

Ecocritical Study of Perumal Murugan's *Poonachi*

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Abstract:

In contemporary Indian English Fiction, Perumal Murugan is known as a quintessential Indian author. He is famous for his themes of environmental consciousness and animal imagery. Most of Murugan's novels reflect the relationship between nature and humans. This paper examines how Perumal Murugan's *Poonachi* reflects the growing need for environmental consciousness through its portrayal of the human-animal relationship. The study draws upon Lawrence Buell's framework of ecocritical reading and Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence, along with the insights of other prominent ecocritics. Murugan departs from the traditional settings of novels and places non-human characters at the core of his literary voice. This study analyses *Poonachi: Or the Story of a Black Goat* by Perumal Murugan, originally written in Tamil and translated into English by N. Kalyan Raman in 2018. The paper argues that *Poonachi* is an important critical work in which non-human focalisation, slow ecological violence and the entanglement of female and animal bodies with environmental degradation work together to challenge anthropocentric literary norms.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Perumal Murugan, animal agency, Indian English fiction, anthropocentrism, *Poonachi*.

Objectives

The following objectives guide the present study. This study first examines the active role of nature in Perumal Murugan's *Poonachi*, rather than treating it as a passive backdrop. It expresses the significance of environmental awareness in the contemporary era. Moreover, it also draws on Lawrence Buell's foundational ecocritical framework. The paper also aims to challenge the anthropocentric assumptions that dominate literary criticism by foregrounding non-human subjectivity. The study thirdly examines the relationship between females and nature, both of which are subjected to patriarchal systems of control. Finally, the study situates Murugan's ecological vision within the broader context of contemporary Indian English fiction and environmental discourse.

Introduction

Ecocriticism studies the relationship between literature and the physical environment. It is one of the most rapidly emerging fields of literary theory in the twenty-first century. As Cheryll Glotfelty asserts in her foundational work *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), co-edited with Harold Fromm, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies and examines the representation of nature across literary traditions. Literature has become one of the most productive sites for expressing environmental awareness in an era of escalating ecological crisis.

However, in the Indian literary field, several contemporary authors have engaged with the urgent concerns of rapid urbanisation, agricultural crisis and deforestation — among them Amitav Ghosh, Kiran Desai, Arundhati Roy, Indra Sinha and Perumal Murugan. Among these voices, Murugan stands out for his deeply rooted ideas of environmental awareness and his formal experimentation

with non-human perspectives. His novel *Poonachi: Or the Story of a Black Goat* (2016; trans. 2018) is a quintessential contribution to this literary tradition.

Perumal Murugan is an Indian scholar and writer who composes primarily in Tamil. He was shortlisted for the Kiriyaama Prize in 2005 and has written twelve novels and six collections of short stories and poems. In 2017, his novel *One Part Woman*, translated by Aniruddhan Vasudevan, won the Sahitya Akademi Prize. In 2023, the translation of *Pyre* was longlisted for the International Booker Prize. Translated into English by N. Kalyan Raman in 2018, *Poonachi* narrates the life of a small black goat that is mysteriously gifted to an elderly farmer and his wife. The goat, too weak to survive alone, is nurtured by the couple, bears offspring and lives out her brief life in a drought-ravaged rural landscape. The novel's apparent simplicity hides a deeper political and ecological ecocritical argument.

This paper argues that Murugan uses a non-human perspective and ecological realism to show how human and animal suffering are deeply connected under conditions of environmental degradation and structural inequality. Firstly, the text highlights nature as an active rather than a passive presence. Secondly, it addresses the non-human as a central literary subject. Thirdly, it explores the parallels between female and animal bodies in patriarchal society. Lastly, apply Nixon's concept of slow violence to the novel's ecological landscape.

Nature as Active Presence: Beyond the Pastoral Backdrop

One of the most significant ecocritical moments in *Poonachi* is Murugan's portrayal of nature as an active and transformative force rather than a mere backdrop. This idea is foundational to Lawrence Buell's ecocritical framework. In *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), Buell asserts that the non-human environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that

begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history. Murugan follows this idea consistently throughout *Poonachi*.

