An Ignorant Protagonist in Perumal Murugan’s Pyre Novel

Dr. G. Naveenkumar
Assistant Professor, Department of English
KMG College of Arts and Science, Gudiyattam, Vellore, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract

India is famed for its diverse cultures, dialects, religions, traditions, and pride in the country’s integrity, but the mysterious fact is that it is also notorious for casteism. In the name of caste, casteism treats unequal societal behaviour. It’s a harsh system that divides people in general. Women are the primary victims of inter-caste marriages in this country. This article examines how Saroja, the protagonist, is ignorant of the casteist system that exists in many of the places where honour killings have occurred.

Keywords: Inter-Caste Marriage, Honour-Killing, Ignorance, Casteism and Society

Perumal Murugan, a contentious Tamil author, is currently employed as a Tamil professor at the Government Arts and Science College in Attur, Tamilnadu, India. He is a well-known novelist, short-story writer, and essayist. His poems are particularly well-known among Tamilnadu dialects from the Kongu region. Murugan’s writings have been translated into several languages. For the novel One Part Woman, he was targeted by local religious groups. Following that episode, he declares that Murugan is still alive and that Perumal Murugan is no longer alive. Murugan touches on the issues of the Kongu region’s marginalised in many of his works. The novel Pyre was originally written in Tamil as Pookuzhi in 2013. The English version was translated by Anirudh Vasudevan in 2016. In the novel Pyre, he juxtaposes the problems of an inter-caste married couple in the village.

Taboos Against Inter-Caste Marriage

Taboos against inter-caste marriage Inter-caste marriage is frowned upon in many Indian societies because of caste differences: “It is generally upheld that one should marry a person belonging to the same caste because, in this way, the marriage will be accepted by not only the parents and the family but also by society at large.” (Das, 367). The caste system is widely accepted. Hindus believe that the caste’s chastity and honour can only be preserved if they marry within their own caste, not from outsiders. If a man or woman marries an outcast, he or she will face threats, forced divorce, and abuse, as well as being cut off from their family and community. Inter-caste married couples are often sentenced to death, a practice.
known as honour killing. “Those who dared for the inter-caste marriage by violating the social norm had to face the consequences in terms of violence, social boycott, family boycott and death of the boys and girls.” (RPCFAIM, Web). In Indian communities, this type of uneven hierarchy is carefully adhered to to perpetuate casteism.

The Hindu Varna system, knowingly Manusmirithi (Hindu Social law), is the main proponent of the caste system’s origin. People are segregated according to their occupation to serve their superiors, according to Manu:

The Indian caste system is a classification of people into four hierarchically ranked castes called varnas. They are classified according to occupation and determine access to wealth, power, and privilege. Leadership positions in society are monopolized by a few dominant castes (Pintane, 157).

In the name of culture, the caste system has created several standards and restrictions for women. This Varna system arose as a barrier to women’s harmony, independence, and social advancement. Even after independence, Indian women were expected to stay at home and refrain from participating in social activities. The caste Hindus think that a woman in the household can save the caste’s purity. Women’s wombs are meant to act as a productive mechanism for rearing community children.

When Indian cities and towns transformed into metropolitan areas, the thousand-year-old concept of casteism and culture was progressively shattered. A guy can live wherever he wants, regardless of which community he belongs to. In Indian villages, however, the situation is entirely different because the property is owned by upper-caste Hindus and the streets are dominated by them alone. As a result, lower-caste men are unable to live on upper-caste streets:

The caste system very much impacted the economic structure in the Indian village. The village was essentially a food-providing unit, where each family of the craft or service caste was linked with one or more of the land owning-farmer-caste families. (Velassery, 18).

Ignorance of the Protagonist Saroja

People have been flocking to cities from all over the country to increase their salaries and establish better lifestyles. It is quite difficult to determine one’s caste in such an environment. Saroja, Murugan’s protagonist, suffers insurmountable obstacles as a result of her inter-caste marriage in Pyre. Saroja was brought up in a small town and has never faced or encountered caste discrimination. In town, she was content to watch television, listen to the radio, and have a friendly connection with her neighbours, regardless of their caste. Saroja’s worry increases when she returns to the village after marrying Kumaresan because her husband is from an upper-caste and she is from a lower-caste.

Saroja believes Kumaresan’s promises and his mesmerising smiles without question. Kumaresan totally dominated her world when he worked in town and lured her with romance. In any case, she would never have imagined her mother-in-law was so nasty in the village, and she would never have accepted her. Kumaresan is the only son supposed to care for his widowed mother in real life. Marayi, on the other hand, rejects Saroja because of her caste; Kumaresan has never imagined his mother being a casteist. Saroja’s condition worsens, Kumaresan’s promises shatter her, and she consciously holds his hands. It indicates her ignorance and fear of society:

Saroja clutched his shoulder and continued to shuffle ahead, making sure her legs didn’t get in the way of his. Smiling faintly, she wondered if he would have taken her smile to mean, ‘I have no one besides you. I have come placing all my trust in you’. (Pyre.5)

