



Voicing the Marginalized: Language, Dalit Identity, and Cultural Sustainability in Perumal Murugan's *Poonachi*

Ms. Miraclin Nivesha M¹, Ms. Edith Catherine V²

¹Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of English, Faculty of Science and Humanities
SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Kattankulathur, Chennai

²Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of Language, Culture and Society
Faculty of Engineering and Technology, SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Kattankulathur, Chennai



Manuscript ID:
BIJ-SPL6-MAR26-MD-126

Subject: English

Received : 06.02.2026
Accepted : 09.02.2026
Published : 31.03.2026

DOI: 10.64938/bij.v10si6.26.Mar126

Copy Right:



This work is licensed under
a Creative Commons Attribution-
ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

Abstract

Language plays a crucial role in shaping identity and sustaining cultural memory, particularly within marginalized communities whose voices are historically silenced. This paper examines Perumal Murugan's *Poonachi: Or the Story of a Black Goat* as a powerful narrative of Dalit identity articulated through literary language and anthropomorphic storytelling. Set in a semi-arid rural landscape marked by scarcity and social exclusion, the novel employs the figure of a female black goat to symbolically represent the lived realities of the Dalit community, especially women, whose bodies and voices are subjected to control, exploitation, and erasure. The study foregrounds how Murugan's narrative language—especially in its translation from Tamil to English—functions as a medium of cultural sustainability by carrying indigenous experiences, rural sensibilities, and caste-based suffering across linguistic boundaries. Through anthropomorphism, *Poonachi* transforms animal suffering into a poignant allegory of human marginalization, enabling a deeper engagement with issues of identity, gender, and caste. The paper argues that the novel not only asserts Dalit identity but also preserves cultural memory by documenting everyday struggles, emotional resilience, and survival strategies embedded in rural life. By situating *Poonachi* within the broader context of translated Tamil literature, this study highlights the role of language as a tool of resistance and representation. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates how Murugan's narrative sustains marginalized cultural voices and reclaims identity through storytelling, contributing to ongoing discourses on language, power, and cultural sustainability in contemporary Indian literature.

Keywords: Language, Dalit Identity, Cultural Sustainability, Anthropomorphism, Translation, Marginality

Introduction

A manifestation of human expression is literature. It has been the most inclusive definition of art that excels at reflecting civilization and culture. Literature takes prejudice to a whole new level of connotation and apprehension in the process of institutional sanity and equity. Translating a work of art from one language to another has always been an artistic endeavor. With the artistic process of

translating, a literary work is given new clothing. A new direction has been found in literature through translations from Tamil to English. It has a wide scope as the ancient language hits the modern contemporary era readers. Tamil Literature has its own grandeur in its literary tradition. Tamil Literary Translations marks its place through writers and their works like Rajam Krishnan's "Lamps in the Whirlpool", Janakiraman's "Wooden Cow", Neela



Padmanabhan's "Generation's" and Perumal Murugan's "The story of a goat".

The identity crisis of the Dalit group is the main focus of the essay, and Poonachi, a female goat, serves as its representative. The idea of scraping by has a rural setting where it is semi-arid, the weather is unpredictable, and there is little food available, but there is a tenacious desire to exist and to love. An analogy for a member of the Dalit group who could be a girl, a woman, or a man is a starving goat. The story is told from the viewpoint of a goat and centers on themes of human love, hope, adventure, and death. The tale of a black goat explores the cruel realities of animal life, including its abuse, exploitation, and misery.

Perumal Murugan is one of the leading Indian authors who explore his Tamil writings. He is an author, scholar, and literary chronicler in the world of Tamil. His works include ten novels, a collection of five short stories, and four anthologies of poetry. His novels include *One Part Woman* (2010), *Seasons of the Palm* (2000), and *Poonachi or The Story of a Goat* (2016). He engages the themes of family, greed, corruption, and identity in his writings. His novel *Seasons of Palm* has been shortlisted for the Kiriyama Prize in 2005 and his English translation novel *Madhorubhagan or One Part Woman* by Aniruddhan Vasudevan has won the Sahitya Akademi's Translation prize in 2017.

The Story of a Goat by Murugan is a dark tale about a black female goat who struggles with life and eventual death among the farmers in search of her own identity. To demonstrate that a goat is capable of enduring any catastrophe that comes its way, Perumal Murugan included a goat in his book, particularly a female goat. This concept of Perumal can be compared to Indian ladies who have the capacity and ability to accept the challenges and problems that come along with life's journey. Poonachi uses the voice of a female black goat to represent the mentality of humanity. It illustrates the solidarity between the animal and the female state.

