

## Inter-Caste Marriage and Caste Prejudice: A Study of Perumal Murugan's Novel 'Pyre'

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### ABSTRACT

The 21<sup>st</sup> century is an era of science and advancement. Due to this advancement, there is an evident threat of climate change, global warming, health issues and biological warfare. In this scenario, our lives are changing rapidly. But one thing that has not changed yet is the caste-system. People are still embedded in caste. The notion of purity and practice of endogamy have contributed in the establishment of the caste system. Endogamy is a founding element of the caste system. It is because of this that caste has become an unaltered force of Indian society. The consequences of inter-caste marriage are often horrible. Couples are rarely accepted by the family and society. Excommunication, torture, honor killing and murder are the consequences of inter-caste marriage. Inter-caste marriage is a great contribution in the eradication of the caste system. Inter-caste marriages not only cast the caste but also bring social harmony and feeling of interdependence among people belonging to different caste. But unfortunately, inter-caste marriages are unaccepted and considered offensive. The present novel 'Pyre' illustrates the ethos that leads a community to give their judgment against inter-caste marriage.

**Keywords-** Caste, Inter-Caste Marriage, Intra-Caste Marriage, Marriage

Perumal Murugan is a renowned Tamil writer. His novel 'Pyre' is recently long listed among the International Booker Prize 2023. The novel is originally written in Tamil under the title 'Pookkuzhi' and published in the year 2013. It was later translated into English by Aniruddhan Vasudevan and published in the year 2016. The novel deals with inter-caste marriage and its consequences. Marriage, no doubt is a social practice and an integral part of social structure but it is also a personal affair. Inter-caste marriages are a positive step towards society as it breaks the notion of purity-impurity (untouchability) and caste prejudice. It is a step towards annihilation of the caste system. It is not even a clash between different cultures and rituals because people from same religion practice the same rituals though it might differ (only the method) from region to region. Inter-caste marriage is a step towards casteless society. The Caste system is based on two important foundations. First, the notion of superiority and second the practice of endogamy. It is because of endogamy that caste has become an unaltered force in Indian society.

The caste system is very strict regarding marriage. The caste system promotes endogamy. Caste biasness and caste prejudice cannot be abolished until there is practice of endogamy. For the abolishment of the caste system Dr. Ambedkar emphasized on inter-caste marriage. In *Annihilation of Caste* he writes:

I am convinced that the real remedy is intermarriage. Fusion of blood can alone create the feeling of being kith and kin, and unless this feeling of kinship, of being kindred, becomes paramount, the separatist feeling- the feeling of being aliens-created by caste will not vanish. Among the Hindus, intermarriage must necessarily be a factor of greater force in social life than it need be in the life of the non-Hindus. Where society is already well knit by other ties, marriage is an ordinary incident of life. But where society is cut asunder, marriage as a binding force becomes a matter of urgent necessity. The real remedy for breaking caste is

intermarriage. Nothing else will serve as the solvent of caste. (285)

In the novel, Kumaresan and Saroja get married. Saroja resides with her father and brother at the town Tholur. Kumaresan goes to the town to work at a soda shop. They both meet there and develop a feeling of attachment. After getting married, they elope from the town Tholur. Kumaresan returns back to his village Kattuppatti with his wife Saroja. Kumaresan decides to tell a lie about Saroja's caste to hide their inter-caste marriage. Kumaresan was assured for their marriage acceptance. Even after being unwelcomed by his mother Marayi, he was very much hopeful and certain. But Saroja has sensed the upcoming troubles. Throughout the novel, she endures the pain of being alien and outcaste. She was humiliated and cursed. Ultimately, she has to pay the price of the marriage (inter-caste marriage). Despite taking such step Kumaresan returns back to his village. He remains conscious about Saroja's caste. Kumaresan instructs Saroja to remain silent about her caste. He takes the responsibility to do most of the talking to avoid any trouble. Kumaresan was confident about his mother's approval. He says, 'Whatever I say amma will listen. She will worry about what others might say, but it will be all right soon. Don't be afraid.' (07)

When they both enter in the village they encounter a village man who enquires about their marriage and Saroja's caste. The man says,

'You have done something unexpected, bringing a girl from elsewhere. What caste? . . . This is not a face from our caste, Mapillai. Does a face that wander over fields and rocks look like this? . . . All right, tell me the truth- whatever it is . . . Is she from our caste?' (12)

Kumaresan was advised by the village folk to leave the girl back to her town as she does not belong to the same caste. Kumaresan assures them that she belongs to the same caste but he fails to convince them. One among them suspects and says,

