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## Tracing the Landscape of Caste in Perumal Murugan's *Pyre*

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### **Abstract:**

Landscapes are central to storytelling as much of the lingering memories of a text concern not only characters, plots and conversations but also the sense of the place that readers obtain from the understanding of landscape. Writers use landscape to establish a solid background for the story, create a desirable mood, and reflect characters and themes. In other words, landscapes are a harmonious appendage to the scheme of the narration. Identity, too, is tied to the landscape as it is a spatial phenomenon that people identify with. Landscape serves both literal and metaphorical purposes. Hannah Kent, in “Most Powerful Landscapes in Fiction”, remarks that the sense of the place is what cements a novel’s memorability, “The skill in writing landscape is to capture it in concise, startling references, well placed within the narrative, that accumulate to create a pervading presence” (par.4). This article traces the landscape of the novel *Pyre* and through it, the landscape of caste. *Pyre* tells the tale of a naïve couple that comes across the crushing weight of the caste system and its violent manifestations after their inter-caste marriage.

**Keywords:** Landscape, sense of the place, caste apartheid, identity, honour killing, ethnocentrism.

Novels dealing with caste-based oppression are of paramount importance in understanding the ethos and social dynamics of Indian society. Writings by non-Dalit writers like Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Rabindranath Tagore and Munshi Premchand have uncovered the caste apartheid harming a significant section of society. On the other hand, contemporary Dalit writers like Bama, Babytai Kamble, Urmila Pawar, Manoranjan Byapari,

and Meena Kandasamy are espousing subtle as well as conspicuous forms of caste-based violence in their works. The writing strategies specify the covert ways the caste system operates in twenty-first-century India. Dalit writings have provided a multi-dimensional representation of Indian society. The literature by non-Dalit writers is complementary in understanding caste oppression from their perspectives.

Perumal Murugan, a writer from Tamil Nadu, has been writing for the powerless section of society. His writing encompasses the experience of the Dalits in many of his novels like *Pyre*, *One Part Woman*, *The Story of a Black Goat* and *Seasons of the Palm*. Perumal Murugan is known for his sensitive portrayal of the complexities of the Indian social fabric with its innumerable innuendoes that reduce lives to oppression and discrimination. Most of his novels narrate the tales of characters living on the margins of society tormented by social hierarchies and have engaging issues of caste, landless communities, and societal constraints at the centre of the narration. Some subjects he deals with in his novels are marriage, the caste system, gender inequity and midlife crises. *Pyre*, *Seasons of the Palm*, and *The Goat Thief* reflect India's caste system. The writer who declared himself dead after being hounded by charges of backlashing Hindu culture continues to be a trailblazer by writing bravely on the many intersecting issues of caste, gender, and culture. In *Pyre*, Murugan deals with the alienating powers of the caste system, which continues to be pervasive through the caste consciousness of the people. Caste and landscape are the fulcrum of the plot of the novel.

Many theories related to geographical perspectives on the origin of castes study the connection between history, culture, and the different factors of the environment. Geography, through its topographical features, climate and natural vegetation, is a deciding factor in shaping the culture of a particular locale. The landscape strongly represents ethnic, racial, linguistic, and caste populations. A landscape often reflects a cultural group's boundaries defined by language, accent, and ethnicity, indicating common descent. The natural barriers caused by the topographical features of the landscape intensify the predispositions for ethnocentrism or casteism.

Murugan treats the landscape of Kattupatti village as a predominant spatial aspect. Landscapes are featured to depict the chaotic elements in characters and even function as an antithesis to them. There are multiple ways in which a landscape converges with the narration of the story 1. It serves symbolic purposes. 2. The required mood for the narration is achieved through crafting the landscape as the author imbues it with their creative imagination to show

it in a particular way. 3. The literal significance of landscape is in its direct influence on the people, culture and life. Egdon Heath in *The Return of the Native* and the Moors in *Wuthering Heights* are classic examples of landscapes serving as symbolic/metaphorical representations of the wild nature of the environment and the characters in the novel. For example, the description of Egdon Heath portrayed the novel's theme of culture versus nature and the resistance to change: "The untameable, Ishmaelites thing that Egdon now was as it had always been. Civilization was its enemy: and ever since the beginning of vegetation its soil had worn the same antique brown dress, the natural and invariable garment of the particular formation... The great inviolate place had an ancient permanence which the sea cannot claim" (*Wuthering Heights* 2). Moors in *Wuthering Heights* symbolise danger, threat, mystery and freedom. They also imbue in them the chaotic spirit and autonomy of Heathcliff and Cathy.

