

Celebrating Fragmentations: A Folkloric Perspective on Perumal Murugan's Poonachi, or the Story of a Black Goat.

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Abstract

We need stories not only to entertain but also to remain humane and sane. Making sense of life has been a perennial practice among civilizations. The consequential and consistent crisis in the history of humanity has always spurred the intrinsic human wit and wisdom to find the solution to existential fragmentation. Animals that speak and discuss their problems just like humans are the essence of folkloric narratives. These stories ponder human plight and offer lessons of survival germinating from the existential crisis itself. Perumal Murugan's *Poonachi or the Story of a Black Goat* (2018) is yet another folkloric response to living and dying, which underlines the necessity of tenderness and sensitivity as a solution to survive. The anthropomorphic traits in the story create the folkloric backdrop where a mysterious goat Poonachi tells about her chequered life full of violence yet driven by love and freedom. This paper discusses how this fable with folkloric elements clings to its characters' indomitable wisdom and tenderness even in the face of violence. It accepts the behavioral dissonance to preserve the belief in harmony.

Keywords: Harmony, Fragments, Anthropomorphism, Wisdom.

Introduction:

Through the fragmentary ..., we can somehow arrive at a more profound understanding of the world. (Power Web)

Nobel laureate Olga Tokarczuk says, "The flood of stupidity, cruelty, hate speech and images of violence are desperately counterbalanced by all sorts of "good news," but it hasn't the capacity to rein in the painful impression, which I find hard to verbalize, that there is something wrong with the world. Once the sole preserve of neurotic poets, this feeling is like an epidemic of lack of definition, a form of anxiety oozing from all directions"(The Tender Narrator Web). Poonachi's struggle and reflections are the answer to this loss of belief in essential and intrinsic goodness. A feeble goat in a fable emerges as a symbol of basic human emotions and seems to propound that survival is purely an act of personal choice in the face of fear and longings while mitigating the difference between the old woman and the goat itself because "animals were mysterious, wise, self-aware creatures with whom we had always been connected by a spiritual bond and a deep-seated similarity" (The Tender Narrator Web). Thus, with its folkloric elements, this novel resorts back to primitive unquestioning spirits amidst

crisis as far as its structure and themes are concerned. Tenderness and sensitivity emerge as the solutions for the inherent skepticism and structural violence symbolized and highlighted in the lifespan of this mysterious black goat and farmer's family.

In mysterious circumstances, a giant, god-like stranger hands over a tiny black goat to a farmer. Farmer's wife names this goat Poonachi and commits to raising her to adulthood. The incidents afterward consolidate the refrain of a moral story highlighting the most fundamental human emotions in the fierce existential dilemmas of a routine life, which emerged from the preferences between right and wrong. While dissolving the boundaries between human and nonhuman, a mysterious goat reflects on universal and mundane human confrontations with desire, love, freedom, poverty, resistance, and greed to generate the meaning of human life in the face of crisis. Her capacity as a thinking and sensitive creature seeks many explanations as far as the thematic and structural design of the text is concerned.

A fantastical beginning of the story is set in a localized village backdrop, where a monstrous man, "what kind of man he is? Is he from a different planet?"(Murugan 5), hands over a mysterious goat from an extraordinary lineage to a farmer, "Look, she is no ordinary kid. Her mother birthed seven kids in a litter" (Murugan 5), highlights the supernatural folkloric tone of the story. This unusual lineage is treated as a legend in the story when Poonachi herself gives birth to seven kids. The primitive cultural practices like the offerings to clan deity Mesagaran and customs of animal sacrifice during festivals highlight the folkloric texture of the story. The innocence of the farmer and his wife in the face of extreme hardships suggests folkloric belief in wisdom. Poonachi, in an anthropomorphic backdrop, corroborates this belief of celebrating the existentialistic fragments of simple village life.

Why does the older woman take such pain for saving this goat kid who has miraculously escaped attacks from an eagle and wildcat? Perumal answers this question with the simple logic of folkloric wisdom: the celebration of fragmentation. A wretched and poverty-stricken older woman transforms the ordinary act of rearing a goat into a lesson of grit and determination, which is primarily an act of obeying one's inherent wisdom.

The Acts of Survival amidst Fragmentations:

A nonhuman animal Poonachi symbolizes the act of survival against all existentialistic odds. A brittle survivor, mirthful kid, longing lover, and a merciful mother, all these roles played by this nonhuman animal Poonachi are embedded in the intrinsic human wisdom used for survival. Similarly, the farmer's wife fighting against poverty, famine, and hegemony emerges as a persistent character that refuses to surrender to destiny. Her conviction in rearing this "kid wriggled like a worm" (Murugan 8) is instrumental in Poonachi's survival from a fragile goat to a playful kid as "a determination that she must somehow raise this kid to adulthood took root in her heart" (Murugan 12). Their immediate response to the existential crisis is not that of lamentation but comparatively a more critical and compassionate understanding of their plight.

