



Inter-Caste Marriages Ends With Honour Killing: A Study Of Perumal Murugan's Pyre

S.B. Suganthi^{1*}, Dr. T. Deivasigamani²

^{1*}Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English, Annamalai University, Chidambaram, Tamil Nadu-608002, hrithik10071983@outlook.com

²Associate Professor, Department of English, Annamalai University.

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ABSTRACT

Perumal Murugan is a renowned twenty-first-century Indian non-Dalit writer who speaks about the life and experience of the Dalit people of Tamil Nadu, India. His writings are pictures of the life, experiences, and treatments of the marginalized people and also represent the oppression faced by the subaltern in the society's caste system. His novels mainly center on caste, untouchability, brutal injustice, honour, injustice to the subaltern, and segregation. The present research portrays how Murugan's novel *Pyre* represents honour of the family and how inter-caste love marriages are turned into the honour killing of young married couples. In the novel, Murugan depicts the caste, gender, culture, injustice treatment, and the relationships between different communities in the Kongu Region. In the novel, the protagonist Kumaresan and his friends converse about the collective consciousness of caste communities. Here, the protagonist's mother Marayi warns Saroja about the caste group in the village and their extremity to protect their honour. The caste system is a bitter fruit obtained after a plethora of amendments throughout history. The irony of these amendments is constituted by the upper caste men for their whims and fancies. The idea of honour is valued more than lives and the institutionalization of honour killing as a sacred duty to restore the honour of their community is underlined. The social expectations of honour for the upper-class, middle-class, and oppressed communities are also different. It is the practice that happened in India and killing people to protect their honour would allow the people to justify the murder and violence.

Keywords: inter-caste, honour killing, caste, violence. Kongu region, oppressed community

Introduction:

Perumal Murugan is a contemporary Indian Tamil novelist, poet, short story writer, essayist, critic, and above all he is an erudite academician and a committed teacher who is working as Tamil Professor and Head, Government Arts College, Namakkal, Tamil Nadu. He belongs to the Kongu community but voiced the voice of Subalterns. His writing highlights the caste-based social hierarchical structure of the state and it has three important social issues: the social condition of the depressed communities, economic exploitation, and the role of

religion. Ironically, every sub-region in Tamil Nadu has certain norms and customs within it and when it comes to the problem of caste, all sub-regions express their caste hierarchical power to dominate and oppress. However, Murugan is known for the portrayal of precise cultural and communal references of a particular land and caste communities within it. His writings mainly focus on the socio-economic and political conditions of different communities in Tamil Nadu, especially the Kongu Region. He has been called the most important regional writer who has brought some of the contemporary burning issues to the forefront in his fictional writings. Most of his novels have been translated into English and he is one of the dominant Tamil voices in contemporary Tamil literature.

Murugan's *Pyre* was originally written in Tamil language as *Pukkuzhi* in 2013 and it was translated into English in 2016 by Aniruddhan Vasudevan. The story revolves around the main characters Kumaresan and Saroja who married each other irrespective of their castes and their marriage was an inter-caste. The village people of Kumaresan did not know about Saroja's caste. When Kumaresan brought Saroja to his village, the whole village

people and his community relatives arrived there to verify Saroja's caste. The village councils also raised doubt over Saroja's caste. In this sense, the novelist emphasizes that caste becomes their utmost concern and all the village people wanted them dead for 'irrational' religious reasons. The brutalities of caste structure are inevitable in village structure in which the entire community joins together and suggests killing the newly married low caste girl Saroja. In the novel, Caste is deeply rooted and influences the people of Kattuppatti, the protagonist's village and his mother Marayi are no exception. When Marayi is found working with people of different castes in her own village, people from her community complain to her saying that Kumaresan was sitting on haunches and socializing with them, rubbing shoulders with them, and roaming around with them. The villagers usually offer water to the low-caste people, they simply pour it without touching it. This makes Marayi feel that Kumaresan should lie at home without even bothering to work. This action shows how Marayi was against any change from the norm that she was familiar to others. Here, Murugan precisely presents how caste bias has been there for generations and how it leads to such kind of honour killing.

