

A Feminist Posthumanist Reading of Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* and *Poonachi*

Hiya Chatterjee, PhD,
Assistant Professor,
Department of English,
Swarnamoyee Jogendranath Mahavidyalaya,
Vidyasagar University

This paper seeks to re-examine the dominant narratives of ecofeminism in India through a posthumanist perspective with two literary texts at the centre: Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* (2010) and *Poonachi, or the Story of a Black Goat* (2016). Through a comparative study of the two novels, this article aims to underscore the need for a more complex engagement with the structures and processes of domination that have shaped and affected—and continue to do so—human-animal relationships in Indian societies, and how the predominant ecological narratives need to be rethought to arrive at a deeper understanding of lived realities.

In *Ecofeminism*, Vandana Shiva conducts a trenchant critique of Enlightenment humanism, attributing the ecological crisis to the Western colonial and imperial enterprise. Shiva calls ecofeminism “a new term for ancient wisdom”, grounding the ideas of sustainability and survival in pre-colonial and pre-modern times and spaces in which people's, especially women's relationship with nature was reciprocal and co-dependent. (13) However, as Bina Agarwal points out, among the primary problems with Ecofeminist discourse, some of the most glaring are a) the belief that the processes of domination are solely ideological b) the ‘essentialist’ nature that tries to locate a ‘feminine principle’ and c) the universalist assumption of the woman as a unitary category. In this discourse, the pre-modern and pre-colonial appears as a homogenous spatio-temporal category in the Global South ruptured by the advent of European colonialism. While there is no question of denying the instrumental role of Western colonialism backed by the nexus of evangelicalism and Enlightenment humanism in bringing about the ecological crisis, a nostalgic, eulogistic evocation of the pre-colonial past as an era of speciesistic equality becomes problematic due to reasons this study will briefly explore.

The concept of ‘Eco-orientalism’, an environmental extension of Edward Said's theory on Orientalism, becomes useful to understand this rhetoric as a methodology that often aids in constructing a discourse of decolonization. According to Tori Bush, eco-orientalism utilizes

representations that categorize and locate “peripheral” spaces as the *other* to mitigate material changes. (Bush 2022). In other words, by locating the problem outside the space of effect, the solution is also found in the absolute negation of the ‘alien’ culture that has caused environmental degradation. This becomes a kind of auto-orientalism in which the affected peoples construct a glorious past and an ideal indigenous culture that was purportedly living in complete harmony with nature.(Droz et al 2024) This auto-orientalism often tends to morph into what Cederlof and Sivaramakrishnan term Ecological nationalism, “where both cosmopolitan and nativist versions of nature devotion converge and express themselves as a form of nation-pride in order to become part of processes legitimizing and consolidating a nation.” (6) Cederlof and Sivaramakrishnan argue against the proclivity of upholding ‘reactionary visions of a golden past’ (9)

Indeed, the notion of a homogenous, monolithic past that harboured a harmonious co-existence between humans and nature constructs a historical and mythical time period that posits Orientalism within a temporal framework. The past becomes that ideal Other to which the present must aspire, glossing over the hierarchical structures that prevailed in a casteist and patriarchal society. These overarching and overlapping modes of androcentric and anthropocentric dominion are explored in Perumal Murugan’s novels *One Part Woman* and *Poonachi* through female sexuality. Set against rural backdrops, both works engage with the themes of fertility, motherhood, sexuality and socio-cultural and religious ideologies that are inscribed on the body of the female of the species. In *One Part Woman*, Kali and Ponna’s inability to have children leads Ponna to engage in consensual sexual intercourse with a stranger as a part of the ancient chariot festival of the *Ardhanareswara* in Karattur. While Ponna is misled to believe that Kali has consented, her decision to go to the festival is mired in ambiguity. Her desire to end the constant social humiliation and stigmatization is perhaps her primary motive, but at the same time, her desire for another man is undoubtedly an expression of her agency, despite being socially and culturally regulated. In *Poonachi*, on the other hand, the eponymous black goat is forced to mate with an older ram against her will despite being in love with Poovan, another goat. While both cases foreground the pathological obsession with reproduction and regulation of the body and female sexuality, *One Part Woman* underlines the marginally higher importance ascribed to the human female than the non-human female in *Poonachi*, whose supposed lack of ‘language’ renders her and all other goats, including males, vulnerable to different forms of exploitation. Through the novels, Murugan highlights the central role of female sexuality and fertility in the formation

