

CHAPTER V

SUMMATION

Literature is the expression of life. Transcending physical boundaries like continents, nations and social divisions like caste, race, ethnicity and gender, literature has brought to the limelight the hidden and unexplored areas of life. After the tedious journey through the kings, and the elite, literature has reached the common men who have started expressing themselves and understanding the situations of their fellow men in other parts of the world.

Literature of the Marginalised has more roles to play than other literatures as it includes, Dalit literature, African American literature, Aboriginal literature, Feminist literature, Literature of the Disabled, and Eco literature. Dalit literature started focusing more on the reality, and the lives behind the stage which continues to exist in darkness. Oppressions, the struggles for existence, journey towards empowerment and hope for a better future are the basic themes dealt in Dalit literature.

When Dalits, who have been suppressed for long, reached a point of bursting out, they come out as revolutionaries and writers. Their expressions are filled with bloodshed, tears, their sweat and agony. From Madara Chennaiah to Raj Gauthaman, the Dalit writers are noted for the realistic portrayal with a hope for a positive future. These writers raised the status of Dalit literature from the Literature of the Marginalised to the Literature of Emancipation or Literature of Resistance, by showing resilience to the domination of higher class literatures.

Dalit literature occupies a prominent position in subaltern or marginalised literature in India. It began as an oral literature in the form of folk tales. The denial of

education for the Dalits greatly reduced the ratio of Dalit literature in Indian literature. After many struggles, Dalit literature began in Marathi and slowly spread to other parts of the country. Translations into English and other foreign languages helped Dalit literature to attain global prominence. It also helped to expose the unseen sides of India and the positive transitions from the past.

The untouchables are a part of subalterns and the oppressed. The term includes women, minorities, blacks, refugees, and migrant labourers. The oppressed has to undergo “the pain of identity and the anger of being in an identity”. Bringing the subalterns out of their inferred identity is a long journey, and the writers and revolutionaries have to fight many a battle to come out of that.

Contemporary Dalit writers in India take the privilege of expressing the social injustice prevalent in their region. They do not feel inferior about bringing out the traumas or their identities. Autobiographies also hold a prominent place in this type of literature. Dalit Narratives like *Growing Up Untouchable in India* by Vasant Moon, *Joothan* by Om Prakash Valmiki, *Karukku* by Bama, *Ants Among Elephants* by Sujatha Gilda are famous for their portrayal of untouchable life. Caste related oppression especially in the life of Dalit women occupies a considerable part in literature. Shashi Tharoor describes the state of the double marginalised in his *India: From Midnight to the Millennium*:

. . . caste continues to enslave village society. Each week brings a new horror story into the national press. A Dalit woman is stripped and paraded naked through the streets of her village because her son dared to steal from an upper-caste Thakur, she is forced to have sex with [the] offending boy before a sneering audience of Thakurs. A high born Jat girl falls in love with an untouchable boy and is caught

trying to elope with him; they and their accomplice , another untouchable are caught, beaten, tortured in front of their families, and hanged, and their bodies are for European and American readers because African readers where they exist at all are only interested in reading textbooks. I don't know if African writers always have a foreign audience in mind. What I do know is that they don't have to. (41)

A regional writer and specifically a writer who writes for semi-literate or illiterate population should try to be as simple as possible.

Perumal Murugan, a regional writer in Tamil has drawn the exact replica of the villages of Kongu Region in his novels. A reader can visit the villages, speak with the people, understand their culture, and taste their cuisines as he goes through the works. The reader who reads the state of the discriminated will feel the pain of the discriminated. The common inhuman practices followed in the Kongu region are agricultural serfdom, untouchability, ban from entering into common temples, using common wells and streets, child marriages, infanticide, dowry deaths and honour killing.

The works of Murugan are set in the locale of Kongu Region. The dry grazing fields which are sometimes lushly, goats and sheep with the goat herds, the tall palm trees, the dusty wind of *aadi*, birds, bats and insects, deep wells, growing moon, small temples for village gods, huts and few thatched houses, men in their loin clothes and turbans, women working in the cattle shed and children playing in the rocks is the environment shown by Murugan. Sasthaa in the article published in *The Week* points out Murugan's connection with the environment: "He is intimately familiar with its customs and dialect. Whether it is the coconut fronds wailing in the moonlight, couples making love in a hay

barn or fields of millet stalks dancing in the wind, Murugan brings alive the place with a lilting lyricism”(64).

