



Whispers Of Earth And Womanhood: An Ecofeminist Reading Of Perumal Murugan's *Poonachi Or The Story Of A Black Goat* Translated By N. Kalyan Raman

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Abstract

Perumal Murugan's *Poonachi or the Story of a Black Goat*, translated by N. Kalyan Raman, portrays the struggles of Poonachi, a voiceless and defenceless she-goat. Throughout her life, Poonachi faces adversity due to her distinct appearance, representing the marginalized and oppressed. The novel draws parallels between the treatment of animals and the plight of women, offering a powerful critique of social hierarchies. Poonachi's experiences symbolize the intersectional oppression faced by women at the lowest social, political, and cultural levels. Deprived of autonomy and constantly subjected to fear and exploitation, her narrative mirrors the struggles of women whose desires are suppressed by patriarchal structures. This paper explores the ecofeminist dimensions of Poonachi's character, focusing on her dual role as both a female and a part of the natural world. The paper analyses the ecofeministic aspects of the character Poonachi who embodies the dual oppression of women and nature, reflecting patriarchal dominance over both.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, patriarchy, rural narratives, animal symbolism

Perumal Murugan: An Introduction

The most famous and controversial writer of the time, Perumal Murugan, is an Indian author, scholar and literary columnist from the state Tamil Nadu. His contributions to the society is vast as he is not just a writer but also a teacher himself who has written novels in his mother tongue, Tamil. He has produced six novels, four collections of short story and four anthologies of poetry in Tamil. The intensity of his subject matter was valued most not only by the other regional writers but also non-Indian readers. Among the six, three of his novels have been translated into English to make it reachable for non-Tamil readers. Perumal

Murugan's novels were acknowledged globally when U.S Publisher acquired rights over his novels. The novels of Perumal Murugan soon will have a worldwide readership as U.S based publisher Grove Atlantic has acquired the rights for publishing them. The agreement was signed between the Publisher of Kalachuvadu Publications Pvt Ltd and Grove Atlantic in the month of March 2018. He is well known for his style of portraying the realistic feelings of the characters in his novels.

Perumal Murugan was born and brought up in the northern area of Kongunadu, near Thiruchengodu. His passion towards writing had begun in his early childhood days. Initially Murugan studied Tamil literature and become a Professor of Tamil literature and indulged himself in a large number of research and academic contributions to Tamil literature in Kongunadu including the creation of Kongunadu's own lexicon of the word, languages and sentences. He also extensively investigated and recorded Kongu folklore. In addition to teaching, he has also produced a sequence of fiction and non-fiction anthologies each with short stories and poems, Murugan has written ten novels, and ten non-fiction books on language and literature and so has become a crucial voice of Tamil literature. A variety of his novels, including Seasons of the Palm and Current Show, have been translated into English. He has initiated his literary career by publishing several short stories in a Tamil journal entitled Manavosai between 1988 and 1991. These tales were eventually compiled and published into a book entitled Thiruchengodu.

An Overview of *Poonachi or the Story of a Black Goat*

Poonachi or the Story of a Black Goat was originally written in Tamil and skilfully translated by N. Kalyan Raman, a Chennai-based translator of Tamil fiction and poetry into English. This is not the first novel that N. Kalyan Raman has translated. The simplicity with the plot and the plain picturesque language which render it a marvellous reading has been translated by Kalyan Raman. The self-imposed literary silence of Perumal Murugan breaks with this comeback novel, *Poonachi or the Story of a Black Goat* which made this novel more special. This novel was translated into eight languages and was already a bestseller.

The protagonist, Poonachi, a black (doe) goat who enters like a miracle into an old couple's life as a fragile child and the story goes on. It's a profoundly touching tale about a black goat raised by a poor farmer and his family. The story begins with an old farmer who would like to add one more goat to his small herd, in a nameless village near Odakkan Hill that resembles the half-arid sceneries of his earlier romances. The nameless elderly man and wife (mainly part of the Asuras cult) look after the motherless child gifted by a stranger whom they call 'Bakasuran' and have been entrusted with her care. The stranger informs him that she is a miracle, a label for which she was loved and disgusted at various places in her life. In the memory of a cat, the wife of the old man, who is surprised by the arrival of the kitten-sized goat, calls her Poonachi. Poonachi has more autonomy and attention than other goats and is becoming a part of the household. From the beginning, she's different. For once she is black and this is a surprise since we are aware that the regime has kill all black goats because they are considered dangerous. It is a surprise. Then the family she serves—she is considered special, as one of the seven children her mother birthed. However, her life is never easy, although she's dear to the old woman from the start. The other goats never let her forget it, and she's an orphan. The storyline contributes to critical moments in her childhood and adulthood; to a daily struggle to eat from