Language, Anthropomorphism, and the Voicing of Dalit Identity

A black goat named Poonachi has an orphaned beginning to her narrative. She is placed in the custody of an elderly couple. The entire focus of the book is on her struggles with hunger, longing, and love at every stage of her life. Anthropomorphism is the idea that a non-human entity, such as an animal, can

have human feelings, identities, and traits. An anthropomorphic book is *Poonachi*. A large black man presents the elderly man with a bag containing a little goat and claims that it has an uncommon ability to bear seven young. The novel runs through the difficulties faced by a girl child as well as a woman in rural as well as urban areas starting from the birth of the girl, her childhood, and her adulthood until her death which is just believed to be a curse rather than a miracle. The main idea of survival is not just meant for the struggle that they face against the harsh living conditions but also the need for sexual gratification.

"A stranger leaves a baby goat to the old couple. Both the couples who were seen to be reluctant in the beginning started to love the goat and they accidentally named it as Poonachi out of the sudden love and affection that they had and in remembrance of their old cat. "Oh, men of fortune are as plentiful as fruit worms, but a kind heart is rare. Only a kind-hearted man can have my baby". (Murugan, 2017, p. 3)

The Big Black man tells the old man about the struggle that the goat's mother took to deliver its seventh one that is Poonachi. Look, she is no ordinary kid. Her mother birthed seven kids in a litter. After she delivered the sixth, I thought it was all over and only the umbilical cord was left. But she contracted her body and pushed hard once more. This one slid out as the seventh and dropped like a piece of dung. She is truly a miracle, look at her". (Murugan, 2017, p. 3)

This incident in the opening scene can be compared to the woman who gives birth to her child after undergoing so much pain and struggles to bring their kid safely into this world. In the case of



Poonachi's mother, she also strived hard crossing many struggles to deliver her baby.

Poonachi's load of numerous offspring was exceptional. She has been denied her own body's rights. She is deprived of all the pleasures life has to give. As her childhood progresses, she continues to be bound by the bonds of established couples. As the bonds of love weaken with time, Poonachi is paired with an aging partner whom she despises. The author here provides readers with a view of Indian culture, where females are compelled to marry men they don't like for the sake of power and reputation. Both Poonachi and a girl can be compared to voiceless members of society.

Poonachi has been a miracle in this human-less world. The human world in which she has been surrounded around never ceases to be amazed by her fragility and fecundity. The way how Poonachi tries to fit in the new herd of goats in the old woman's house is a natural aspect that is very much relevant to the Indian society woman who fit into their in-laws' house accepting all the pros and cons of the family that she gets married.

The other aspect was that life was not a bed of roses for her as well as her owners who lived in the poverty-stricken village where she lands up. Poonachi is of a magical origin, a mysterious figure who makes the couple think that she can bring good luck and prosperity to their poverty-stricken life. But the reality is that Poonachi is more mundane, she lives a life that only hits loss and tragedy that ultimately sucks the couple's resources that leads to the devastation of hope and loss.

Though Poonachi is a magical born she is considered as a curse to the couples once they face loss in their farms. This can be contradicted in Indian society where women are treated as a miracle once they enter into a family, but then the wave of misfortune happens the miracle changes into a curse. "Taking care of this miracle is ruining our lives," (Murugan, 2017, p. 17).

Poonachi can be looked at as a perspective where she is seen longing for her lover as well as the love that she needs in her course of life. Poonachi's thoughts and feelings are as same as those of a

human being. She heavily mourns for the loss of her lover as how a girl mourns when she loses her loved one. "Poonachi stood still, feeling great emptiness within." (Murugan, 2017, p. 60). Once she loses her loved one Poovan suffers in utmost guilt of thinking about her survival without her loved one. "Why should I live anymore?" (Murugan, 2017, p. 78).

Gendered Bodies, Caste, and Cultural Sustainability in Poonachi

Poonachi can be associated more with its feminist aspect of the desire for freedom of her coupling. In Poonachi's case, she is made to breed with an unfamiliar old goat whom she detests more. She is deprived of her own freedom to choose her own partner to mate. This violent act can be connected to the feminist aspect of rape or sexual harassment that happens to women in a forceful way in which she is deprived of their own freedom or opinion. "It felt strange to think that a dried-up old goat had invaded her body," (Murugan, 2017, p. 90).

She is disturbed and worried about her coupling with another goat since of the love she has for Poovan. Being emotionally connected to Poovan she feels very bad by heart for the previous breeding act in which she was involved. Without accepting reality nor acting toward the present Poonachi yearns for a better situation. "The two kisses planted by Poovan lingered on her mouth. She thought about it all the time, and her happiness playing with Poovan." (Murugan, 2017, p.112).

