

**We Know What Poonachi Thinks: A Study of Animal Subjectivity in Perumal Murugan's
Poonachi or *The Story of a Black Goat***

Kadambri Gasso

PhD Scholar, Department of English, BPSMV, Sonipat, Haryana, India

Ashok Verma

Associate Professor, Department of English, BPSMV, Sonipat, Haryana, India

Abstract: In his work, *The Feeling of What Happens*, neuroscientist Antonio R. Damasio propounds the existence of “autobiographical sense” and “core consciousness” in animals. His thesis argues that animals can remember, feel a wide range of emotions and possess a marked sense of self. Animals understand the world they inhabit and respond to it in their ways. In Literary studies, animal subjectivity allows us to assess and critique the world of humans by centring the narrative from the perspective and sensibility of animals. The inversion of the narrative in such writings not only reaffirms the proximity between the human and the natural world but also opens up the former for scrutiny by comparison with non-human living beings. The tradition in literature of examining the thin line that separates humans and animals by juxtaposing the essential characteristics of both aids in understanding the perils that accompany “animalistic” human behaviour. Informed by the detailed discussion in Carrie Rohman’s critical work, *Stalking the Subject: Modernism and the Animal*, this paper will analyse how Perumal Murugan’s novel *Poonachi* or *The Story of a Black Goat* (2016) allegorises and addresses the systems of exploitation and marginalisation through the consciousness of an animal. It will also discuss the significance of such writings in answering the question: What does being “human” mean after all?

Keywords: Animal Subjectivity, Marginalisation, Core Consciousness, Exploitation, Humanity

The depiction of an intimate relationship between humans and animals dates back to the cave paintings of the palaeolithic man found all over the world. The oldest of these are claimed to be

around 40,000 years old in Indonesia (Brumm 2021). In India, the cave paintings from the Harappan civilisation illustrate how humans perceived animals as their companions on the planet. These non-verbal cohabitants of the planet, although fundamentally different from humans, have always played a major role in positioning the human's idea of "self". A continuous contrasting deliberation on what is "humanistic" and what is "animalistic" has informed the discussions on determining the directions of the discourse on "humanity." The volatility of the relationship between humans and animals with all its variations has been a subject of art for a long time. The depiction of animals on the walls of the caves is spread all across the world indicating the close relationship of humans of those times with animals. This also points towards the desire to identify with the self by including animals in their paintings. To see oneself with or in association with the image of an animal.

