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BURNING BOUNDARIES: CASTE, GENDER, AND THE POLITICS OF HONOUR IN PERUMAL MURUGAN'S PYRE

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Abstract

Violence against women, particularly within patriarchal and caste-based societies, has remained a persistent and deep-rooted issue in India. Despite modern progress in gender equality, societal norms continue to marginalize women, especially when they challenge traditional constructs like caste and marriage. Perumal Murugan's *Pyre* is a poignant depiction of such intersectional oppression, tracing the tragic journey of Saroja, a woman whose inter-caste marriage places her at the mercy of a deeply prejudiced rural society. This paper examines *Pyre* through a gendered lens, highlighting themes of double marginalization, social ostracization, and the symbolic as well as literal violence inflicted on women who defy societal norms.

Keywords: Caste, Gender, Patriarchy, Honour Killing, Double Marginalization.

Introduction

Violence against women has long been entrenched in human societies, often manifesting through rigid gender roles, expectations, and institutional structures such as marriage. Although contemporary society outwardly respects women, traditional perceptions of gender roles persist, particularly in patriarchal societies like India. The institution of marriage, often idealized as sacred, continues to function as a site of control and subjugation for women, especially when intersected with caste hierarchies.

Perumal Murugan's novel *Pyre* serves as a powerful narrative that underscores the gendered implications of caste-based violence. Through the experiences of Saroja, a woman who marries outside her caste, the novel lays bare the brutal consequences of defying social norms. This paper seeks to analyze *Pyre* as a literary critique of the intersection between gender oppression and caste-based discrimination in rural India, shedding light on the deeply embedded misogyny within the socio-cultural and religious fabric of Indian society.

Caste, Gender, and the Institution of Marriage

India's caste system, one of the oldest social stratification systems in the world, continues to dictate various aspects of individual identity and social interactions. The deeply rooted nature of caste ideology has ensured that inter-caste marriages remain taboo, often resulting in acts of social boycotting, emotional torture, and even honour killings. Women, in particular, become the principal targets of such societal violence as they are seen as the bearers of familial and caste honour.

Saroja's decision to marry Kumaresan, a man from a different caste, becomes the catalyst for her social alienation. From the moment she steps into the village of Kattupatti, she is othered—not just as an outsider, but as a woman who has transgressed both gender and caste norms. The quote, "I have no one besides you. I have come placing all my trust in you" (Murugan 5), encapsulates her vulnerability and the weight of societal abandonment. Her trust in Kumaresan is her only anchor, in a world that otherwise denies her dignity and personhood.



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Objectification and Dehumanization of Women

Saroja's gendered experience is further marred by the objectification she faces in Kattupatti. One of her early encounters with a village man reveals how deeply entrenched the caste prejudices are: "You managed to find yourself a cow!" (Murugan 11). Such dehumanizing language reduces Saroja to the status of livestock—an object to be possessed, judged, and used. Her fair skin makes her stand out, further intensifying the villagers' suspicion and scrutiny.

As the narrative progresses, the language used to describe Saroja becomes increasingly violent and symbolic. She is called a "hen," a "monkey," and a "donkey," all animals associated with either stupidity, servility, or uselessness. These labels not only reflect misogyny but also the contempt reserved for those who transgress caste boundaries. Marayi's words, "All this mixing might work with soda colours, but it doesn't in life" (Murugan 133) represent the ideological rigidity of caste and the inherent resistance to change.

Double Marginalization: Gender and Caste

Murugan's novel brings to the fore the concept of **double marginalization**—a phenomenon where women face layered oppression based on both gender and caste. While Kumaresan, though socially frowned upon, still enjoys a certain level of mobility and acceptance in the village, Saroja is confined to the domestic space, constantly subjected to ridicule, insult, and isolation.

Despite sharing the same act of transgression, Saroja alone bears the brunt of societal wrath. Her mother-in-law, Marayi, refuses to eat food cooked by her and openly voices her disdain. In contrast to Saroja's muted presence, Marayi's voice dominates the household, reflecting how women within the accepted social framework (in this case, caste conformity) are privileged, while others are ostracized.

Saroja's voice, both literal and metaphorical, is silenced. The once-free, independent girl from Tholur who was affectionately called 'Roja' by her brother, is now reduced to an 'Erukku' plant, considered cursed and associated with death. This metaphor effectively captures the transformation of her identity, from a cherished daughter to a cursed outcast.

Patriarchal Judgements and the Witches' Trope

The characterization of Saroja as a seductress and witch echoes age-old patriarchal narratives where women who assert independence are demonized. When Marayi exclaims, "What did you do to bewitch my son?" (Murugan 16), she invokes a trope commonly used to discredit women who act outside social conventions. Such character assassinations are further exacerbated by the moral policing associated with female appearance. Saroja's use of makeup is seen as evidence of her "promiscuity," and Marayi even labels her a prostitute. This conflation of femininity with seduction and dishonour speaks volumes about the entrenched misogyny that dictates female behaviour. In rural settings, where cultural purity and honour are fetishized, any deviation from tradition is met with hostility, especially when performed by women.

Honour Killings: The Ultimate Gendered Violence

Perhaps the most brutal expression of patriarchal and caste-based violence is the phenomenon of **honour killings**. In *Pyre*, Saroja becomes a symbolic representation of thousands of women who fall victim to this inhumane practice. In societies where family honour is placed above individual autonomy, women become expendable. Their lives are seen as collateral damage in the preservation of social order.

Honour killings, particularly in rural India, often go unreported or are covered up as suicides. Saroja's tragic fate mirrors these real-life atrocities. Despite her love for Kumaresan, her willingness to adapt, and her endurance of relentless discrimination, the societal structure ultimately consumes her. Her love becomes a "sin," and her life, a casualty in the name of honour.



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Conclusion

Perumal Murugan's *Pyre* is more than a novel; it is a mirror to the caste-ridden, patriarchal society that continues to devalue and dehumanize women. Through the character of Saroja, the novel exposes the deep interlinking of gender-based violence with caste prejudice, emphasizing how women remain the primary victims of societal transgressions. Her story is one of love, betrayal, suppression, and eventual annihilation—an all-too-common narrative in a country still struggling to uphold the dignity and freedom of its women.

Campaigns and awareness movements have been launched to prevent such violence, but they fall short of uprooting the deeply embedded social mindset. For true change, transformation must occur not only through policy but also within the collective psyche of individuals. Gender equality, caste reform, and social justice must intersect in practice not just in theory for women like Saroja to live with dignity and autonomy.

Primary sources

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