ponna consider participating in a temple festival where childless women can conceive with strangers. This decision reflects the immense societal pressure that guides their choices. Although Kali initially hesitates, the collective insistence on fulfilling familial duties compels him to consent. Ponna's choice, filled with emotional conflict, reflects her desperate desire to fulfill the societal expectation of motherhood, even at the cost of personal integrity. As Murugan writes, "She sat on the edge of the river, watching the current flow swiftly, as if carrying away all her doubts. The decision was no longer hers alone—it belonged to everyone around her." (19), symbolizing how the overwhelming societal pressure usurps personal agency, forcing Ponna to navigate a moral dilemma dictated by social norms. The river in this context represents the uncontrollable flow of tradition, suggesting that her individual desires are swept away by the collective will of society.

In *Poonachi: The Story of a Black Goat*, Murugan uses the black goat as an allegory to explore the themes of marginalization and systemic oppression. Poonachi's life reflects the struggles of those at the periphery of society, constantly subjected to exploitation, control, and dehumanization. The internal conflict she faces

arises from her desire for freedom and autonomy, yet she is repeatedly constrained by the societal systems that seek to define her existence. The black goat is symbolic of the marginalized, whose lives are dictated by external forces rather than personal will.

When Poonachi is introduced into the household, she is marked by her differences: “She was small and black, and no one thought she would survive. The other goats looked at her with disdain as if her existence itself was an affront” (21). This excerpt illustrates her status as an outsider. The disdain of the other goats and the treatment she receives reflects the harshness of the social hierarchy in which those who deviate from the norm are marginalized. Her very existence is seen as a disruption to the order of things, making her a symbol of the oppressed in society.

Poonachi’s life, marked by forced reproduction and the relentless expectations placed upon her, mirrors the experiences of marginalized individuals, especially women, in a society that values productivity and subservience. Her desire for agency and dignity is consistently thwarted by the societal systems that impose her role as a mere tool of reproduction. “No one asked her if she wanted to have kids. It was decided for her, just like everything else in her life” (21), this highlights the lack of autonomy in Poonachi’s life, underscoring the systemic control exerted over her body and existence. The parallel between women and lower-caste individuals in rigid caste societies is clear—often reduced to their reproductive function and valued only for their labor.

The allegory of the black goat in Poonachi extends beyond the individual plight of the titular character to critique broader systems of oppression. The goat’s life, filled with exploitation, neglect, and control, mirrors the marginalization of those at the lower rungs of the caste system, as well as the exploitation of women. Poonachi’s longing for freedom, her fleeting moments of agency, and the eventual realization that escape from her circumstances are nearly impossible, serves as a powerful commentary on the dehumanizing effects of caste, gender, and class hierarchies.

Murugan depicts how ingrained social norms often override personal desires and moral boundaries, shaping characters’ choices. The internal conflicts of Kali, Ponna, and Poonachi reflect broader

societal issues, as noted by scholars like Binadi. Kali’s outward conformity, Ponna’s internalized shame, and Poonachi’s passive compliance with reproductive expectations highlight how societal pressures intersect with personal aspirations, diminishing agency and self-determination. This aligns with Amrita Narayanan’s work on the pervasive nature of social control in patriarchal societies and its impact on women’s autonomy (25).

By situating these struggles within a larger socio-political framework, Murugan critiques how caste, gender, and social norms create barriers to individual agency. The allegory of the black goat symbolizes the marginalized in Indian society, echoing Ambedkar’s critique of the caste system as a tool of social control (26). Through these narratives, Murugan explores internal conflict and highlights the resilience needed to navigate a world where personal desires clash with societal expectations. This resonates with Dutta’s research on the psychological impact of social marginalization and internalized oppression (27). Nandhini Thiyagarajan’s analysis of Poonachi further emphasizes the symbolism of the goat’s blackness, marking her as an outsider (28). These interpretations, alongside Jayaprakash’s observation of Murugan’s challenge to confront complicity in systems of inequality, enrich the understanding of the novel’s complex themes (29).

