

Surveillance and Violence: Examining the Biopolitics of Caste and Gender in *Poonachi*

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Abstract

This paper examines the intersection of caste and gender through the lens of biopolitics in Perumal Murugan's 2018 novel, *Poonachi: Or The Story of a Black Goat*. Drawing from Michel Foucault's theory of Biopower, this paper seeks to analyse the biopolitics of social structures that sustain marginalisation. Biopolitics refers to the structures of power that monitor, control and regulate bodies in a society. *Poonachi* serves as an allegory for the Indian Dalit woman whose body operates as a site of control and violence. In the novel, her fertility is monitored, her offspring are commodified, and her agency is systematically erased. She represents the lived reality of countless women whose bodies are subjected to caste-based violence and patriarchal control. The novel exposes how gender and caste hierarchies are sustained through the normalisation of surveillance and control through everyday practices. It calls to attention the pervasiveness of power and the effects it has on marginalised bodies.

Keywords: Biopolitics, biopower, surveillance, intersectional feminism, caste-based violence, anthropomorphism

Introduction:

Poonachi: Or The Story of a Black Goat is a Tamil novel penned by the acclaimed writer Perumal Murugan. It was translated into English by N Kalyan Ram in 2018. Perumal Murugan has written over twelve novels, six collections of short stories and several poems, with his most famous novel being *One Part Woman*, which won him several accolades, including the Sahitya Akademi Award. However, the novel also caused great uproar in Tamil Nadu over its critique of caste and gender. Copies of his books were forced to be withdrawn, and Murugan was forced to apologise for writing about certain practices despite being true, in his book. Therefore, in his subsequent novel, *Poonachi*, he uses anthropomorphism as a literary tool to critique society. The novel is a simple tale about the life of a black female goat navigating life in a rural agrarian landscape. However, beneath the fable-like narrative lies a sharp exposition of the practices that sustain gender and caste hierarchies. A keen observer of rural India, Murugan's politics lie with the marginalised, and he does not shy away from calling out societal prejudice and conservative traditions.

The novel foregrounds marginality as a lived condition and exposes the biopolitical systems that use the labour of their bodies. *Poonachi*, a frail black goat, occupies the lowest position within this ecosystem, both physically and symbolically. Her existence is shaped by vulnerability to the harsh realities of her environment and dependence on her caretakers for survival. Murugan's masterful use of anthropomorphism avoids human directness and instead focuses on intensifying the universality of these experiences.

Michel Foucault's concept of biopower was first established in his book, *The History of Sexuality*, published in 1976. Biopower refers to the way modern states exercise control over populations beyond laws or direct coercion, through reproduction, mortality and labour. It's a form of power that operates at the level of populations rather than individuals, aimed at

managing the biological processes of humans. Poonachi functions as an allegory for the Dalit female body, whose life is governed by surveillance, reproductive control, and commodification. Through this framework, the paper demonstrates how caste and patriarchy function as biopolitical systems that discipline and regulate marginalised bodies, thereby normalising practices of control over their bodies.

The Biopolitics of Caste and Gender:

Biopower is a concept developed by the philosopher Michel Foucault which examines the shift of power structures in society. In earlier feudal systems, power was centred on the sovereign's "right to take life," meaning rulers could decide death as an expression of authority. Biopower, however, shifted later during the 18th and 19th centuries, through capitalism, where economic productivity and social stability were prioritised. Governments sought to regulate populations through labour and behaviour through disciplinary institutions, which Foucault describes as the power to "make live and let die." This shift reflects how modern states became invested in organising and sustaining life rather than simply exercising the right to kill. Foucault introduces this idea most clearly in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, published in 1976. He explains that biopower operates in two key forms. Firstly, biopower is concerned with the disciplining and training of bodies to be productive. Secondly, it focuses on the regulation of populations through biological processes such as birth rates, mortality, health, and life expectancy. However, unlike earlier forms of power that relied primarily on coercion or punishment, biopower operates through subtle mechanisms such as surveillance, normalisation, and discipline, ensuring that bodies remain productive and compliant within hierarchical systems. (Foucault 139). In modern society, these social systems thrive in a democratic framework through biopolitics. Biopolitics is the process by which biopower is exerted, and life is managed with the aim to achieve 'equilibration', 'regularity' (Foucault, 246) and 'normality' through mechanisms of control and modes of intervention. (Bithaj). Policies and laws passed by the government decide whose lives are more important than the other. Foucault argues that modern societies seek to optimise life by regulating populations, thus transforming individuals into subjects of control (Foucault 145).