In Tamil Nadu, many honour killings go unreported as the deaths are often passed off as suicides. It is not a concept in which women are the sole victims. Men are also killed due to the perception that they have acted dishonorably, albeit in much smaller numbers than women. The aim of the research is not to diminish the gravity of honour issues about males, the highly gendered nature of current academic literature points to the biases against women when it comes to the phenomenon of honour killing. Here, Kumaresan has the social power to flee or take refuge if threatened, while the woman (Saroja) lacks such opportunities as they are controlled by the dominant sex. Honour is a product of human society and becomes associated with certain actions and performances, while it is left excluded from others. This concept is given socially constructed meanings, it is deemed socially appropriate. Similarly, human behaviour that does not align with the social reality that is seen as acceptable, is subject to negative sanctions and disapproval. Therefore, the ideas behind honour and dishonour, are not only created by society but also rewarded or punished. The loss of honour is brought about by actions that are considered deviant within the socially constructed reality and involve social disapproval. While the punishments for dishonourable behaviour are varied, certain actions are viewed as so far from acceptable social norms that they deserve the extreme penalty of death. It refers to the practice of honour killing, wherein a family member is murdered by a relative due to the perpetrator's judgement that the victim has done something to blemish the honour of the family. It can prove to be a worthy choice in exploring the social construction of honour norms and the compliance that accompanies them. The present research concentrates on how honour killing is practiced in Murugan's novel *Pyre* in the name of caste, and how social forces lead to certain actions being labelled as honour killings. Through reading and understanding Saroja's character the reader can ask the question of how Indian society collectively comes to decide on the meanings that are assigned to honour killing, such that it is recognised as a form of social control.

Review of Literature:

Aisha K. Gill (2014) in her article "All they Think About is Honour: The Murder of Shafiea Ahmed" highlights how Shafiea Ahmed's murder happened and how the trial and conviction of her parents, occurred. Through a detailed analysis of the circumstances leading up to her death, as well as the trial that led to her parents' conviction for her murder, it shows how these contextual issues diverted attention away from how honour-based violence relates to other forms of violence against women. Consequently, simplistic explanations framed this crime as the outcome of the Ahmeds' 'alien' culture. A close examination of the case reveals the diverse factors, including the gender and generational conflicts and dysfunctional family dynamics that contributed to Shafiea's murder. It also reveals how attributing violence against women solely to questions of 'culture' ignores the broader picture as regards both the causes of which honour based violence and the factors underpinning its perpetuation.

Thrasher and Handfield (2018), in their article "Honour and Violence: An Account of Feuds, Duels, and Honour Killings" portrays a model of honour norms and honour violence, which makes understanding them significantly easier. They investigate honour-based violence as a signal of quality or status and norms of honour as social mechanisms that create and communicate the signal. These norms are legitimate and reinforce the social structure created by the signal. Moreover, they suggest that honour norms organize conflict and cooperation by reference to socially recognized measures of quality and quality is socially and contextually dependent. More specifically, quality for women is linked to sexual fidelity, and for men; it is their perceived trustworthiness to abide by and defend social norms of honour. Here, Thrasher and Handfield have divided the honour norms into the categories of revenge-type and purification-type; the former involving violence instigated by and directed at an out-group member, and the latter by an in-group member. While both revenge-type and purification-type honour norms and violence are concerned with restoring lost honour, purification-type honour violence is relevant to this analysis due to its distinguishing characteristic of the violence being directed towards an in-group member, arising from a perceived loss of social status. In the group member in purification type honour violence (as it pertains to honour killings) can be a family member, which is a defining feature of honour killings.

Frank Henderson Stewart. (1994) in his book *Honour* categorizes honour into two distinct types Horizontal Honour and Vertical Honour. Horizontal honour is also known as Personal honour: the rights of a person that people could lose and consequently, they attempt to retain by following certain rules, or assured standards that can also be

mentioned as a code of honour. The possession of horizontal honour can be lost, it is retainable. The other type, Vertical honour is majorly contrasted with horizontal honour. The concept of Vertical honour refers to the special right to enjoy special respect by the superior communities, castes, classes, sexes, ranks, or anything that claims it has superior honour i.e., Vertical honour. Understanding honour from the logical perspective led the reader to

comprehend the concept of honour which is the fundamental factor for every oppression. For instance, the upper-class people in the society refuse to treat the working-class people as equal to them, and in the same way, the 'self-declared' upper castes in Indian society refuse to treat the oppressed caste communities as equal to them. In the real world, it is an agreeable point that the upper classes, castes, and men have much more potential to get their chance than the lower class, caste, and female communities.