### **Landscape and the Sense of the Place**

The landscape of the village of Kattupatti dovetails with the theme of intersecting the power of the geographical landscape with the ideologies of the caste system. The caste rigidity and the formidable geographical landscape create a sense of place. The sense of the place is induced by viewing the characters' different experiences in the novel. The landscape has an equal presence to the characters in the novel, and it has a vital role to play in the characters' lives. The reference to the landscape in mystical, metaphorical allusions leaves the sense of the place in the readers' minds and builds the legitimate climate for narration.

The place projected in the novel is experienced differently by different characters. Simon Schama in *Landscape and Memory* observes, "It seems right to acknowledge that it is our shaping perception that makes the difference between raw matter and landscape" (*qtd.* in Wordsworth par.11). Saroja sees it as an agnostic, startlingly mysterious place that hides frightening details behind the simple landmarks. Her fears and anxieties coincide with her conceptualisation of the urban landscape in which she had always lived in comfortable anonymity versus the village landscape, where her presence and differences are alien. For Kumaresan, the village is his idyll, inhabited by kind people. He intended to escape the place that arrested his avenues of freedom, though he had seen the village as a place to love. The landscape of the village resonates with the identical values of his controlling mother, who restricts him in many aspects of his life about whom he talks to and who he mixes with. However, it is a space for his mother that utters resilience and strength. After her husband's death, the place has been the symbol of her lone, resilient life formed on the Rock. The Rock

of caste had upheld her lone struggle as a widowed mother in bringing up Kumaresan. For Bhai, the egg seller, the place offers an opportunity for his commercial venture and a halting point on his relentless journey. The place replicates the individual orientation as each character looks through the prism of their emotions and feelings. In addition, the narrative voice combined with all other perspectives on the place compasses the sense of the place. The narrative voice in the novel mystifies the landscape by amplifying the metaphorical references:

The sun was blazing overhead when Saroja and Kumaresan stepped off the bus. Beyond the tamarind trees that lined the road, all they could see were vast expanses of arid land. There were no houses anywhere in sight. With each searing gust of wind, the white summer heat spread over everything as if white saris had been flung across the sky. There was not a soul on the road. Even the birds were silent. Just an ashen dryness, singed by the heat, hung in the air. (*Pyre* 3)

The first passage in the novel describing the landscape of Kattupatti runs concurrently with the title. It sketches the village as a simmering, inhospitable, fearful landscape ridden with gloomy images. The heat spread over the village like a white saree mystifies and signals the onset of the unfolding of festering events. The opening paragraphs in the novel are a prelude to the incandescent theme dealt with in the novel. What the characters undergo, what the readers experience reading, is the simmering, gagging feeling of intolerance and inimical caste consciousness. The dry, humid emptiness of the place that terrifies Saroja designates a cultural landscape that speaks of rigidity and fragmentation.

Saroja's vantage point embeds the sense of the place in the novel. The village visualises outside forces with hostile curiosity in the rock and the village. Inter-caste marriages are viewed as a threat to the delicate balance of the caste, denuding its claim of purity and lineage. The treatment meted out to Saroja highlights the unwelcoming disposition of the people and the land. The alien feeling evoked by the outsider is not just an assumption of her lower caste lineage, which is unknown initially. Compared to the landscapes of towns and cities, the landscapes of villages spatially segregate people based on caste. Dr Ambedkar called for marginalised sections to move away from villages. He remarked that villages are "a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communism" (*qtd.* in Devupalli par.1). The village is a closed community of people suspicious of outsiders. The culture of the land nurtures people's profoundly entrenched caste consciousness. The possibility of caste

contamination dictates their fears on the one hand, and on the other, it is the solid xenophobic tendencies that define their hostility towards the unknown. Saroja partakes in the position of an outsider even though people presuppose the likelihood of her being from an upper caste. It is possible to see the whole village as the personification of the caste system, as the tight-knit community sees anyone from outside its fold as a threat.

