

Venturing Vulnerability in the Writings of Perumal Murugan: A Review

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Abstract

Perumal Murugan, a responsible social writer, has been vocal about the controversial social milieu of rural Tamil Nadu. The very purpose of a writer is to bring a change in society. Murugan, considering this as a principal obligation, has been producing influential literature representing the disturbances faced by the vulnerable people. The article aims to discuss the vulnerable components installed by extraneous factors depicted across Murugan's novels. Murugan's sharp social commentary on class and caste discrimination, social hierarchy, and political dullness across his works brings a renaissance effect on his readers. The characters across his works are unpretentious yet thought-provoking, and their vulnerabilities and victimisation are documented realistically. The article reviews some of his most commendable fictional works to explore the vulnerable and precarious elements found in the lives of the vulnerable.

Key words: Vulnerability, Class, Caste, Society, Hierarchy, Discrimination.

All life forms are intrinsically vulnerable in their quest for survival. During their lives, every individual goes through several different periods in which they reveal their vulnerability. Recognising vulnerability is crucial, as existence within society is inherently contested by several causes. The quality of life is considerably improved to a higher degree when possible vulnerabilities are identified. Vulnerability studies, an emerging field within literary discourse, encompasses a broad spectrum of subjects, including individual and collective fragility in human cognition, the antagonistic social environments shaped by gender, ethnicity, and class, and environmental hazards affecting human existence. Vulnerability studies examine the degree to which people, communities, or systems are prone to threats and their responses to those risks. This article discusses and reviews the notable works of Perumal Murugan and aims to identify and understand the factors contributing to vulnerability and responsiveness within the selected texts.

The area of vulnerability studies in Indian English literature offers extensive opportunities for discourse. Commonly addressed social issues encompass gender identity, social marginalisation due to caste and location, geopolitical turmoil, border conflicts, and economic instability linked to societal hierarchies. The lived experiences of many vulnerable groups, including marginalised communities, women, and individuals with disabilities, are often depicted in the works of Indian English literature, and these subjects are examined via the frameworks of gender studies and subaltern studies in diverse contexts. Vulnerability studies have arisen as a subject that incorporates the attributes of gender, social hierarchy, and other factors that impact the livelihoods of precarious and vulnerable populations.

Kanthapura, presumed to be the first Indian English Novel by Raja Rao, emphasises the obstacles faced by marginalised populations in colonial India. Ever since the inception of the novel genre in Indian English literature, especially after India gained independence, literary studies of Indian English literature have created a space for discussing sensitive topics from the past. Vulnerability studies have evolved to include perceptible challenges and those beyond human influence. In reevaluating vulnerabilities, the recollection and narration of these experiences are paramount. Mainstream subaltern literature from India articulates the experiences of ostracised communities and those deprived of freedom, equality, fraternity, and justice.

Perumal Murugan may be regarded as a writer of subaltern literature, since his works predominantly articulate the struggles of underprivileged populations in the Kongu area of Tamil Nadu. His writings exemplify the exploration of vulnerabilities among people in need and convey the false hierarchy of communities. They offer a comprehensive view of society, highlighting that women are both receptive to and actively involved in the patriarchy through oppression and exploitation. Consequently, his works challenge the idealised concept of solidarity among all women. His bold depictions in the novel *One Part Woman* incited controversy by fictitiously revealing the cultural practices of a particular caste in a fictional town in the Kongu region. His novels have the substance to be analysed through vulnerability studies due to the diverse forms of resistance exhibited by the characters, alongside the integration of religion, affinity towards cultural myths, and the impact of class consciousness within the ethnic background throughout the narrative. In vulnerability research, resistance is crucial as it analyses the victims' fortitude and addresses elements that weaken their resilience. (Masschelein et.al 2)

The premise of many of Murugan's works revolves around resistance and its failure. When people display resistance, their rustic character is on full display, rarely triumphing over their contrariness. The literary works of Murugan, beginning with his inaugural work, articulate the conditions of ordinary individuals and the obstacles they encounter in their living environments. Perumal Murugan's works illustrate the intricate dynamics of a marginalised group, particularly in rural contexts. His captivating narration engages and challenges readers to rigorously analyse questions of identity, tradition, and social justice. His contributions to Tamil literature further establish him as a significant voice in contemporary Indian narrative. Murugan's writing continues to be influential, inciting more scrutiny and discussion within academic and literary circles. His writings serve as a resource for the emerging discipline of Vulnerability Studies, focusing on class and caste ties, gender issues, and the resilience of affected individuals. Perumal Murugan's works received significant attention for their in-depth exploration of rural life in Tamil Nadu and their engagement with complex social issues.

His debut novel, *Eru Veyil*, published in 1991, is a fictitious story of a town thrown into the grips of industrialisation and was translated in 2020 as *Rising Heat*. It exemplifies the ramifications of relentless urbanisation in contemporary society. The narrative, conveyed through the viewpoint of Selvan, a tenth-grade student from an agrarian family, illustrates the state's appropriation of his ancestral lands for developing a housing colony, coupled with insufficient compensation. The family's many difficulties after their transfer are illustrated, along with the distinct challenges posed by the strange environment and their methods of overcoming them. The vulnerability of the outcast community is vividly described in the narrative.

