

SOCIAL POWER AND SUBALTERN RESISTANCE IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF PERUMAL MURUGAN

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Abstract

Perumal Murugan is an Indian author, literary chronicler, scholar who primarily writes in tamil and many of his novels have been translated into English. This Paper examines the themes of social power and subaltern resistance in the select novels of Perumal Murugan. Social power is a Vital Part in the novels of Perumal Murugan. Murugan's fiction examines how power operates through patriarchy, land ownership, caste, family structures, religion, social customs, and community authority. Caste is one of the strongest mechanisms of social power in Murugan's fiction. In the novel *Pyre*, the inter-caste marriage of Kumaresan and Saroja challenges the caste boundaries maintained by the village. In *Seasons of the Palm*, exploitation and dehumanization of marginalized agricultural labourers are vividly explained. In *One Part Woman*, social power operates through marriage, fertility and expectations concerning motherhood. Kali and Ponna's childlessness become a matter of community concern rather than a personal issue. In particular, Ponna, experiences pressure from society because women's social status is connected to reproduction and family honour.

Keywords / திறவுச் சொற்கள்: social power; subaltern resistance; community authority; caste boundaries; dehumanization.

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Introduction

Perumal Murugan is widely regarded as one of the most significant voices in modern Indian literature. Writing in Tamil, he powerfully portrays the complex relationships between caste, gender, land, and language within the rural life of Tamil Nadu. His narratives are known for their frank realism and compassionate portrayal of marginalized communities. After facing intense controversy over his novel *One Part Woman* and withdrawing from writing for a period, Murugan eventually returned with renewed creative energy. His comeback has been marked by remarkable productivity and depth. In 2023, *Fire Bird*, the English translation of his Tamil novel *Aalandapatchi* by Janani Kannan, received the prestigious JCB Prize for Literature. The novel, both poignant and powerful, once again demonstrated Murugan's talent for transforming ordinary rural experiences into stories with Universal resonance.

Caste as the primary source of social power

The Important form of social power in the novel *Pyre* is caste power. The protagonist character Saroja's caste identity becomes more important to the villagers than her individual identity. She is Kumaresan's wife, the community continually attempts to determine which caste she belongs to. "You live in a different town. Please don't come back here dragging along a girl from a different caste" (56). The novel therefore shows that caste is not merely an individual belief; it functions as a social system that regulates marriage, belonging and interpersonal

relationships. The Villagers suspicion gradually becomes collective hostility. Murugan presents the village community as a powerful social institution. Kumaresan and Saroja believe that marriage is a personal decision, but the community treats their marriage as something over which it has authority. The novel *Pyre*, demonstrates how social power operates through pressure to conform. The villagers expect individuals to follow established caste boundaries. Anyone who crosses these boundaries risks social exclusion and punishment. Kumaresan's confidence that his marriage will be accepted contrasts with the community's determination to preserve its established social order.

Social power in the novel is also gendered. Saroja becomes particularly vulnerable because she is a woman entering an unfamiliar village and a different social environment. Her body, sexuality, marriage and caste identity become matters of public concern. This demonstrates how patriarchal communities can exercise authority over women's choices and mobility. The family is not simply a source of emotional support in the novel *Pyre*. It can also function as an institution that reproduces social expectations. Kumaresan's relationship with his mother, Marayi, illustrates the tension between individual affection and inherited social attitudes. Family relationship becomes entangled with caste expectations, honour and community pressure.

Saroja's position is particularly significant for a social power analysis. She is simultaneously, a woman, an outsider to Kumaresan's village, a person whose caste identity is questioned and a wife whose marriage challenges social expectations. "The entire village bears a mark of impurity if there is a woman here whose caste or family are unknown" (72). Her marginalization demonstrates how caste and gender can intersect to intensify vulnerability. Kumaresan and Saroja's marriage itself can be read as an act that challenges the existing social hierarchy. Their attempt to establish a life together represents individual agency against caste-based social regulation. *Pyre* examines the enormous pressure placed on individuals who challenge deeply established social structures. Thus, *Pyre* represents social power as a pervasive force embedded in caste hierarchy, community surveillance, family authority and patriarchal conventions. Through the tragic experience of Kumaresan and Saroja, Perumal Murugan demonstrates how an individual's freedom to choose love and marriage is constrained when it conflicts with the collective authority of caste-based society.

In *Seasons of the Palm*, Murugan explains social power is represented through the unequal relationships between caste, landowners, labourers, adults and children, and the dominant social institutions of rural Tamil society. "A Young lad like you should get up once!" (13). The novel, *Seasons of the Palm*, shows how power operates not only through physical force but also through economic dependence, caste hierarchy, discipline, and control over labour. The novel portrays a deeply hierarchical rural society in which caste determines a person's social position and opportunities. The children working on the farm belong to an oppressed caste, while the landowning and socially dominant groups exercise authority over them. Their caste identity limits their freedom and reinforces their subordinate position. "nobody from the Gounders' family is allowed to touch any part of these chakkilies" (56).

