

## **Punitive Regularisation of Prohibited Caste Performances in Perumal Murugan's *Pyre***

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### *Abstract*

*Contesting the essentialist foundations of identities, postmodernism, staying true to its anti-authoritarian spirit, holds all social identities performative. By extending Judith Butler's idea of (gender) performativity to the social institution of caste, the performative constitution and regularisation of the identity can be studied, opening new avenues in the field of caste studies. Similar to gender, caste identity is a "performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo" and caste norms are produced and maintained through sustained processes of disciplinary regularisation. This paper analyses how the prohibited caste performance of exogamy/miscegenation - marrying a member from another caste - is punished through punitive measures in Perumal Murugan's novel *Pyre*. Set within the theoretical framework of Judith Butler's performativity, Michel Foucault's disciplinary measures and B R Ambedkar's caste mechanisms, the paper attempts to understand caste operation in Tamil Nadu, a microcosm of the larger Indian society, as represented in the text.*

**Keywords:** Caste performativity, punitive measures, Tamil society, endogamy, prohibition

### **Introduction**

The notion of identity underwent a major transformation in the 20th century. Contesting the essentialist foundations of identities, postmodernism, staying true to its anti-authoritarian spirit, held all social identities performative, rather than an expression of an inner essential core. Stripped of their essentialist fabrications, many ascriptive identities like gender, race, caste, religion, and ethnicity that had thus far been naturalised were reformulated as social constructions produced discursively through the processes of regularisation by the society.

Applying Judith Butler's methodology of gender performativity, caste identity can be studied as a "performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo" ("Performative" 520). In Butler's conceptualisation of performativity, the processes of iterability and regularisation

become indispensable.

... performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms... This iterability implies that “performance” is not a singular “act” or event, but a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production... (*Bodies that Matter* 95)

In a similar fashion, caste performativity too works as a ritualised reiteration, whereby a fixed set of performances are sanctioned and prohibited for different caste groups, to maintain caste division and hierarchy. Caste subjects are constantly placed under surveillance where their everyday actions are monitored by various institutions of family, education, religion and governments. Caste transgressions are rewarded with punishments ranging from simple rebuke and humiliation to ostracization and death, which instils fear and compels the caste subjects to perform conventional behaviour.

This paper focuses on the prohibited performative act of exogamy that has the potential to disrupt the caste order and analyses how it is regulated through various disciplinary methods leading to a (re)production of caste culture. Perumal Murugan’s novel *Pyre* is chosen for analysis as it represents in nuanced ways how the Tamil caste society responds to and regulates transgressive performances. Set within the theoretical framework of Judith Butler’s performativity, Michel Foucault’s disciplinary measures and B R Ambedkar’s caste mechanisms, the paper attempts to understand the strategic operation of caste in Tamil Nadu, a microcosm of the larger Indian society.

Perumal Murugan (1966-) is a world-renowned contemporary Tamil author whose works have been translated into several world languages including English, French, Czech, Polish, Norwegian, Arabic, Hungarian, Italian, Welsh, Filipino, and Spanish. Murugan is known for firmly rooting his stories in the regional flavours of Tamil Nadu and capturing accurately the caste and gender dynamics of the land.

*Pyre* (*Pookuzhi* 2013) by Perumal Murugan, translated into English by Aniruddhan Vasudevan in 2016, was longlisted for International Booker Prize in 2023. The novel, set in rural Tamil Nadu in the 1980s, non-linearly follows the lives of Kumaresan and Saroja who fall in love and unite in an inter-caste matrimony. Since the couple does not adhere to the compulsory norm of caste endogamy and perform the prohibited act of exogamy, they are punished by Kumaresan’s mother Marayi, dominant caste relatives and village members. Saroja is burnt alive (hence, the title) and murdered at the end of the novel.

The text highlights the ways in which a caste society strategically responds to and regularises caste performances of caste subjects. Divided into three sections, the paper lays down the theoretical framework of how caste identity is performatively constituted, followed by the discussion of prohibited caste performance of exogamy in the text and an analysis of the various punitive measures employed to discipline the caste subjects.

### **Caste as Performance**

The term “performance” is no longer limited to its theatrical connotations as it has gained new layers of meaning and has become an operative word in studying social behaviours. Richard Schechner, one of the founders of Performance studies, states “Performances – of art, rituals, or ordinary life – are “restored behaviors”, “twice-behaved behaviors,” performed actions that people train for and rehearse” (28). “Restored” or “twice-behaved” behaviours are physical, verbal, or virtual actions that are done not-for-the-first time, but that are prepared, rehearsed (29). This all-encompassing definition would include rituals, habits and routines of an ordinary daily life as they are all restored behaviour that are done in repeated fashion.

