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A Study of *Fire Bird* by Perumal Murugan: Evaluating Social Conventions, Natural Laws, and Human Choices to Find Purpose in a Changing World

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Abstract:

Using *Fire Bird* by Perumal Murugan, this text explores how individuals can find purpose in a changing world. First, it will discuss how social conventions and natural laws that change over time and place shape human choices. ‘Social conventions’ can be contextually defined as the systems of society in different places and times that are often initially made to bring order but later evolve into weapons of social inequality. Meanwhile, ‘natural laws’ refer to the laws of nature that govern the natural world and human instincts irrespective of societal conventions and morality. Second, it will discuss how individuals can find comfort in change once they find their purpose. ‘Purpose’ can be defined as something abstract rather than concrete, not found permanently as one specific thing but rediscovered repeatedly under changing circumstances: it is shaped by an individual’s moral ideals and preferences and reflected in his/her choices. In *Fire Bird*, Muthu’s journey to find land can be viewed as symbolic of his internal journey to find his purpose and define himself. The mention of ‘a changing world’ is significant here as this text discusses a contemporary issue of not just finding purpose but the difficulty of doing so amidst constant change, this change being in different forms. This text focuses on two main forms: change in reality and change in perception. ‘Change in reality’ here means exterior changes around individuals such as migration, change in relations, and aging shown through the characters’ experiences in *Fire Bird*. Here ‘change in perception’ means internal change in individuals as they view things differently. For example, gradually, Muthu perceives his older brother, Periannan, in a much more negative light than his younger self could have imagined. Therefore, these two types of changes are interconnected: exterior changes affect individuals internally and vice versa. In the contemporary world, reliant on migration and rapid technological change, it is relevant to explore

Muthu's journey as he loses himself in the world of changes to finally find a sense of purpose derived from what he chooses to view as 'natural', that gives him direction in any changing circumstance.

Keywords: social conventions, natural laws, human choices, purpose, change, firebird, Perumal Murugan.

Introduction:

The setting of the novel *Fire Bird* is in rural Tamil Nadu, India. Muthu, a middle-aged farmer, sets off on a journey directed by the wrath of his wife, Peruma. She cannot tolerate life in Muthu's homeland and urges Muthu to find a new land far away from all their relatives. It is revealed that Muthu, being the youngest son of his family, is distributed the smallest piece of land among his brothers, hardly enough for him, Peruma, and their three children to live in. His brothers, so fond of him in childhood, soon seem strangers who argue over materialistic needs, sparing his family little water and barely greeting him at sight. As Muthu, with the loyal companionship of his oxen and Kuppan, interacts with different people and uses his farmer's knowledge to evaluate different land, he is forced to grow independent, contrary to his childhood when he was pampered by and was reliant on everyone in his family. Initially, Muthu struggles to keep up with the reality of his caring brothers from his childhood being the same ones presently so distant and divided from him and his problems. He cannot view his family as completely unjust and devoid of affection for him, the way Peruma views them. However, he finds it difficult to stay illusioned by his memories when he learns that Periannan, his oldest brother and once father-like figure, sexually assaulted Peruma without remorse and that later, his mother defended Periannan as she called Peruma the derogatory 'fire bird'. On finally finding a piece of land larger than all his brothers combined, Muthu's negotiation of price and interactions with the native people show his character development. He develops from someone who tolerated and accepted everything done to him to someone who stands his ground. As Muthu toils to build his house and prepare the land, he, along with Kuppan at the end of their journeys, prepares for a dangerous robber and comments on how comfortable with change he has become. This contrasts with Muthu initially not wanting to leave his homeland and Kuppan not being used to commonly leaving his house.

Below is a brief on the two themes in this text and their importance.