Poonachi is deprived of her own kids. This is because that society has branded the black goats as something low in caste. So Poonachi being a black goat and a female goat is deprived of her own right of having her own kids. She suffers so badly when her litter is taken away. This act is in direct relation to the Indian Tradition of the caste system of neglecting the low-caste people.

Poonachi's burden of multiple pregnancy was something remarkable. She has been deprived from the rights of her own body. Any pleasure that life offers her she is denied of it. "While fetal rights grow, women's rights shrink" (Wilson, 1998, p. 597) clearly says that a woman holds her rights until her



fetus but after the fetus she is deprived of her own body and own kids. She is just seen as a reproductive machine who needs to function the program of delivering children and whatever happens to her does not adhere to her familial expectations or the social and religious expectations that she has towards the society. Her duty is just to give birth and not to take right or question the after math of it.

Poonachi, a black goat with a frail frame who survives through thick and thin. The goat emerges from the darkness with eyes gleaming with every affordable bit of affection. It is a time when humanity's development has taken such a turn that humans themselves wish not to confront their own nature and instincts. Rather hiding behind heavy veils of modesty and morality. Murugan gave his readers an unashamed reflection of humanity that was real, careless, fearless, and most of all, unsympathetic.

A starving goat is an allegory for a Dalit community member who is either a girl, woman, or man. The novel revolves around the themes of love, hope, journey and death of the people spoken from the voice of a goat. The story of a black goat interrogates the stark reality of animals, their sufferings and their exploitation and how they are abused. A malnourished goat allegorically represents a malnourished girl or a woman through the concept of Anthropomorphism. Poonachi is seen as an incarnation of a miracle of burden in this merciless world.

Thus then the novel brings to light the immature patriarchal society that still suppresses women in this modern era. Recent days women explore the world in various fields of life but still somewhere this stereotyped society pushes women to the trivial norms of the society. She is slowly seen as a "lost sex" by the oppression and injustice done by men to her. Simon De Beauvoir in her work *The Second Sex* highlights the concept of women as a lost sex from the view of men where he says that "Woman is lost. Where are the women? The women of today are not women at all" (Beauvoir, 2010, p. 289). A woman can never be measured by her actions,

positions or situation instead she stands apart for who she is whether a miracle or a burden to the society.

Conclusion

Perumal Murugan's *Poonachi* is a voice of the Dalit community. He mainly touches on the voice of the Dalit community as their voices are unheard to society. As we live in dark times where our utmost intimate feelings down through the ages we step in it has been all under siege. *Poonachi* raises out the voice of a girl child of Indian society through the voice of a goat, especially a female goat. We live in a world where women have been treated as a curse and there actually represents to be joy in this merciless world. Mostly the Dalit community not only women even men are considered as a curse. Poonachi is just not only a metaphor but pictured as a real person like a human being who comes across dreams, desires, love, pleasures, and pains of motherhood just as a woman undergoes in her journey.

Poonachi beginning as a foundling and enduring the trials of being a miracle, Poonachi travels through both promise-filled stages and violent ones in her life as a female goat. The central theme of Poonachi is that of a malnourished goat who, in the context of a man, allegorically represents a malnourished girl. Poonachi is a representation of an impoverished orphan girl and the hardships she faced in this patriarchal environment. In terms of Indian society, Poonachi and every girl child is a miracle of happiness in this cruel world. As a result, finding one's own identity is a personal challenge for everyone.

Poonachi beginning as a foundling and enduring the trials of being a miracle, Poonachi travels through both promise-filled stages and violent ones in her life as a female goat. The central theme of Poonachi is that of a malnourished goat who, in the context of a man, allegorically represents a malnourished girl. Poonachi is a representation of an impoverished orphan girl and the hardships she faced in this patriarchal environment. In terms of Indian society, Poonachi and every girl child is a miracle of happiness in this cruel world. As a result, finding



one's own identity is a personal challenge for everyone.

References

1. BBC News. (2018). *Perumal Murugan: India's "dead" writer returns with searing novel*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-43194547>
2. Beauvoir, S. de. (1971). *The second sex*. Knopf.
3. Beauvoir, S. de. (2010). *The second sex* (C. Borde & S. Malovany-Chevallier, Trans.). Jonathan Cape. (Original work published 1949)
4. Friedan, B. (1963). *The feminine mystique*. W. W. Norton & Company.
5. Murugan, P. (2017). *Poonachi: Or the story of a black goat* (N. Kalyan Raman, Trans.). Context, an imprint of Westland Publications.
6. Slate, R. (2018). *On The story of a goat, a novel by Perumal Murugan translated from the Tamil by N. Kalyan Raman*. <https://www.ronslate.com/on-the-story-of-a-goat-a-novel-by-perumal-murugan-translated-from-the-tamil-by-n-kalyan-aman/>