reluctance of suckling children, and to pursue the delirious liberation that leads to herds' confusion and destruction, to the unbearable pain of losing passion for motives she cannot comprehend. The story shows Poonachi's growth into adulthood and her little helplessness and her sexual awakening later unabashedly. This story shows Poonachi's maturing development, her limited helplessness, and her sexual awakening later unequivocally. To be a doe prevents her from the cruel fate of neutralizing and slaughtering that is the lot of her bucks, but makes her vulnerable to the accompanying tribulations, whether it is her numerous children who are exhausted or painfully separated from them, pregnancy and maternity. She is further harmed by her status as a miraculously fertile, high-milk, seven-kid birthing mother. Amidst all the misfortunes, Poonachi snatches her little bit of happiness in Poovan, in the midst of a short life of joy and prolonged misery, the gentle and loving dumbbell, she finds twice briefly in pilgrimage to the home of the old couple's daughter.

Poonachi's miraculous union with Poovan is described in terms of sexual intensity and tenderness generally related to human behaviour. The achievement of puberty and menstruation, the irrepressible sexual longing and the first unsatisfactory sexual experience, the exhilarating and draining maternity experience all help to construct a unique educational novel and biography of a female animal. All these are the unsentimental and earthly matter of fact in the true Perumal Murugan style, drawing attention to the hardship of the female body and to the numerous and violence demands on it, whether by nature or by society. While the all-knowing protagonist occupies Poonachi's minds in the form of the stubborn independent thinking, the vividness of her visions, the poignancy and ruminations on her love for Poovan and her subsequent jests on the essence of all being, it is difficult to distinguish between the individual and the caprine. The tone of the narrator switches between the old man, his wife and Poonachi to show gradients of dominance and impotence in life constrained by a punishing atmosphere, a social harsh system.

Evolution of Ecofeminism

The term Ecofeminism was coined by the French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne in the novel *Féminisme ou la Mort* (1974). Ecofeminism incorporates basic value of women equality, reassessment of non-patriarchal or non-linear systems, and a philosophy which recognizes natural mechanisms, systemic connections and the importance of instinct or partnership. Ecofeminism combines both an ecological engagement and an appreciation of relationship between nature and women. Furthermore, this philosophical approach underlines how hierarchical (or male-centered) society treats both nature and women. The effect of gender categories is examined by ecofeminists to demonstrate the unfair dominance of social norms over women and nature. The ideology further argues that these principles contribute to an imperfect view of the world and its scholars support an alternate view of the world which recognizes the planet as holy, respects humanity's natural-world reliance and valued all existence as precious.

The modern ecofeminist movement was formed by a number of conferences and workshops held in the United States in the late 1970's and early 1980's by a coalition of academic and professional women. They explored that feminism and environmentalism can be connected to respect women and nature, and they were inspired by the fact that both are marginalized by a long historical history of women being identified with nature.

The early works of ecofeminism primarily recorded the historical connections between women and the atmosphere and then explore ways to separate these ties. A notable and mentionable early work on ecofeminism was written by Rosemary Ruether. Ruether, one of the pioneers of ecofeminism, claimed that every human being would understand the law of nature and work to put it away if he were to strive towards his own emancipation. It calls for women and the public to work together in order to put a stop to patriarchal systems that promote hierarchy, control and socioeconomic inequality. This approach combines ecology with feminism to explain the feminist character of ecology. In order to analyse the relation between human and nature, feminists have given the concept of gender theory. The soil is often viewed as feminine by nature owing to its abundance, which nurtures life and is a property owned by humans. In Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies' book *Ecofeminism* modern science is evaluated. The modern science is, according to them, largely mastered by men, which, by using birth control medicines, greatly affects the natural process of birth. It depends on the specialized medical technologies that are controlled by men, for the birth and finally the health and life of women. This is seen as one of many examples of ecofeminism in the literature created to help improve the situations of women in a natural context.

An Exploration of Ecofeminism in *Poonachi*

Ecofeminism sees the parallel connection between the exploitation of nature and the exploitation of women in the patriarchal society by men. The Ecofeministic approach towards the novel *Poonachi* or the Story of a Black Goat is quite interesting as the protagonist herself serves as a representative of both nature and womanhood. Ecofeminist theory connects women's oppression with nature's suppression. Both the nature and women have been exploited by men (human) over ages who never realises or recognises the importance or value of them. The Protagonist, Poonachi is a black female goat who undergoes several problems that a typical woman would undergo. The problems that Poonachi had faced being a representative of nature and being a woman are discussed in detail.