Kavitha (2019), in her article "Emasculating Caste: Honour Killings as Portrayed in *Pethavan* (The Begetter)," analyses the caste discrimination and violence against women for the sake of caste chastity, which results in the exploitation of Dalits. In Tamil Nadu, many deaths related to honour killings and caste exploitation go unreported or are passed off as suicides. Social fiction writers like Imayam have excited the conscience of the general population to understand the tribulations brought about by terrible social dissimilarities and exploitations. He has sufficiently responded to the desire to rid the world of the painful desolations of the socially low-born and low-placed. Caste pride and considering women as assets are the prime factors behind honour killings. These killings are motivated by the belief that women are the guardians of the virtue of ancestry. Imayam indicated that intermediate communities cannot digest the idea of exchanging their progeny with other downtrodden communities through their women. For this reason, men resort to viciousness when their women fall for Dalit men, they would not fret if their husbands married a Dalit woman.

Objectives of the Study:

This study traces how inter-caste marriages end with Honour Killing represented in Perumal Murugan's novel *Pyre*. It revolves around the love and marriage of Kumaresan and Saroja who are the central characters in these novels. This research paper focuses on the following objectives:

- To investigate the caste and social identity of the major characters in the novels of Perumal Murugan and how they survive in the caste-ridden society.
- To highlight the focal points, various aspects of the novelist's experience in his native, and the vision from different angles.
- To understand the true nature and characteristics of Dalits, as well as how they are affected by higher caste from upper castes.
- To investigate how the caste system and gender inequality separate people and how women's social lives are reflected in this novel.
- To understand the readers how the caste system is practiced in India, especially Tamil Nadu, and how the upper caste people want to retain their honour to save their caste than their children.
- To delineate how inter-caste love and marriages are not permitted by the upper caste of India and how these marriages end with honour killing.
- To find a real picture of Murugan's characters by recording the changing South Indian social issues and problems and how the central character Saroja is isolated from her social values,

Scope of the Study:

The scope of the study is to explore the system of caste and status of honour practiced in Indian society, especially Tamil Nadu's Kongu Region, and how the low-caste woman Saroja faced caste violence and honour killing. Here, Dalit woman Saroja faces caste harassment from the upper caste people including women for whom they work from the caste structure of the society.

Even though the kind of caste violence that Dalit women faced multi-layered oppression, she has failed to get adequate representation in women's movements, which have remained upper-class. In this context, it can be said that in a country divided along caste, class, and religion, Dalit as a movement needs to be more multifaceted and complex, taking into consideration the multiple identities of Dalits.

Both Upper and lower caste people need to be understood in terms of their locations, which in turn influence relations of power. As a result, Dalits felt the need for their organizations and discourses to represent their agonizing experiences as Dalits. As a non-Dalit, Murugan is trying to get equality and social responsibility of lower caste people against the greater atrocities of the caste system on the one hand, and at the same time critiquing the caste discrimination perpetrated by the upper caste on the other.

Findings and Discussion:

Perumal Murugan's *Pyre* presents a stark critique of caste-based identity. It is a love story of Kumaresan and Saroja who belong to different castes. They elope and get married and came to Kumaresan's village to face the wrath of his mother and the entire community that supposedly represents the lower caste community. The entire novel the protagonist Kumaresan's mother Saroja's caste is never revealed. It is left to the villagers and the reader's imagination and preconceived notions. Food spaces in the novel bring out complex issues of caste identity, making the readers uncomfortable with the question of the unnamed caste identity of Saroja. In the story, the space of this remote village is clearly defined as the space of the 'other.' The writer outlines,

There were no houses anywhere in sight. With each searing gust of wind, the white summer heat spread over everything as if white saris had been flung across the sky. There was not a soul on the road. Even the birds were silent. Just an ashen dryness, singed by the heat, hung in the air. Saroja hesitated to venture into that inhospitable space. (P 3)