Poonachi and the farmer's wife sail in the same boat and confront the harshness of life, leaving both of them helpless and weak. However, their resolution to survive develops the

story's thematic concerns, preserving the perennial folkloric act of fighting with fragments without questioning. The episode in which Poonachi is taken to ear-piercing highlights the ungrudging courtesy and kindness maintained in challenging situations. The older woman shows unwavering resolution to get the ears of the little goat pierced as per the strict rule of the regime. Since this little goat was not born at the old woman's home, it is tough to convince the officials about her origin because "if they replied that they had received the newborn as a gift, that a man who looked like Bakasuran, the gluttonous demon, had given her away, the authorities might register a case of false testimony"(Murugan 30). But the old woman, instead of giving up, decides to wait for a few more days and, "In that time, the pregnant goat in their yard would have delivered her litter. Her first pregnancy had yielded just one kid; the next few uniformly yielded two kids each. They could easily club Poonachi with two newborns and claim a litter of three" (Murugan 31).

She succeeds, but it becomes a harrowing experience for a fragile goat kid as, "in Poonachi's case, the needle had struck a vein in her ear; causing it to bleed ... they didn't care that she's a newborn and stabbed her so hard in the ear" (Murugan 45). This is an excruciating exercise for the farmer's wife also because all the villagers have "had mouths only to keep shut, hand only to make obeisance, knees only to bend, and bodies only to shrink before the authorities[and] had a difficult time doing all this while trying to keep their goats under control"(Murugan 35). Poonachi grows more fragile after ear-piercing. Still, the old woman also equally grows convinced of saving the goat because "she couldn't give up on her, could she? She also believed that Poonachi couldn't die since she had taken a vow of supplication to Mesayyan, her god" (Murugan 47). This uncritical and undiluted faith becomes the act of survival, and "the pus dried up only after a month. Slowly, the wound scabbed over. During the entire month, Poonachi never left the old woman's side" (Murugan 48).

In their struggle to survive, the older woman and Poonachi enlarge the dimension of comprehending folktales as life lessons relevant in modern times. Death of Uzhamban, another buck in the clan, highlights not only the older woman's stance against adversity which comes in the form of death but also Poonachi's deep sense of understanding existential crisis expressed through an anthropomorphic animal. The lesson comes in the words of another woman from the village declaring that "pity the person who suffered the loss, but it's no gain for the one who got the meat" (Murugan 99) and an old woman who herself refuses to eat the meat of dead animal but at the same time declares her sanity and deep-rooted sense to survive by not stopping the fellow villagers from eating the flesh of dead Uzhamban. She seems to accept the reality of this loss and acknowledges that "the difficulties of the dead leave along with them, those of the living are here to stay" (Murugan 100). As far as Poonachi is concerned, she also seems to be accustomed to life's fragmentations when she says, "Is he going to wake from the dead if I worry about him? Of course we must remember him. But if we think about him all the time, how are we to live?"(Murugan 101) Thus, a complex and traumatic concept like death is elevated to a lesson of maintaining profundity rather than poignancy in the face of death.

Another incident, in which Provan, a buck, Poonachi meets during her visit to an old woman's daughter's house and "took a great liking to Poovan" (Murugan 87) is sacrificed at the altar of the local deity highlights the resilient self of this anthropomorphic animal. The authorial concerns in the text to preserve the fundamental human essence of fighting with dying come to the fore with the response documented through Poonachi. For her:

It was a sorrow that surpassed all previous woes. She stood still, crying. Sometimes she felt that it was not Poovan's body that hung there: he had become one with her, so how could he still have a body of his own? Now, she was the one who had to look after him. She would protect the one inside her, not allow any damage to this person. She was happy that this Mesagaran had permitted them at least that much. (Murugan 150)

Similarly, when the older man for sacrifice slaughtered her kid, Poonachi introspects on the act of survival and death. Instead of wailing, "Poonachi looked at the kid's severed head and cried for a while. She recalled the day she had seen Poovan's severed head. 'We die for meat. We die for sacrifice, 'he had said. Had her kid died for meat or sacrifice?'"(Murugan 162). This confrontation with death may appear:

Little uneasy, wondering: How badly will this goat be made to suffer? If very badly, why bother with such a story? Why go to literature to encounter suffering? "The Story of a Goat" answers this question with more grace, wit, and feeling ... We go to such stories for relief of honesty; to see what is hidden brought to light; to acknowledge, if here alone, the pain routinely inflicted on lives typically considered too insignificant to be the subject of great literature (Sehgal).