First, ‘social conventions, natural laws, and consequent human choices’ is a theme under which this article will explore how both social conventions and natural laws can be beneficial and harmful. Social conventions like the caste system in India supposedly started by dividing society based on human skills into different occupations. BBC refers to Manusmriti as ‘widely regarded to be the most important and authoritative book on Hindu law’ and mentions that it ‘acknowledges and justifies the caste system as the basis of order and regularity of society.’ (*What is India’s caste system*) However, society soon ranked these occupations in terms of respect, reaching the extent of injustice that made certain castes untouchable and lowly. *Fire Bird* explores specific social conventions in parts of rural Tamil Nadu, such as land ownership, caste systems, religious beliefs, and gender roles. Natural laws, meanwhile, are the basic laws that govern the instinctive nature of humans and the natural world. *Fire Bird* intricately weaves descriptions of plants, animals, and humans in the setting of Tamil Nadu and in the process, delves closer into the way nature works, raising the question of whether social conventions often cause humans to forget their natural instincts. It also raises the question of whether what is now treated as natural by society in the contemporary world was always natural. Natural laws, as much as they might seem to lean towards moral righteousness, also include human traits like self-preservation, greed, and jealousy. Both social conventions and natural laws can be harmful to society and nature as well as beneficial to them. As humans build their characters with the help of these conventions and laws, they make choices, good or bad, choices that define them as individuals with purposes.

Second, the theme of change as a constant is proven to be a natural law throughout *Fire Bird*. As Muthu ages, as his relations with his loved ones change, as he travels to unfamiliar places, and as he builds new relations, his character experiences many explicit changes. His character development is a change shown more subtly, as he grows independent, actively values moral righteousness, and learns to defend himself and others. From someone more passive in the beginning, journeying by the force of his wife’s words, he later becomes more active and desperate about starting a new life as he views his family not only from his own but also from Peruma’s perspective. For this specific theme, this essay would like to explore the concept of change initially being uncomfortable but also something inevitable that individuals should eventually learn to embrace rather than avoid. As individuals delve deeper into their true nature and understand what they value in this world, they form a sense of purpose that they cannot lose; rather, it can evolve

through changing exterior circumstances. This sense of purpose might ultimately make them comfortable with change as shown in Muthu's character.

Social conventions, natural laws, and consequent human choices:

First, focusing on Peruma, the 'fire bird' of the novel, I would like to explore a part of the major social conventions shown in *Fire Bird*. Being a woman in this rural setting of farmers, she is expected by societal conventions to get married, have children, and take care of her family. However, the choices she makes as an individual, despite being limited to her roles in society, reveal her values and purpose. On the surface, her revolt against the system that binds her is not as drastic, but in reality, she controls her family's fate as she initiates Muthu's journey. 'There was no way for Peruma to win an argument against her mother-in-law.' (Murugan 70) contrasted with 'She had everyone from her husband to her children under her thumb,' (Murugan 70) are sentences explicitly describing the limits of the power she holds in society. 'She did not say much but when she did, her words pierced like papercuts,' (Murugan 93) is a quote showing her consistent and sustainable rebellion. She stands in contrast to Saroja in Murugan's *Pyre*; as S. Ygnasri writes, 'Saroja as a character has been seen as an obedient, helpless woman,' (Ygnasri). Although socially just as helpless as Saroja, Peruma asserts herself through her mannerisms and constant dramatic snide remarks. She thinks things through but limits her actions to the words she speaks, these words making all the difference. Her character is an example of preserving one's nature and values within oppressing social conventions that indirectly demand them to change. Peruma is comfortable with who she essentially is and stubborn about it. Shifting to Muthu's homeland, an unfamiliar place with many unwelcoming people, she does not give in to what they demand from her- this makes her a 'firebird' in the eyes of society, someone apparently unsocial, but in reality, someone protecting both her nature and her family with her fiery flames. Despite being unable to migrate physically and journey throughout the novel like firebirds do, Peruma's decisiveness in her beliefs reflected through her persistently harsh words is the main driving force of Muthu's journey that indirectly frees her from the relatives who control her life. Unlike Muthu, who is initially confused regarding his purpose, {'Muthannan did not have the heart to leave his village' (Murugan 7)}, Peruma is a contrasting character who shows no matter how passive one's actions might seem, if these actions are stubbornly consistent and fueled by confidence, they can have significant effect.

