

The colour of love

Pyre

By Perumal Murugan

Translated from the Tamil by Aniruddhan Vasudevan

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PRAVINA COOPER

“Perumal Murugan the writer is dead”, posted the Tamil writer on his Facebook page in 2015. This came after the vicious attack on his book *Mathorupagan* or *One Part Woman*. The novel, a story about an infertile woman who sleeps with a stranger in order to get pregnant, a ritual permitted by religious custom during Festival time, was seen to dishonour the religious sensibilities of the community. The novel resulted in strong protests and severe censorship of the author. Eventually, in a court case in 2016, a judge ruled: “Let the author be resurrected to what he is best at. Write.” Write he has, and written well according to the International Booker Prize judges, who longlisted his recently translated work *Pyre* as one among the 13 books from across Asia, Africa, Europe and Latin America for the International Booker Prize 2023 and according to the JCB Literary jury which more recently

awarded him the 2023 prize for his novel *The Firebird*.

At first glance, *Pookuzhi* or *Pyre* set in Murugan’s familiar caste-ridden world of agricultural labourers of the Kongu Vellala community, seems to be about the theme of “love against the world”. Young Kumaresan, part-time goat herder, part-time labourer, goes into Tholur a neighbouring town, and meets Saroja, a girl not of his caste. Saroja appears to him “shining in the sunlight like a heavenly maiden, “her every movement...like a whiplash”. He marries her and brings her home to the village where the couple face hostility, and a constant barrage of insults. Kumaresan’s entire family – his beloved appucchi and ammayi (his grandparents) and uncles – ostracise the couple. The lovers enmeshed in their newly discovered romance, do not realise the conclusion that the villagers are coming to as the chapters build up to an apocalyptic ending.

Two women dominate the novel: Saroja, the innocent young

daughter-in-law and Marayi, the mother-in-law from hell. While Saroja is the victim-protagonist and large chunks of the novel are framed from her terrorised consciousness, Murugan allows space for Marayi’s world to emerge. We are given clues to the hardships in her life: a young widow, whose husband died by falling into a well, she has raised her son with great difficulty in a village where “finding rice was like finding gold”. Working through ghostly early morning hours in her old age, Marayi herds goats, fetches water, feeds the hens and ekes out a miserable living. Now, having acquired an out-of-caste daughter-in-law, Marayi becomes a raging and tragic hero of her own story. She finds her outlet in anger and in abuse. To be a woman in the village during near-starvation times is bad enough. To have a daughter-in-law who brings no dowry and does no labour compounds the tragedy. “In days of harvest, will she be able to do some weeding, or pick grains, or pluck fruits?” “Any good woman would be expected to take the goats in and tether them. She

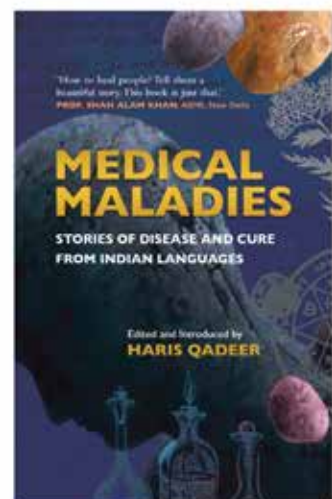
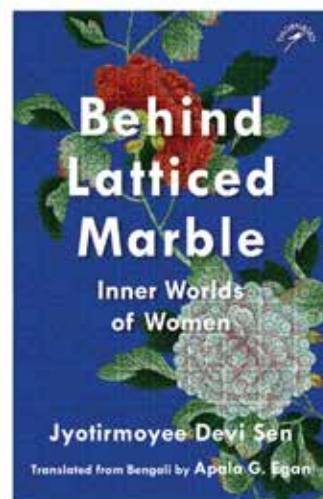
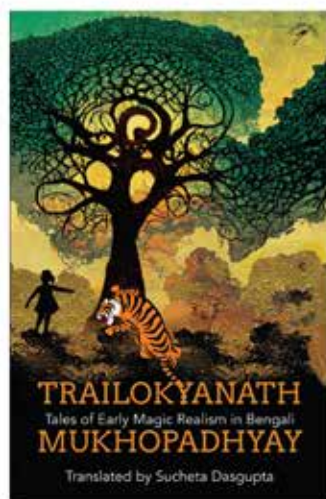
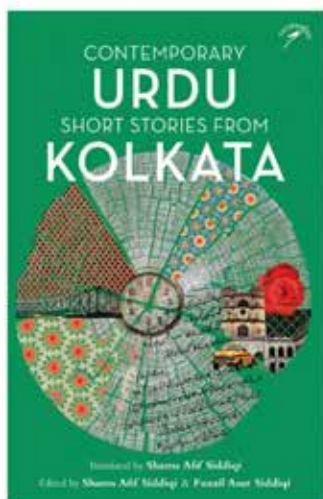
would light the fire to heat water so her husband could have a wash and stoke the fire in the kitchen to start cooking. That is what a farmer’s wife does” laments the mother-in-law. A daughter-in-law should “come decked with jewellery and accompanied by a bullock cart full of vessels and a rich trousseau”. We are made aware that in Marayi’s world, love is an extravagance, a luxury that villagers such as herself can ill afford. In a farming community such as theirs, it is survival rather than love that is of supreme value.