In the Indian context, caste is a framework that governs, controls and discards bodies. Caste is an inherent part of Indian society. It is divided into four varnas or categories: Brahmins (priests/teachers), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (business class), and the Shudras (cobblers, butchers etc.) In his seminal work, *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), B. R. Ambedkar says that "Caste is not about division of labour, it is division of labourers." Caste transforms into a biopolitical tool of the government and, through social practices and tradition, which directly affects individuals' bodily autonomy, dictating who can access resources, who can reproduce within certain boundaries, and who is marginalised. It is a system of inequality that organises society into rigid hierarchies. Therefore, caste functions as a biopolitical system that regulates life itself. Gender further intensifies this oppression. Feminist theories talk about how women's bodies are often controlled through the regulation of women's sexuality and reproduction. Dalit feminism was particularly key in highlighting the intersectionality of caste, gender and power and therefore instrumental in shedding light on Brahmanical patriarchy. Uma Chakravarti in *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens* (2003) defines Brahmanical patriarchy as a set of rules and institutions in which caste and gender are linked, each shaping the other, where women are crucial in maintaining the boundaries between castes.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) elaborates on the lack of visibility and autonomy of the marginalised. Spivak argues that marginalised subjects, particularly women, are rendered voiceless within dominant structures of power. Their experiences are mediated, silenced, or erased, often rendering them voiceless through hierarchical structures. She particularly talks about the delicate but inseparable intersections of caste and gender that dictate Dalit women's lives. "Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears..." (Spivak 271). Dalit women, situated at the lowest end of both hierarchies, experience compounded oppression. Their bodies are subjected to exploitation, violence, and control, often justified through social and cultural norms.

Poonachi, therefore, is a sharp criticism of the various intersectional state sanctioned and socially practised methods of oppression that place individuals in a hierarchy in society. On the surface, it tells a simple story of a black goat adopted by a childless couple, but reading between the lines, it becomes evident that the story is about the lived realities of the Indian Dalit woman.

The Marginalised Body as a Site of Violence:

Poonachi's body becomes a site of violence from the very first chapter of the novel. The reader does not know where she comes from, which contributes to her invisibility in society. She is given away to an old man and his wife who live on Odakkan Hill. Poonachi was just a day old when the imposing nameless figure tried to sell her. She loses her bodily autonomy from the day she is born, existing merely as a money-making object in a capitalist society. The old woman looks at the frail black goat, akin to a tiny kitten and gives her the name "Poonachi". Her blackness carries additional symbolic weight, evoking associations with caste-based discrimination where darker bodies are often stigmatised. This marking of the body as "other" aligns with the ways in which caste operates to classify and marginalise individuals based on inherited characteristics. Her blackness, small size, and frailty symbolise the vulnerability of marginalised bodies. This image emphasises her dependence, positioning her as a being whose survival is uncertain.

