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## **Patriarchy and Oppression in Indigenous Contexts: A Study of Perumal Murugan's *Poonachi: or The Story of a Black Goat (2018)***

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### **ABSTRACT**

Men rule and run everything in a patriarchal social structure, and this system of discrimination based on gender not only often reproduces inequality and hinders choices but is also used to give force to prevailing prejudices, thereby (re)oppressing women as well as animals. This paper aims to explore the themes of patriarchy and oppression in indigenous contexts by using Perumal Murugan's novel, *Poonachi or The Story of a Black Goat (2018)*, as the primary text. By presenting the struggle of the black goat named Poonachi, whose life is laid to waste by societal oppression, gender-based exploitation, and the cruelties of patriarchal society, the novelist attempts to depict a critique of patriarchy and demonstrates how the male members of the society control human and animal lives. In the book, Poonachi is a symbol and represents those women who are side-lined, oppressed and exploited everywhere under the domestication of a patriarchal society. Her experiences mirror that of the common woman's lack of autonomy over her own body, a duty to be a parent and bearing children in our patriarchal society. This paper aims to examine the strained, oppressed, and underprivileged life patterns within common spheres of daily life and critique gender-based oppression in specific rural contexts. Therefore, the study seeks to examine *Poonachi or The Story of a Black Goat (2018)* as a critical text that reflects considerable socio-



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cultural power and patterns of subjection, thereby furthering our understanding of gender dynamics in Indigenous tales.

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### **Introduction:**

Perumal Murugan is one of the prominent writers of literary works in the Tamil language. He has written novels, short stories, poems, and books of non-fiction, and his works have been translated into English. Perumal Murugan's *Poonachi: The Story of a Black Goat* (2018) is a classic novel that explores the struggles and pains of its protagonist, Poonachi, a black goat, and through her journey, the author attempts to symbolically portray the wretched conditions of women in our patriarchal society. The novel delves deeper into the rural world of Tamil Nadu, portraying the daily lives of ordinary people and their reliance on domestic animals, such as goats, sheep, and cows, for their livelihood. The novel presents a poignant allegory through the portrayal of Poonachi and other goats, critiquing the social oppressions prevalent in indigenous and rural contexts. Hierarchies in our society and patriarchy build societal structures and relationships between humans and non-humans. Literary texts poignantly describe the complex social strata and painful experiences of indigenous communities. Elizabeth Kuruvilla, in her book review, writes, "Poonachi is an ironic look at society, of power and abuse, bondage and greed, surveillance and the silent acquiescence of the weak in their own subjugation." Through the narrative of the black goat, Poonachi, Murugan shows how patriarchy functions in our society and reveals that not only human beings but also domestic animals are affected by it. Poonachi and other domestic animals lead their lives in exploitation, subjugation, and ultimate resilience. Therefore, the novel critiques the broader power dynamics and patriarchal structures of our society.

### **Objectives of the Study:**

This study aims to:

- Examine how *Poonachi* symbolically represents patriarchal oppression through the life of a female goat.
- Analyse the intersections of gender, caste, poverty, and state power within rural and indigenous contexts depicted in the novel.
- Explore how control, surveillance, and reproductive exploitation function as mechanisms of patriarchy affecting both humans and animals.
- Investigate the themes of resilience, endurance, and silent resistance embodied in Poonachi's journey.



- Situate Murugan's narrative within feminist and subaltern theoretical frameworks to understand the politics of voicelessness and marginalisation.