Morality becomes Marayi’s shield as she and the villagers turn their energies against Saroja’s purported sins unrelentingly. “Did our Nondi boy give you a little something in your womb?” asks one villager. “That fair-skinned girl must have spread her legs for Nondi”, says another. Men leer at her: “I have the same complexion as Kumaresan, perhaps even fairer — a good match to your skin tone”, says a distant relative, offering himself.

While the novel initially encourages us as readers to identify with Saroja’s victimisation and against Marayi’s abusive nature, Murugan eventually dissipates the integral force of each position, offering a dialectical one, where we are made to understand the circumstances of both perpetrator and victim: being a villain or hero is a matter of chance and circumstance. Murugan makes us see not only the force and power of the abusers, but also their utter impotence and empty arrogance. The collective anagnorisis is not that Marayi is wicked and Saroja innocent, but that nature and society are guilty. As Marlow in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, explaining the unhinged nature of Kurtz says about collective responsibility, “If everything supposedly belongs to Kurtz then all Europe contributed to his ‘making’.”



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Pyre is also a story of two temporalities: of modernity and feudalism, the key characters tenuously balanced between future alternatives and past entrapment. While we watch the doomed lovers dreaming and planning their future, the narrative is also forcefully taking us into the past. Modernity exists on the fringes of the village of Kattupatti in the town of Tholur where Bhai Anna, a trader of eggs shows Kumaresan the way to the future: entrepreneurship. Modernity exists in Virichipalayam where castes mingle. Modernity exists in the transistor that Kumaresan presents to his mother to her delight and the potential soda shop that Kumaresan is keen to acquire.

In Kattupatti proper, on the other hand, the villagers abide by narratives of Fate and Fatality. Fate provides both a collective and a pre-determined history for the villagers. The honour code outlawing different castes is bloody and cruel, but not to follow its demands would be worse. Marayi ponders, "If we start the festival here with this defilement in our midst, we might incur the wrath of Goddess Mariyatha." Referring to the marriage between Kumaresan and Saroja another villager comments, "They say that marriages made in Panguni will perish." "When the men go astray, even the sky gets angry. Not a drop of rain" mourns another villager.

Devoid of rich images, Murugan's prose is relatively simple. For many readers used to modernist or stylistic writing, *Pyre* will disappoint. With none of the flamboyance and sumptuous prose of an Allan Sealy, nor the shimmering word-play of a Salman Rushdie, nor even the sly satire of Kiran Nagarkar's Marathi works, Murugan's prose is minimalistic and terse, what Rushdie might have called "parochial writing". In his Introduction to *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing, 1947-1997*, Rushdie had damned much of regional language writing in India, suggesting that "...the range of subjects and the manner of the treatment of them is depressingly familiar: village life is hard, women are badly treated and often commit suicide, landowners are corrupt, peasants are heroic and sometimes feckless, disillusioned and defeated."¹ To many readers of Indian writing in English, this is what Murugan's work will appear at first sight. But Murugan's aesthetic devices in structuring his narrative do surprise in many ways.