Ownership of land becomes an important form of social power. The landowners control employment and livelihood, making agricultural labourers economically dependent of them. Because the children and their families depend on wages, they have little ability to resist exploitation. The children are particularly vulnerable because of their age and social status. They are expected to perform difficult agricultural work under adult supervision. Their innocence and dependence contrast with the authority exercised by employers and supervisors. Physical punishment and threats function as mechanisms of control. Discipline is not simply about correcting behaviour; it reinforces the hierarchy between those who command and those who must obey. The labourers experience humiliation because of their caste and economic position.

Their treatment demonstrates how social power can operate through language, insults, exclusion, and everyday behaviour rather than only through institutional authority.

Gender also influences relationships within the rural community. Women and girls experience restrictions produced by patriarchal expectations, while men generally possess greater authority in family and labour structures. Thus, caste and gender intersect in determining social status. Murugan does not portray the oppressed characters merely as passive victims. Their friendships, conversations, imagination, humour, and small acts of resistance provide forms of agency. However, their ability to challenge the larger social structure remains limited by caste and economic dependency.

Thus, Murugan's novel *Seasons of the Palm* can therefore be studied through the concept of social power as the ability of dominant groups to control resources, labour, behaviour, and social status. The novel demonstrates that caste and economic structures reinforce one another: those who control land and employment also possess greater social authority, while landless labourers remain dependent and vulnerable.

Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* examines social power through caste, patriarchy, marriage, fertility, religion, and community customs. The novel demonstrates how power is exercised through social expectations and traditions, particularly over women whose worth is measured through their ability to produce children. Patriarchy is one of the strongest forms of social power in the novel. Kali and Ponna's marriage are judged by the community according to its ability to produce a child. Although infertility is a shared marital experience, the social pressure falls particularly heavily on Ponna as a woman. "If you are always worried about what others are going to say, you will always be in trouble" (81).

The absence of a child becomes a means through which the community controls the couple's lives people repeatedly question Ponna about pregnancy and offer advice about rituals and religious practices. Thus, fertility becomes a social expectation rather than a private matter. The Village community exercises power through gossip, questioning, ridicule and social judgment. Ponna and Kali cannot easily maintain privacy because their marriage and reproductive life become subjects of public discussion. This illustrates Michel Foucault's idea that power can operate through continuous social surveillance. Caste influences relationships and social status throughout the novel. The community is organized through established caste practices, and religious and social customs are not equally experienced by everyone. Murugan therefore connects caste hierarchy with other forms of social authority.

The One Part Woman festival at the Ardhanareeswarar temple provides the central context for the novel's exploration of religious power. The belief surrounding the festival creates a temporary suspension of ordinary social rules, allowing women who are unable to conceive to participate in a ritual associated with fertility. The festival consequently reveals a contradiction: the same society that stigmatizes childlessness also creates a religious space in which alternative possibilities are temporarily permitted.

Ponna's body becomes a site of social control. "The plant that we plant grows; the seed that we sow blooms; is it only me who is the wasted land here?" (66). Her reproductive capacity is treated as something that determines her status as a wife and daughter-in-law. The novel therefore illustrates how patriarchal society can transform a woman's reproductive body into a social concern. Power is also exercised within the family. Ponna faces expectations from her husband, mother, mother-in-law and wider network. Her personal desires are frequently subordinated to what the family and community consider appropriate.

Social power does not always require physical force. Repeated criticism and expectations gradually become internalized. Kali and Ponna begin to experience Shame, anxiety, guilt and insecurity, showing how external social pressure can become psychological control. Ponna is

not simply a passive victim of social power. Her participation in the festival represents a moment in which she enters a space where conventional restrictions are temporarily loosened. Murugan uses this situation to question whether social traditions actually protect individuals or instead impose restrictive expectations upon them.

Thus, Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* critically examines the operation of social power through caste, patriarchy, fertility, religion, marriage, and community surveillance. The novel presents a rural society in which an individual's identity and social status are strongly influenced by established customs and collective expectations. Ponna's inability to conceive becomes a source of social stigma, demonstrating how patriarchal society places disproportionate importance on women's reproductive capacity. The community exercises power through gossip, questioning, ridicule, and religious expectations, transforming a private marital issue into a public concern. Through Ponna and Kali's experiences, Murugan reveals how social power operates not merely through direct authority but also through customs, religious beliefs, family structures, and psychological pressure. The novel consequently exposes the unequal power relations that govern marriage, womanhood, fertility, and social belonging in a caste-based rural community. "I don't want a child so desperately. Moreover, all of you will call me impotent and laugh at me. So, let it go" (98).

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