Murugan’s dealing of the oppressed is universal, which includes untouchables, lower castes and women. He shows the oppressed as survivors who exist out of all odds. They live their life happily despite their sufferings. The farmhand children find happiness in playing in the Munisami temple, which is prohibited for them. When they do not get enough food, they share their food and even give a share for the dog. They find succour in the wells.

Murugan brings out the most prevalent social evils like Agricultural servitude and honour killing and issues like ostracism. Ostracism was a common practice in the 1900s in the villages. Tamil Movies provide ample examples of this practice. In the last four decades, Kollywood has given special importance to the caste system. Unlike the movies before 1950, which showed positive men from higher castes, recent movies portray the reality by presenting both sides of the higher caste people. The movies ranging from *Madurai Veeran* (1956), *Vedham Pudhidhu* (1987), *Thevar Magan* (1992), *Nattamai* (1994), to *Parierum Perumal* (2018), *Asuran* (2019) are realistic pictures. The scripts also openly attack the caste system. Such movies drive home the message that caste discrimination can never be abolished unless people change. Moreover, every caste-based movie stresses the importance of education because only that will help Dalits come up in life and become equal to others.

Murugan’s works are set in the late 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. *Poonachi* and *One Part Woman* are set in pre independent era and his recent works like *Estuary* and *Neduneram* are of the twentieth century. *Neduneram* is set in the COVID 19 period.

When asked about the casteism in his works he said that caste is present universally and there is no way of leaving it unnoticed. The bondage of children as farm hands, sex selective abortions and female infanticides are more prevalent at that time. As he changes the time strap of his works, the issues of that particular time are given importance.

In *Poonachi*, he deals with the life of Indian rural farmers under the British rule. People and their cattle are given tags and any small birth should be documented, which led to people stand in queues for a long time in the sun to get their cattle registered. The officials were very rude and they treated both the farmers and their little animals cruelly. In *One Part Woman*, Murugan deals with the trauma of a childless couple.

The next set of novels, *Seasons of the Palm*, *Aalandapatchi* are about the agricultural servitude and the state of farmhands. *Current Show* is about the life of abandoned boys. The novels *Rising Heat* and *Pyre* are based on the society of 1980s when there was more of urbanisation in the villages and honour killing. The novel *Resolve* takes the next time strap of the late 1980s and 1990s with female infanticide and sex selective abortions. The latest novels *Estuary* and *Neduneram* are based on the issues of contemporary Tamil Nadu.

Murugan gives an effective portrayal of his characters. There are untouchables almost in all of his novels, but his treatment and description differs from one to another. He fills them with the traits of the natives. He takes care not to miss any basic nature of the people of the area. The people of Kongu region are very independent and strong. They have much of tolerance which they have learned from the fields. Everyone has a thirst for power. Shorty is an oppressed farmhand but he tries to imitate how his master exhorts his

power. When a cuckoo or a goat does not obey his commands, he feels anger welling up. Shorty is the representative of all the farmhand children.

Sathi exemplifies the impoverished untouchable children. Both Shorty and Sathi are untouchables. But Shorty is more empowered. He gets his food, finds freedom in the wide fields. Though his parents have bonded him to the landlord, they are there to help him in troubles. But Sathi who has faced trauma due to his leper-father and the loss of his mother, is the most suppressed. He has his friends but does not have the freedom Shorty and his friends experience.

The next major difference between them is their living environment. Murugan uses two contrasting environments in *Seasons of the Palm* and *Current Show*: Open fields and enclosed theatre. Shorty and his friends have exposure to sunlight and moonlight whereas Sathi has to live inside the dirty walls of an old theatre during the day and in the darkest areas of night. Shorty loves being in light, be it the scorching sun or the full moon. When Murugan introduces Belly, he says that she loves the sun. Shorty and his friends are afraid of darkness.

