



PRAKRITI WITHOUT PROTECTION: A SAMKHYA FEMINIST READING OF POONACHI OF PERUMAL MURUGAN

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Abstract: The classical Samkhya theory of Purusa and Prakrti is used in this paper to provide a feminist reading about Perumal Murugan in Poonachi using indigenous feminist interpretation. Keeping the original philosophical names, Purusa, as witnessing consciousness and Prakrti, as active, embodied, productive force, the study opposes allegorical gendering and considers the distribution of ethical responsibility and action in the story. Poonachi introduces life as an unending vulnerability: reproduction without consent, nurturing without protection and sufferings without moral redress. Prakrti, who is represented by the biological existence of the goat, keeps the world alive through hard work and perseverance, with purusa-like social order: ritual, economy and community, are uninvolved spectators of suffering. Feminist meaning is created not by opposition or empowerment but by demonstrating prakrtic weariness and subsequent abstraction. This paper suggests that Poonachi can be regarded as a book that expresses a decolonial feminist ethics of embodiment, vulnerability, and moral absence by locating the novel in an indigenous metaphysical context and not in western feminist paradigms. The research makes a contribution to the Indian feminist theory, as it proves that classical philosophy can be used to explain the modern narratives without any conceptual distortion.

Keywords: Samkhya philosophy, Puruṣa–Prakṛti framework, Indigenous feminist theory, embodiment and vulnerability, decolonial feminist ethics

I. Introduction:

The Indian context of feminist literary criticism has up to now emerged by adapting Euro American theoretical motions like liberal feminism, radical feminism, Marxist feminism, and more recently, intersectionality. Although these strategies have been significant in revealing gendered oppression and structural inequality, the generalising presuppositions through which they are enacted have frequently been jarring with Indian texts that have been influenced by the indigenous ethical frameworks, philosophical traditions, and non-liberal conceptualization of agency. The notions of autonomy, resistance and empowerment, which are the main themes in the Western feminist discourse, are not necessarily sufficient to explain the story, where women experience their life in terms of perseverance, silence, withdrawal or embodied suffering as opposed to direct opposition. This theoretical flaw is especially noticeable in the modern Indian literature which prefigures marginal, rural, and non-human lives. The book of Perumal Murugan: Poonachi: Or the Story of a Black Goat (2019; English translation 2022) stands out as a very impressive example of such text. The novel tells the story of a goat that was born in precarity and portrays the life as a cycle of hunger, reproduction, vulnerability and death.

Lack of humanized feminist signifiers, namely: Speech, consciousness or resistance, has encouraged critics to interpret Poonachi as an ecological, caste-based or animal-studies work. Although these readings are useful they are not exhaustive in relation to the ethical arrangement of the novel, especially its continued focusing on the way suffering is normalized, observed and unguarded. It claims that Poonachi could fruitfully be interpreted in terms of classical Samkhya of Purusa and Prakrti, so long as the terms are preserved in their original philosophical sense, and are not diminished to symbolic gender dichotomies. The terms Purusa and Prakrti are used in Samkhya philosophy to refer to passive and active, respectively, witnessing and productive force. The framework is used as an ontological and ethical approach to the distribution of action, responsibility and consequence in the narrative of this study, rather than allegorising Purusa as man and Prakrti as woman. The paper will reconsider the feminist ethics beyond the resistance-based paradigms by placing Poonachi into the context of this native philosophical model. The feminist meaning in the novel is not empowerment and transformation but rather the revelation of prakrtic life forced to continue on when no ethical protection exists. This kind of reading will help to build an indigenous and decolonial feminist theory that can address modern Indian text without dictating theoretical requirements on it.

