

Contrasting Worlds, Common Defiance: Literary Resistance and the Sustainable Development Goals in the Works of Shobha De and Perumal Murugan

Mekala Susmitha¹, Dr. Fathima Rani²

¹Ph.D. Research Scholar, Adikavi Nannaya University, Rajamahendravaram

² Associate Professor, Department of English, ST. Theresa's College for Women, Eluru.

Abstract:

This paper examines how contemporary Indian Literature contributes to the discourse on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as catalysts for India's revitalization and transformation. Through a comparative analysis of Shobha De's urban narratives and Perumal Murugan's rural fiction, the study demonstrates how literary resistance aligns with three critical SDGs: Gender Equality (SDG 5), Reduced Inequalities (SDG 10), and Climate Action (SDG 13). De's *Socialite Evenings* and *Starry Nights* expose systemic gender barriers in metropolitan India, epitomized by protagonists who challenge patriarchal norms—"I didn't want to be a good daughter-in-law, I wanted to be a person." These narratives mirror SDG 5's imperative for women's empowerment in India's urban transformation. Conversely, Murugan's *One Part Woman* reveals how caste-based exclusion ("There was no room in this world for a barren woman") perpetuates rural inequalities (SDG 10), while *Poonachi* allegorizes the climate crisis through its depiction of ecological precarity ("Water was rationed even for the animals"), addressing SDG 13's urgency. This paper argues that these contrasting literary worlds—one reflecting India's globalizing cities, the other its marginalized countryside—converge in their critique of development challenges. Their shared defiance offers unique insights for India's SDG implementation, suggesting that literary narratives can diagnose structural obstacles to sustainable development, amplify marginalized voices in policy discussions, and imagine culturally grounded solutions for India's transformation. By bridging literary analysis with development studies, this research highlights fiction's underutilized potential in SDG advocacy, particularly for India's unique urban-rural dynamics.

Keywords: SDGs, Indian Literature, Gender Justice, Caste Equity, Ecological Sustainability, Narrative Resistance

1. Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) represent a comprehensive global vision for equitable, inclusive, and sustainable societies. While frequently analyzed through political, economic, and environmental frameworks, literature offers a distinctive lens—an emotive and ethical mode of engaging with the human implications of these goals. As Martha Nussbaum (2010) asserts, literature fosters empathy, ethical reflection, and civic imagination, offering insights into the real lives hidden behind data points and metrics.

In India, a society marked by both progress and persistent inequalities, authors like Shobha De and Perumal Murugan serve as literary diagnosticians. Their novels engage directly with themes aligned with key SDGs: Gender Equality (SDG 5), Reduced Inequalities (SDG 10), Climate Action (SDG 13), and Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions (SDG 16). By narrating the struggles of marginalized individuals in both urban and rural settings, their works reveal how cultural

narratives intersect with developmental discourse and offer tools for both critique and transformation.

2. Literature as Resistance

Literature has long operated as a medium of resistance against systemic injustice. Edward Said's concept of contrapuntal reading (1993) emphasizes the need to recover silenced voices within hegemonic discourses, while Gayatri Spivak (1988) famously asked, "Can the subaltern speak?"—a provocation that remains central to contemporary literary studies. Fiction becomes not only a mirror to society but also a space of intervention where power dynamics are contested and alternative imaginaries emerge.

In the works of Shobha De and Perumal Murugan, resistance is not merely thematic but structural. Their narratives subvert dominant ideologies and center the lived experiences of those often relegated to the periphery. The alignment with SDGs in their fiction underscores the role of storytelling in advocating for systemic change and cultural inclusion.

3. Shobha De's Urban Critique: Socialite Evenings, Starry Nights, and Gender Defiance

Shobha De's urban novels, notably *Socialite Evenings* and *Starry Nights*, delve into the intricacies of women's lives within India's metropolitan elite. Through her female protagonists—Karuna, Anjali, Aasha Rani—De explores themes of identity, autonomy, and social constraint. Her work aligns closely with SDG 5 (Gender Equality), as it critiques patriarchal structures while simultaneously revealing the psychological costs of rebellion (Srinivas & Ollala, 2021).

In *Starry Nights*, Aasha Rani navigates the exploitative terrain of the film industry, where agency is both performed and denied. Her story exposes the commodification of women's bodies and labor in neoliberal India—a theme that intersects with Kakar's (1996) analysis of sexuality and repression. Similarly, in *Socialite Evenings*, Karuna's rejection of traditional wifehood reflects an assertion of selfhood within rigid gender expectations.

Critics often argue that De's focus on the elite marginalizes broader social realities. However, Uma Narayan (1997) insists that feminist resistance must be contextual and multifaceted. De's urban feminism reveals how even seemingly empowered women are entangled in cultural scripts that enforce submission, thus resonating with the deeper goals of SDG 5.