In the case of Sathi, he and his friends steal when they get a chance to smoke the bidis and cigarettes in the darkest corners of the theatre. Every form of abuse takes place at night – when the boys are attacked at the end by someone and when Sathi is sexually abused by the film reel man. Murugan calls the place they take shelter as the place which is fit for pigs, dogs or for people's job which need the cover of darkness. And the most notable point is that, the children too prefer darkness as they are used to it. The children in *Seasons of the Palm* take shelter in nature, whereas in *Current Show* they take solace in drugs. And there are good relationships and hope for betterment in *Seasons of the Palm*.

In the same way, Saroja is an untouchable, who is described as weak and ineffective. But unlike the other characters she is ignorant of all the casteist segregations as she grows up in a town. She is oblivious of the circumstances around, and her inability to think through the situations lead to her death. She comes to the village trusting Kumaresan and even ignores the advice of a villager about the casteist mindset of her mother-in-law. She becomes the victim of caste structure, gender discrimination, and her innocence.

Mangasuri of *Neduneram* also undergoes problems due to inter caste love as she, who belongs to the higher caste is in love with a lower caste boy. She is not murdered like Saroja but is given in marriage to her cousin. Murugan shows ingroup bias as a trait of casteism in both the novels, *Pyre* and *Neduneram*. Kumaresan is not killed because of the casteist bias.

In *Rising Heat*, Murugan brings together the landlords' and the untouchables' suffering due to the same cause. Urbanisation leads them to the loss of lands and loss of jobs. The landowners get some money as compensation. Selvan's father after working for some time and getting loan from friends manages to buy a new piece of land. His uncle sets up looms; but the untouchables on the other hand are left in the streets. Kuppan, the farmhand starts mending slippers and Ramayi is forced into prostitution. The novel does not deal with caste as its primary theme and so the relationship of the farmhands and untouchables is not given importance.

Resolve focuses on female infanticide and sex-selective abortion and so the caste division is not given prominence. *Estuary* deals with the education system, the state of government officials and the addiction to media and technology. *One Part Woman*, A

Lonely Harvest, Trial by Silence feature the life of Ponna and Kali and the after effects of being childless. In novels like *Alandapatchi*, the treatment received by the untouchables is a little better; but in all his works, Murugan uses the caste in the background.

Murugan's characters are the subjugated, who accept their fates as they are. Gomas in his article describes Murugan's portrayal of his untouchables.

Murugan develops the chapters one by one, introducing a sad day, a contradiction, or a problem that makes the children cry and scream in anger. Their lives are shown as images hanging loosely which become inexorable, impassable, intolerable existences at some point. . . . It makes the readers ask, 'Why shouldn't a husband in his foolery worship his wife? and why shouldn't the breeze embrace the boy who is punished? Everything continues as pain and agony. (Gomas 34)

When there are women who are empowered in spite of their suppressions, Saroja is the most subdued women portrayed by Murugan. She does not come out of the cruel web of caste till the end. All other women like Mangasuri, Belly, Ponna and Poonachi become empowered in one way or the other. The other women are empowered. They try to fulfil their needs and the needs of the family by themselves without depending on anyone. The widows like Seerayi and Marayi who bring up their children alone are the best examples.

Poonachi, one of Murugan's very important novels also draws the character of the women of the Kongu region. Becoming a daughter in a poor household, going through similar problems as women undergo, Poonachi lives her life. An article on *Poonachi* in *Shelf Awareness* says, "A wholly human story wrapped up in the person of an orphaned black goat . . . As the story progresses, its sophistication and maturity more closely

evoke *Animal Farm* . . . A frank exploration of oppression, greed, love, and what good can be made of even the most meagre life”.

Murugan while presenting the struggles of the oppressed women stresses the importance of positive bonds for human life. As he describes the life of Shorty, a farmhand, he gives the readers hope through the paternal character of his Master. Exposing the pains of the boys in the theatre in *Current Show*, he also gives hope through their friendship. He also gives importance to the friendship among the children, their innate attachment with nature which soothes them during their struggles.