Comparative Analysis of *One Part Woman* and *Poonachi: The Story of a Black Goat*

In both *Poonachi: The Story of a Black Goat* and *One Part Woman*, Perumal Murugan skillfully weaves narratives that explore the intricate dynamics of oppression, resilience, and the possibility of social change, using different frameworks and allegories. Although the protagonists of both novels are positioned within distinct contexts—Poonachi as a marginalized animal and Ponna as a woman struggling with infertility—thematic parallels emerge in their experiences of societal control and their responses to systemic oppression. The novels, while seemingly different in their premises, converge on the universal struggles for autonomy, dignity, and transformation within rigid societal structures. Both novels, as Binadi asserts, expose how these intersecting forces shape individual and collective experiences, often leading to a profound sense of cultural and personal identity crisis (30).

One Part Woman delves into the intimate world of Kali and Ponna, a childless couple navigating the suffocating pressures of societal expectations and caste-based norms. Their struggle to conceive becomes a poignant metaphor for the ways in which caste permeates even the most private aspects of life, dictating social standing, kinship ties, and access to resources. Murugan masterfully illustrates how deeply ingrained social hierarchies, particularly those related to caste and patriarchy, can inflict psychological violence and erode individual agency, as seen in Kali's tragic fate. In contrast, *Poonachi* employs a broader allegorical lens, utilizing the titular black goat to expose the systemic brutality and dehumanization faced by marginalized communities. Poonachi's experiences of social exclusion, exploitation, and constant threat of violence mirror the precarious realities of those deemed "other" within a rigid caste system. As Hussain argues, "Poonachi's blackness becomes a powerful symbol of difference, marking her as an outsider in a society obsessed with purity and hierarchy" (18). By tracing Poonachi's journey, Murugan compels readers to confront the insidious ways in which caste-based prejudice operates, not only through overt acts of violence but also through the subtle erosion of dignity and selfhood.

Despite their differing approaches, both novels underscore the persistent struggle for cultural assertion and autonomy within a society stratified by caste. Kali and Ponna's desperate attempts to conceive, even resorting to unconventional means, reflect a yearning for agency and a desire to fulfill culturally prescribed roles. Similarly, Poonachi's resilience and quiet acts of defiance, such as seeking nourishment from forbidden sources, embody a resistance against the dehumanizing forces seeking to define her existence solely through the lens of caste.

The theme of social change is explored differently in each novel but is equally central to Murugan's critique of societal norms. In *One Part Woman*, the question of social change is subtly woven into the narrative through Kali and Ponna's eventual decision to participate in the temple ritual. This act represents a temporary escape from the rigid social structure that dictates their lives, and the possibility of change lies within the ritual itself. However, the novel also critiques the limitations of such systems of change. The festival, while offering

a solution, remains deeply tied to patriarchal and casteist norms, indicating that true social change requires a dismantling of the underlying structures that perpetuate oppression. Thus, Kali and Ponna's struggle for parenthood represents a larger struggle for social transformation, but it remains a struggle within, rather than against, the boundaries set by society.

In *Poonachi*, social change is almost absent, as Poonachi's life is a series of cyclical, oppressive experiences that do not provide room for revolution or escape. Her fate is largely sealed by the caste and gendered structures of her world. However, the novel subtly critiques these structures by presenting Poonachi as a symbol of endurance in the face of systemic exploitation. While she does not enact change in her world, her resilience can be seen as a form of passive resistance. Murugan uses Poonachi's existence as a commentary on the inertia of caste-based and patriarchal systems, suggesting that change is needed, but may be elusive for those who are systematically oppressed.

A key comparative element in both novels is the role of societal expectations in shaping identity and agency. In *One Part Woman*, Ponna's identity is defined by her inability to conceive, forcing her to internalize societal judgments about her worth. Her desire to change her status as "barren" becomes a driving force in her life, but the pressure to conform to societal norms stifles her sense of self (19). In *Poonachi*, the titular goat's identity is similarly dictated by her utility as a reproductive agent (21). Murugan presents her as an animal whose value is derived not from her individuality but from her capacity to labor and reproduce. In both novels, social structures redefine the protagonists' identities, creating tensions between personal desires and external labels. Ponna's experience of infertility, much like Poonachi's status as a "black goat" (21), exemplifies how individuals at the margins of society are often reduced to labels that determine their worth.

The parallels between the two novels—through the themes of oppression, resilience, and the potential for social change—speak to Murugan's critique of caste, gender, and patriarchal systems. While *One Part Woman* offers a more direct engagement with social change through the characters' moral dilemmas and rituals, *Poonachi* presents a more nuanced, symbolic examination of

oppression that emphasizes survival as resistance. Both works, however, highlight the persistent struggle of individuals within rigid societal structures and the complex interplay between personal agency and systemic forces. Through these two narratives, Murugan invites readers to reconsider the possibility of change and transformation in societies defined by inequality and exploitation.