Erving Goffman in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* duly notes that “performance is socialised, moulded and modified to fit into the understanding and expectations of the society in which it is presented” (22). In societies where caste is pervasive and functions as a primary marker of identity, behaviours of individuals are moulded and modified by caste values. Every individual subjected to caste authority becomes a caste subject who actively performs out her/his caste identity.

Caste identities are not performed uniformly as modes of behaviour prescribed for caste groups differ and vary according to their position in the hierarchy. These different modes of behaviour can be studied in terms of caste scripts. Vivek Narayan terms the “interaction between performative codes of conduct, materiality, and social behavior” that are prescribed for each caste as “caste scripts”. These “caste scripts govern particular modes of self-presentation by dictating conduct, defining access to particular things, and mandating forms of social behavior” (274).

Caste codes are enacted in caste scripts with regard to stylisation of the body, rituals, customs, habits, vocation, marriage and social behaviour, differing for each caste and sub-caste. Caste subjects perform their respective caste scripts repeatedly and constantly rendering their identities intelligible within the caste matrix. Caste scripts grant a set of sanctions and taboos that are materialised in the performances. For instance, the Brahmin subject’s caste script dictates the wearing of sacred thread (*poonool/janeu*) while it is forbidden for avarna caste groups that are not considered “dvija” (twice born) communities. In many cases, a strict adherence to and internalisation of a prohibition becomes formative of caste identity. For instance, prohibition of meat eating for Brahmin subjects.

Caste scripts are followed and caste performances are prescribed with the strategic aim of maintaining caste within its hierarchical frame. Performances in the domain of matrimony are strictly regulated as they offer scope for vertical mobilisation in the system.

### **Exogamy in *Pyre***

Perumal Murugan’s *Pyre* has as its premise an inter-caste love marriage and the horrors of the prevalent practice of honour killing. The Tamil original (*Pookuzhi*) is dedicated to Ilavarasan, a Dalit victim of caste pride killing which happened in Tamil Nadu in 2013. Though Ilavarasan’s story frames *Pyre*, Murugan makes a Dalit woman the victim in his novel to call attention to

both caste and gender oppression.

Kumaresan, a member of the land-owning caste falls in love with Saroja, a Dalit woman. When Kumaresan returns to his hometown after eloping with Saroja, he is disowned by his family and caste members. As a caste subject is bound to marry within one's own caste to strengthen its own population and maintain its purity, Kumaresan is believed to have caused pollution by marrying Saroja and bringing her home.

While the caste system houses many prohibitions, the prohibition of exogamy – marrying a member from another caste - can be considered the foundational aspect of the Indian caste system. B R Ambedkar in his essay “Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development” states that endogamy is the essence of the caste system and postulates that the superimposition of endogamy on the prior existing practice of exogamy marks the beginning and origin of caste system. He notes that though it was the priestly class which first started socially isolating itself through endogamy, other communities eventually started to imitate the performance due to “infection of imitation” to secure the same prestige enjoyed by the priestly class.

Of all the features of caste system like hereditary and confined membership, close corporation among a caste group, common occupations in a particular caste, limited social intercourse and prohibition of inter-dining, Ambedkar identifies “endogamy,” in other words, prohibition of exogamy, as the defining feature of the system. He singles it out and terms it the “essence” of the caste system as he believes it is not a characteristic common in the other divisionary systems around the world. Through an intersectional analysis, Ambedkar lays out how caste and patriarchal operations are interlaced as both find their foundations in the subjugation of women. He posits that the practices of sati, enforced widowhood and girl child marriage came into being as tools to enforce endogamy with the purpose of maintaining proportionate sex ratio within a community.

Exogamous unions/ inter-caste marriages within the Hindu framework were invalid by law as late as the mid-20th century. Manoj Mitta in his book *Caste Pride* (2023) discusses the legalities of inter-caste marriages in India comprehensively. The Civil Marriage Act of 1872 allowed inter-caste marriage only under two conditions. First, the marriage would have to be solemnised in a secular way through registration before a state authority and second, the parties engaging in such a union would have to disavow Hinduism and face the resulting economic and social consequences in terms of inheritance and maintaining relationships (172). A series of legal battles were fought between the years 1918 and 1949 to validate both the kinds of inter-caste marriages under the Hindu law (171-216).

Despite the legal sanctioning, inter-caste marriages continue to be socially proscribed and discouraged in modern society. Various reasons such as hierarchical and cultural differences, lifestyle dissimilarities, notions of purity and pollution, and archaic ideas of family honour and pride are still cited to prevent such unions. Obtaining a new liberal rationale, caste endogamous marriages have remained the norm in India.