Vulnerability studies have progressed to encompass other dangerous elements affecting human life quality, including climate change, environmental degradation, and increasing urbanisation, which particularly impact marginalised groups. In the discourse on vulnerability studies, it is acknowledged that all humans are susceptible to unforeseen events such as diseases, accidents, and natural disasters;

however, individuals from marginalised communities are significantly more vulnerable and are expected to exhibit resilience to the adversities imposed by dominant communities. *Current Show*, translated by V. Geetha in 2017, was initially released as *Nilzhal Mutram* in 1993, and is situated at a cinema in Pasavu. The current show depicts a group of fragile young guys whose lives are intricately intertwined by their unfortunate poverty. The narrative centres on Sathivel, who peddles soda during intermissions and engages in card games and marijuana consumption with his companions Hulk and Natesan during his leisure hours. The strained connection between the protagonist and his father, exacerbated by poverty, is authentically depicted in the story. The story is a compelling endeavour to represent the victory of perseverance over adversities in the daily lives of underprivileged individuals.

Murugan's *Koolamadari*, published in 2000 and translated into English by V Geetha as *Seasons of the Palm* in 2004, narrates the narrative of a young Dalit boy named Shorty, who is tasked with herding sheep and performing various home duties for his master to repay a debt owed by his father. He ultimately succumbs to death, as the occurrence illustrates the proof of a failed upbringing in a caste-oriented system that renders individuals artificially vulnerable.

Pookuzhi, written in 2013 and translated as *Pyre* by Aniruddhan Vasudevan, is an incisive critique of caste-based honour killings prevalent in rural Tamil Nadu. *One-Part Woman*, released as *Madharu Pagan* in 2010, presents a nuanced depiction of rituals, caste oppression, patriarchy, and identity through the lens of the married, childless pair Kali and Ponna. This work represents a pivotal moment in Murugan's career, as he nearly abandoned his writing. Subsequently, *A Lonely Harvest* and *Trial by Silence* were published as sequels, where the trials and tribulations of this couple are realistically portrayed.

Murugan's *Poonachi*, translated by N Kalyan Raman as *Poonachi, a Story of Black Goat* in 2018, poignantly narrates the story of a poor, marginalised couple. The story is narrated in the voice of a black fertile goat, Poonachi, who delivers sharp commentary on human hierarchy and discrimination inflicted on its owners by upper society. Several other translated versions of Murugan's novel, such as *Estuary* in 2020, *Fire Bird* in 2023 and several other literary pieces, highlight the vulnerabilities inflicted on vulnerable communities.

In a power-structured society, specific populations are susceptible amidst the hypocrites who are prone to vulnerabilities. However, women, irrespective of their class, status and group, are prone to vulnerability. Narratives of Perumal Murugan address contemporary happenings and culture's representations and discussions of vulnerability through the voice of the vulnerable. The substance in his works progresses from fundamental notions of precarity and vulnerability to explore themes such as social security, the politics of social structure, inherent vulnerabilities due to castes, urban desolation resulting from economic instability, and resilience amidst violence and fragility.

The concept of vulnerability in the Indian context has been examined from the inception of Indian English literature. Both colonial and independent India faced pressing societal issues that required resolution. Despite being discussed for centuries, there is a persistent necessity for Indian English literature to evolve from colonial origins to global importance. The first Indian English novels reflect societal sensitivity, as seen in the works of Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, and several other literary figures. Their representations of Indian life and society in English remain significant in the current debate of Indian literature in English. In recent decades, authors including Salman Rushdie, Shashi Tharoor, Meena Kandasamy, Bama, Arundhati Roy, Vikram Seth, Kiran Desai, and many others have expanded the genre to examine urban life and social experiences in their writings, reflecting the diversity and evolution of Indian English literature.

Indian English novels explore various themes that reflect the complexities of Indian society. The cultural diversity of India creates a literary landscape in which writers may explore the nation's attractive attributes and the sombre realities of existence in such a heterogeneous community. In India, several challenges predated the marginalised communities during the colonial era and still prevail, including caste prejudice, gender inequality, and disparate work opportunities contingent upon one's social status. All of these themes were addressed in the earlier fictional works, and unfortunately, the need to confront them remains significant as society continues to face such challenges today. The themes of identity and self-discovery, caste and socioeconomic inequity, and gender discrimination remain pertinent issues, since little has altered since independence.

Vulnerability studies is a complicated area that examines how people or groups might be vulnerable to specific events. It focuses on how different conditions and situations make people or groups more likely to be harmed or disadvantaged. This new field of study looks at several ways that people might be vulnerable, including those related to their social identities, health, and the environment. This concept incorporates concepts such as humanitarianism, resilience, and precarity. Perumal Murugan's literary works serve as a comprehensive resource for elucidating the ideas of vulnerability. The fictional works in his bibliography portray how Tamil Nadu's regional districts deal with gender inequality, social precarities, and hierarchical communities.

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