### **Landscape and Symbolism of Caste System**

The landscape of *Kattupatti* does not yield to simplistic analysis. It is a symbolic representation of the ancient caste system. The picturisation of the Rock in *Kattupatti* reminisces Egdon Heath in *The Return of the Native* and the Moors in *Wuthering Heights*. It is unlike the landscape of the town of *Bulashah* in the novel *Untouchable*, which has hierarchical segregation of spaces demarcated for each caste. The outcast colony that Bakha and other Dalits inhabit is a compromised space in radical acceptance of the segregation of humanity. Bakha's resilience stems from his acknowledgement of his status as a sweeper, condemned to live in the outcast colony. *Kattupatti* is a village that vocalises power, nativism, and the hegemony of caste-based structures. The landscape belongs to the land-owning agricultural community of people who are protective of their women, caste pride, and lineage:

So something happened between the two of you when you were there. That's okay; it's not a mistake. But why didn't you leave her there? You could have gone back once in a while for a few days to enjoy her company. And we could have respectfully married a girl from our caste, Mapilla. In what way are our women inferior? They may not be as fair as she is, but they are not very dark either. (*Pyre* 26)

The villagers, who pontificate about the necessity of respecting women and fulfilling ethical duties, expect Kumaresan to violate the codes of ethics when it comes to women of other communities. Caste-based ethnocentrism rests on the principle of glorifying its own culture and idealising it to portray it as superior. On the other hand, the process of idealisation is complete by creating an ethnic enemy by projecting it as immoral, low and dangerous to the prevalence of the other community. Caste consciousness reins in people to be the de facto ambassadors of caste pride when it concerns women. The sexualisation of women of other castes entails upholding the supremacy of a particular caste. Projection of women from other communities as the 'other' becomes necessary to overlay the narratives of their superiority, "You might have married her elsewhere, but you brought her here. . Mark my word: All this

mixing might work with soda colours, but it doesn't in life" (133). The women in the village, including her mother-in-law, see her as a woman of loose moral character who has bewitched Kumaresan. They constantly assert the superiority of their caste to project her otherwise, "Would she have run away like this had she been raised by a woman? She has been raised by a man. That is why she has gone astray like this" (29).

The antique land bereft of modernity and technology is a challenge not just to the outside visitors but also to the people transcending the limitations of the land. The untamed, expansive locale is cold and unwelcoming to anyone who resists its antiquity with its versions of civilisation and culture. The locale translates itself to the people who live in the village. From the outside, the village looks calm with a menacing element, foiling the attempts of those who challenge it. The Rock and birds in bushes and trees are all metaphors for the culture of the land and people. The novel counters the simplistic assumptions about rural life. The writer takes the readers deep into mundane assumptions about the simple lives of rural people.

Kumaresan's life after his marriage to Saroja, a girl from another caste, also brings before him the unexpected facet of his land and people. The familiarity of the village and its people turns into undecipherable dynamics with caste at the centre. Until that moment, he barely understood the cultural shock that his marriage would bring into the ecosystem and the severe disruptions it would cause, affecting the honour of his family and community. The anger and viciousness of the people stem from the idea that the community and caste pride are intact when the representatives of the castes are respected. The transgression of caste pride and honour directly incriminates people by challenging the notions of identity and honour.

The stifling experience of Saroja, struggling to adjust to the ethos of the village, is similar to being on the pyre. The heat and exhaustion on the Rock and her daily battles against the onslaughts of her mother-in-law and the neighbours are the perennial realities of her little exhausting world. Like Eustacia Vye, who feels Egdon Heath as "My cross, my shame, my death," Saroja vies for an escape where she is spoken to and acknowledged without subjecting her to degrading treatment. The landscape of the town and city is liberating to her as the element of anonymity is a premeditating trait of the town dwelling. The town Saroja is from is a space where people can bury their caste differences, walk as equals, where she could "walk about swinging one's arms freely on those streets" (75).

The structure of caste subdues anything or anyone that acts contrary to its core beliefs. Kumaresan's naivety made him conjecture gradual acceptance of Saroja after initial hiccups.