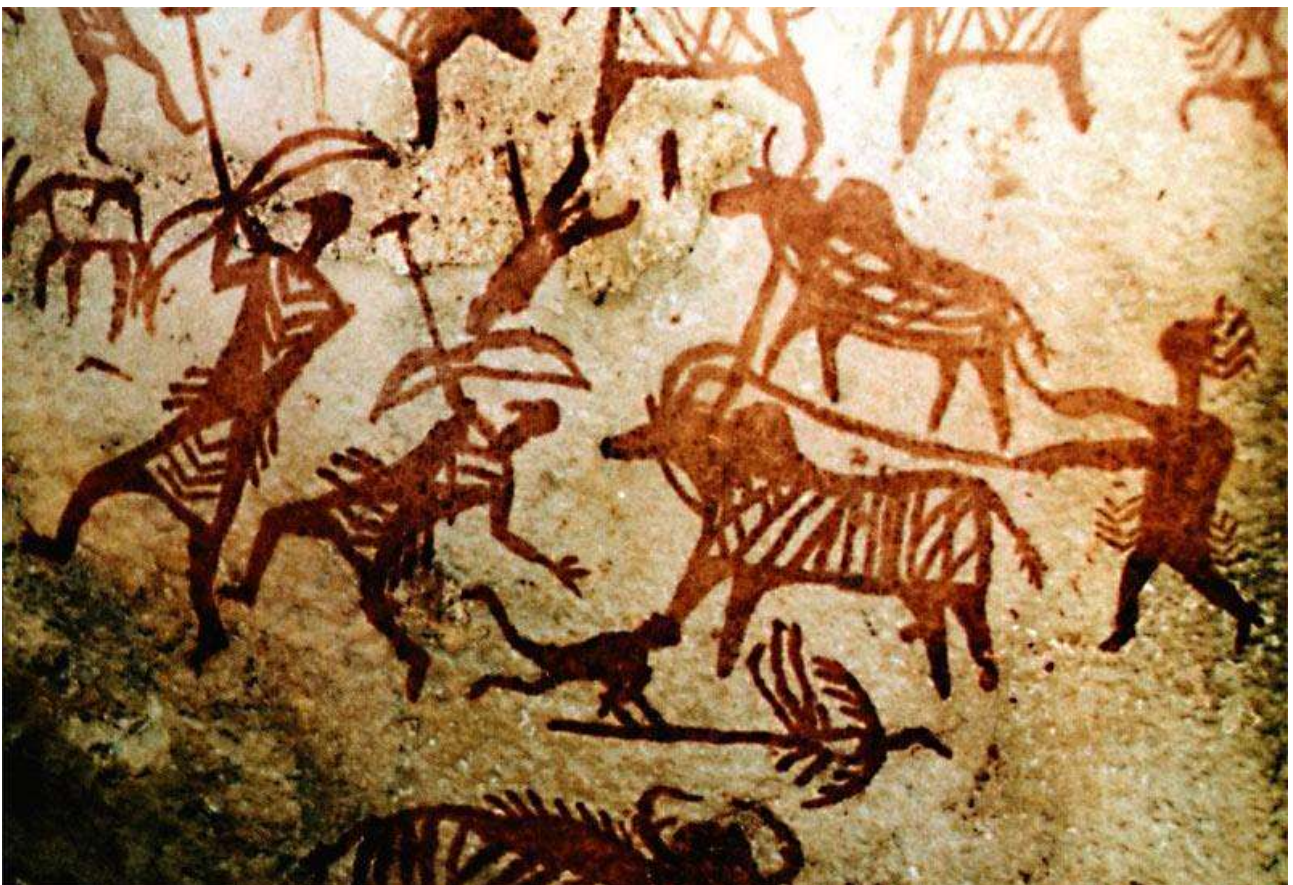


Fig. 1. "Prehistoric Rock Paintings"

Just like the cave paintings, the stories centred around animals or presenting animals with human emotions and behaviours were written around the world, at different times, in different civilisations.

The earliest examples of animal-centred narratives in India emerged with the Panchtantra tales that were written between 1200 BCE and 300 BC and are attributed to the author Vishnu Sharma. Similar stories were also popular in ancient Mesopotamia, the most famous example being that of “The Eagle and The Serpent”. The Greeks had Aesop and the Romans had the great fabulist Phaedrus writing animal-centred narratives.

Onno Oerlemans, a professor at Hamilton College and a leading researcher in the area of critical animal studies, analyses the need for animal-centred narratives. In this respect, he deliberates that the absurdity of animals acting as humans amuses us as readers. Secondly, the “absurdity of ventriloquism” (301) teases the sense of superiority that humans feel over animals by denoting them in art as capable of speaking, creating a parallel to human monopoly while at the same time piercing the isolation of human speech. Thirdly, anthropomorphism grants writers the freedom to speak and portray things that they might not be able to express through human characters lastly, he emphasises, animal animal-centred narratives refocus meaning generation according to the “natural order” and challenge the established human hegemony on the production and determination of meaning.

Oerlemans’ descriptions of the animal-centred narratives reflect the power that these narratives hold, which is evident even from the long tradition of these narratives being significant in situating the narratives of humans within a broader range of discourse that includes animals in the narratives and pushes open the limitation of humans as the subject of literary writings. This reduces the “othering” of the animals and dilutes anthropocentrism. *Poonachi*, however, cannot be categorised clearly as a fable or an allegorical tale. It is a fable because it poses questions to the morality of humans. It works as an allegory when the black goat becomes a portrayal of all the marginalised people of this world. While falling in both categories of literary genres, this novel can also be read as a life account of a little black goat.