'I don't think people of our caste live in that town . . . You can't fool us like this. There will definitely be a village meeting in a few days. We don't know what the village is going to say. Just be careful. Or . . . like I suggested, take her back and leave her there. (28)

Saroja was unwelcomed by her mother-in-law. She grabs Saroja by her hair and accuses her for bewitching her son. Saroja was so much terrified that she faints and collapse. Marayi behaves indifferently and cuts herself off from the couple to show her disapproval and disappointment. But she repeatedly seeks a way to humiliate and taunt Saroja. She shows her grief and plight for losing her son. In the absence of Kumaresan

she finds a way to taunt Saroja. Marayi's presence and her dirge make Saroja frightened. Marayi complains,

'I have one son only – one son to continue my family line . . . only prostitutes stand like this on the street of Kunnor town! And my son had brought one of them home! Has she bewitched him by mixing something in his food? How can I release him from her magic? . . . Will I ever get my son back, or have I lost him forever to this wretched woman?' (62)

When Kumaresan decides to visit his maternal village he does not tell his mother about it. His childhood memories and love which he received there bounds him to visit his grandparents. Saroja was afraid to be an object of everyone's attention and scrutiny. She does not wish to go but she was convinced that this visit is only a way of hastening the inevitable. When Kumaresan reaches his grandparent's house, his grandfather rush towards Kumaresan and slaps him hard. He shouts, 'Why have you come here, you shameless dog? . . . you ungrateful dog! I raised you. I fed you.' (98-99). Kumaresan had not expected such a welcome. He was only expecting the scold from his relatives. But he was humiliated. It made him to cry. All his dreams scattered in a moment. Other relatives scrutinize Saroja. One of the women says, 'Look at her! She was not ashamed to elope with a man, but she is feeling shy now! (101) . For his relatives Kumaresan has done an offense and ashamed them. He has brought a stigma in their prestige. Frequently he was being asked the same question, as his grandfather asks, 'Couldn't you find a girl in our village, from within our caste? We can't even face our people. You have shamed us all. If your uncles see you now, they will hack you to death.' (102)

Through Saroja and Kumaresan, the novelist has depicted the plight and dilemma of such young couples who dare to take such steps. But, Kumaresan and Saroja sustain all the troubles with a hope. Because we all believe that love and humanity is above caste and class. But Saroja's trouble increases day by day. She was an object of wonder for the entire village. She feels terrified in the absence of Kumaresan. She was not welcomed in the village. The great cause of their trouble was that their marriage was not even accepted by Kumaresan's mother. There was nothing which gives her strength to confront these obstacles except Kumaresan's love. All her expectations regarding her new life came to an end as soon as she entered in the village of Kumaresan. She goes through intolerable situations. She was criticized and humiliated for the act of elopement and inter-caste marriage. Saroja was a beautiful and fair skinned woman which was rare in Kumaresan's caste. Saroja used to hide herself inside the hut to avoid the village folk. She was afraid to confront their taunt. Her mother-in-law and the village women accuse her for bewitching Kumaresan. Once some visitors gathered

outside the hut and forced Saroja to step out. One among the women inquires,

‘How did you bewitch Nondi? Some four or five girls here tried to reel him in, but he wouldn’t budge. . . What did you show him that has him so enchanted? . . . Tell me, Aaya. My husband is a ruffian. I ask you so that I too can try to bewitch him. Don’t be shy. . . .’ (52)

Saroja was too much surprised over the indifference of her father and brother. She thinks of the family bonding which now seems to her futile. All the family reminiscences hurt her. She was disdained by both the families. Moral degradation makes Saroja to think and inquire about her decisions. She takes the whole affair and its consequence as her mistake. She contemplates that they should have waited a little longer. She took a decision without prior information and upcoming consequences. Her disposition and potential as woman, as a wife and as a daughter-in-law judged on the basis of her caste. More than anything the villagers care about the right caste that is the same caste. Saroja was not able to fulfill the criteria to win the heart of the villagers. There was no one to accompany her and regard her at this new place. Her only companions were the hens, birds, trees, the rock, and a cat. Kumaresan keeps her motivated for the spirit and spark which she had before coming to the village. It was only Kumaresan who keeps her alive in these ordeals. He used to say,

‘Please don’t let yourself be affected by the things people say. You should continue to be the way you have always been. Everything will be all right.’ (85)