Murugan’s characters are both revolting and submissive. In every novel, Murugan shows the oppressions faced by the suppressed. Every novel has hope for future too. In *Pyre*, the change comes at the beginning of the novel with the marriage of Saroja and Kumaresan. In *Current Show*, the change is shown at the end where Sathi wishes to go out of the suppressive ambience of the theatre. In *Seasons of the Palm*, change occurs in the middle when Shorty plants palm and Tallfellow escapes to town. Nallayan in *One Part Woman* is a unique character, who revolts against the village’s social norms. He does not abide by the rules followed in the village for ages. He is so different in that he cut his hair very closely unlike others and has an untouchable boy in his house to cook and run errands for him. Necessity changes the unwritten laws of caste.

And in terms of the effects of caste system in society, one should come out of the myths like honour and purity. The outlook of social identity should change as there is nothing called ‘high or low.’ Social groups differ only by their culture and other characteristics. One’s identity should be respected by others. The ‘concept of purity’ should also be understood clearly. Caste does not make one pure or impure; nor does the

job they do. Only dignity of labour matters, and whatever deeds people do sincerely and conscientiously bring honour to them.

Honour cannot be associated with a woman's body. As Thiruvalluvar says,

Like the wild ox that, of its tuft bereft, will pine away,
Are those who, of their honour shorn, will quit the light of the day (Kural 969,
translation . by Pope)

Thiruvalluvar says that like a wild ox that dies if it loses one of its hairs, men who consider honour as their life will die when there is even a minor threat to their honour.

Honour is of paramount importance to man, but man should not use honour as a weapon to threaten others' life. Coming out of such negative attitude attached to honour is not an easy task. Since honour is related to so many other aspects essential for human life, that should be given its due regard. The patriarchal mindset should also change and people should understand that there is 'no honour in honour killing.'

With strictly imposed and effective laws, such violence against people, especially women can be reduced to a certain extent. Verma refers to the remarks made by Dipak Misra, The Chief Justice of India, while speaking against honour killings in India; when two adults are free to marry, "no third party" has a right to harass or cause harm to them and any one violating the court rule will face accusation of breaking the law. Honour killing is suggested by only a few dogmatic heads of some social groups and the perpetrators never feel guilty as they think that it is not sinful if it is done for preserving honour.

It is worthwhile to mention Fanon's comments with regard to the use of violence; he says, "Violence is not psychologically liberating and leads to psychological degeneration. Even if the violence is done to regain a sense of respect [, it] is not

justifiable. Neither rape nor terrorism is justified” (qtd. in Kaushal 5). The equality between social groups is possible by accepting people as they are considering each one’s uniqueness. With education and understanding the value of human life, caste discrimination can be reduced.

Murugan always kept himself in silence and under cover. He is hesitant of coming outside and he says it is his mother who helped him get out of his cocoon. In his preface to the book *Amma*, he says “Amma took this shy, introverted child by the hand and pushed me into the world. The natural ease that I felt when talking to her and being around her has eluded me in every other relationship”(x).

An introvert with no interest for fame, Murugan gained international fame when his novel *Pyre* got longlisted for the 2023 Booker Prize. The novel made a record by becoming the first Tamil book to be longlisted for the Booker Prize. The Booker Prize judges praised Murugan as, “Perumal Murugan is a great anatomist of power and, in particular, of the deep, deforming rot of caste hatred and violence” (qtd. in Bhaskar). Other than that, Murugan always kept himself away from the society but observed every nuances.

Though Murugan is simple and gentle, he is very strong and firm. He does not allow compromises in his writing. He is a person who does not want to attain any place through his writing. The honours and awards he has received are all due to his sincerity, realistic portrayal and the vigour of his writing. He has made his life based on his writings and what he writes he lives also. He approaches even his own caste critically without any prejudice.

When Murugan has undergone threats and exile due to the controversy that arose after the publication of *One Part Woman*, he stopped his communication with people as much as possible. He vented out himself in the poetry collection, *Songs of a Coward: Poems in Exile*. Sasthaa in her article says, “If he had not been thrust into the limelight, the soft-spoken Murugan might have preferred to remain in the shadows. He has never promoted himself for celebrity status. Even when protests broke over his book, he did not get combative. He simply kept his head down and stuck to his daily routine” (65).