II. Theoretical Trajectory:

The philosophical tradition of this study is based on classical Samkhya which is one of the oldest systematic schools of Indian thought. The most important aspect of Samkhya metaphysics is the duality of Purusa and Prakrti that explain the composition of reality without referring to a creator god. Any literary use of this framework will necessitate conceptual faithfulness, the terms have been widely abused with symbolic, gendered or moralised meanings. Purusa is the meaning of consciousness in classical samkhya. It is inactive, passive and non-agentic and serves only as the drasta or witness. Purusa does not act nor does he have any responsibility with respect to material processes. It is characterized as being devoid of qualities (nirguna), unattached (asanga) and not subject to either pleasure or pain. Notably, Purusa is not a metaphor of manhood, power, and social capability, but, in fact, it is a state of impersonal consciousness that is outside the scope of material causality. Prakrti on the contrary, is the productive and active principle of existence. Prakrti, which consists of the three gunas sattva (illumination), rajas (activity), and tamas (inertia) is the cause of all manifestation (that of body, mind, matter, and emotion). It is dynamic and creates life by transforming and reproducing itself. Prakrti is a dynamic, embodied, and burdened with continuity, unlike Purusa, which does not have the consciousness of self-reflexivity. The association between Purusa and Prakrti is that of intimacy and not subjugation. In classical Samkhya, activity of the cosmos is realized to be due to their intersection: Prakrti has to act in the presence of Purusa, whereas Purusa has to be a witness of the acts of Prakrti. Hierarchy does not result in ethical imbalance but rather in the misrecognition, especially in the case of seeing consciousness not to dislocate itself in relation to the products of Prakrti. The Samkhya concept of liberation is caused by the withdrawal of Prakrti after it has served its purpose. This framework does not make Purusa and Prakrti identify with characters when applied to the analysis of literature. Rather, it provides an ontological prism, by which the distribution of action, embodiment, and ethical responsibility can be analyzed using narratives. Prakrti is a means of knowing in which places labour, suffering, reproduction and vulnerability reside and Purusa are the means of detached witnessing which witness these processes not interfering with them. Such differentiation makes it possible to have a feminist reading which is grounded in indigenous thought without necessarily invoking resistance or freedom of choice as the central means of meaning.

III. Methodology: Ontological Ethics as a Feminist Reading Practice:

It is an ontological-ethical approach to literary analysis in making use of classical Samkhya philosophy to explore the allocation of action, responsibility, and consequence in narratives. Instead of using Purusa and Prakrti as either symbolic or characteristic categories, the methodology uses them as analytical principles that explicate the ethical organisation of a text. This method makes it possible to have a feminist reading, yet does not imposing western feminist norms, yet is committed to indigenous philosophical ideas. The initial methodological process entails the identification of prakrtic labour places in the story. Prakrtic labour is a type of embodied labour that generates life and continuity, reproduction, nurturing, endurance and exposures to harm. There is interest in characters or bodies human or non-human, which bear the weight of action and endure the impact of material being. This action prefigures embodiment as an ethical term and not a metaphor that focuses on the naturalisation of vulnerability and productivity in the narrative world. The second step is devoted to identifying the cases of purusa-like detachment. This is not in terms of literary understanding of individual consciousness but it goes beyond that to social, ritual, and economic order that bear witness to suffering

and do not take responsibility of suffering. The normalisation of such detachment is characterised by normalised pain, loss is internalised within the routine and moral intervention is lacking. Reading witnessing as an active ethical position and not a neutral position, through the analysis, reveals the displacement of moral responsibility. The last stage explores ethical result of the disproportion of Prakrti and Purusa. Based on the interpretation by Samkhya on liberation as the process of the withdrawal of Prakrti after exhaustion, the paper critically examines instances where embodied life no longer provides continuity. This withdrawal, breakdown, or death is not considered as failure but ethical exposure. It shows the inability of a system based on continuous prakrtic labour and left morally alienated. In this methodological framework, feminist meaning is not created in terms of resistance or change but rather in terms of endurance being taken as an ethical burden. The silence, vulnerability and exhaustion are subjected to critical meaning and this enables Poonachi to be read as a modern story which is a performance of indigenous feminist ethics of the embodiment and moral inexhaustibility instead of empowerment and autonomy.

