

India, Identity, and Globalization

The Goat Or The Girl?

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The Story of a Goat, also known as the work that marked South Indian writer Perumal Murugan's rebirth into the world of writing, revolves around the life of Poonachi. An orphaned black doe whose care was handed off to an old couple in the Oddakan Hills by a supposed man-giant Baksuran. At first look, the novel seems like a sweet fable with elements of magical realism but a more analytical read tells the audience it is anything but that. Post the backlash Murugan received on his novel "One Part Woman" he swore off writing about societal issues using humans as characters. *The Story of a Goat*, therefore uses Poonachi to render the human predicament and the range of human experiences through the story of an animal. Poonachi's relationships, plight and position in society is Murugan's use of symbolism to obliquely comment on the status of rural women in India.

The very opening line of the novel states "The birth of an ordinary creature never leaves a trace, does it?" by labelling Poonachi an ordinary creature, someone whose arrival is not worth celebrating or worth noting in any way Murugan subtly brings out and mocks the Indian Society's preference for a son to be born into the family and their unwantedness for a girl child. Furthermore, Baksuran's first interaction with the old man draws parallels to a father trying to marry off his daughter into a good family because he cannot house her or her needs anymore. He constantly emphasizes that taking care of her is "beyond him" and therefore he wishes to hand her off to a "kindhearted man"

Poonachi's relationship with the old women resembles that of a mother-in-law with her daughter-in-law as well. Though she does seem to genuinely care for the doe, it is obvious that she treats her like an outsider whose responsibility she has to unwillingly bear. When the "visitor" comes to purchase Poonachi's children much later into the story and asks to be given Poonachi as well, the old woman herself states that "She is actually a daughter-in-law who has entered my home, a lady whose come to expand my family." Here, Poonachi's worth is reduced to a baby-making machine, sadly this is also the reality of many women who reside in rural villages in India. Often times they're forced by their elders to procreate as soon and as many children as they possibly can. Many a times this is for two primary reasons, firstly, the desire for a male child and secondly because the more children a daughter-in-law births the more labor and profit opportunities a poverty-stricken family has.

When the old couple realizes that Poonachi does indeed belong to a line of does that can miraculously birth seven children, they fully exploit her for their own benefit. They cash in on Poonachi's children for selfish reasons multiple times, when the first sale is made the old man uses the money to buy his wife, daughter, and grandchildren gold jewelry. Her children were the reason he could indulge in extravagances that he had lacked so far yet he was neither thankful to Poonachi nor concerned with what the buyer planned on doing with her children. We find out further on in the novel that all the does from Poonachi's first litter had died, the old man however is so blinded by his new riches that despite the does' untimely death he still sells Poonachi's second litter to the same man again. His indifference towards his "supposed" daughter-in-law's daughters serves as a reminder of the much-used statement "ghar ki beti humesha parayi hoti

hai” (*the daughter of the house is always a stranger*) and highlights the mistreatment of Indian women by their own families. Once they’re married off, many a time their parents completely detach themselves from their daughters, with no care in the world for their happiness or security, they’re officially considered to have “left” one family and joined another.

Murugan, through Poonachi also explores the lack of agency women have in their lives in both personal and professional spheres. Poonachi’s fate, like that of many women in rural India, is determined largely by those around her, she seems to be a silent party in decisions that have the potential to change the course of her life completely. This is brought out best through her relationship with Poovan and her forceful mating with the old buck. When she’s visiting the old woman’s daughter Poonachi and Poovan seem to develop intimate feelings for each other. So much so, that they’re both heartbroken at the thought of separating. Their forbidden relationship reflects the reality of many women in India, where the custom and expectation is to wed a man of the family’s choice. Very rarely are women in rural areas of the country permitted to marry a man of their choosing, being in an arranged marriage is the norm. The aforementioned love affair with Poovan serves as a catalyst for the introduction of a rope tied around Poonachi's neck, which then becomes a permanent fixture. The rope alludes to the phenomenon of women being constrained by familial demands and expectations throughout their lives. Moreover, When Poonachi is shown expressing her feelings about losing Poovan, her tears are met with scorn. The old woman is seen stating “She never cried this loud even when she was lost in the forest” and “Look at how saucy she is. She doesn't even have flesh on her body, but she wants a male partner it seems.” The old woman’s reaction to Poonachi’s romantic and sexual desires is a means for Murugan to comment on Indian societies orthodox views on sex especially when it is

craved by a woman. Women that are sexually liberated are often shunned and considered disrespectful since sex is not something that should be openly discussed or wanted by them.

Lastly, Poonachi's mistreatment at the hands of her human caretakers was a fascinating representation of the marital lives of many women in the country. I say this because I've witnessed women I grew up around being subjected to violence and abuse at the hands of men and their families as soon as they fail to serve the purpose the man brought them in his house for. Years and years ago, I had a caretaker named Kooni, Poonachi's story is unfortunately just like hers. Kooni got married at a very young age to a man much older than her, at first his family was joyful at the arrival of a stealthy, attractive woman with a fair amount of money to her name. However, the second they realised Kooni was infertile and unable to give them an heir the damnation for her bareness begun. She was eventually banished from the house, whilst her husband married another woman.

Growing up, Kooni would often recite this story to me. Today, I can't help but draw parallels between her and Poonachi. Poonachi was considered a miracle, a gift from the couple's deity Lord Mesugaran himself. The old woman took great care of the little doe, doing her best to ensure she could keep her alive with whatever means necessary. However, that was all before the drought hit and Poonachi and her care became a bane rather than a boon. She constantly cursed at her and often treated her as an object rather than a living being with her own emotions and experiences simply because her presence was a inconvenience rather than an advantage.

There are so many moments in the novel that blurred the lines between the human and animal world. As a female reader myself, there were instances where I had to constantly remind myself that Poonachi is the story of a goat and not a girl. Or is it?