For illustration, the drought in the novel that ravages the landscape of the work is not incidental but constitutive. It shapes every event and every relationship. Even when Poonachi searches for nourishment across the parched hillsides. The novel registers the ecological emergency through her body. “Some grass lay green and lush in the fields. Soon, the season of dew would be here. The dew cover would help the grass withstand the sun’s heat and survive for a few more days before drying up completely” (Murugan 7). This highlights that land does not merely provide the context for Poonachi’s suffering, but it is the active cause of it. Thus, Murugan fulfils Buell’s criterion for environmentally oriented literature. The text refuses to treat nature as a backdrop; rather, it plays an active role in shaping both human and animal life.

Furthermore, the novel also represents that nature plays a vital role in human life and highlights the shared dependence and vulnerability of both humans and the natural world. When the rains fail and the common grazing land is depleted, both the human and non-human inhabitants of the region suffer alike. As Murugan highlights in the novel, “Every year the water we get from rainfall keeps going down. If this continues, famine will surely set in” (Murugan 57). This shared vulnerability also challenges the idea that human suffering matters more than placing human suffering above ecological concerns. However, Cheryll Glotfelty, whose foundational scholarship helps to establish ecocriticism as a discipline, similarly argues for reading texts through the lens of environmental relationships.

Decentering the Human: Non-Human as Central Literary Subject

A second and related ecocritical commitment of *Poonachi* is the radical decentering of the human as the primary subject of literary attention. Glen A. Love, a famous theorist of ecocriticism, in his influential study *Practical Ecocriticism: Literature, Biology and the Environment* (2003), argues that literary criticism must move beyond human-centred thinking and must recognise the non-human world as equally important. Murugan's decision to concentrate his narrative through *Poonachi* endorses exactly this shift. The representation of a creature's grief is equally important and is represented through this statement. "Even as Poonachi trembled and contracted her body in fear, the kids would run towards her, leapfrog over her body and stand on the other side." (Murugan 33-34). This is not sentimentality but an honest representation of animal pain. Murugan renders Poonachi's experience as important in itself. Her hunger, her grief at the loss of her offspring, her small pleasures and large fears — all are narrated with a precision that insists on their value independent of any human meaning they might carry. When Poonachi's kids are taken away and sold, the novel registers her distress in unflinching physical terms.

Murugan's use of the fable structure in *Poonachi* is therefore not a retreat into the merely literary but a formal strategy for insisting on the value of non-human life writing style. It also represents the decentering of the traditional writing style. Moreover, Scott Slovic, in *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing* (1992), argues that fable and animal narrative are among the most powerful vehicles for ecological consciousness.

Rob Nixon's Slow Violence and the Ecology of Rural Tamil Nadu

Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence," introduced in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the* (2011), refers to environmental harm that occurs gradually and accumulates across time.

Unlike direct forms of violence, its effects often remain invisible and are dispersed across time and space. Nixon argues that slow violence disproportionately afflicts and marginalises communities that lack the political and media capital to make their suffering visible. *Poonachi* is, among other things, a literary mapping of slow violence in rural Tamil Nadu.

The drought that structures the novel's ecological landscape is precisely the kind of slow environmental harm. Moreover, Nixon's theory highlights not a sudden catastrophe but a long, grinding depletion of land, water and life. Murugan collects evidence of this decline across the novel's episodes without ever dramatising a single cataclysmic event. For instance, the wells dry slowly, the pastures thin gradually, and the animals weaken by degrees. "The fields were bereft of even a small, dry leaf. On some days, Poonachi ate neem leaves or chewed agave plants. Finally, when everything was wiped out, the couple did not know what to do with her" (Murugan 118). This is the gradual nature of such violence and change. So, gradual as to be nearly invisible, yet devastating in its cumulative effect.

Moreover, Poonachi's body is the novel's clearest reflection of this slow ecological violence. Like her reproductive capacity, her milk yield and her physical strength are all directly connected to the health of the land. Even as the drought intensifies, she becomes lean, and when her kids are born into ecological scarcity, they struggle to survive. "After squirting the last drop of milk from Poonachi's udder, the old woman stopped milking her, saying that she was likely to yield only blood from now on. There was no blood either in Poonachi's body. The kids in her belly were sucking that up as well" (Murugan 118). This relationship highlights the connection between the body of the female animal and the body of the land. It is one of the novel's most powerful ecocritical gestures.

The slow violence of ecological degradation is made worse by the injustice of an indifferent state apparatus. The novel's meetings with government officials and market intermediaries reveal a system in which the rural communities are subjected to bureaucratic surveillance and fiscal extraction while receiving minimal support. The ear-tagging episode, in which the animals are subjected to a government identification scheme with no accompanying welfare provisions. It is a pointed illustration of how administrative violence operates through incremental and routinised processes.