IV. Reading Poonachi: Prakrtic Life, Reproduction, and Embodied Vulnerability

Poonachi: Or the Story of a Black Goat by Perumal Murugan shows the life at its most primitives level, deprived of interiority, intent, and symbolic redemption. The story is about the creation, life, procreation, and demise of a black female goat whose life is determined solely by hunger, the exposure of her body, and the biological need. What is particularly important to an indigenous feminist reader in Poonachi is not just the fact of suffering it had to chronicle but the fact that its suffering is normalised in a social world that is witness to vulnerability and is not ethical responsibility. As interpreted on the classical system of Samkhya, the novel is an expressive manifestation of Prakrti that is full of continuity and operating in a purusa-like ethical vacuum. Since Poonachi is born, his body is brought into forces that are outside his control or will. The hunger of the goat, his vulnerability to sickness and his habitual exposure to danger are not paraded as extraordinary events but rather some of the normal circumstances of life. The prose used by Murugan is not sentimental, which supports the feeling that suffering is neither tragic nor meaningful it just is. This narrative reserve is quite consistent with the idea of Prakrti that is described by Samkhya as blind, fruitful and exhaustless. Prakrti does not ask how it functions, it goes in continuation because continuation is its operation itself (Isvarakrsna, Samkhya Karika). Among the most vivid things about Poonachi is its continuous emphasis on unprotected reproduction. Poonachi is taken into reproductive cycles that undermine and drain her body but reproduction is discussed as an unquestionable need in the rural economy. The ability to procreate is what makes the goat a valuable entity, which reminds the feminist theorists of a long-standing observation of instrumentalisation of reproductive bodies (Federici; Shiva). But the story of Murugan goes further and leaves even the intentionality of humans out of such exploitation. There is no villain in particular, instead, the system itself functions effectively and makes the suffering invisible due to routine. Here the purusa-like principle is analytically important. The witnessing without action defines Purusa in the classical Samkhya. This form of detachment in Poonachi is seen not in the personal consciousness but in social forms of detachment ritual, economy and custom, which witness suffering and which are morally inactive. Villagers kill, sell and sacrifice animals as a normal part of their lives, and they never stop to question the moral price of continuity. This watching together is what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak refers to as the official ignorance of ethical regimes that rely on invisibilised labour (A Critique of Postcolonial Reason). The feminist implications of this set up is the skewed ethical responsibility. Everything, biological, emotional, material, is forced upon the embodied life, and moral thought is extrinsic. The pain, fear and exhaustion are being absorbed by Prakrti in the body of Poonachi, Purusa, as the dispassionate observer, is not touched. This inequality is symptomatic of a larger set of social realities in India, where feminised bodies, women, animals, lower-caste subjects are historically situated as the place of continuity and care without any protective response (Rege; Rao). Notably, the novel does not give in to anthropomorphism. Poonachi does not receive an interior monologue and symbolic consciousness. This narrative option thwarts the liberal feminist readings which use voice or choice as the indicators of agency. Rather, agency is found in endurance itself, the ability of the body to proceed despite exhaustion. Suffering tends to manifest itself in the mundane as opposed to dramatic eruptions of resistance as the argument by Veena Das suggests (Life and Words). This banality is disturbingly accurate in the story Murugan tells. The death of Poonachi is the climax of the novel that should be read.

In a traditional moral perspective, death can manifest itself as narrative resolution or tragedy. In a Samkhya-oriented feminist perspective, death is prakrtic withdrawal, however. According to the Samkhya philosophy, Prakrti only stops acting after being exhausted that is, when its role has been accomplished. The death of Poonachi is not redemption, or even struggle; it is the natural

culmination of a body that has been forced to give so much and so unguarded without any defense. This withdrawal shows how the system relied on her has flunked.

By refusing catharsis or moral resolution, Poonachi leaves the reader in a space of discomfort. There is no corrective justice, no transformative awakening. This absence is itself ethically significant. As Judith Butler notes, lives that are rendered ungrievable reveal the limits of prevailing moral frameworks (Frames of War). Poonachi's life and death occupy precisely this ungrievable space, forcing the reader to confront the cost of ethical detachment.

Thus, when read through the Purusa-Prakrti framework, Poonachi articulates a form of indigenous feminist critique that does not rely on empowerment, resistance, or voice. Instead, it exposes how embodied, reproductive life is compelled to sustain continuity within systems that refuse ethical accountability. Feminism here is not aspirational but diagnostic: it reveals the unsustainability of a world that witnesses suffering without responsibility.

V. Feminist Implications: Exhaustion, Withdrawal, and Indigenous Ethical Critique

The feminist significance of Poonachi lies not in resistance, voice, or transformation but in its sustained exposure of ethical exhaustion. Unlike liberal or radical feminist narratives that centre agency in speech, rebellion, or self-assertion, Murugan's novel insists on a form of life where agency is located in endurance without recognition. When read through the Purusa-Prakrti framework, this endurance reveals a deeply gendered ethical structure in which embodied life is compelled to sustain continuity while ethical responsibility remains detached.

The mainstream feminist theory tends to confuse empowerment with visibility and freedom. Nevertheless, in conditions that do not guarantee safety or legibility of resistance as argued by scholars like Veena Das and Sharmila Rege, the experience of Indian women, especially that influenced by the caste, rurality, and poverty, often takes place. Poonachi radicalises this understanding by making it go beyond the human. The life of the goat shows how this vulnerability itself is turned into a state of being, into naturalisation and made beyond doubt. The feminism in this case is not one that raises an uproar but rather that makes the violence of being unbearable.

Prakrti is characterized by constant movement according to a Samkhya standpoint. This activity is practiced in Poonachi through biological reproduction, care and survival in face of danger. The reproductive labour has been historically feminised and systematically devalued as perceived by feminist theorists like Silvia Federici. The story of Murugan reveals another underlying issue: reproductive labour continues to exist even when there are no exploitative agents to be identified. It is not the personal inhumane behavior that is morally wrong, but the system, which demands never-ending prakrtic production without any specific care.