### **Discussion:**

At the beginning of the novel, we witness an old man sitting on a hillock and enjoying the sunset, and mysteriously, a giant-like figure appears to him and offers him a black goat kid. In memory of their dead cat, the farmer's wife renamed the goat kid Poonachi and started raising her with other goats. They faced various challenges in raising the motherless goat kid, and the nanny goat's milk kept her alive. The novelist mentions, "...there was a problem in getting even the small quantity of milk that kept Poonachi alive. The nanny goat had learnt the skill of making its udder go dry at will. If they tried to get Poonachi to suckle when her kids were not around, no milk would flow from her teats" (Murugan 17). Gradually, when she grows up, she is valued primarily because of her reproductive abilities and the financial profit she brings to her owners. Perumal Murugan's portrayal of Poonachi is very significant because it successfully draws parallels between the gendered oppression of women and domestic animals in our patriarchal society. She was born in an unknown place as a tiny, sickly goat in a world that values only strong and productive creatures. This reflects the condition of the subaltern in our society, whose identity is marked by difference and exclusion. In her essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak asserts that "the subaltern cannot speak" (Spivak 40) because the power structures prevent them from having a voice in public discourse. In the same way, Poonachi is voiceless throughout much of the novel and does not have any autonomy in her life. Poonachi's life as a female goat is dictated by her ability to bear kids, which echoes the traditional expectations of women as wives and mothers to fulfil gendered roles centred on reproduction and domestic labour. Thus, the symbolic representation of Poonachi and other domestic animals shows that one's worth is only measured by utility rather than individuality in a patriarchal society.

The novelist's portrayal of the state as an encroaching apathetic entity adds another layer to his critique of authority. Taking goat kids for ear piercing or registering their births is necessary in the state. However, the old man and his wife faced difficulties in registering Poonachi's birth because she was a motherless kid, and her colour was black. As a black goat, she is like a lower-caste woman who faces discrimination in the patriarchal society. The arbitrary demands of the state mirror the intrusive nature of governmental control over the lives of marginalised communities. The arrogant behaviour of government officials towards the poor people of the village shows the social hierarchy which is still prevalent in our



nation. The common masses are dominated by the bureaucratic structure of our society, and the novelist critiques this through the portrayal of Poonachi and other goats. This critique extends beyond the individual to encompass the broader societal structures that uphold and legitimise the oppression of innocent animals like goats and sheep. Therefore, the novelist questions the social disparities between the rich and poor and says, “When did the rich ever suffer any hardship? It’s only poor people who come here like fools to stand in the queue and suffer” (Murugan 39). Through this novel, Perumal Murugan represents the callousness of government officials and the state’s apathy towards the problems of the common masses of South India.

Poonachi’s interactions with other goats in the house of the old man and his wife and the pasture land depicted by Murugan, show that humans build a microcosm of a society steeped in hierarchical control. As the owner of Poonachi, the old man acts like the archetypal patriarch who exerts authority and power over her life and decisions. Sylvia Walby, in her book *Theorizing Patriarchy*, mentions, “Patriarchy is a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women” (Walby 12). So, Poonachi’s lack of autonomy in her life as a goat is depicted by the novelist to show the oppression of animals by human beings as their owners, and this, in turn, is mirrored in the lives of the women in our society, who are similarly restricted and dominated by societal expectations and male supremacy. Murugan describes the inner agonies of Poonachi because the male goats also only bother about their biological desire, as we find in the depiction of the male goat Kaduvayan and his actions. Murugan says, “Kaduvayan alone came near her now and then, sniffed her vagina, pressed his mouth on it and raised his head. Savouring the thrill with his snout pointed upward, he lifted a hind leg and tried to rest it on her” (Murugan 58). Therefore, it can be said very clearly that the novel portrays the subjugation, oppression, and confined experience of women in the sphere of male dominance as objects of biological desire.

The novel also represents the concept of surveillance in the strata of patriarchal society and how it acts as a tool for controlling submissive creatures like Poonachi because she is constantly monitored by the old man and his wife as her owners. This imprisoned situation of Poonachi parallels the broader social surveillance that women and marginalised communities experience in their day-to-day lives. Murugan’s depiction of Poonachi’s constant fear as a female goat and her subservience serves as a metaphor for the oppressive conditions faced by those on the lower rungs of the social hierarchy. Poonachi had a high fever after her ears were pierced by government officials. She also felt disgusted when she was taken to a male goat for forced copulation to become pregnant. The novelist mentions,



“The kid did manage to survive. But the wound refused to heal quickly. It festered and bled. The old woman kept trying different cures using sundry leaves and herbs” (Murugan 47). She becomes a wonder when she delivers seven kids, and many villagers come to see her. Despite the pervasive oppression, the novel also explores themes of resistance and resilience. Therefore, the journey of Poonachi as a female goat is one of survival against all challenges, which reflects the indomitable spirit of the marginalised and oppressed creatures in our patriarchal society.