Kumaresan and his family were excommunicated for certain period of the time. The wrath of the villagers terrified Saroja. She wanted to leave the village. Kumaresan starts to look for a shop to open his soda business in Virichipalayam, a nearby town. He manages to take a room on rent to open his shop there. Kumaresan starts to manage the shop. He has to take frequent visits to Virichipalayam. Kumaresan invites Saroja to visit Virichipalayam. There she feels liberated and accepted. That day she was not willing to return back to the village where she was carrying caste stigma. She wishes to stay there. Kumaresan was working hard to get the shop ready. When they return back to the village, Saroja fall ill. But Kumaresan had to go to Virichipalayam for two days to manage the shop. When she comes to know that the shop would be ready soon, she becomes immensely happy. But the thought of living two days in the village in the absence of Kumaresan terrify her. She aspires to convince Kumaresan to settle down in Virichipalayam. Because she was terrified to confront her mother-in-law, the relatives, men and women of the village. Their inspection, taunt, judgment, indifference and sadistic approach haunt Saroja. In the absence of Kumaresan she

used to spend her day in the lap of Nature. Her hut was surrounded by trees, a rock and bushes. That day while waiting for Kumaresan’s return in the evening, she spent her time in the company of birds. While observing the birds, she contemplates whether the birds have troubles as humans. That evening she was completely unaware that an imminent danger was awaiting her. That evening, she had a feeling to relieve herself so she goes in the bushes situated in the nearby ditch. She was not habitual to use bushes or field so she takes proper care while entering in the bushes. After getting relieved she gets up to go. Suddenly she hears whispering of human conversation. It terrified her. It was too dark by then. She tries to listen carefully. In that darkness she recognized the voice. It was her mother-in-law. She says,

‘I am patient only for one reason. I don’t want any harm to come to him. He has started talking back to me now! He used to be such an obedient boy; she has changed him. I have endured all these days only for his sake. Otherwise, I’d have cut her throat with the sharp edge of the palm frond and ended it all long ago.’ (180)

It took her no time to get the idea of the matter. It was very evident that her mother-in-law and the men were looking for her. They grab the opportunity of Kumaresan’s absence. Though terrified of snakes and insects, thorns and unfamiliar objects hidden within the bushes, she dare not to come out. She decides to hide there until Kumaresan does not return back. To keep herself safe and conceal she moves firmly to the dense area of the bushes. But suddenly her body slams against a tree. Her presence was caught. God did not listen to her prayers and Nature betrayed her. The villagers wait her to come out from the dark bushes. They dare not to enter in the bushes. It relieved Saroja. But suddenly she hears something that was an end of all her aspirations and hope. Someone says,

‘Uncle! The entire bush has dried up. It is only the thorns that look lush on the outside. Why don’t we set fire to the bush? We will smoke her out of there . . . And if she doesn’t get smoked out, she can burn and die inside. Yes, let’s set fire to it! That’s the best idea.’ (195) Ultimately she had to pay the price of the marriage (inter-caste marriage). Her journey which she started from seven steps ended at pyre. She was burnt alive. Along with the body a hope was burnt. And the act illustrates the rigidity of caste consciousness in our society. It also denotes the lack of empathy where caste is superior to humanity.

Prohibitions on inter-marriage are not only a hallmark feature of the caste system- designed to ensure rigid social norms of purity and pollution-but are essential to maintaining its very existence. As a result, inter-marriage between Dalits and non-Dalits frequently become flashpoints for conflicts and can result in extra-

judicial punishment that include the public lynching or killing of couples or their relatives, rape, public beatings, and economic sanctions. (Narula, 275)

Intra-caste marriage has made people narrow-minded and biased. Due to this a strong disparity is visible in the society. On the other hand conflicts between people belonging to different caste are raising hatred and enmity for each other. This indifference and aversion have become the measurement of judging one's ability and aptitude. This notion and prejudice have made the society fragile and inadequate. The notion of caste prejudice has annihilated the feeling of oneness. Inquiring the caste and approaching the caste is prior action in the society. The strict observation of intra-caste marriage encourages the establishment of caste system. To eradicate endogamy and caste prejudice Government has announced various schemes to encourage inter-caste marriages. These schemes support the inter-caste married couples financially and legally. The Special Marriage Act, 1954 enacted to validate and register both interreligious and inter-caste marriage. It is a law to protect the couples. Inter- caste marriage is not a threat or problem but a solution to multiple social dilemmas. It promotes the concept of liberty, equality and fraternity.

Inter- caste marriage eradicates the discrimination based on caste and untouchability. It is a solution to attain just and equal society. But unfortunately, despite various reforms and movements, laws and schemes, the caste system and notion of caste prejudice remain the same. Couples who try to break this old aged custom have to endure the wrath of the caste guardians.

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