One brilliant narrative move on part of Murugan in the novel is not to advise readers what caste Saroja belongs to. Not only does he refrain from identifying Saroja as lower caste or upper caste, Murugan builds into the sketch of Saroja varying signals of her possible caste identity. "She is pink like the eastern sky at dusk. Just like a film star", comments one villager on her light skin. We are told that she is not used to labouring. While these details seem to indicate a higher caste, her treatment at the hands of the villagers seems to indicate a lower one. In omitting this crucial detail of Saroja's caste identity, Murugan gives the reader an important role in the construction of the story. We, as readers, are constantly forced to read the 'signs' and are made aware of our own preconceived notions on the subject. In this way, the novel becomes a critical meditation on the discourse of caste and its arbitrary construction rather than another treatise on the ills of society.

Yet another critical device in Murugan's novel is his use of geography or landscape to portray the violence and

menace of the village. While description has always been a rhetorical device in socially realistic fictions, this is more what Clifford Geertz called "thick description" which is not description in the narratological sense at all, but rather the reproduction of the deep structure of a community or practice — an anthropological analysis.² The shady neem tree that Saroja finds so comforting in her early introduction to the village, will turn out to be part of a cemetery. The rock that is Saroja's new home becomes a nightmarish inhospitable space. "The rock had no compassion for her. Only on those nights when Kumaresan was next to her did the rock relent and hold her in its cool embrace." In the end, Nature in the form of a burning bush will be Saroja's pyre, a symbol of man's human struggle and defeat in the universe.

Caste emerged as one of the early themes of fiction in early 20th century and post-independence India. Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935), Munshi Premchand's *Godaan* (1936), Raja Rao's poetic *Kanthapura* (1938) and several

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of RK Narayan's stories. Murugan's rural fiction continues the concern for reform but now is full of menace and brutality. Departing from the logic of sentimentalising the peasant in what Manu Joseph has called "Empathy Incorporated"³ or what Rushdie in another context called "tractor art"⁴, Murugan's rural fiction is presented viscerally with all the brutal violence that accompanies an unredeemed existence. No Gandhian idealism, no pastoral timeless villages, no Nehruvian developmentalism under-write these stories. His work is closer perhaps to Mahasatwa Devi's tribal stories in their anger and shock value.

While the novel plods in many parts, the ending rudely jolts the reader into a world of spectacular gothic horror. One fateful night, Kumaresan is away on business and is expected to return shortly. As Saroja goes out to the bush to relieve herself, she hears snatches of conversation of the villagers' plan to kill her. Here is where we get Murugan's indigenous artistry in his portrayal of the landscape as key narrative device. The geography itself assumes an air of a fatalistic, inhuman malicious force. In order to escape the villagers who are hunting her down, Saroja crawls on all fours like an insect, her hands "scuttled like rats". Nature proves to be

a labyrinth of blindness, darkness and death. "Would even the plants and trees betray her now?" she asks herself. As she starts to pray to Kali she realises that "Kali's wrath was directed against her... and the goddess betrayed her hideout." Even as she surrenders to the flames that engulf her, she hears the distinct sound of K's bicycle approaching. The violence of the ending provides a strong operatic contrast to the lyrical love story in the beginning of the novel. Murugan's narrative strategy has been to tantalisingly promise us a forward movement in the story, while in fact, expanding the past. Instead of a love story doomed by caste obstacles, *Pyre* has focused on the obstacles through which we get glimpses of love as it could have been.

In the end, we have the macabre grotesquerie of the ancient female body of India on fire. Saroja is burned and charred. No allegorical body politic of *Midnight's Children* but the Dalit gendered body burnt and charred. Writing neither in the tragic nor in the triumphalist modes, the novel leaves

us with unanswered questions. Who do these Dalit bodies belong to? Civil law, the nation-state, or custom? The violence in Murugan's stories seems to interrogate both the reformist liberal mode and the ancient casteist models. Perhaps class, not desire is the transgressive force in Murugan's world. Early in Dostoevski's novel, *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov is presented with two alternative visions of advancement in the world: to kill the old pawnbroker and embark on a crime or to resist. Raskolnikov's choice to define himself by means of a crime has often been interpreted as an impatience to transform Russia once and for all: a form of stepping over centuries. The murder in *Pyre* similarly feels like a kind of similar overstepping, in which violence feels like an attempted restoration. ■

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