This folklore underlines the awareness and sensitization of older women and Poonachi towards the implications of the crisis that emerged from social milieus. Survival becomes a physical necessity for Poonachi and her rearer. The story develops into the literature on survival, which asserts that survival is an exclusivity of existence. It is the honesty in comprehending the perennial conflict in human society and resilience to increase the probabilities of remaining alive at any cost. Through the perk of storytelling, the writer reflects on our humanistic responses toward living and dying. The animal in the story with folkloric essence takes us "deep into an intimate history of humanity and the irreducible human essence that we must fight to preserve" (Murugan 172).

Drawing Parallels to Create Cohesion:

The acts of celebrating fragmentations in the story become symbols of intrinsic human duality, which according to the author, is a primordial urge to survive. Survival is not an easy act to perform. By delineating the other side of the animal and her rearer in the story, Murugan enlarges the folkloric essence defining human behavior. Poonachi and the older woman are not mere protagonists of the story; they are antagonists also. Their acts of survival are not only based on essential goodness, but they manifest the other side of human behavior based on

greed and selfishness, which eventually becomes a new means of comprehending the fragmentations and solutions to survival.

Murugan says, "I avoid creating one-dimensional characters. I believe all humans are a mix of both" (Murugan Web). This is undoubtedly a metamodern revisiting of folkloric acknowledgment of good and evil. The old lady who puts everything at stake to save the goat suddenly becomes selfish when she faces a financial crunch and is ready to sell Poonachi's kids for money. Her kindness becomes conditional, and she favors her husband in selling the kids because she eventually starts feeling that "taking care of this miracle is ruining our lives" (Murugan128). Her consent to sell all the kids jeopardizes her act of rearing Poonachi as it questions her impeccable sincerity until she finds her family in dire need of money. She seems indifferent to Poonachi's pain as she was "thrilled when she saw the jewelry that her husband had purchased. The old couple was so overwhelmed by their good fortune that they could not sleep. Grief-stricken at losing all her kids at one stroke, Poonachi couldn't sleep either" (Murugan141).

Similarly, in the earlier phase of the story, when Poonachi had to leave the couple's daughter's house, she grows repulsive towards the older woman. The reason is that she had developed a bond with a buck called Poovan at the home of the older woman's daughter and surprisingly even forgets all the trouble the old lady had taken to survive her and that how just a day before when Poonachi has lost her way in the forest the older woman had tried earnestly to find her and made sure that she would not leave without finding Poonachi. Her short association with this buck brings forth the fundamental human tendency of selfishness highlighted through an animal. Despite all care and concerns bestowed on Poonachi by the older woman, the moment the more senior woman insists on taking Poonachi with her:

From that moment on, Poonachi began to dislike the older woman. Who asked her to come looking for me? She could have left me there. I would have spent my time happily eating wild creepers and loitering around with wild boars. She didn't let that happen. Now, she won't allow me to stay here with Provan either. The old wretch. I have to keep falling into her arms, it seems. From now on, I shall avoid being trapped, Poonachi said to herself. (Murugan 90)

However, this development of selfishness in older women and Poonachi is suggestive of authorial vision treating excellent and bad aspects of human sensibility. Moreover, there is undoubtedly a folkloric message of wisdom that synthesizes all aspects of human behavior. Instead of lamenting or discarding this unusual and unexpected treatment of Poonachi and the older woman towards each other, the concern is to celebrate this fragmentation. Olga says, "I have always intuitively opposed such orders, since they lead to limiting authorial freedom, to a reluctance toward the experimentation and transgression that is, in fact, the essential quality of

creation in general. And they completely exclude from the creative process any of the eccentricity without which art would be lost" (*The Tender Narrator Web*).

Conclusion:

The story ends with the death of Poonachi in tragic circumstances but not for a moment the compassion between the older woman and the goat loses its sheen as far as the message of accepting human good and evil as a familiar dichotomy based on age-old folkloric wisdom to establish cohesion among parallels is concerned. The inquisitiveness is undeniably a significant virtue but what folkloric knowledge propounds is the inherent humaneness required for survival. In the backdrop of a story on a goat and older woman, the writer has down rightly established the essence of folkloric acceptance of existential crisis, which is of paramount value in this age of skepticism and nihilism.

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