Second, let us focus on Muthu, socially the youngest son of a farmer's family and so someone who has no say regarding the amount of land he has been given. 'The youngest had to quietly accept whatever was given to him and had no right to demand anything,' (Murugan 54) describes his social limitations which soon lead to Peruma's family questioning him with, 'A lousy divide they made, and you accepted it all quietly! Why will your siblings think of your welfare? Everyone waits for that moment when they can take advantage of the situation,' (Murugan 62). This shows how the social convention of land ownership in Muthu's homeland, though initially made to bring equality by giving more land to the elder brother (typically thought to have a larger family, more responsibility, and greater needs than the younger), soon transformed into a weapon harming not only Muthu but even people related to him. S. Ygnasri writes, 'In Pyre, Murugan dissects the artificial divisions of society that become real when love is replaced by hate and innocence is trampled by blindness,' (Ygnasri). This is also relevant in the case of *Fire Bird* as Muthu, used to being loved by his brothers, suddenly grows up to face alienation. His innocence is also 'trampled', not only by blindness but by the materialistic cravings of his brothers which override their natural brotherly affection.

The mention of everyone taking 'advantage of the situation' raises the question of whether self-preservation is a natural law within humans that often causes beneficial social conventions to evolve into something unjust. It raises the question of whether the purpose behind social conventions is lost as they betray their natural basics. These questions have different answers from different people. First, it seems to be almost answered by Kuppan as he once mentions, 'I know more about a sparrow's family than a man's. Followed by the families of goats and cows. I like the way they live. I believe that's how it must have been for man too. Somewhere along the way, things changed for us. We lost any sense of order or reason. But like crows and sparrows, I will go through this life waking up in the morning and feeding my family,' (Murugan 145). Kупpan views loyalty to family as natural and something beautiful. This view is contrasted by Muthu's father saying, 'Just like how a koel throws out the young crows when the fledglings in its nest grow wings. It doesn't say, "Oh, I have protected them all this while, I should now feed them too." Once it knows they aren't its own kind, that's how it treats them,' (Murugan 53). Muthu's father dismisses eternal loyalty to the family as natural law and instead thinks betrayal is natural. Muthu's mother later uses the comparison of five fingers made unequal, which exposes her view of inequality being natural. This shows how Muthu's mother has morally ambiguous ideas; she

confuses the naturalness of unique individuals born with unique strengths and weaknesses (and so being 'unequal' in different aspects), with the unnatural choice of unequal social treatment.

Based on these different perspectives, it could be inferred that what is supposedly 'natural' is the foundation of change in social conventions and human choices. While loyalty and emotional bonding are natural, self-preservation and betrayal based on it can also be just as natural- a human is not born good or bad but complex. If individuals choose to view elements like betrayal as natural, they will soon dismiss opposites like loyalty as natural. Therefore, it is the choice of actively embracing different types of 'natural' in their 'true nature' that they are born with that gives them purpose. 'True nature', in this context, means the amalgamation of inherent skills, emotions, and mannerisms. 'Actively embracing' means choosing to act on certain natural traits and developing them into something meaningful.

Muthu observes, 'But people's nature was the same everywhere. Desire, jealousy, deception- there were no differences among men when it came to these aspects. It was really habits and customs that changed region by region,' (Murugan 86). Through Muthu's view, Perumal Murugan further emphasizes how natural laws stay constant but social conventions which are choices humans collectively make, reflect what society *chooses to consider* 'natural'. This choice, taken uniformly by societies and uniquely by individuals within these societies, defines them.

Change as a constant:

Muthu is an example of a character who undergoes the discomfort of change, is forced into confronting it, and finally embraces it- initially forced into exterior change, he consequently changes and grows internally. At first, Muthu is like a plant, not used to change, unlike Peruma- 'She was, after all transplanted there. But it was not the same for him. He had germinated on that soil and was rooted there,' (Murugan 114). For Muthu to try and cut off the deep-rooted connections he had with his family members is not easy or comfortable, especially since part of his family seems so comfortable with the same. While Peruma is explicitly called a migratory 'firebird' and has already experienced the migration after her marriage, Muthu is unexpectedly thrown into it. However, rather than being a plant that grows nurtured by the care and protection of his family, he seems to grow better as a migratory bird. His oldest brother defines him as he says, 'He is never going to deny me anything I want,' (Murugan 102) while attempting to assault

Peruma. Muthu's passive nature, which he was nurtured into growing, is something he chooses to cut off as he bargains with the 'nattamai' (village chief) of his new village and interacts with the people- he stands his ground and denies when he thinks fit. 'Today, he was in a position of authority,' (Murugan 156) Murugan comments on Muthu, showing his growth as he rises from someone dependent and vulnerable to someone independent and like Peruma, certain of his own nature.

