

## Caste, Silence, and Social Oppression in the Fiction of Perumal Murugan

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Received: 07 / 12 / 2025

Accepted: 18 / 01 / 2026

Published: 28 / 01 / 2026

**Abstract:** Perumal Murugan's fiction offers a compelling exploration of caste as a pervasive and enduring structure of social oppression in rural South India. Rooted in the lived realities of Tamil Nadu's agrarian communities, his narratives illuminate how caste hierarchies regulate personal relationships, silence marginalized voices, and normalize everyday forms of violence and exclusion. This article examines the interrelated themes of caste, silence, and social oppression in Murugan's major works, particularly *Pyre* and *One Part Woman*, situating them within broader debates on caste, power, and resistance in Indian society. The study argues that silence in Murugan's fiction operates both as a mechanism of domination and as a survival strategy adopted by oppressed individuals navigating hostile social environments. Through an analysis of narrative structure, characterization, language, and rural ecology, the article demonstrates how Murugan exposes the tacit codes that sustain caste prejudice while also foregrounding subtle acts of resistance embedded in love, desire, and personal choice. By articulating the lived experiences of those constrained by caste norms, Murugan's writing challenges the myth of a casteless modern India and underscores literature's critical role in making visible the silenced histories of social injustice.

**Keywords:** *Caste, Silence, Social oppression, Inter-caste relationships, Marginalization Resistance, Indian English translation*

**Cite this article:** Singh, J. (2026). Caste, Silence, and Social Oppression in the Fiction of Perumal Murugan. *MRS Journal of Arts, Humanities and Literature*, 3(1), 17-19.

### Introduction

Perumal Murugan stands as one of contemporary India's most incisive chroniclers of rural life and entrenched social hierarchies in Tamil Nadu. His fiction traverses the simple surface of village routines to reveal deep structural forces—especially caste—that shape personal destinies, silence dissent, and perpetuate social oppression. Murugan's writing exposes how caste functions not merely as a social identity marker but as a pervasive system of exclusion that constrains love, autonomy, and human dignity. Although his works span various themes, the enduring concern remains: how caste hierarchies mold interpersonal relationships and silence marginalized voices. This research article examines how Murugan's fiction dramatizes caste-induced oppression and the resulting silences—individual, communal, and institutional—through narrative strategies that weave together voice, violence, and resistance.

#### Perumal Murugan: Context and Literary Significance

Born into the agrarian environment of western Tamil Nadu, Murugan belongs to the Kongu region—a social milieu where caste hierarchies are deeply entrenched within everyday life. His fiction reflects lived experiences shaped by caste relationships, economic precarity, and rural norms, making his work both specific to Tamil Nadu and resonant across broader Indian social realities. Murugan's oeuvre includes more than a dozen novels, numerous short stories, poetry collections, and critical essays, many of which recount the lived experiences of ordinary people within caste structures. His fiction, translated into multiple languages, has garnered international attention and has become a

key site for understanding how caste operates within literature and society.

Critical responses to his work highlight Murugan's engagement with caste as a central organizing principle of social life. For instance, his novel *Pyre* (original Tamil title *Pūkkūḷi*), which was longlisted for the International Booker Prize, foregrounds caste hatred and honor-based violence in the tragedy of an inter-caste couple. Similarly, other novels such as *One Part Woman* trouble caste and gender norms in intimate and communal spheres. Through narratives deeply rooted in rural Tamil contexts, Murugan draws readers into the world of caste relations where love, desire, identity, and autonomy are continually restrained by social prejudice and institutional silence.

#### Caste as Structural Oppression in Murugan's Fiction

Murugan's fiction presents caste not as a mere backdrop but as a structural force shaping characters' lives. In *Pyre*, the central conflict arises from an inter-caste elopement that triggers the village's collective hostility. The male protagonist Kumaresan and his partner Saroja find their love besieged not by personal adversity alone but by communal bigotry that defines Saroja's unknown caste as a threat. Villagers resort to social ostracism, harassment, and dehumanizing treatment, forcing the couple into a state of exclusion and despair. This oppressive environment is not random but a product of caste-based prejudice that deepens social divide and engenders violence.