The purusa-like ideality of the novel is seen as moral isolation institutionalised in custom and in habit. Villagers are not violent and malicious, they engage in day-to-day activities that naturalise pain. This echoes the attitude of Judith Butler who states that some lives are not intended to be valued and thus grieved (Frames of War). The life of Poonachi is not grieved since it has not been known as ethically important. In this case, the feminist critique works through revealing the manner in which invisibility of ethics is created. Notably, Poonachi attacks anthropocentric feminist theories. The novel disrupts this belief by placing the body of a non-human woman in the centre, hence feminism is not necessarily voiced by consciousness or through language. This is in line with the ecofeminist criticisms that challenge the human exceptionalism but warn against the idealisation of nature (Shiva). Murugan is not romanticising any such way. Prakrti is not nurturing, benevolent, it is exhausting, vulnerable, and exposed. This non-idealisation of Prakrti is extremely vital in the maintenance of philosophical integrity on the framework of Samkhya.

The scene of the death of Poonachi is the climax of this feminist criticism. Instead of providing redemption or narrative justice, death signifies prakrtic withdrawal the ending of embodied work on exhaustion. Withdrawal is terminated in the Samkhya philosophy upon the completion of the role of Prakrti once its role is complete. This retreat reveals the moral poverty of the world that relies on living without safeguarding it in the story of Murugan. The matter of feminism is not an offer of liberation; it is a manifestation of moral fallacy.

Dominating feminist stories of hope and future are also made difficult by this reading. Laurie Berlant argues that some modes of endurance are forms of cruel optimism in which mere survival is a drag. Poonachi does not provide any future-based solution, which is why it does not comply with the demands of feminist texts to create alternatives. Rather, it requires moral accounting on the reader. The unease created by the novel is not an incident, but rather the place where feminism steps in.

Placing Poonachi in an indigenous philosophical paradigm, this paper proves that feminist ethics in India do not have to be supported by the foreign theoretical terms. An embodiment, vulnerability, and moral absence can be read in advance through the Purusa-Prakrti model without falling into symbolism and ideology. Feminism stands out as a criticism of moral disengagement, and not an empowerment endeavor.

VI. Conclusion: Toward an Indigenous Feminist Ethics of Embodiment

As this paper has argued, Poonachi by Perumal Murugan expresses a kind of feminist ethics that cannot be sufficiently described in the context of the most prevailing Western feminist paradigms of autonomy, resistance, or empowerment. Through the classical Samkhya model of Purusa and Prakrti, without any figurative gendering or conceptual dislocation, the paper has shown how the novel reveals a basic ethical imbalance: in the form of embodied and reproductive life, which, however, is forced to maintain continuity, the element of moral responsibility is passive and alienated.

By retaining the original philosophical senses of Purusa witnessing consciousness, and Prakrti active productive force, it is possible to read an embodiment category of an ethical one in advance. Instead of extraordinary mean-spiritedness, pain in Poonachi is the result of the hum-drum of life itself. The helplessness of the goat, its reproductive loss and subsequent death are not framed as a tragedy or as part of an unjust system that needs redressing instead, they are framed as natural consequences of a system that habitualises prakrtic labour, but fails to protect. This is the normalisation which, according to the paper, is the key feminist message of the novel.

The rejection of anthropomorphism and sentimental identification renders the story by Murugan to oppose the expectation of feminist meaning to be expressed in voice or consciousness. Rather, the agency resides in perseverance, and morality is born out of exposure and not out of change. This imminent death, which here means prakrtic withdrawal, is not liberation or resistance, but the display of the boundaries of a moral order that relies on continuous embodied labour. This backlash forces the reader to address the question of ethical detachment as a structural issue and not a personal weakness.

The use of the Purusa-Prakrti model also leads to the wider discussions of the Indian feminist theory. It provides a means of theorising vulnerability, care and reproductive labour without necessarily falling into the trap of biological essentialism or importing the universalising feminist categories. The paper questions the need to apply and use external theoretical perspectives to bring out feminist insight by placing the feminist analysis on indigenous metaphysical thought on the assumption that Indian literature and writings cannot be understood using their own theoretical frameworks. Rather, it shows that even classical Indian philosophy can serve as a critical resource in the contemporary feminist enquiry, in case of conceptual fidelity.

Finally, Poonachi has no vision of the future and does not provide a moral solution. This rejection is its feminist power. The novel requires moral accountability and not hope by introducing life as vulnerable Prakrti in a purusa-like amoral vacuum. This kind of reading calls feminist criticism in Indian context to transcend the narratives of empowerment and resistance to indulge in a more profound involvement with embodiment, fatigue, and moral emptiness. By thus doing so it provides space to an indigenous feminist ethics that is sensitive to the realities of vulnerability that are lived, as opposed to the emancipation promises.

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