At the beginning of the novel, Murugan establishes that the space of the village is unwanted space of the other which is uncomfortable and inhospitable and not a part of normative society. The village is symbolic of the unwanted caste space of the lower class. Saroja who belongs to the city space and presumably, part of the upper caste society feels

claustrophobic, bound, and unwelcome in this space. The novel is close to the third-person narrative and centers on Saroja, who elopes with Kumaresan and finds resistance to their inter-caste marriage within his community. The characters are prototypical, the novelist unfolds with the capricious rhythms of a thriller. The story is the Tamil original harks back, through its dedication to Dharmapuri's Ilavarasan's tragic story of a young Dalit man, whose elopement with a Vanniyar woman led to a Vanniyar mob setting fire to more than 300 Dalit homes in Dharmapuri, Tamil Nadu. Ilavarasan was subsequently found dead on a railway track in the name of Honour killing.

Anupama Rao in her review entitled "The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India" portrays that Caste subaltern's efforts to overturn prevailing relations of caste and community through the creative transformation of existing social categories and practices thus challenged caste Hinduism and the privileges that reproduced it. The social expectations of honour for the upper-class, middle-class, and oppressed communities are also different. For example, men from underprivileged and oppressed communities of Tamil Nadu are vulnerable and at the same time, their wives and daughters are more defenseless than the other victims are. Even though honour is the tool to build a power structure in society, it recompenses its victims by allowing them to have morals and honour of their own. Honour is not an individual consciousness or an instrument, which destroys the social structure of the secular society. It is a 'collective consciousness' that belongs to a particular caste, class, and gendered group or community. It is evident through the real-life cases in Tamil Nadu, that the continuous demand to kill their son or daughter occurs only at the 'collective consciousness' level. The determination to protect the honour of their caste community at any cost persuades the family to make the brutal decision to kill their own family members. The people in the honour community will earn titles such as "honourable" which creates a reputation for them. In contrast, violation of the rules means disloyal to the honour community. The novel *Pyre* exposes that 'families' are the first and foremost honour groups in society and the direct and indirect influences of honour in the existing society. Honour is a multi-phenomenal concept, that creates the hierarchic structures in society and it inscribes virtue, value, and morals on communities to follow in their everyday life.

The culture of India is a mixture of these diverse sub-cultures spread all over the Indian subcontinent and traditions that are several multicultural societies though cultural assimilation and the erosion of secular values have been long-term basic objectives. The culture of modern India has evolved manifold since the ancient ages. The history of India has played a significant role in shaping up Indian culture. In the historical past, India has been invaded several times and this brought in a mix of cultures. The other factors that contributed to shaping the culture of India are its unique geography and different religions. The modern Indian culture is a more evolved version of the ancient cultures in India. Also, modern Indian culture has been profoundly influenced by Western culture. Post-independence the culture of India began to evolve further into what is the call the modern Indian culture. This can be clearly in its architecture, performing arts, food, clothing, and festivals. There are no cultures that come together leading to hybrid forms instead cultures are the consequences of attempts to still the flux of culture hybridity. Therefore, cultures come after the hybridizing process rather than the existence of culture. The discourses on the subject of 'moral and honour' primarily focus on the notion of 'honour' through the prism of 'culture'. However, the cultural aspect alone is inadequate to explain the factors behind the hegemonic concept of honour. The existing culture always has indeterminacy over discourses on honour. It is indispensable to reinterpret the 'existing cultural' values to expose the voices of the depressed, oppressed, and exploited communities. The novelist questions the entire collective identity of a community when he criticizes the notion of parenthood and women in the community.