4. Perumal Murugan's Rural Defiance: One Part Woman and Poonachi

In contrast, Perumal Murugan's fiction offers a poignant portrayal of rural life shaped by caste, gender, and ecological precarity. *One Part Woman* focuses on a childless couple, Kali and Ponna, whose lives are shattered by societal expectations around fertility. Murugan critiques how tradition enforces reproductive norms, marginalizing women who deviate from these ideals—an urgent reminder of the intersectionality of SDG 5 and SDG 10.

Murugan's *Poonachi* expands this critique into an allegorical tale. The titular goat becomes a stand-in for the female subaltern, surveilled, controlled, and ultimately expendable. In its depiction of scarcity, loss, and survival, the novel speaks to SDG 13 (Climate Action), highlighting how environmental crises disproportionately impact the marginalized.

Murugan's narrative strategies—ranging from realism to fable—create spaces for dissent that challenge dominant historiographies. His withdrawal from public life following political backlash, and eventual return, underscores the perils and potency of literary resistance (Baldwin, 2020).

5. Shared Resistance: Parallel Trajectories

Though distinct in style and setting, the works of De and Murugan converge thematically. Both authors chronicle the inner lives of characters navigating exclusion and asserting dignity in the face of entrenched social norms. De's protagonists defy gender roles within urban cosmopolitanism; Murugan's resist caste and ecological erasure in rural Tamil Nadu.

Their shared narrative of resistance reflects not only personal defiance but a collective yearning for justice. These stories underscore how the SDGs are lived at ground level—through everyday struggles over identity, rights, and recognition. Whether in the smoky corridors of Bollywood or the parched fields of Kongu Nadu, resistance takes form in individual decisions, silent disobedience, and narrative reclamation.

6. Literary Lenses on the SDGs

De and Murugan's contributions can be aligned explicitly with the following Sustainable Development Goals:

SDG 5 (Gender Equality): De's women resist internalized patriarchy, asserting autonomy and questioning tradition. Murugan's female characters challenge reproductive expectations and cultural roles.

SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities): Murugan's caste-based critique confronts India's entrenched hierarchies. His stories expose how tradition can operate as exclusionary violence.

SDG 13 (Climate Action): In Poonachi, environmental degradation becomes a metaphor for systemic neglect. The novel illustrates the unequal distribution of ecological burdens.

SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions): Both authors question the integrity and inclusivity of institutions—be they familial, religious, or governmental—and call for justice rooted in equity.

Appadurai (2013) and Chatterjee (2004) argue that the cultural imagination is essential to development. Fiction, with its capacity to narrate pain, injustice, and hope, serves as an unacknowledged ally in policy thinking and public engagement.

7. Conclusion

Shobha De and Perumal Murugan demonstrate how literature can critically engage with the Sustainable Development Goals, moving beyond technocratic discourses to highlight the lived complexity of development. Their protagonists resist not only personal injustices but broader cultural systems that legitimize inequality, silence, and exclusion.

By situating their stories within India's urban-rural binary, these authors uncover how development cannot be uniform, nor justice monolithic. Instead, transformation must be dialogic—rooted in both global principles and local narratives. Their works compel us to consider fiction not merely as art but as a form of socio-political engagement, capable of advancing the global goals through cultural introspection and narrative urgency.

As India strives to meet its 2030 agenda, voices like De and Murugan's offer vital insights—urging a development vision that is inclusive, imaginative, and just. Literature, thus, is not a passive observer but an active participant in the journey toward sustainability.

Works Cited

1. De, Shobha. *Socialite Evenings*. Penguin Books India, 1989.
2. De, Shobha. *Starry Nights*. Penguin Books India, 1991.
3. De, Shobha. *Second Thoughts*. Penguin Books India, 1996.
4. Murugan, Perumal. *One Part Woman*. Translated by Aniruddhan Vasudevan, Penguin, 2013.
5. Murugan, Perumal. *Poonachi*. Translated by N. Kalyan Raman, Westland, 2018.

6. Murugan, Perumal. *Pyre*. Translated by Aniruddhan Vasudevan, Penguin, 2016.
7. Appadurai, Arjun. *The Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition*. Verso Books, 2013.
8. Baldwin, T.W. "Silence and Survival: The Return of Perumal Murugan." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 56, no. 1, 2020, pp. 55–70.
9. Chatterjee, Partha. *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*. Columbia University Press, 2004.
10. Kakar, Sudhir. *The Inner World: A Psychoanalytic Study of Childhood and Society in India*. Oxford University Press, 1996.
11. Narayan, Uma. *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third World Feminism*. Routledge, 1997.
12. Nussbaum, Martha C. *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. Princeton University Press, 2010.
13. Pandian, M.S.S. "Caste, State, and History Writing: Perspectives from Tamil Nadu." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 55, no. 3, 2020.
14. Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. Vintage, 1993.
15. Srinivas, Ollala. "Gender Issues and Intricacies in Shobha De's Select Novels." *The Creative Launcher*, vol. 6, no. 3, 2021.
16. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, University of Illinois Press, 1988