As caste membership is autogenous and hereditary, the prohibition of exogamous unions

prevents any sort of vertical mobility within the structure. The absence of intermarriage between communities keeps intact the hierarchical differences and the rigidity of the caste structure. The prohibition of caste exogamy becomes common to all caste groups.

Since caste societies are founded and solidified on caste endogamous marriages, marriages are key caste performances that are highly regularised. Caste homogeneity in Kumaresan's family is broken when he marries Saroja, also making the caste position of their future offsprings ambiguous. The exogamous union alters Saroja's social status and seemingly allows her vertical mobility in the caste hierarchy as she becomes the daughter-in-law in a dominant caste family. However, caught between her previous and current caste positions, she occupies a liminal position, unable to completely break out of the stigmatised old and embrace the new, causing confusion in the caste order. Deviating from the endogamous mandate, exogamous marriages have real potential in disrupting the traditional family structure and caste order.

### **Punitive Measures**

It can be observed how the personal act of the protagonists is forcefully brought under the purview of the public and is punished. Michel Foucault notes that in a classical society, "individuals are controlled and tied down first of all by their membership of castes, communities, and groups" and an individual is "caught up in a set of rules" that direct her/his behaviour (*The Punitive Society* 205). As caste membership holds immense power, every member of the community is expected to act as a social being rather than an individual and fulfil their caste duties. Kumaresan marrying Saroja, though a personal prerogative, trapped within a caste matrix, can only be seen as a causal act which creates a series of social disruptions.

The various punitive tactics employed can be categorised under the four kinds listed by Foucault. The four forms of punitive tactics of various historical, temporal, and geographical origins that are common in the society are "to exclude", "to organise a redemption, impose compensation," "to mark," and "to confine" (*The Punitive Society* 6-8). These tactics are used to punish those a society deems as "social enemies". A "social enemy" is someone who breaks the social pact which binds her/him to the society and threatens the social order by causing chaos. Punitive measures are taken in order to bring the person under control, prevent her/him from doing harm and curtail the multiplication of such enemies. The punishment is regarded as "a measure of protection, of counter-war that society takes against the criminal" and "the notion of a penalty" is not "measured by the gravity of the offense or harm", but based on "what is useful for society" (*The Punitive Society* 32-34).

Kumaresan and Saroja in *Pyre* can be considered "social enemies" as their actions are perceived as crimes committed against the systemic caste order. The punitive measures listed by Foucault can be seen employed in various modes and degrees in the text.

The first punitive tactic "to exclude" is defined as "prohibiting an individual's presence in communal or sacred places, removing or prohibiting all the laws of hospitality concerning him" (Foucault, *The Punitive Society* 6). This common tactic of ostracization is used against Kumaresan by his grandparents and maternal uncles as he is not even let inside the house and

is beaten up. The couple is denied hospitality at a relative's function and is sent away. Citing reasons of impurity and god's wrath, the village committee announces to Kumaresan,

...we are going to excommunicate your family. We won't take donations for the temple from you, and you will not be welcome at the temple during the festival. No field labourers will come to work at your place. You cannot have any transactions with any of the houses in the village. If you violate these rules, you'll be insulting the village (134).

Saroja's family breaks ties with her and does not even attempt to search for her after she elopes. When they come to know her whereabouts, her father and brother exhibit no desire to reconnect and declare, "Let her get lost, we can't be looking for her" (182).

Marayi excludes Saroja from the everyday household chores. Inside their own house, Saroja is not allowed to touch certain utensils and eat the food prepared by her mother-in-law. The exclusion that Saroja experiences is both in public and private spaces because of her caste position.

"To organise a redemption, impose compensation," the second tactic, which is put forward in a monetary sense, gets manifested quite differently in the Indian context. Redemption is sought and compensation is demanded in terms of life and death. After Kumaresan's family is ostracised by the village, Kumaresan's mother, to gain the family honour back, connives with the village folk to bring about the death of her "outcaste" daughter-in-law. Marayi believes that Saroja's death would compensate for her son's transgressive behaviour and would facilitate the community's acceptance of them.

The third tactic, "to mark" means "to leave a sign on the body, in short, to impose a virtual or visible reduction on the body, or... to inflict a symbolic stain on his name, humiliate his character, damage his status" (Foucault, *The Punitive Society* 7). Shame functions as an important disciplinary tool in enforcing the caste norm. While Kumaresan is also continuously shamed by his relatives and village members, due to her gender and caste position, Saroja gets tormented more. Marayi constantly brings into question Saroja's character and humiliates her. The very first lines that Marayi says to Saroja when she sees her are, "What did you do to bewitch my son? How many men have you done this to?" (16). When Saroja prepares to go to the movies with Kumaresan, Marayi laments,

At dusk, any good woman would be expected to take the goats in and tether them. She would light the fire in the kitchen to start cooking. That is what a farmer's wife does. But look at her! She has decked herself up in all her finery. Only prostitutes stand like this on the streets of Kunnoor town! And my son has brought one of them home! (62)

Saroja also becomes a victim of sexual advances and sexual innuendos made by the male relatives and members of the village.