Caste here operates as both a visible and invisible force. The villagers' reactions are explicit in their hostility; yet, much of the oppression functions through silence and social codes. Silence in *Pyre* emerges when characters avoid naming caste directly, replacing it instead with suspicion, rumors, and rumor-fueled hostility. Saroja's caste status is never openly stated, yet it becomes a site of fear and speculation that drives violent social exclusion. The novel thus portrays how caste hatred can thrive not only through overt aggression but also through the silence that shrouds structural prejudice.

The intersection of caste with class and gender further complicates the experience of oppression. Academic analysis notes that *Pyre* reveals how caste and class intersect to shape the lived reality of marginalized women, subjecting them to layered forms of exclusion and inequality. In Saroja's case, her presumed lower caste position, compounded by her womanhood, intensifies her marginalization: she is insulted, demeaned, and reduced to animalistic tropes, revealing how structural prejudice extends into language and perception.

Murugan's fiction thus models caste as an oppressive structure with pervasive effects that constrain mobility, social belonging, and the possibility of dissent. The novel's tragic end, brought about by communal hostility, serves as a stark critique of caste-based social order and its lethal consequences.

#### **Narrating Silence: The Politics of Voice and Absence**

Silence in Murugan's fiction is as significant as spoken hostility. It functions on multiple levels—internal to characters, communal within the village, and institutional across society.

At the individual level, characters often endure repression without articulation. Saroja's silence about her own caste stems from lived experience rather than choice, shaped by social stigma that discourages open confrontation of caste identities. This silence, however, does not denote passivity; rather, it reflects the constrained space in which lower-caste individuals must navigate oppressive social terrain. Their silence becomes a survival strategy in the face of overwhelming hostility.

At the communal level, silence manifests through social codes that suppress open discussion of caste. In *Pyre*, villagers circumvent direct engagement with caste by resorting to euphemism and rumor, preserving the veneer of social decorum even as they perpetuate violence. The refusal to name caste openly underscores a societal unwillingness to confront the deep-rooted prejudice shaping daily life. This collective silence sustains caste oppression by normalizing discriminatory practices.

This politics of silence extends beyond narrative worlds into real-world responses to Murugan's writing. Murugan faced severe backlash and even threats of violence for his earlier novel *One Part Woman* (original title *Maadhurbaagan*), which depicted a community's unconventional sexual ritual tied to a childless couple seeking a chance at conception. Right-wing caste groups in his home district accused him of assaulting tradition and religion, forcing him into a period of withdrawal from writing. Later reflections suggest that this backlash influenced his decision to avoid explicit caste themes in later works, indicating how real-world censorship and social pressure can shape literary silence.

Through these layered silences—of characters, communities, and institutions—Murugan's fiction and its reception reveal how caste discourse is often suppressed, both within

narrative worlds and outside them. The silence entailed in refusing to acknowledge caste-based discrimination allows oppressive structures to persist unchallenged.

#### **Love and Resistance: Contesting Caste Norms**

Despite pervasive oppression, Murugan's fiction also articulates subtle forms of resistance. Love, desire, and personal fidelity emerge as sites of quiet defiance against caste-imposed boundaries. In *Pyre*, the mere act of inter-caste love becomes an affront to oppressive norms. The emotional commitment between Kumaresan and Saroja, however fraught, stands as an assertion of human autonomy in the face of societal hostility. Their determination to be together, even when ostracized, represents resistance to social conventions that prioritize caste over personal choice.

Similarly, erotic and intimate desires in *One Part Woman* challenge patriarchal and caste-sanctioned norms that control sexuality. Although this novel's narrative focuses on childlessness and unconventional sexual liberation, its critique of social normativity implicates caste as part of the web of oppressive traditions that govern personal lives. By foregrounding the inner emotional and erotic lives of characters constrained by caste expectations, Murugan contests dominant narratives that reduce individuals to caste identities.