Poonachi, a black goat, is the central character of the novel. She thinks and feels like a human. She has a rational, humanlike understanding and responds to her surroundings. Born as the seventh in a litter of kids, she's given away to an old man by her current owner, Bakasuran, who cannot

manage the care of so many young goats. The complex dynamic between the old couple and Poonachi is explored in the novel to reveal the human-animal relation and reflect on the complexity and contrast between the two living species. Perumal Murugan gives her the space and qualities of a character existing equally amongst the humans in the novel. A concept that Antonio Damasio describes as “core consciousness” (Johnson), in which he states that a human’s consciousness is shaped by the response of the body to what the mind experiences, can be observed in Poonachi.

As an orphan, Poonachi actively seeks love and warmth from Kalli, a mother goat on the farm and the old woman. Her yearning for love, care and affection is a reflection of an early age of innocence, untouched by the harshness of reality. While she is still acclimatising herself at the old couple’s house, she is attacked by a cat-like predator in the night. This incident, for the first time, informs her of her vulnerability in the world. This incident follows a series of experiences for Poonachi through which she understands the depth of apathy, indifference and violence of the world. The death of her playmate, Uzhumban, and her kids' separation from her traumatise her extremely. She is agonised by the circumcision that her male friends, Kaduvan and Poovan, are given.

The human-animal conflict binary was created as a result of scientific theories like “Survival of the fittest” that indicated a competitive war within the living species. The classic literary examples that embody the spirit of this binary are Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* (1851) a raving tale of Captain Ahab’s revenge journey against a whale, and Ernest Hemingway’s *The Old Man and The Sea* (1952), of the old fisherman Santiago and his last fight to catch a marlin fish to lift the “unlucky” curse from himself. The contest with the animals in both cases proves fatal for the main characters, ironically proving the superiority of nature and the futility of human beings' endeavour to conquer it. Furthermore, these stories point towards a crucial function animal-centred narratives perform, that is, helping humans to self-reflect and engage in a self-identity that emanates and depends on the difference or similarity with the animal.

In later works, like Franz Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* (1915) and George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (1945), the position of conflict is transformed into elaborate and complex narratives that

disguise themselves as animal-centred narratives but are essentially narratives that have human experiences and transactions as their focal point. Whatever the authors found difficult to present with human characters at the forefront of their narratives, they used animals as a substitute to lead their narratives. Thus, Kafka chose a man metamorphosing into a cockroach to address the existential questions of the Modern Age while Orwell dissected Soviet politics through Napoleon and Snowball's animated "war".

In *Poonachi*, animal subjectivity is used as a vehicle to express the inner thought processes of an animal as a companion, dependent, and then a victim. It is unique in its approach to exploring the world of a marginalised animal character by giving her an active internal voice. Poonachi's voice is pervasive in the novel. The reader is submerged in her consciousness; getting details of her emotional states, her perspective on reality and becoming an indirect witness to her experiences. The novel thus, details the life events of a little black goat while she experiences the oppressive structures.

Poonachi's arrival in the lives of the old couple is because of an act they deem "divine", separating her from the rest of the cattle that the old couple own. The old couple is thrilled to have a miracle baby goat. The prospect of Poonachi birthing a litter of seven goat kids is the main factor in their decision to keep her. Initially, when she arrives, the relationship between the old couple and Poonachi is idealistic. They take care of her like their own child. When she gets pregnant, they assist her in all possible ways. Poonachi gives birth to seven kids, just like her mother. However, they sell off her kids to different buyers. After this, the behaviour of the old couple starts deteriorating towards her. The divinity wears off from Poonachi, however, it is never enough to protect her. Poonachi becomes a catalyst in drawing out the real nature of the old couple and by extension the depth of corrosion possible in human values and morals.