The themes of Murugan are agriculture, casteism, social identities, women of soil, regional dialect and environment, and ecology. His backdrops play a major role in his works. They act as characters themselves. New Yorker comments, “Murugan is nothing if not a chronicler of the ordinary . . . It is rare to come across a writer who enjoys such intimacy with not just the land but also the customs that govern the lives of the people who live on it” His love for his native environment and culture is admirable.

Murugan is well-known for his dictionary, *Kongu Vattara Sollagaradhi* (Kongu Vernacular Dictionary). As it is known Kongu dialect is unique for its words full of veneration and musical tone. It was compiled under the inspiration of his Professor Nagaraj who taught him Folklore, and Prof. K.R.Palanisamy who learned Linguistics for the sake of teaching. They influenced him and on searching about dictionaries, he could not find much on dialects. He sought the help of his teachers and started collecting words from the people as they talk. And his friend Sivakumar collected the words of his region and helped him. Thus, after an exhaustive work of around 10 years, he finished his dictionary and published it in the year 2000. Through this work, Murugan brought the uniqueness of his region’s dialect. He has taken everything about the Kongu region to the world.

In most of his novels, Murugan used the Kongu region and its surroundings and in some of his novels he has given a change in the background. In *Current Show* he changes the rural background to a semi-urban theatre, but he shows fields and a well in one instance when the boys take a break from their theatre works. In *Rising Heat*, Murugan uses both rural and semi-urban areas. There are references to theatres, soda shops, constructions and housing units in the novel. In the same way, *Neduneram* is also a blend of city, towns and rural villages in the lockdown of COVID 19. *Estuary* is built around the city but Murugan emphasises the importance of connecting with nature.

After the controversy due to *One Part Woman*, Murugan has stopped writing with his society as the background, but has been using Asurapuri as the background. The villages, people, and the situations are the same as on earth but he uses the characters of Asuras to expose the evil traits of human beings. *Estuary*, *Poonachi* and *Neduneram* are the Asurapuri based novels.

Particularly *Estuary* is a political and social allegory which satirizes the government, its rules, system and the society which is controlled by modern technology and media. The novel tells about the marks based education system which bridles students and treats them as prisoners. The novel is described as, “a razor-sharp parody of everything from e-commerce to the fitness industry, art appreciation to political manipulation, cram schools to social networks” in the wrapper.

As much as Murugan has worked for bringing the reality of the geographical, political and social aspects of the area, his translators have worked really hard in bringing the exact emotions of Murugan. His translators are Aniruddhan Vasudevan (*Pyre*, *One Part Woman*, *A Lonely Harvest*, *Trial by Silence*, and *Resolve*), V.Geetha (*Current Show*,

Seasons of the Palm), N. Kalyan Raman (*Poonachi: Or The Story of a Black Goat, The Goat Thief*), Nandini Krishnan (*Rising Heat, Four Strokes of Luck*), Janani Kannan (*Estuary*), Kavitha Muralidharan and Nandini Murali (*Amma*).

Aniruddhan Vasudevan won Sahitya Akademi Prize for Translation for *One Part Woman*. As a part of regional works, the translators have to face more challenges than the translators of normal works in Tamil, the major challenges being, to reproduce the exact emotion, the tone, the dialect of the people, the living habits and the environment which have to be conveyed as nearly as possible in the original along with the music of the context. The rhythm cannot be produced exactly but Kongu dialect is very unique for its musical tone.

Among all the translations, N Kalyan Raman's translation is the simplest and Nandhini Krishnan's is comparatively a little high sounding. Aniruddhan Vasudevan's translation of *Pyre* had a lot of challenges because of the differences in the dialects of Kumaresan and Saroja. Geetha's translation of *Current Show* gives the novel as it is. Her lucid description of the area in *Seasons of the Palm* lets the readers visualize the grazing fields and the waning moon. Nandhini has played her part very efficiently in the translation that a reader will feel that *Estuary* is the exact replica of *Kazhimugam*. The novel is psychological and Nandhini has captured the emotions of the characters vividly.

