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## REPRESENTATION OF UNTOUCHABILITY IN POSTCOLONIAL INDIA: A STUDY OF PERUMAL MURUGAN'S SEASON'S OF THE PALM.

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**Abstract:** Perumal Murugan is an Indian author, scholar and literary chronicler who writes in Tamil. He wrote many novels which talk about some or the other social stigma that is prevalent in the society due to which he faced several criticisms. Basically, he belonged to a family of farmers, due to which we can say that he had a clear view of the society from bottom to top and he wrote upon the issues concerned, being in that position. Murugan's third novel, described by the translator and critic N. Kalyan Raman as a 'tour de force' was titled *Koolamadari* and was published in 2000 which was translated by V Geetha as *Seasons of the Palm* that came in 2004. The book dealt with the life and travails of its protagonist, Koolaiyan, a young goatherd of the Chakkili caste, who was bonded to work in a Gounder caste family to repay his father's debts. The book dealt with themes of childhood, autonomy, and freedom. The central theme being 'Untouchability', the author gives us a glimpse into the lives of the Pariah community living in the southern part of India so that we can be aware of the conditions of the Untouchables/Dalits/Pariahs even in the other parts of India that is still prevalent today.

**Index Terms -** Untouchability, Dalits, Slavery, Identity crisis, casteism, suppression, fatalism, Discrimination.

### I. INTRODUCTION

“Dr. Ambedkar wrote: “Turn in any direction you like; caste is the monster that crosses your path”. Caste permeates every social sphere in India.”

Learning about the Dalits and untouchability is not a new knowledge for the Indian society. It is deep rooted into the psyche of India. But the very idea of the word is side-lined and neglected since decades. People are least concerned about Untouchability, i.e., the systematic ostracization and segregation of those from “untouchable” castes solely on the basis of birth. Dalits are the oppressed community who are figured chiefly as passive. Louis Dumont in his book “*Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications*” states that “The word “pariah” itself comes from a dalit caste of southern India, the *paRaiyar*, “those of the drum” (parai) or the “leather people” (pg.54). Sagarika Ghose in her article “The Dalit in India” says, “The word “dalit” or “crushed underfoot” or “broken into pieces” is the contemporary version of the word “Untouchable”. Dalit owes its genesis to the nineteenth-century writings Jotirao Govindrao phule as well as the literature of the Dalit panthers, a political group found in 1972 in the state of Maharashtra. British colonial census takers grouped together all those communities’ neighbors considered “polluted” and called them “Untouchable”. “Harijan” or “children of god” was Mahatma Gandhi’s names for dalits. The word “Untouchables” is still

used, but harijan is seen as an equivalent of “Uncle Tom,” a paternalistic and condescending categorization of a group doomed to remain in perpetual bondage. (pg.85-86).

Discrimination, casteism and suppression is still prevalent in Postcolonial India. The inevitability of the lives of the downtrodden is internalized by the very class, not with a free will but without any choice but to follow the predicaments that befall upon them. Here, the narrator is Shorty, a young boy, who faces the ill-treatment meted out to him by his master. The very tender age of the boy gives us a realistic, pathetic and a heart-wrenching condition of the Pariah community (as known in South India) in Tamil Nadu, through which they can never escape and are forced to face their master’s wrath. He leads his life as an underdog up to the final tragic denouement. Shorty’s work is to herd sheep and do other jobs in his Master’s house to pay off the debt his father owes the Master. This debt seems to never end as his father keeps taking more money and the interest piles on. Likewise, there are other children too, who seek refuge in their master’s house in order to earn their daily bread, in more or less the same condition the protagonist is intended to live. The author uses various symbolization in order to describe the deprived condition of the Pariah community since the beginning of the novel to the end, through their repeated comparison to the speechless animal and the environment. For example, throughout the novel the author uses phrases to compare the conditions of the children like ‘A season for mourning’ (the harvest period), ‘The marks of the harvest can still be seen’, etc. It gives us a narrative of violence, images of silent submission and also an inevitable endurance.

There are a group of kids belonging to the Pariah community who live a monotonous life, grazing cattle for a few coins living a life not less than an animal, malnourished, mistreated by their masters, deficient in every way sharing more or less a same fate. Each day is an equally bad day which brings no hope and as we proceed further in the novel, we become aware of their unbearable presence as we come to know that there is no exit to their unending sufferings. Shorty is so acclimatized to the condition living with the sheep that he doesn’t care a presence of human existence around him and cried at the thought of his favorite sheep Veeran’s sacrifice, that can be witnessed through the following lines; “This pained Shorty, filled him with a sense of loss, as if he had been forced to relinquish a cherished child. He left alone, with no one to talk to. (SP: 225) The Untouchables were treated as if they were not humans and were not allowed to join the village festivals. Sagarika Ghose states in the very beginning of her article that “... The right to pray to a Hindu god has always been a high caste privilege. Intricacy of religious ritual is directly proportionate to social status. The dalit has been formally excluded from religion, from education, and is a pariah in the entire sanctified universe of the “*dvija*.” (Pg.83).