Saroja is afraid of the village right from the start of the novel. The folks assumed that she was odd and asked a lot of questions about her caste, colour, and the language she spoke. She was
able to conceal herself behind Kumaresan whenever she was overheard by the villagers. It is quite evident that she lacks village culture, rituals, and inhabitants. Saroja’s white skin contrasts with the skin of upper-caste women, prompting many villagers to express disparaging remarks about her appearance. The villagers conclude that she is unsuitable to work in the field:

Can’t I tell by face’ he prodded relentlessly. ‘This is not a face from our caste, Mapillai. Does a face that wanders over fields and rocks look like this? This is the face that wanders over fields and rocks look like this? This is the face of someone who hasn’t toiled, a body that hasn’t suffered summer’s heat.‘ (Pyre.12)

In any case, Saroja has complete faith in Kumaresan, and he is always on Saroja’s side. He defends her from the villagers’ questions.

Every woman used to think about her family after she got married and strive to maintain a pleasant relationship with her mother-in-law. In fact, most arranged marriages in India are marred by a lack of family understanding. Only a few women are successful in establishing a conjugal relationship. Similarly, Saroja is not unique in that she is ignorant of inter-caste marriage. Saroja, the protagonist, thinks like other ordinary women and has low aspirations. She is undoubtedly ignorant and victimised because of her inter-caste marriage.

Apart from these taboos, Saroja’s expectations are shattered when she enters Kumaresan’s hut dwelling. Saroja had never lived in a hut or town without electricity, and she despised the open toiletry system and bathing in the outdoors. Saroja, on the other hand, compromises herself for Kumaresan’s sake. Although she believes that being with him brings her happiness. Kumaresan later planned to migrate to a nearby town, which made her happy. It indicates that Saroja is unprepared to confront the casteist society.

Saroja is constantly nervous when she enters a new environment. Her dreary surroundings prompted her to study various aspects of herself. Is Kumaresan’s mother willing to welcome us? What should I do if she accepts? What should I do if she doesn’t? What should I reply to the villagers? Would they be able to communicate naturally? How do you respond if they speak? Similarly, a strange atmosphere is preoccupying her thoughts. Even so, she is hesitant to talk with her neighbours about the caste. Would they force her to reveal her caste? These questions keep going in her mind, and she can’t seem to get them out: “She had not expected the people to be so inquisitive about caste here.” (Pyre, 29)

Saroja wanted Kumaresan to be with her in all situations, so she hesitates to drink water from the hut when he isn’t available. This is the most deplorable state of a common woman, driving her to believe that she should not be on such premises. Sometimes, Saroja doesn’t understand what the villagers speak in many places. It illustrates the protagonist’s inability to tackle difficult situations.

Saroja shows her weakness by not responding to the villagers in many places. Saroja cries frequently when she remembers her father and brother are in town. She thinks about returning to town and apologising to her father. “She couldn’t help but feel that it was her father’s and brother’s knowledge.” (Pyre, 32)

These are all serious problems that the protagonist, Saroja, is struggling with. It reveals that she is not a rebel and is incapable of shattering casteism’s cocoons through inter-caste marriage. Rather, Saroja tries to convince herself that she is a normal woman who is ignorant of her circumstances. She is not able to face her inter-caste marital issues. A woman who is unaware of the casteist society of the twentieth century is at a serious disadvantage. Saroja, the protagonist, endures quietly in every situation in which she is required to speak up, and she is unable to tackle the matter in numerous phases. She could have prevented honour-killing if she had protested against these anti-social elements. Saroja’s failure is largely due to her fear and inexperienced casteism.
Murugan is a tireless chronicler of social problems, especially casteism and its terrible manifestations. Murugan has vividly presented Saroja, the young woman of Pyre, as a helpless victim of an inter-caste marriage that has destroyed her life. Casteism plays a critical role in society. Every thrust is rooted in casteism. The novel culminates with Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s vision of eradicating casteism through inter-caste marriage, which unites people from different castes together under one umbrella. People, on the other hand, are unwilling to listen to Ambedkar’s advice and are stubbornly adhering to casteism, which is harmful to our Indian society as well as human beings. In the novel, Perumal Murugan eventually uncovers the horrors of inter-caste marriage and its consequences.

References
1. Murugan, Perumal. Pyre. Trans. Aniruddhan Vasudevan. Penguin Publishers: New Delhi, 2016. print.
2. Das Kumudin, Das K. C., Roy T. K. and Tripathy P. K., Dynamics of inter-religious and inter-caste marriages in India, https://paa2011.princeton.edu/papers/111281. Cited on 14-08-2021.
3. Pintane, Andrea. “Brahmans Within the Caste System.” Home - CSU, Chico. Web. 11 Oct. 2010.
4. Velassery, Sebastian. Casteism and Human Rights: Toward an Ontology of the Social Order. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Academic, 2005. Print.
5. Real Problems Couples Face After Inter-Caste Marriages https://www.bonobology.com/15-real-problems-couples-face-after-inter-caste-marriages/. Cited on 14-08-2021.