The story starts with a description of semi- arid stretch of land named Odakkan Hill and how the land is dried out in the absence of rain. Murugan also exhibits the reason why rain fails the human, that is, when the sky outpours relentlessly throughout the day, the human would curse the rain by saying, 'Why is it raining like this?' as they are tired of protecting themselves from the downpour. Murugan takes the side of nature by saying that even an enemy should be welcomed with courtesy and why would the rain visit again if the human curse and drive away the rain which brings wealth and prosperity. The human race has a selfish note in all their activities as they seek some favour from everything around them. We, human, are the imminent threshold of self-seeking who values our own need and interests before those of others. If rain fails, the yield from the harvest would be very less and ultimately the reason why famine happens is because of the negligence of nature by mankind.

Poonachi, a malnourished female goat was taken care by the old couple for a reason. Poonachi belongs to a particular breed that would give birth to seven kids at a stroke which is a miraculous thing. The story starts with the thought of the old man who wanted to have one more goat to grow so that he can utilised later. Poonachi came to him as a blessing. When she gave birth to seven kids at a stroke for the first time, the old

couple was astonished and shared the news to all the people in village. They have also collected money from people who wanted to take a look at Poonachi and earned money out of Poonachi. The couple have also sold most of Poonachi's kids and some they have slaughtered for Bakasuran. They have failed understand the feelings of a mother. Motherly emotions are not only meant for human. Animals also do give birth by experiencing the same labour pain, in fact, more than that as Poonachi had given birth to seven kids at a stroke. 'A man with money can do whatever he wants.' (Murugan 140)

Human's intention is only to make profit of everything and whatever they do. They have earned money by selling Poonachi's kids and with that money, the old man had bought his wife a gold chain, studs for his wife and necklaces for his granddaughters, gold waist-string for his grandson. The old man also had money left over and made a plan to build a temple for Bakasuran. When they were delighted to gain so much, the poor Poonachi was grief-stricken as she had lost her kids whom she carried for 120 days. The old woman was cursing Poonachi for becoming pregnant for consequently the second time earlier. But when the old man has bought all these things, her mind has changed. The mankind never fails to utilise the maximum from the non-human things. 'She had called her an evil wretch and a devil. When she got some money from selling the kids, she changes instantly.' (Murugan 143). Human would never try to understand the need and necessity of domestic animals unless a misfortune like famine, flood, and drought hits.

Perumal Murugan feels that the men of fortune are plentiful as fruit worms but a kind heart is rare. Among human, there are millions of people who remain blessed but are less in number who has a kind-heart. The stranger also mentions that her mother gave birth to six before her and she dropped like a piece of dung at the last. From an ecocritical point of view, all the living organisms has its own intrinsic value in the world. The way he has mentioned the birth of the goat kid was not appreciable as she is a living being for whom the mother would have given all her life to give birth to her. All the organisms in the ecosystem deserves respect irrespective of their usage to mankind. It is animals that are exploited in different ways because a human may emerge from these Voiceless creatures in all sizes of greed from meat to conventional products. Even an animal's basic needs such as nutrition and sleep have been sacrificed and allowed, regulated or increasing in compliance with human needs and expectations.

Male animals are forced to breed and women are forced to give birth. When the animals struggle for their livelihood and to feed their new-borns, their owners are eager to meet their ends. The Goats had no other choice than to be reliable on humans as the human hands are tend to feed them. The human race must be condemned for utilising the helplessness of the other fellow creatures. Human becomes inhuman when they tend to serve the others especially the non-human creatures. The anthropomorphism of the book aims to graft the social and gender standards of the battered goats. Villagers discuss how goats are "stealthy" and "arrogant" if not constantly examined. 'Even when they hit us on the back, we should only mumble to ourselves.' (Murugan 47)