In her work *Stalking the Subject: Modernism and the Animal*, Carrie Rohman analyses Djuna Barnes' novel *Nightwood* and comments that "(it) refuses the disavowal of animality onto marginalised others in the service of imperialist and masculinist projections" (133) pointing towards "revising of humans" by their interactions with the animals. She points towards the character of Robin

as “removed from the realm of reality” (147) and existing closer to the animalistic world. Her thesis for the critical work delves into the ways the hierarchical binary of man and animal is challenged in the modern age by writers. Her work explains how this inversion of the binary alters the human subject; its morality, identity and existence. Tracing the works by understanding the “entanglement” between human and non-human creatures reverses the binary.

Contrarily, Murugan’s depicts the relationship between the human/animal binary by reversing the hierarchy itself. He emphasises the “animality in humans” by contrasting it with the “humanity in animals.” When the old couple decides to eat the dead Uzumbhan, one of their little goat kid, and later, when there is a drought they kill one of their goats to satisfy their hunger. More and more, turning into the animals that they rare.

Ownership and slavery too are addressed when the old woman ties a rope around Poonachi’s neck, after an incident in which she got lost in the forest while travelling. Poonachi realises her slavery,

All the love the couple showed her had shrunk to the length of this rope, Poonachi thought. When the old woman found it difficult to look after the kids, she freely abused Poonachi. She had called her an evil wretch and a devil. When she got some money from selling the kids, she changed instantly. Now she was carrying all her jewellery in a waist pouch kept hidden under her sari. The couple who never used to be afraid of thieves, moved about with great caution, in constant fear of being robbed. (144)

Poonachi’s body becomes the exploitative territory for the old couple. The old man directs the villagers, “There is a charge for touching and looking at the wonder-goat that has delivered seven kids in a litter” (141). From an adored, magical, mystery creature, Poonachi’s status in the household is relegated to a source of income generation. Her desire for a life with happiness, freedom and love is made unattainable by the interference of the old couple. When Poonachi gets lost in the forest for a night, that is when she experiences complete freedom and joy, away from the watchful eyes and

control of the couple. Her childlike enthusiasm and curiosity are crushed by the burden of making money for them.

Furthermore, this exploitation is the result of and reflective of the couple's cruelty. They not only mistreat Poonachi but Uzumbhan's death is caused by a rock thrown by the old couple. They kill Poovan as a sacrifice to the God Mesagaran. They give away all of Poonachi's kids. When she gets pregnant for the third time, the circumstances are not as amiable and she dies while giving birth. Her death is the pinnacle of the exploitation of her body by the couple who wanted to repeat the cycle of her birth-giving for money and popularity.

The quality of feeling and existence emotionally, having sympathy, a sense of justice, rationality, reason and morality (Arnold 303) distinguishes humans from animals. However, as the novel progresses, all the "human qualities" are shifted onto the character of Poonachi. But on the contrary, she has no share in the power. Poonachi's experience expands to include all the marginalised experiences. The pitiful conditions of her existence become a part of the structures that were meant to oppress her and there is little she can do to get out of it.

While Poonachi represents the attributes of a human; sharing grief, connection to her environment, cohabitating with others and not living off of the exploitation of others, the humans are juxtaposed with what we understand as "animalistic" traits of hunger and survival overshadowing the former. Keeping her subjectivity at the centre of the narration, Murugan reveals the deterioration of human values in society. One particular thing, however, that distinguishes Poonachi's experience from the "others" in the human world is that her marginalisation leaves her incapable of fighting for herself, something that humans can do for themselves.