His belief rose from his experience of growing up in the care of his people, who, for him, were essentially kind and loving. These assumptions concerning his people backfire when his life involves more than his family and the village circle, i.e. caste. Kumaresan hoped Saroja's fair skin and civilised ways would grant her acceptance in his village—mistrust and hostility of the villagers towards Saroja border on xenophobia, another manifestation of ethnocentrism. The rigidity of caste ideologies delineates the geographical location of the novel. Like the landscape, marked off for its extreme harshness of weather, the villagers treat Saroja brazenly. They all look at her as an external presence that has bewitched Kumaresan. The women and the men taunt her for her fair skin and delicate features. She is a sultry seductress, temptress, and a witch in the eyes of the people. James M. Sebring, in "Caste Indicators and Caste Identification of Strangers", observes that the villages in North India perceive caste identification of strangers as essential and that the identification process is determined by social anthropological analysis (199). People of the village try to recognise the traits of living in their geographical conditions, "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 of someone who hasn't toiled, a body that hasn't suffered summer's heat" (*Pyre* 12).

### **Topographical Features and Caste Rigidity**

The geographical isolation ensures the village is cut off from the outside world and has formed the life of the rural community rooted in rigid beliefs about the sanctity of its origin. The village's geographical composition discourages the easy mobility of people as moving out of the town means traversing hundreds of kilometres to go to other places, especially the metropolitan areas. The prominent topographic features of the village in the novel are the Rock, the bush, the cremation ground and the roads. These landmarks and the emptiness of the entire landscape evoke fear in Saroja. The village's landscape includes a long stretch of path that looks "strewn with long, slithering white snakes, whose heads or tails she could not discern" (8, 9). The paths to the village look like a cremation ground adjacent to the village. The cremation ground hints at the enigmatic nature of the landscape: "It lay beyond the neem tree, a vast outgrowth of bushes and huge trees that rose to the sky. There was no sign of anyone being buried or cremated there. The place hid all sorts of secrets within itself while displaying a modest appearance to the world" (8).



The Rock is a unique feature of the landscape, and Kumaresan's thatched hut lies on this giant rock. It appears as "the colour of a dried-up stream of blood" (53), symbolising violence:

The rock had no compassion for her. Only on those nights when Kumaresan was next to her did the rock relent and hold her in its cool embrace. At other times, all it offered her was oppressive heat and stifling humidity. She has never experienced such a sultry climate anywhere before. .. even air moved like a heavy wall and slapped her on her face. Her mother-in-law's words too bounced on the rock and bombarded her with greater ferocity. Deep down she could never stay alone in this village ever again. So she had made up her mind to go with him wherever he went (151).

The dominant aspect of the landscape of *Kattupatti* is the Rock on which Kumaresan lives with his mother. The rock is central to the narration of the tragedy for its evocative power to orchestrate the lives of the people on it. The rock is a dominant geographical trait and a motif in the novel. The Rock is not an easy place to live in, "The Rock absorbed all the heat during the day and then released it at night; " one couldn't even step barefoot on it" (80).

The bush is another potent symbol of the caste system in the novel. The deep bush made one lose its way: "Here, you go into the bush, it takes you an hour to get out" (184). The villagers and Kumaresan's mother plan to kill her after learning about her caste. Saroja hides in the bush and listens to the voices of people who talk of killing her. Her mother-in-law says, "I don't want any harm to come to him. He has started talking back to me now! He used to be such an obedient boy; she has changed him. I have endured all these days only for his sake. Otherwise, I'd have cut her throat with the sharp edge of the palm frond and ended it all long ago" (180). Saroja struggles for her life inside the bush to extricate herself from the clutches of the people who frantically search for her inside the bushes. Their objective is first to rape and then to kill her.

The open-ended narrative in this novel is a cliffhanger in the final scene that describes the ordeal of Saroja to survive. Towards the end of the novel, the narration gives a glimpse of the landscape that defines the relationship of *Kattupatti* with the system of caste, and it summarises the reasons for the conflicts in the novel:

At first glance, this village looked like it was made of a few houses surrounded by a large expanse of land, and that anything could easily enter and get around. But that was an illusion. In truth, not even the wind from elsewhere could enter this space. The air in these parts had circulated within the confines of this place and had turned poisonous. The space would not allow anything to enter; even Kumaresan did not know this secret” (193)

The landscape was only a partial answer to the secret of understanding the convoluted caste system and the violence of the people in their vociferous rejection of inter-caste marriage in their attempts to establish fundamentalist monoculture by erasing the syncretic proclivity towards diversity and heterogeneity.

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