In *Pyre* Murugan deeply deconstructs the collective consciousness of a particular community (Gounder) that persuades the entire village people to burn down or murder or kill the couple or the girl who independently chose their life partner. In the novel, the protagonist Kumaresan and his friends converse about the collective

consciousness of caste communities. A few boys are speaking in support of inter-caste marriages but they are not saying anything useful. They comment about the inter-caste marriage of Kumaresan and Saroja and say: "he liked her, so he married her... it has got nothing to do with the village. Do you think this is fair? Tell us. You might have married here elsewhere, but you have brought her here. If there is a festival or a function, you will want to take her along with you" (P 133). Kumaresan's character is presented as a bold hero. He is unlike his friend Periyasami who hails from the same district. He does not mind looking at girls from other communities. He prefers to marry a girl from his community. He tells his friend that if he marries a girl from another community, he will be poisoned or beaten to death. Kumaresan does not listen to his friend's advice. He falls in love with Saroja and elopes with her, marries her, and takes her proudly to his village. By marrying Saroja, he defies society and is a more courageous man than a politician. He assures his wife not to worry about anything and promises to be always by her side. He decides to face the problems of hypergamy with the support of his friends, mother, and uncles. However, he finds no concrete support from his mother and relatives.

The caste-stricken discrimination in Kumaresan's village is so severe that it has no compassion for Saroja and leads people to burn a fertile crop of corn. The moment when she enters the village along with Kumaresan, she is greeted with statements such as:

This is not a face from our caste. This is the face of someone who hasn't toiled, a body that hasn't suffered summer's heat. The looks of Saroja do not let villagers accept her as their own. The women who stare at her comment that she is not dark like us, is she? She is pink like the eastern sky at dusk. Just like a film star. Men's gazes hound her as they inspect her as if she were an animal and they pass remarks such as A rare piece of sweet jaggery. (P 6)

The villagers do not approve of Kumaresan's hypergamy and his mother Marayi regards her daughter-in-law as a reason to weep for the rest of my life and assaults her by grabbing her hair. The other women who witness this gruesome act remain mute and they do not even offer water to Saroja when she faints and collapses. The women taunt her regularly by asking how she had bewitched Kumaresan. Marayi frequently blames Saroja for her looks. She says, her face is pale and she looks like someone who is dying of hunger. She cries: "Of what use is a girl who does not have the strength to fetch two pots of water?". She feels betrayed by his son for having brought home a girl who would be of no use to her either at home or at the workplace. She does not look like she can cook even for two people. In days of harvest, she will be able to do some weeding, or pick grains, or pluck fruits. Marayi's statement proves that Saroja is haunted for her complexion which makes her different from the rest of the women in Kattuppatti. This colour and shape are different from her community and it is a shame for her social structure and decides to kill to maintain her honour among the villagers.

In the novel, the role of caste plays a crucial role in dictating the functions of the family and an individual. The political, economic, and social power of a specific caste community in a place steered it to the natural order of holding the power center of proximity. The concept of 'honor and caste' is witnessing the contemporary society that brutal killings occur in the society. Either the girl or boy from the oppressed caste community is being murdered and sometimes the girl or boy from the upper caste community is being murdered and rarely, both are being killed for dishonouring their family, caste community, the ancestry of the family, and importantly they destroyed the future of the family by their act of independence. The concept of honour and honour killings is deeply related to the religious customs in Tamil Nadu. It is easy to understand the honour killings that happened in Tamil Nadu with the prevailing religious customs. In the novel *Pyre*, when Kumaresan brings Saroja to his village, the entire village is curious enough to know about her caste. Subsequently, Kumaresan arrives in his village just before arrangements for the temple festival in his village where they conduct a village caste council meeting before the temple festival. Marayi compels her son to cooperate with the village folks: "Just answer their questions, tell them what they want to hear. Otherwise they won't leave you in peace. Don't underestimate the village folk. They value their honour" (P 125). Because the villagers were unable to find out the caste of Saroja, the entire village was not ready to begin the preparations for the temple festival. Because the 'mark of impurity' incurs the wrath of Gods in the village and says:...should not start any temple work without getting rid of the impurity that has come to our village because of a girl from a different caste is living here" (P133). Contrastively, the goddess from each caste community has a different historical background in Tamil society. Many Tamil anthropologists have done serious research in the field of 'local deities' where they have found that the 'some' goddesses that the people worship had been killed or murdered by their family members long ago. In fear of sin and bane to their family lineage, they had begun to worship the murdered women as their goddesses for their caste community.