Ecofeminism: The Parallel Exploitation of Women and Nature

Poonachi is represented as a female animal whose reproductive body is controlled, monitored and exploited for its productive capacity. The old farmer manages her pregnancies, appropriates her milk and sells her offspring. This is not merely animal husbandry but a system of bodily control. Murugan renders this with deliberate attention. "If this Poonachi reaches puberty and has a litter, the first male kid will be yours, Mesayya" (Murugan 48). This agricultural metaphor tells us that *Poonachi's* body is figured as land, productive, exploitable and valued only for what it gives.

Another significant aspect of the novel's ecocritical argument is the parallel between the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women. An ecocritical theorist, Val Plumwood's *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993) establishes the theoretical foundation for this reading, arguing that the same patriarchal logic that dominates and exploits women also dominates and exploits the natural world. In *Poonachi*, the female goat's body is exploited both as an animal and as a female. Furthermore, it also highlights the relationship between women and nature and shows how both are controlled by society.

Vandana Shiva's work in *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* (1988) similarly argues for the importance of preserving traditional knowledge and the intrinsic value of nature against the reductive logic of modernisation. For example, the old couple in *Poonachi* exemplify this traditional ecological knowledge. Their understanding of animals, land and seasonal rhythms is gradually being eroded by the forces of modernisation and state control. Moreover, Shiva describes the displacement of lived ecological knowledge by bureaucratic abstraction, and it aligns with the novel when the government scheme imposes its administrative categories on the couple's herd. This situation represents the same kind of forced change.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a careful reading of the primary text through multiple ecocritical lenses. It is also supported by a range of secondary sources, including published journal articles, scholarly books and newspaper reports.

Conclusion

Poonachi: Or the Story of a Black Goat is a work of considerable ecocritical sophistication. Through non-human focalisation, ecological realism and rejection of human-centred storytelling, the novel makes an urgent contribution to the literature of environmental crisis. Murugan validates that the lives of goats and the lives of the rural communities are not parallel but deeply entangled concerns, shaped by the same structures of exploitation and the same processes of slow violence. Drawing on Buell's framework of environmental presence, Plumwood's ecofeminism and Nixon's concept of slow violence, this paper has argued that *Poonachi* challenges anthropocentric literary norms and offers a new kind of writing for ecocritical fiction in the Indian context.

Endnotes:

- 1) The story of a Black Goat or Poonachi first appeared in 2016 under the title Poonachi Allsthu oru Vellayadu Kathai by Kalachuvadu Publications. Murugan's original work, translated into English by N. Kalyan Raman and published by Context/Westland in 2018, and references in this paper are drawn from Raman's translation.
- 2) Eco Criticism or Eco Critical gained importance from the early 1990s, particularly after the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) was founded in 1992 in the United States. Cheryll Glotfelty and Fromm's foundational collection, *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), can help to understand the developing years of this field.
- 3) Perumal Murugan faced violent protests in 2015 for the novel *One Part Woman*, which caused Murugan considerable suffering. He decided that he would no longer write for human beings and would make the animal or black goat *Poonachi* the central character. This was a powerful response to this crisis. His original statement appeared in *The Hindu* on 13 January 2015.
- 4) Rob Nixon is famous for his concept of Slow violence. This represents the quiet environmental destruction of some countries, specifically rural India, sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America. He was thinking about these communities because they were largely ignored by the international media and policymakers. Rob tries to make this hidden suffering visible.
- 5) Murugan's Ecological studies are mostly founded on similarities with Amitav Ghosh's novels. His famous novel, *The Hungry Tide*, mostly covers the same ideas of ignorance of the political landscape towards the environment.

- 6) Val Plumwood's ecofeminist arguments are also similar to Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature, Woman, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (1980). This work is recognised as the first in Western culture to discuss the similarities between women and nature's conditions.
- 7) Drought, which was depicted in the story, is not purely fictional. It was based on Tamil Nadu's water scarcity issues. According to data from the Indian Meteorological Department, the state experienced below-average rainfall during several years between 1990 and 2020.
- 8) The structure of this story is not accidental. It is intentional because Murugan regards it as the best way to speak truth through animal voices. Basically, this tradition stretches from Aesop in ancient Greece to La Fontaine in 17th-century France. By placing an ancient narrative form within a contemporary context of environmental and social crisis, Murugan gives the genre renewed ecological relevance.

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