The human race never feels hesitated to discuss and show interest towards a buck's sexual urgencies. When Kaduvayan, a male goat has its heated moment, his attention is centered on a vamp and the old woman reacts with anger to the buck's impropriety in the approach to the doe. The physicality of the rubbled young bucks had been shown in several lines. The wild Kaduvayan would visit each flock on the pasture and sniff the female goats' vaginas. He would be butt and knock down by a few mother goats. The young women would be scared and run away, and their tails would be firmly placed. As a result of their sexual urgency, the goats encounter all manner of horrors, unfortunately from castration to conception, everything is conveyed graphically from the point of view of a poor female goat who had lost her brother-like Kaduvayan. The mankind never had an empathy to feel the pain of being castrated and so the old man was trying to console the boatman by saying that men who have murdered are leading a peaceful life and comparatively castrating a male goat is nothing offensive. The sin is nothing big for a few men like the brutal old man. This sin of castrating a male goat even affects the mankind as he has destroyed the future generation of that particular goat. The man himself cries out of his sin and he takes liquor to drink his guilt. The bucks go through their short lives and wonder what happened that day, their minds are totally broken. The manhood is reduced to a whimper and Poonachi realised it when her exuberant friend Kaduvayan is castrated.

Subsequently Poonachi met Poovan, a billy Goat, in the village of their daughter and fell in love with him, but laughing people dragged her back home. She also reaches her animal fate when she traverses the range of human emotions. After all, goats are farmyards. It exists for the good of its masters. She sees her fellow players and even her love dismembered and his flesh distributed. The miracle of the stranger who gave her to the elderly man is fulfilled when the subsequent litters of Poonachi bring the old couple happiness. The human enjoys luxury through the sufferings of animals. The old man become rich buys his wife gold ornaments. It never will be enough, they confess, regardless of how much you give to this body. The human must feel overwhelmed by the efforts of Poonachi to bring up seven kids at a time which is almost unimaginable to humans. The responsibility of bringing up the children is not only restricted for human but also for animals. Instead what the mankind would do it separate the kids from the mother and sell it for their own profit. The young girl goats would be compelled to mate with an adult goat and the boy goat will be castrated.

Womanhood in *Poonachi*

Poonachi, a female goat represents the womanhood as a whole as womanhood and the qualities of womanhood is not restricted for human as it is common for all the creatures. The patriarchal society consider women ONLY as a producer of kids. While wild animals reflect the rights of man, domestic animals are female slaves of men. The treatment of women and nature in patriarchal society is identical or intertwined. In order to understand the feminine qualities of Poonachi, the black female goat, anthropomorphism should be employed. Anthropomorphism is attributing the human characteristics like emotions, behaviour, intentions on non-human entities. Poonachi, on the note of anthropomorphism has been treated as a woman who experienced all the feminine emotions and challenges everyday throughout her life. She has been shown as a female through her explicit emotions towards her fellow beings like love, affection, puberty, pain of childbirth, motherhood, discrimination based on skin colour, loneliness, etc. which are precisely categorised as feminine attributes.

The writer would have mentioned Poonachi as a harmless and problem-free creature as she is a female goat. The men always find women weak, harmless, problem-free and tender by heart and so he never restricts himself from being dominative. The writer has introduced Poonachi as an ordinary life which would never leave a notable trace of her existence. It can also be seen as women who lead a normal life would never leave an impression behind her at the end of her life. Women are truly a miracle. Murugan by addressing Poonachi says about women. Women remain interesting, incomprehensible and admirable like a miracle and only those who respect and honour womanhood would be blessed with one such miracle. The first time when the old man held the goat kid in his hand, he felt like he has a flower on his palm which indirectly says that women are tender and subdued. When the old man moves her to his house by keeping the goat kid in a basket and he set it on his head, in no time, she was attacked by an eagle. The eagle here may be compared to any kind of problems that women might have come across in their younger days. The Old man says 'This moment of peril must have been in her destiny' (Murugan 9). Human in general blame the destiny of that particular girl or woman for all her misfortunes. They have never realised that women are like infants who have to be protected and taken care by the society. With the reference of the old woman, Murugan portrays that women would never give anything in return if someone fails to do something for them which is completely untrue. If the old man had got any injury in his limb, she would have done anything to cure him. The men or human always have a wrong notion towards women.

All the female child would come across this statement once in their lifetime as the birth of a baby-girl leaves people clueless about their future. This statement typically shows that being a girl child, she would obviously have to face a lot of challenges which is destined to her. The old woman named her Poonachi in the remembrance of her dead kitten. Poonachi was also criticised for her skin colour as she looks pitch-black in colour. Discrimination based on colour is not new to humans but it sounded weird when a goat was ignored for her colour. She was denied milk to fill her belly by a nanny goat, Kalli. Orphanism is horrible to human either but when it comes to an infant goat, it is deadly. She was denied attention from the other fellow goats in the herd. She was left alone and at times harmed by the other goats. The taste of being independent was felt by Poonachi inside the forest. But still, being a woman, she can never give up on her family. Even though all the modern women wanted to be independent, at the end of the day, all they need is their own people, own family. This context proves that Poonachi is a representative of all the working women and their feeling of loneliness and longing of her family as they feel more comfortable and secured with them. Poonachi recognizes that unlike sheep who always bow their heads, goats are a lot confident. Although they are naturally rebellious, goats can be tamed too. Poonachi tastes the exuberant freedom of forest life and yet opts to go back to her own herd. 'Living amidst her own community would give her lasting security.' (Murugan 82)