She went through several difficulties since she came to the old couple’s house. The old man’s wife carefully raised her, and she was taken to the pasture lands, where she found the environment new and very strange. The novelist mentions, “For Poonachi, the environment and the grazing were new and strange. She floundered, not knowing what to do. She ran behind the other goats. She was so tiny that all she could see were legs. Since she was unable to push herself between the legs, she couldn’t eat a single leaf” (Murugan 57). The old man and his wife went to their daughter’s house and took Poonachi and the other goats with them. For the first time in her life, Poonachi gets the opportunity to see the outside world beyond the village and its pasture land. She starts liking the buck kid, Poovan, at the house of the old man’s daughter, and one day, Poovan kisses her, and Poonachi likes it. However, the old man and his wife depart for their home the next day, and it makes Poonachi very sad. Poonachi felt very helpless after leaving Poovan, and the old woman kept scolding her all the way home.

Poonachi gave birth to seven kids, and it became miraculous news in the area, and many people started coming to see her. Murugan writes, “News of the miracle of the seven kids spread through the territories under the government. There were many people who wished to see them. They started heading there with bundles of food for the journey. Some brought a portrait artist with them” (Murugan 125). For the old man and his wife, it was a bigger opportunity to earn money, and they started taking money from the people who came to see Poonachi and her seven miraculous kids. When they faced challenges in raising all seven kids, making Poonachi sad, they sold all their kids after a few days to a stranger for a good amount of money, purchased ornaments of gold, and became very happy. However, on the other hand, Poonachi felt vulnerable as a mother after losing all her loving kids. Through the depiction of Poonachi’s helpless condition, the novelist symbolically represents the miserable situations of women in our society, where their only value lies in their reproductive abilities, and nobody thinks about their inner agonies and struggles. Murugan describes the suffering of Poonachi and writes, “...Poonachi passed the night in a pool of tears. Her family, which had filled the front yard, had vanished without a trace. She had offered her udder and squirted blood for six or seven months to raise them, but what was the use? Not a



single kid was left for her to look at” (Murugan 139). The denial of Poonachi to be subdued entirely by her painful situation echoes the struggles of marginalised communities in broader ways, who resist oppression through endurance and subtle acts of defiance. The novel is not only a critique of patriarchy but also depicts the intersectionality of oppression, particularly in indigenous and rural contexts and also highlights how caste, gender, and poverty intersect to create layers of disadvantage that compound the experiences of marginalisation.

Poonachi became pregnant for the second time and gave birth to seven kids again. However, the old couple was not able to raise their kids because there was no rainfall last year, and all the villagers faced difficulties surviving. They somehow managed to eat the small amount of food grains they saved for themselves. The novelist describes, “There were no goats, cattle, poultry, cats or dogs in any house in the village. People were desperate, not knowing what to do. Some families left for other villages and towns” (Murugan 165). In this situation, the old man and his wife rely entirely on Poonachi’s milk for survival. The precarious economic situation and dependence of the old couple on Poonachi for financial stability reflect similar socio-economic vulnerabilities faced by indigenous communities. Murugan shows how there is no pure economic exploitation without patriarchal oppression, for the powerless are plugged into the services of those with power. They even slaughtered Poonachi’s kids and ate their meat without thinking about Poonachi’s pain. Gerda Lerner, in her book *The Creation of Patriarchy*, mentions, “Patriarchy, in its wider definition, means the manifestation and institutionalisation of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general” (Lerner 16). The critique of patriarchy is thus given broader support when framed by a historical and intersectional understanding which places it as a part of capitalism, colonialism and white supremacy.