Poonachi experiences direct violence in the novel when the old man takes her to a bull to mate, an experience that becomes traumatic for her. Additionally, the continuous loss of playmates and kids, and the loss of trust and love between her and the old woman scar her on an emotional and psychological level. In this case, violence multiplies itself in the absence of resistance. The old couple has no one to question them, therefore, they gradually start acting like despots. All the animals in

their home suffer immensely from the transformation in them. The pact of caretaking, loving and trust between them is broken. Poonachi tries to comprehend the reasons behind the mistreatment but she is unable to fathom the real reasons behind it. As the violence that the animals face is culturally accepted, that is, the sense of it being wrong is obscure; they are unable to grasp what is happening to them. Galtung explains this phenomenon in his paper titled “Cultural Violence,” in which he describes that the victim is unable to understand the reason behind the violence against him/her, especially when it is structural or direct because it is “legitimised” culturally and there is no agency for the victim through which they can speak against it. The voice of Poonachi’s consciousness compensates for her muteness in relating her suffering to others.

In the hierarchy of the living world, Poonachi’s life is of consequence as long as there is commercial value that can be associated with it. The cycle of exploitation and greed becomes insufferable for her by the end. Death becomes the easiest way to escape this cycle. The old woman, who had been happy by Poonachi’s existence, even if for commercial purposes, comments with disdain: “Ever since this cursed thing entered our house, she has cleaned out all the live animals from here. Now she will wipe out the humans too, just wait and watch” (164). The old woman’s disdain for Poonachi’s existence is in stark contrast to her early reactions to Poonachi’s arrival at her home. Poonachi becomes a burden for her, even though she gave her all to them.

As means of income shrink for the old couple, they start eating their cattle. As Poonachi is pregnant for the third time, they reluctantly care for her. The old man comes up with a plan to use Poonachi’s milk as breakfast rather than give it to her kids from the previous birth. Surviving on meagre meals, Poonachi’s health deteriorates, until she is unable to feel the kids in her stomach. Her body turns cold and she is unable to pick her weight on her legs. Before she dies completely, her consciousness trails in the memory of all the things in her past. She remembers all her kids, Poovan and has a slight glimpse of Bakasuran. Poonachi’s cycle of oppression comes full circle. The old couple finds out more and more ways to exploit and maltreat Poonachi, something that Waldau

speculates when he says, “...the forms of oppression are linked, even interlinked...abilities to oppress others are in some respects like a muscle that is strengthened by use ...” (Animal Studies 260).

Through the particular interest in the life of a black goat, Murugan addresses the larger problems that are created by systems of domination in the lives of the marginalised. On this shift in the animal-centred narratives, Ivanovic comments,

...the animal figures in animal tales have a rather peculiar function: it is precisely because they cross cultural borders that they subvert any concept of nation and national literature. The image of the animal mirrors a society of all living beings, a society in which there are different species and cultures, in which there are oppressors and oppressed, and in which there are human as well as nonhuman animals—and in which there will always be a demand for the acknowledgement of the rights of the other. (25-6)

Poonachi, thus becomes every other human, non-human entity that is oppressed and doing this breaks the boundaries of “nation and national literature” but also of grief, pain, exclusion, and suppression. The use of animal subjectivity simplifies by universalising the experience of a mute, orphaned black goat. Ivanovic connects this marginalisation with the “denied political influence” (25). However, *Poonachi* points towards the intersection of social, cultural and gender marginalisation; a complete position of non-negotiation with the structures of power and dominance that inflict harm on them and endanger their existence. Perhaps Helene Cixous summarises the intimacy shared by humans and animals precisely when she writes, “On close inspection, all literature is probably a version of the apocalypse that seems to me rooted, no matter what its socio-historical conditions might be, on the fragile border (borderline cases) where identities (subject/object, etc.) do not exist or only barely so—double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject. (*Power of Horror* 207). The identities of the humans and animals are blurred in the novel, Poonachi becomes more “human” than the actual humans. She becomes a metaphor for how greed turns humans indifferent, apathy leads to moral decadence and loss of sense of justice and judgement leads to ethical devaluation.

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