When the love life of Poonachi is taken into consideration, her unsatisfied passion and desire to make love to Poovan was purely representing a woman who love her soul mate with all her heart. This love life of Poonachi refreshes our minds and maybe makes us think that only animal affection is more sublime and genuine than the condition of man. When the old couple took Poonachi to their daughter's house to attend a function, she encountered the well-managed Poovan, who stole her heart as a child. The love and comfort that

Poovan provided her was never felt by her before. At the same time when Poonachi was compelled to mate with an old ram, felt disgusted and did not like react to it. She expressed her disgust by feeling small and humiliated. It would have been a happy event for Poonachi if she had mated with Poovan as she can satisfy her sexual torments with her beloved. She remains under the old couple's slavery and is engaged to mate with an old partner whom she detests deeply. She is today a mother of seven-baby litter, but of a normal mating with a male veteran in a cage.

The next challenge she had faced in her life was her period of pregnancy. The pregnancy from a mate whom the girl dislikes is a curse. Poonachi has been cursed in that case and her period of carrying the baby goats is for 120 (one hundred and twenty days). With all the pain of labour, she has delivered four bucks and three does. The last doe was resembling her mother and so she is going to be the next Poonachi. 'Being female, she is destined to leave for another home someday' (Murugan 139)

Women were destined to leave their mother's house as a conventional rule and it also suits for goats because womanhood irrespective of anything should get into a family of strangers to expand their family. All the kids of Poonachi were sold at a high price, thanks to the uniqueness of the delivery, and which gave them a local star value. When the old couple were happy about the money they have got, the poor Poonachi was grief-stricken at having lost all her kids at one stroke remained sleepless. On a feministic point of view, Poonachi also implies on the idea that women need not to hold their head down for various reasons. If they do so, they would fail to live their instead they will be surviving. Unless women come out of their shackle of bending down and obeying the conditions of others, nobody can make women shine.

Poonachi is a very special project that is also deeper in exploring the human condition through the life trajectory of a small black goat and is a superbly imagined tale for our times. The plot is rather basic, the most important component of which are descriptions. In the immediate and basic on the top, but below the narrative is a complex framework that gives way to important messages. Written in a lucid language, the book focuses on several social evils-the satire becomes apparent as the story continues. The story of Poonachi is the story of every daughter in our country. This book comments a lot about our social and political life. The grammar is simple, and the book has a rustic and enticing atmosphere. All that is expected from human beings is their realisation that they're not the only species on this earth, while there are others besides us. The Almighty who had created all of us should gift us the understanding to live with each and every single creature on this planet in peace and harmony. When humans don't realise the importance of nature & tend to fiddle with it, it creates an imbalance, chaos of a kind, the likes of which the world has never witnessed before. Nature has already proved this earlier via her actions, yet people tend to take it for granted & misuse it. However, we, humans haven't only taken it for granted but also we've the audacity to harm the innocents, kill them with no second thoughts. If we had the right sense of mind, we wouldn't be chopping down animals to quench our hunger & thirst, nor do we ever want to rape any girl or women just to please one's carnal desires.

In the comfort of our mother's womb our relationship with others and the nature begins. The desire to be loved is the ultimate focus on the fellowships that one can try and obtain as small children, and affection matures into social creatures that are capable of giving and receiving that has been decreed by evolutionary experience. Ecofeminism requires an ethical or moral connection between nature and women. Sexuality aids us in communicating, sympathizing, taking care of and demonstrating shared approval. These alienation issues of both nature and women must be addressed by the ecofeministic readers whenever possible. The idea of recognising and respecting the existence of other fellow beings can be seen as the distinctive characteristic of humanity. Through the eyes of the goat, Perumal Murugan brings a strong voice to the world, to love and wish and to the fights of life and death. The reader could see the parallelism of the lives of women and the responsibilities they bear and the denial of their own hopes and desires with the live of female animals. He discusses several other problems—the shortage of peasants, debt and starvation, through his central character Poonachi.

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