Paying for being an outcast, Shorty’s condition is worse than a slave. He is illtreated, starved, beaten to death and equally speechless and helpless like an animal. He sleeps in the sheep shed and covers himself with jute sacks in the monsoon. “Most days, the Mistress packs his tin pail with kambu balls from the day before. Thin, shrivelled and smelling faintly of rot, they do not stir his stomach like this. But he waits every morning, resigned and eager, for the rotten balls. Like a dog, he thinks, much like a dog, anxious for its master’s voice. He waits until the Mistress calls out, ‘Dai! Bring your pot!’”(SP: 6). Not only the master, the whole village illtreats the Untouchables; like Shorty is not allowed to touch the lid of the milk can while supplying milk in the neighborhood and if he does the milk would be taken to be polluted and would be a waste. Although the Untouchable children are frustrated by the treatment meted to them by their masters but they do not say a word and it is only while they are eavesdropping about their masters that give them a little pleasure and also it is the open fields and nature that give them exposure and relief. They don’t have any right towards their own life. Since the day they are born it is their parents who decide to which master they would be send to after a certain age and also their pay would be negotiated and handed to their parent’s and the children would be at the mercy of their master’s. For example, in case of Shorty, “He gets a yearly wage and is fed three times a day. For this, he is expected to stay at the Master’s house and do whatever work there is to be done. He does not go home to his parents often-maybe on festival days or if someone dies”. (SP: 28)

The protagonist never desires to ask the amount of payment received for his work and he feels embarrassed to be called ‘Master’ by the people who buy roots collected by him. It depicts the mental construction of the Untouchables who take their lives to be granted by their masters for whom they work. The master’s son Selvan feels insecure and frustrated at the thought of Shorty taking him to be his equivalent and calling him ‘Dai’. And Selvan realizes his dominant social position as a Master that isn’t taught to him but is inbuilt. Even Shorty knows that Selvan is his master and whatever Selvan says or does is absolutely correct in response to his position in society. Afterall, Sagarika Ghose says, “Every child born into an upper-caste Hindu family grows

up with a mind's eye image of the *acchut* (Untouchable). The Imagined Untouchable is squalid in appearance and it is the religious duty of a "pure" Hindu to consider him perpetually inferior." (pg.86-87). The reason Shorty is chosen as a protagonist by the author is appropriate because apart from the other Untouchable children it is Shorty who never resists his master and the upper caste people without breaking the social strata, whereas, the others try to compensate the treatment given to them by saying words and doing things against their masters when left alone. Shorty's fatalism can be well traced by the end when Selvan doesn't return after Shorty dips him into the well and Shorty follows either in search of Selvan or to escape from the reality that waits for him in the world outside. The tragic denouement of the novel gives us an idea of the inevitable death and disappearance of the Untouchable boy.

They are not allowed a single breathe of relief from their whole days' work and on the other hand they are bound to work for more than their capacity. Their aching body due to heavy work and the ruthless behavior of the master is the reason that they do not raise a single voice against their master's. There is fear within them even regarding their own parents because they know if their master's complained against the children and they are sent back to their family then they would be sent to a much crueler master who would force them into a 'Bone-breaking work.' And also, their vulnerability and assentation towards the upper caste is a kind of custom since decades that they dare not question. They are conditioned in such a manner that they dare not break the clutches of the community who enslaved them since generation. They fear to raise their heads against their masters because they know that if they do so they would be either beaten to death or can be deprived of the obligation of the upper castes whom they consider to be their godfather. It costs them their life if the Untouchables dare to go against the set norms of the society. In case they make a mistake whether knowingly or unknowingly, they are taught a lesson for their lifetimes and even beaten to death in certain cases. Once due to carelessness of one of the Untouchable bond slaves, few sheep died and he ran away out of fear was caught and brutally whipped. When inquired by Shorty of being beaten, "Tallfellow answers with the air of one who has seen many things and for whom the world holds no surprises." (SP: 252). Shorty felt his body died when once he was humiliated and beaten to death for stealing from others field. Many times, the Untouchables become sour towards their own community and bully the ones who are weaker to them without any regret.

By showing the reality of the Untouchables in the novel, the author is neither gathering sympathy for them nor he is trying to create disgust for the one's bullying them, on the other hand, he is bringing that section of society to the center who have always been suppressed and their issue needs to be confronted in a genuine manner. Sagarika Ghose correctly justifies their existence in the contemporary society, "Today most Untouchable castes would prefer to use the term "dalit" as an identity of assertion". (Pg. 86). The narrative doesn't intend to teach anything, on the other hand the work creates an awareness of the surrounding where we live and prosper, neglecting the very existence of the suppressed class whom we encounter in our day-to-day lives. The lives of the Untouchables have not changed and it is just the same as it used to be before the Independence, with only slight modifications. The myths regarding them (the Untouchables) have not yet changed and Casteism is so rampant and obvious in our society that even a caring heart practice it unawares.

## II. CONCLUSION

This study has been undertaken to scrutinize the condition of the Untouchables or the Dalits, the terms used interchangeably, in the contemporary society as compared to the period prior to the Independence. It gives us a glimpse of their position and mental dilemma in the southern part of India, through which we can figure out their lives they intend to live in the other parts of India.

The article not only gives a real picture of the ghastly acts and violence done towards the minority (the Untouchables) but also helps us better understand the real reason behind the treatment of the Untouchables in Postcolonial India. This special issue therefore, not only focuses upon the social hierarchy that is constructed by the upper section of the society. It also raises awareness regarding their condition to which they are not willingly inclined to, on the other hand, they are forced to live under such conditions. There is plethora of angles from which further scrutinization can be done upon the topic and discussions can be done from a different standpoint.

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