and successful operation of hegemonic institutions of patriarchy, casteism, speciesism and capitalism. Whereas *One Part Woman* is set in pre-independence India, *Poonachi*, despite its fable-like ahistorical quality has repeated references to a highly bureaucratic ‘regime’ that exercises biopower over the human and non-human subjects. The ideological as well as repressive apparatuses work on different levels to influence and affect the sexual lives of all ‘subjects’, especially the female of the species, whose value is contingent on her fertility. Poonachi is deemed miraculous because of her purported ability to produce seven kids, whereas Ponna (and Kali) are devalued because of their infertility. While statist biopolitics controls the lives of the goats and goatherds in Poonachi, it is the traditional, casteist, and patriarchal systems that govern and declare worthless Ponna and Kali’s otherwise loving conjugality. Childlessness was a curse for the primarily agrarian Gounder caste to which Kali belongs, due to the lurking fear of losing land and property to another, as the novel recurrently points out. In *Poonachi*, despite the old woman’s love for Poonachi as her own daughter, the goat becomes a liability when they are hit by famine and lose their pasture. As land becomes the bone of contention in both agrarian and post-agrarian industrial economies, the novels trace the origins of human/animal and male/female binary to the origins of civilization founded on anthropocentric and androcentric hierarchy.

Murugan’s works demonstrate that the Indian ‘past’ that revivalists often yearn for, had a theocentric core with clear distinctions between the human, the animal and the divine. The concept of rebirth in Hinduism (and also Buddhism), for example, holds the human incarnation as superior to all other animal incarnations. Moreover, the act of ritual animal sacrifice, which was also a part of many ancient Indian traditions, firmly endows the human with power over the beast whose body can be used for various purposes. Cary Wolfe points out how the “humanist concept of subjectivity is inseparable from the discourse and institution of a speciesism which relies on the tacit acceptance that the full transcendence to the human requires the sacrifice of the animal and the animalistic.” (39) Derrida’s concept of ‘carnophallogocentrism’ is useful to understand this overlap between anthropocentric and androcentric modes of domination. “Carnivorous virility is therefore manifested not only in our eating practices...but is also dispersed throughout the (human) cultural or civilizational field, inflecting morality, religion and politics. (Baumeister 56). In *One Part Woman*, the alleged curse of childlessness on Kali’s family is brought upon by the wrath of the tribal deity Devatha angered by the rape of a tribal girl by Kali’s ancestors. The mythopoeic quality of

Poonachi, that begins with the mysterious appearance of the figure of Bakasuran who hands her over to the old man, is interspersed with the bureaucratic intervention of the state that demands proofs of the miracle that Poonachi is. The juxtaposition of mythical and folklore traditions with the modern biopolitical and bureaucratic impositions serves to situate the human and the non-human amidst rites and practices of power that operate on the body under different labels but through similar methods of exploitation. The primary difference that Murugan establishes between human oppression and animal oppression is that while the oppressor for animals is real, for humans he is an imagined being whose 'word' becomes the law. Since animals do not have 'words', they are treated as mindless 'bodies' subjected to androgenic and anthropogenic violence since the beginning of civilization, that indirectly legitimize all other kinds of violence. (Wood 1999) Furthermore, it evokes the complex, pluralistic social, cultural and religious history of India's past shaped by countless interventions and influences that preclude its universalization as a singular category. The ambivalent relationship between nature and culture is explored vis-à-vis the lived, experiential reality of the characters, thus destabilizing the nature-culture binary and the essentialization of both categories. In conclusion, it may be argued that by unsettling the categories of the human, the woman and the animal, the novels affirm the posthuman feminist position that as 'woman' should not be the subject of feminism, the 'human' cannot be the subject of posthumanism. The novels dismantle the notion of an egalitarian past which historically denied the transcendental possibility to women, lower castes and animals who embody the physical world.

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