As Poonachi grows, her body becomes a site of discipline and control. Her reproductive capacity is closely monitored, and she is forced into repeated cycles of breeding. Her body is valued not for its own sake but for its ability to produce offspring, reflecting the biopolitical emphasis on reproduction as a means of sustaining systems of power. It is repeatedly emphasised that fertility and reproductive cycles are mechanisms through which social hierarchies are sustained." (Raj and Lazarus 4)

The commodification of her offspring further adds to this dynamic. Her kids are treated as economic assets, bought and sold without regard for emotional bonds. When it comes to the matter of Poonachi's kids, there is no difference. Motherhood is also criticised, as women are stuck in an endless cycle of labour (Murugan 132). The old woman takes care of Poonachi and the baby goats, but here her labour has no end until it is met with the violence of separation. Poonachi undergoes extreme labour pain when her pregnancy lasts for 120 days. The old couple decide that her last kid, the little black doe like her, would be given away. "Being female, she is destined to leave for another home someday" (Murugan 139). This highlights how gender decides the course of one's life from birth. Poonachi's separation from her offsprings and her experiences of motherhood mirror the experiences of marginalised women whose reproductive labour is exploited within patriarchal systems.

Poonachi's lack of agency is highlighted throughout the novel. In her childhood, she experienced the comfort and care of the lush landscape around her. She has a favourite mango tree and enjoys frolicking over the hills. This is the closest she gets to her bodily autonomy. However, even the time she spends on her own is heavily surveilled and limited. Despite the brief moments of unobstructed joy, the inevitability of her end is foreshadowed. "Her silence and inability to resist mirror the voicelessness of Dalit women in patriarchal and casteist systems." (Moorthi 16). Murugan's use of allegory allows him to critique the voicelessness of the Indian Dalit women. He addresses the normalisation of the violence on marginalised bodies and invites readers to question the legitimacy of these structures of power.

Surveillance and the Normalisation of Control:

Surveillance is a central mechanism through which biopolitical control is exercised. The novel depicts a world in which bodies are constantly monitored, counted, and regulated. Through the allegory of a goat, Murugan shows how human bodies are constantly monitored and regulated. An example of surveillance can be seen early on in the novel when the goats and their caretakers are forced to stand in a queue under the scorching sun. The labourers justify the surveillance by saying that they must get used to standing in queues so that they can be trained to be patient and tolerant. (Murugan 38). Another important aspect of surveillance is increasing inequality. The wealthy are not subjected to such bureaucracies. There were rumours that an old man died while waiting in the heat, but the regime ignores such claims. Fear and punishment play a crucial role in maintaining this system. The threat of violence ensures compliance, while the absence of overt resistance highlights the internalisation of power. Surveillance is further legitimised by the law when policemen beat up those who did not obey the regime's instructions (Murugan 40-41). This practice echoes Foucault's concept of surveillance as a means of disciplining bodies (Foucault 149). When it is Poonachi's turn to get her ears pierced, the question of her lack of documentation appears as a hurdle. There is no history of her origin, and if she is allowed to exist, she must get her ears pierced with a tag that says she has been documented (Murugan 44). Documentation, therefore, becomes a tool of the surveillance state to legitimise the lives of individuals. "Murugan portrays the internalisation of power, where even those under control accept systemic oppression as part of daily life." (Kumar 668). By observing and recording individuals, surveillance ensures conformity, creating a system in which control is all-pervasive.

The hardships Poonachi endures in her life are presented as ordinary, but they reflect the aspects of marginalisation that are normalised in society. The novel reveals how systems of power sustain themselves through the normalisation of such practices. Surveillance is masked as a sign of progress and order, but in reality, it is instead a legitimised tool of violence that is often misused by those in power. Through Poonachi's narrative, one is compelled to question whose bodies are rendered vulnerable to be discarded.

Conclusion:

Perumal Murugan's Poonachi offers a compelling allegory for the lived experiences of marginalised bodies, particularly Dalit women, within the intersecting systems of caste and patriarchy. Michel Foucault's theory of biopower demonstrates how social hierarchies legitimise the control and regulation of bodies. Poonachi experiences the double oppression of caste and gender throughout her life. Her fertility is monitored, her offsprings are taken away, and she is rendered voiceless throughout the novel. It shows how marginalised people are visible only in terms of their utility to dominant systems. In a surveillance state, the oppressed are made

complicit in their own domination by the hierarchical structures through everyday practices like documentation. Therefore, the novel invites the reader to critically examine the societal practices that sustain inequality and simultaneously question the legitimacy of these structures.

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