Through these narratives, Murugan prompts a critical examination of the far-reaching consequences of caste-based oppression, urging readers to move beyond simplistic understandings of social hierarchy. As Rao aptly notes, "Murugan's works challenge us to confront the uncomfortable realities of our own complicity in perpetuating systems of inequality" (17). By delving into the intricate interplay of caste, culture, and identity, Murugan's novels offer a powerful testament to the enduring human spirit while issuing a potent call for social justice and a dismantling of oppressive structures.

Conclusion

Perumal Murugan's *Poonachi: The Story of a Black Goat* and *One Part Woman* explores the complexities of caste, violence, and social hierarchy, shedding light on the ways caste discrimination shapes individual lives, relationships, and identities. *One Part Woman* examines the struggles of Kali and Ponna, a childless couple, navigating societal expectations in a stratified community. In contrast, *Poonachi* uses the allegory of a black goat to explore marginalization and violence within societal structures. Both novels highlight the impact of caste on human identity and showcase resilience in the face of oppression.

While the novels are set in rural Tamil Nadu, their themes resonate with urban caste dynamics. Contemporary studies show that caste discrimination persists in urban areas through practices like residential segregation and economic exclusion. Murugan's exploration of caste oppression extends beyond rural settings, providing insights into urban caste relations and the ongoing struggle for social mobility and equality.

Murugan's novels illuminate the persistent nature of caste-based oppression and how social systems shape individuals' lives. The findings suggest that caste dynamics continue to permeate both rural

and urban contexts in India, albeit in different forms. While caste-related discrimination in urban areas might be less overt than in rural regions, practices such as residential segregation and the marginalization of lower-caste communities in social and economic spheres continue to hinder social mobility. This enduring inequality reinforces the necessity of addressing caste discrimination at multiple levels—both in law and in everyday social practices. Additionally, gender plays a crucial role in how caste oppression manifests. Women from lower-caste backgrounds experience compounded oppression due to the intersection of caste and gender, as seen in the experiences of Ponna. This intersectionality deepens the complexity of caste-related discrimination and calls for a more nuanced understanding of how caste, gender, and class interact.

The themes explored in Murugan's novels could significantly inform future discourse on caste and gender in India. First, the novels highlight the importance of recognizing intersectionality—how caste and gender intersect to create unique forms of oppression. This perspective is essential for understanding the lived realities of marginalized groups, especially women from lower-caste backgrounds. Future discussions on caste relations should not only focus on caste alone but also account for the complex ways in which caste and gender overlap to affect individuals' lives. Moreover, Murugan's portrayal of resilience and agency in the face of systemic oppression underscores the importance of empowerment in the struggle for social change. The characters in the novels demonstrate how individuals, despite being constrained by oppressive systems, continue to resist and seek autonomy. This theme could be central to future discourses on how marginalized communities can reclaim agency and push for structural reforms that address both caste-based and gendered inequalities.

Finally, Murugan's critique of societal structures, represented by the allegory of *Poonachi*, calls for a re-examination of social hierarchies in India. His work suggests that caste-based and gendered oppression are deeply ingrained in Indian society, and true social change requires dismantling these hierarchical systems. For future discourse, this means advocating for a comprehensive approach to caste and gender equality, which includes both challenging discriminatory practices and

promoting policies that foster inclusivity and equality. In conclusion, Murugan's novels offer a profound reflection on the complexities of caste and gender in India. By addressing the intersectionality of these identities and the resilience of marginalized individuals, his works provide valuable insights for continuing the conversation about caste relations and gender equality. As India progresses toward greater social justice, it is essential to remember the enduring impacts of caste and gendered oppression and the need for structural reforms that address these issues comprehensively.

Abbreviation

Nil.

Acknowledgment

We wish to thank the SRM Institute of Science and Technology for the use of its resources to carry out this research.

Author Contributions

Both the authors contributed to the study.

Conflict of Interest

The authors of this work state that they have no conflicts of interest about its publication.

Ethics Approval

Not applicable.

Funding

No specific grant from a public, private, or nonprofit organization was obtained for this study.

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