Initially, Muthu also learns that purpose is to be rediscovered in different forms under changing circumstances rather than something defined. His purpose was to find good land, protect his family, and be generous to those mutually loyal to him (the oxen, Kuppan)- his purpose reflects what he values. It is by coming to terms with what he values and how much Muthu can gain a sense of purpose- for example, he values Peruma and his children over his brothers and parents; therefore, he values the morally right over the morally wrong. He also significantly values mutual loyalty over social conventions of caste, shown through his treatment of Kuppan. 'For a man with a plan, there is but one path. For one with none, limitless options open up,' (Murugan 8) and 'All I ask for is the ability to decide which path to take,' (Murugan 8) are Muthu's thoughts towards the beginning of his journey, showing how lost he was with the indefiniteness of change but also how that gives him the freedom to question the 'plan' or definite purpose that social conventions fed into him. For example, he questioned if he only had to be a farmer and started to use his tree-climbing skills. Muthu also questioned the 'one path' of doom that he was oppressed into accepting- he went against his societal fate of less land and poverty. Being someone initially without a concrete plan to find land (this land being almost symbolic of the sense of purpose he tries to find), Muthu throughout his unpredictable journey with 'limitless options' through his impromptu decisions, naturally defines his nature and finds his sense of purpose. By the time he finds his land, he has grown into someone independent and reliant on only his nature to guide him. He says, 'All the experiences will be new. As long as the curiosity to explore remains, anything will be interesting,' (Murugan 119) showing how positively he views change now. Kuppan later tells him, 'I say that in a land that eats snakes, simply choose an agreeable portion of the snake and start eating,' (Murugan 179). This shows how even Kuppan, someone who stayed pent up in his house, has learned to embrace change and the risks that come with it.

Change for Muthu leads not only to his discomfort but also forces him to sacrifice things he otherwise might not, one such thing being superstitions. He re-evaluates them as a luxury more than a necessity, showing how change makes him re-evaluate the importance of things he was taught to value. 'Moreover, only a person who has everything going for him could afford to check omens. For someone standing alone with nothing, the only way to advance was to keep an open mind and seize any opportunity,' (Murugan 163) describes his mindset. 'If he couldn't buy a lot of gold and marry his daughters into richer families, so be it. They could be married into poorer families like his own, and work for a living,' (Murugan 97) is another compromise in Muthu's mind, showing how change makes him readily adapt to the idea of his daughters working. As Muthu thinks, 'Everything will be okay,' (Murugan 188) towards the end of the novel, his confidence in himself and his ability to be purposeful in any circumstance is portrayed. Finally, the question at the very end of the novel- 'Where were we born and where do we die?' (Murugan 294)- raises the question in the mind of readers of the unpredictability of life and how it might not be as intimidating as it seems if one knows who they are. After all, Muthu would not have wanted to die in his homeland, poor and oppressed, but rather in his new land, liberated and respected for who he is as a person, rather than as someone with a set role in society.

Conclusion:

In today's world, a world reliant on migration to different places with different social conventions, it is imperative for individuals to re-evaluate what society considers 'natural' by feeling and thinking independently so that they realize their unique natures, natures that do not just reflect what they were naturally born as but what they choose to be in this world- natures that allow them to re-discover their changing purposes in changing circumstances, natures that allow them to adapt to change comfortably, this comfort being crucial to their survival. Rather than directly trying to fit into a foreign society by accepting its norms, exploring and becoming comfortable with who they are as purposeful individuals in this world makes them more adaptable- they change themselves not because others expect them to but because they internally feel the need to. Takshi Mehta deals with the idea of, 'seeking permanence in a world where displacement is inevitable,' as she reviews *Fire Bird* in Hindustan Times (Mehta). While agreeing with 'displacement' being 'inevitable', this text has explored that Murugan not only deals with the narrower concept of 'displacement' but also with the broader concept of *change* in general. Rather than Murugan's

novel being about merely ‘seeking permanence’, this text views it as highlighting the importance of embracing change as ‘permanent’. The symbolism of the ‘firebird’ reminds one of the individuals, caged by social conventions and imposed definitions of ‘natural’ setting a part of themselves free as they realize that if they can think independently, while others can try to cage them, a part of them is already impossible to cage.

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