These narrative strategies do not depict triumphant liberation; rather, they reveal resistance as a difficult, precarious, and often unsung struggle. Murugan's characters rarely overcome structural oppression outright, but their actions—love, endurance, and subtle defiance—highlight human agency within constraining social orders.

#### **Murugan's Rural Ecology and Caste Dynamics**

Murugan's fiction situates caste not only within human social interactions but also within broader rural ecologies. His narratives intertwine agricultural life, community rituals, and family ties to depict caste as embedded within spatial and economic contexts. Rural landscapes in his work are not idyllic backdrops but terrains shaped by caste hierarchies that demarcate space, labor, and relations.

In *Seasons of the Palm*, for example, Murugan explores bonded labour and exploitation of lower-caste workers under upper-caste landlords. This narrative foregrounds how caste structures influence economic relations and labor hierarchies, further entrenching social hierarchies. The traditions, rituals, and seasonal cycles of the village frame caste relations, showing how caste systems extend into everyday rhythms and routines.

By depicting caste against the backdrop of rural life, Murugan captures how oppression is not only systemic but also spatial and environmental. Caste hierarchies shape access to land, labor opportunities, and social mobility. The characters' existential dilemmas—whether to stay in oppressive villages or seek uncertain futures elsewhere—underscore the tension between belonging and subjugation.

#### **Language, Dialect, and Cultural Expression**

Murugan's nuanced use of language and dialect further amplifies issues of caste and silence. Writing in Tamil, and often rendering Kongu dialects, Murugan centers the voices of rural speakers whose idioms and expressions carry cultural specificity. The translation of his work into English raises questions about how

casteed contexts are conveyed across linguistic boundaries. However, the preservation of local flavor in translation has helped global readers engage with caste issues that remain poorly understood outside South Asia.

Murugan's linguistic choices not only honor rural Tamil speech but also resist the homogenizing tendencies of dominant literary cultures. By foregrounding regional dialects, he resists linguistic hierarchies aligned with caste-based access to English and elite literary platforms. In doing so, Murugan's work asserts the cultural legitimacy of marginalized voices, challenging literary spaces that often exclude or marginalize them.

### Critical Reception and Implications for Caste Discourse

Scholarly engagement with Murugan's fiction underscores its importance in critiquing caste oppression. Academic studies highlight how casteism and discrimination are intricately represented, especially in *Pyre*, and how characters' lives are defined by caste identities and social prejudice. Intersectional analyses further show how caste intersects with class and gender to produce unique experiences of oppression. Through detailed textual analysis, critics emphasize Murugan's contribution to unveiling caste prejudice's insidious mechanisms—and the structural violence that often remains unspoken in mainstream discourse.

Importantly, Murugan's fiction compels readers to confront uncomfortable truths about Indian society. It challenges narratives that minimize caste's persistence or frame caste oppression as a relic of the past. Instead, his narratives depict caste hierarchies as living, dynamic systems shaping contemporary social life. This critical engagement destabilizes complacent views of caste and foregrounds literature's role in social critique.

### Conclusion

Perumal Murugan's fiction provides a powerful lens through which to examine caste, silence, and social oppression. His narratives reveal caste as a structural force—pervasive, violent, and silently normalized—that governs personal relationships, social belonging, and cultural expression. Through stories of love constrained by caste prejudice, communities shaped by silent codes of exclusion, and individuals navigating oppressive structures, Murugan's work foregrounds the lived reality of caste-based discrimination.

While oppressive social hierarchies seek to silence marginalized voices, Murugan's fiction amplifies them: through language, narrative form, and emotional depth. His characters' struggles—whether marked by tragic ends or quiet resistance—

underscore the ongoing relevance of caste as a site of contention in Indian society. Murugan's literary project thus remains a vital intervention: challenging silence, unveiling structures of oppression, and insisting on the visibility of caste as a force shaping human life.

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