The fourth punitive tactic "to confine" does not occur as a result of direct external force. It is self-imposed. Saroja remains confined to her room because of Marayi's taunts. The shame she is subjected to leads to her isolation as she avoids people in the fear of being further humiliated. She tries to reduce her own visibility to protect herself from hostile gazes.

These punitive tactics are effective in regularising caste performances as they guilt the characters into believing they have done something wrong. Saroja repeatedly wonders if she had committed a mistake by marrying Kumaresan and regrets leaving her family behind. Kumaresan loses his respectability and love from his family and village members because of his marriage. He is abused by his own mother, disowned by his grandparents, forsaken by his relatives and ostracised by his village members. Non-acceptance from his loved ones leads to a distortion of his own identity and a loss of his sense of self which prompts him to develop the habit of drinking. Saroja observes that “something in him had come undone after that fateful visit to his grandparents’ home”, “his inner anxieties and struggles were becoming more manifest” and that “the stench of arrack laid bare the extent of his inner turmoil” (122-23). Failure to perform his caste correctly interferes in his life/familial performances as a son and a husband, causing more harm to his personhood.

These punitive measures are also so commonplace that they help in preventing others from repeating these behaviours. When Kumaresan suggests to a friend to find a wife in the town, he responds, “ayyo! . . . if I so marry a girl here, I can never go back to my village. I’ll have to sever all ties with the people of my caste, and live here. If I dare to go back, they will poison me. Or beat me to death (44). The common knowledge and widespread use of punitive measures create fear and help in the self-regulation of actions, thus maintaining and reproducing caste culture. Caste authority can be understood as a form of social authority that seeks its power from tradition and convention. As Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai in their work *Experience, Caste, and the Everyday Social* discuss: while political authority is “agented, situated, focussed, and spatially and temporally located”, social authority is “diffused and pervasive” (152). Social authority is said to be a “large invisible space that exerts this pressure” on people to act a certain way (151). In the novel, it is evidently seen that it is not a particular institution or a caste organisation that controls its community members. It is not even one specific member who has the sole authority to take decisions regarding which punitive tactic must be carried out. It is a collective activity in which all members of the society and family act as agents to correct and discipline the offenders.

It can be seen that Marayi goes to great lengths to prevent and punish the inter-caste union, and this is also a form of social compulsion. Guru and Sarukkai build on Sedikides and Brewer’s psychological concept of self which consists of three kinds of self-representations: “the individual self, the relational self and the collective self” (114). This is based on how a person makes sense of their self-experiences. The individual-self differentiates itself from others through its unique characteristics, the relational self builds personalised bonds with people around and the collective self is based on impersonal bonds that one shares through membership to larger groups (114). While Saroja and Kumaresan act as individual and relational selves giving primary importance to their own personal selves and bonds that they share with people they love, Marayi’s actions are controlled by her collective self. Marayi, who loses her husband at a young age of 20, sustains her respectability in the society by following caste norms. She prioritises her caste community over her son’s happiness. She does not think

as an individual and her human agency is, in Guru and Sarukkai's words, "reduced to a mere carrier of the overall caste structure" (130). Caste is a disciplinary regime which regularises itself through various punitive tactics.

### Conclusion

Foucault emphasises that "we live in a society of disciplinary power" (*The Punitive Society*, 237) and there are several apparatuses, mechanisms and techniques at work that control and discipline people. People are constantly placed under surveillance. The task of surveillance is entrusted to all members of a community as they are socially compelled to enforce caste disciplined conduct in people. The characters' family and village members keep watch over them, pass on news and information to one another and work together to protect their caste honour. Villages, being caste homogeneous in nature, function as "disciplinary sites" where it is easier "to establish presences and absences, to know where and how to locate individuals, to set up useful communication, to interrupt others, to be able at each moment to supervise the conduct of each individual, to assess it, to judge it, to calculate its qualities or merits" (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 143). Kumaresan and Saroja are subjected to horizontal surveillance at all times by neighbours in such quarters and it becomes easier to keep track of activities and regulate them. The authority to punish them arises from within a group, as a form of "endogenous control" (*The Punitive Society* 205) and is not imposed or exerted by an outside or external power.

By establishing caste as a performative and analysing the prohibited performances of exogamy in the chosen texts, this paper studied how the caste system operates to maintain, sustain and reproduce itself in the society.

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