In the novel, the informal and extra-judicial decisions are made by the local panchayat in which the elders of the community resolve family disputes and other local conflicts. These panchayats and the elders in a particular community have been creating much impact on the structure of the family; they have decided to punish Saroja and her family for violating the norms. They excommunicate the whole family from the other families; the panchayat members exclude the economic progress of a family, which could affect the other women in the family. In the novel, Marayi feels dishonoured by her son Kumaresan's marriage to the girl Saroja whose caste is unknown. When the couple arrived in their village, the entire village had gathered to know about the caste of the girl. The visitors to Kumaresan's house threatened him about the village caste council meeting. He exposes her mother's thoughts: "You have ruined my life here in Kattuppatti and wrecked my reputation in Vairipalayam, why don't you climb the hill in Kunnoor and announce this dishonourable business from there

for the whole world to hear? (P 97). The novelist depicts the thoughts and cultural circumstances of the characters with their notion of honour and shame. Women have the unique tool to control the honour of their family and their caste community. Women's sexual behaviour is perceived as more powerful than male members of the family, it could also bring shame to the male members of the family. The shame is nothing but a father, a husband, a brother, and all male members are polluted by the dishonourable act of women in their family.

Kumaresan's mother Marayi expects her daughter-in-law to fulfill the role assigned by the patriarchal society. When Saroja wore fine dresses, Marayi degraded her:

At dusk, any good woman would be expected to take the goats in and tether them. She would light the fire to heat water so her husband can wash, and stoke the fire in the kitchen to start cooking. That is what a farmer's wife does. But look at her! She has decked herself up in all her finery. Only prostitutes stand like this on the streets of Kunnoor town! (P 62) The elders of the village excommunicate Kumaresan's family for his hypergamy till the village festival. They feel that if we start the festival with this impurity in our midst, we might incur the wrath of Goddess Mariyatha. Would she tolerate another caste? Even the maternal uncles and aunts of Kumaresan voice their opinion against the marriage, Kumaresan is ostracized by the entire family. Saroja is always at the receiving end of torrential abuses not for her character or her deeds but just for her communal identity. Her supposed superiority is challenged by people around her. One of the men directly questions Kumaresan, – In what way are our women inferior? Kumaresan is excommunicated for bringing disrepute to the women of his community by marrying an outsider. Even Kumaresan's aunt feels that Kumaresan has brought a woman from somewhere else as if there were no beautiful women in our caste This incident took Saroja no time to get an idea of the matter. It was very evident that her mother-in-law and the men were looking for her. They grab the opportunity of Kumaresan's absence. Though terrified of snakes and insects, thorns, and unfamiliar objects hidden within the bushes, she dared not to come out. She decides to hide there until Kumaresan does not return. She keeps herself safe and concealed as she moves firmly to the dense area of the bushes. But suddenly her body slams against a tree. Her presence was caught. God did not listen to her prayers and nature betrayed her. The villagers wait for her to come out from the dark bushes. They dare not to enter in the bushes. It relieved Saroja. But suddenly she heard something that was the end of all her aspirations and hope. Somebody says:

Uncle! The entire bush has dried up. It is only the thorns that look lush on the outside. Why don't we set fire to the bush? We will smoke her out of there . . . And if she doesn't get smoked out, she can burn and die inside. Yes, let's set fire to it! That's the best idea. (P 195) She has to pay the price of the inter-caste marriage. Her journey started from seven steps and ended at the pyre. She was burnt alive and along with the body, a hope was burnt. This act illustrates the rigidity of caste consciousness in our society. It also denotes the lack of empathy where caste is superior to humanity.

Conclusion:

The novel *Pyre* reveals the existential problem faced by inter-caste couples Kumaresan and Saroja. Saroja is not a rebel to break the cocoons of inter-caste married life. It illustrates how she is a common woman who is unaware of her circumstances. Moreover, she is not in a position to confront the consequences of what is going to face after the marriage, especially honour killing due to the inter-caste marriage. She remains quiet in every action wherever she is required to raise her voice against, she is incapable of tackling the situation in her deprived conditions. Moreover, she would have rebelled against these anti-elements like caste, and patriarchal domination, she could have fought against honour- killing not becoming a victim of this casteist moron's hand but rather ending her dream of married life The writer has vividly depicted Saroja's character who is a helpless victim of inter-caste marriage that ransacked her life.

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