A writer always writes under many influences. Though the works are not completely autobiographical, they would have traces of the author's experiences and include many ideas taken from his life and society.

The novel, *Rising Heat*, being Murugan's first novel has many autobiographical elements. It has references to Perumal Murugan's childhood. Aishwarya Sahasrabudhe in her article in *Firstpost* tells about the author's real-life experience on urbanization:

For he was but an 11-year-old when his family's land and his grandfather's 11-acre fields were taken for development by the government. Agriculture was the way of life for rural folk in his region and his young eyes watched their livelihoods being washed away, leaving behind a state of confused despair. "Where to live? How to make a living? They had no clue. So they were all shaken like never before.

Murugan's father was a soda seller in a theatre. In the novel, Selvan's brother works as soda seller in a theatre. It was the times when theatres started emerging providing employment opportunities. The character of Selvan with his quietness, introvert nature, shares similarities with the author. Like Murugan, Selvan loves books and reading. He saves every penny his mother gives to buy books. Murugan's *Songs of a Coward* is the expression of his loneliness and feelings in exile.

Murugan has married out of caste and he too has faced problems from his family and community. Like him, his wife also has faced many difficulties in understanding the dialect of the region. Regarding his Kongu dialect, his wife says in *Amma*, "I did not understand as I barely followed her [mother-in-law] dialect"(xvi) and she was asked by many in the neighbourhood about her nose ring. The land holding castes do not wear nose rings. But women of many other castes in the Kongu Region have rituals associated with wearing nose rings.

Murugan wrote *Pyre* under the impact of witnessing many honour killings around the year 2000. This made him write a novel on inter-caste marriage and honour killing.

Saroja of *Pyre* is from town and so her language is different. Kumaresan is from the dominant community having a different dialect and Saroja finds it very difficult to understand him and his mother. “He often scared her with such grandiose language. Sometimes she simply could not understand what he said. When he spoke very fast, it sounded like a whole new language to her and she would wonder if he was just being mischievous” (8).

Kumaresan also insists on her not talking to anyone so that she will not be identified. Saroja wears a nose ring and her way of wearing her saree is different, which becomes the talk of the village women. “Did you see how brilliantly her nose ring shone, catching the sunlight? . . . Now all the women here are talking about the front pleats in your sari” (21, 120).

Similarly in *Resolve*, Murugan focuses on the reduction of female sex ratio and the problem of the men born in 1980s. Many of his friends remained bachelors in his community, because of lack of suitable brides. Murugan says in his Preface to the novel, “At one point, in a nearby village with a hundred households, there were thirty young men of marriageable age, and only two women” (ix).

His father owned a soda shop in a theatre and he had friends in theatre. His experiences in the theatre and the soda shop led him to write the novel, *Current Show*. As Vairamuthu in his novels describes every minute aspect of his regions, from the cooking to the rituals of death, Murugan elaborates on every detail from ploughing, planting, harvesting to toddy tapping and cooking. He is a representative of the Kongu region in all its aspects.

Every caste has its own traditional practices and heritage and an understanding of the meaning behind these practices will help people to embrace their individual culture. Parents should understand that love is not a sin and every individual irrespective of his/her gender has a right to live. When parents are loving and supportive, the entire social structure can change. When human beings treat others with love and humanity and realize that God has made them all as humans, they will wipe out inequality at all levels. Only then, can man prove that he is the ‘crown of beings.’

Other than casteism and social identities, there are many more concepts, themes and ideas in the works of Murugan on which further research can be done. They are, The Predicament of Women as portrayed in the Works of Perumal Murugan. Autobiographical Elements in the Works of Perumal Murugan , Portrayal of Male Characters in the Works of Perumal Murugan , Perumal Murugan’s Works in Eco-critical Perspective, Mythical Elements and Regional Beliefs in Perumal Murugan , The Loss and Gain in the English Translations of Perumal Murugan’s works and Perumal Murugan and Social Reformation. Comparative studies can also be done comparing Perumal Murugan and his works with other authors of similar works found in other literatures.