The forced breeding of Poonachi when she reaches puberty and the selling of her kids by her owners to earn money symbolise the exploitation and objectification of female bodies in the patriarchal society. Gerda Lerner, in her book *The Creation of Patriarchy*, writes, “Women are the majority, yet we are structured into social institutions as though we were a minority” (Lerner 19). Poonachi’s journey as a motherless kid, not getting enough milk, being fed rice water by the old man’s wife, the denial of other goats to take her into their group, and her bodily weakness all symbolise the journey of a female in our patriarchal society, where they always feel neglected and becomes a burden for their families. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, in her book *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, mentions, “Women are defined consistently as the victim of male control — as the “sexually oppressed”



(Mohanty 24). The novelist tries to represent how animals are exploited like women for various reasons in rural India.

The novel also highlights the problematic existence of male goats. They are sold for meat when their owners want to earn money. The male goats are also castrated, leading their life without purpose as weak creatures after their castration. The novelist describes the incident of the male goat, Kaduvayan's castration, and says, "With tears pouring from his eyes, Kaduvayan collapsed to the ground. Now there was no need for anyone to hold him down" (Murugan 72). Kaduvayan could not join his legs together and kept crying loudly in severe pain after losing his male organ. Through the representation of Kaduvayan's castration, the novelist tries to describe that the owner of the goats, the old man as a patriarch, never thought about the feelings and passions of Kaduvayan and, to control his biological desire, castrated him and, after a few days, also sold him for a good amount of money. Poonachi started liking Poovan, another male goat, at the old man's daughter's house, but one day, he was also sacrificed to their local deity, Mesagaran, when the festival ended. Poonachi saw that Poovan's lifeless body was lying inside a basket, and his head was missing. Through this novel, the novelist also depicts that male goats are sacrificed for religious purposes. Overall, how the patriarchal society and its rituals killed the male goats are also highlighted in this book.

Tamil Nadu's cultural diversity and indigenous contexts embedded in this novel make it a very significant book. The novel depicts the lives of Asuras, an indigenous community living near Odakkan Hill. The rustic people worship their local deities, grow crops in their fields and keep domestic animals such as goats, sheep, or cows. One day, a wildcat attacked Poonachi, and some villagers came to the old man's hut and guarded it at night to protect Poonachi from the dangers of wildcats. This reflects their unity against all the odds in their village. On the other hand, as the owners of domestic animals, they control their lives and think about the financial profit they can get from selling the animals because they are financially dependent on them. One day, when the old man and his wife were coming from their daughter's house, one of their goats started grazing on the field of a farmer, and after getting hit by the farmer's stone, the goat died. This incident made the old man and his wife very dejected, but after a few moments, the villagers told them to sell the meat of the dead goat Uzhumban, and after selling his meat, they got enough money. Poonachi witnessed the incident and felt inner pain for the dead goat. The novelist describes, "The stone flew through the air and struck Uzhumban – who had raised his head at the interruption – on the temple. There was a loud scream. Uzhumban's body rose in the air, spun around and dropped inside the field" (Murugan 95). The rural background of the novel, with religious practices and



customs, in addition to traditional beliefs, serves as a specific yet universal ground that represents the oppression domestic animals face inside the households of their owners. The novelist's use of rural dialects, myths, religious rituals and rustic images enriches the narrative, along with the lifestyles of common people in South India.

### **Conclusion:**

Through this novel, Murugan critiques the subtler, culturally ingrained practices that perpetuate gender inequality in our society, besides patriarchy. In the novel's preface, he mentions that he is fearful of writing about humans, and that is why he has chosen to write about a female goat to show the gendered oppression of women symbolically. The novel challenges us to consider how traditions, culture and societal norms can marginalise women as well as animals and shows that patriarchy is not a monolithic structure but manifests in diverse ways across different contexts. The book not only highlights the specific cultural and indigenous contexts of Tamil Nadu but also speaks about universal themes of exploitation and subjugation. By centring the story on a non-human creature, Poonachi, Murugan expands the discourse on oppression and illustrates how patriarchal norms transcend human society and impact all forms of life. Ultimately, we find that Poonachi lost everything and could not survive, and the novelist writes that she became 'a stone idol'. Her death is a tragic ending, but it also liberates her from the oppression of patriarchy. Therefore, we can say that the novel remains a witness narrative to the persisting challenges against oppression and the ultimate resilience of the marginalised and offers us an intense commentary on the human condition through the journey of a humble black goat.

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