

Women as Voiceless Subaltern: A Socio-Cultural Overview in Perumal Murugan's Novel *Pyre*

Y. Sri Ram Kumar¹   Dr S. Khaleel Ahamed²  

Abstract

*Words are the most powerful weapon, capable of constructing a beautiful society. A well-built and knowledgeable society can be easily identified if it is enriched by the works of scholars who are concerned about their community. Perumal Murugan, an Indian writer who is one among those scholars who write for the people of the voiceless community. Many of his works speak about the day-to-day problems which are happening all around the society; among them, the novel *Pyre* (2016) discusses the cultural contribution of our ancient society. The application of a sociological approach in the novel will help to focus the socio-cultural problems which are discussed in the novel. The novel discusses communal pride and its consequences, which further lead to social problems in the society. The aim of the research is to bring out the voice of the subaltern by encouraging them that no one is superior or inferior; everyone is equal in the world. This article focuses on the area where women are subjugated everywhere, whether she belongs to the upper class or lower class and brings out that women too have blood as men, but they are subjugated everywhere, and suggests ways to overcome it.*

Keywords: subaltern, socio-cultural, women subjugation, equality, voiceless community

Submitted: 14.12.2025

Accepted: 05.02.2026

Published 28.02.2026

¹Y. Sri Ram Kumar, PhD Research Scholar, Research Department of English, Sadakathullah Appa College, Rahmath Nagar, Tirunelveli-627011, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli- 627012, Tamil Nadu, India.

²Dr S. Khaleel Ahamed, Assistant Professor, Research Department of English, Sadakathullah Appa College, Rahmath Nagar, Tirunelveli-627011, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli- 627012, Tamil Nadu, India.

©2026 Y. Sri Ram Kumar & Dr S. Khaleel Ahamed. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction, provided the original author and source are credited.

Introduction

Women are the pillars of the family; they sacrifice their dreams and desires for their family. One side of the women's community sacrifices their wishes by thinking of the socio-cultural background setting of their family. The other side of the coin is even rougher; the women of the particular family and society are forced to sacrifice their longings and dreams. Women are not allowed to open up for their basic rights. Many women are not allowed to get proper education; they have been treated as commodities which will go for a good price in this society. People in contemporary society treat women as inferior in every part of their lives. There is no restriction for men in any cultural activities. But it is not the same in the case of women. Not only restricted, she is prohibited, subjugated and subaltern.

Women's Oppression in Socio-Cultural Structures

Mukherjee argues that Indian fiction closely mirrors social realities and addresses pressing societal concerns (12). Perumal Murugan never fails to speak about the problematic structure and the cultural construction of contemporary society in his works. He raises his voice for the voiceless people through his words and text. He keenly observes contemporary society and reflects the social problems through his work. By analysing his literary career, one can understand his ideology of standing behind the voiceless people. He travels towards equality in society. He imposes the idea of prohibiting the culture of discrimination and subjugation through his literary works. Murugan knows that the content he is dealing with in his works is sensitive and could be manipulated. In spite of these situations, he wished to stand for the voiceless subaltern to bring out their struggles in this traumatic society. The backdrop of the story discusses the socio-cultural contributions of traditional society.

In *Pyre*, Perumal Murugan discusses the pain and struggle faced by the common women to survive in this society. This article looks at the subaltern nature of voiceless women and suggestions to overcome subalternity and points out the cultural discrimination in society and suggests women overcome their subjugated mindset.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretative approach grounded in sociological and postcolonial literary criticism to analyse Perumal Murugan's *Pyre*. It draws on the theoretical frameworks of subaltern studies, particularly Antonio Gramsci's concept of subalternity and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's interrogation of the subaltern voice, along with Pierre Bourdieu's notion of symbolic violence. The research employs close textual analysis to examine how caste, gender, and cultural norms intersect within the narrative to construct and sustain women's marginalization. By situating the novel within its socio-cultural context, the study explores how literature reflects and critiques real-

world systems of oppression, especially those embedded in caste hierarchies and patriarchal structures.

The primary aim of this article is to examine the representation of women as voiceless subalterns in *Pyre* and to highlight the socio-cultural forces that contribute to their silencing. The objectives include analysing the character of Saroja as a subaltern figure, investigating the role of caste-based discrimination in shaping gender oppression, and exploring how cultural practices reinforce women's subjugation. Additionally, the study seeks to emphasize the need for social awareness, education, and collective resistance to dismantle these oppressive structures, thereby enabling women to reclaim agency and voice within society.

Analysis and Discussion:

Caste is the boundary which determines the relationship of two persons. An individual marrying someone from another caste is not equal to their cultural heritage; they are considering that marrying someone in their own caste is a communal pride. But it's not like that; marriage is a bond where true souls merge together without any boundaries and restrictions. Perumal Murugan explicates this mindset of the people in *Pyre*, "You have done something unexpected, bringing a girl from elsewhere. What caste? the man said" (12).

'Subaltern' means 'someone of inferior rank'; the term is adequately used in post-colonial studies, which describes the women's subordinate role in the patriarchal societies. The term was adopted by Antonio Gramsci to refer to those groups in a society who are subject to "the hegemony of ruling classes. Gramsci explains that subaltern groups remain outside hegemonic power and lack control over their representation (52). They have less access to the means by which they may control their own representation and less access to cultural and social institutions (Ashcraft et.al 314-315).

Saroja as a Voiceless Subaltern Figure

Saroja plays the female lead role in *Pyre*. Mushtaq highlights that female subalterns endure both physical and symbolic forms of silence and oppression (4). Saroja leads a peaceful life in her hometown with her family. Later, she loves the protagonist of the novel, Kumaresan. They belong to different castes. They have an inter-caste marriage and begin their life. The problem starts here: when she gets into the house of Kumaresan, everyone, including her mother-in-law, starts to curse her. They are not in the position of accepting her, as she belongs to a different race and caste; they dominate her. Her freedom is restricted, and she does not have a voice of her own; their states of affairs compel her to take a position of silence. The situation and the circumstances push her to adopt the nature of subalternity. It is not that someone voluntarily adopts subalternity and becomes voiceless, but the societal trauma which is

created by other forces causes someone to become voiceless.

Caste Pride and Cultural Violence

Pyre discusses the communal pride and its consequences, which further lead to the social problems in the society. The family members and the neighbours of Kumaresan are very much fond of their caste and its culture. They have a huge pride over their caste and a dominating attitude towards Saroja by describing Saroja as 'other'. The activities of Kumaresan's family members show that they are valuing their cultural caste more than the common man. Their over-proud mindset or superior nature leads them to make a plan of murdering Saroja. These dominating activities make Saroja feel inferior and insecure and voiceless. She is incapable of speaking anything in favour of her. She represents every voiceless woman who is struggling in the socio-cultural society.

Caste Discrimination

"Hey! Don't take her inside; who knows what caste she belongs to! Our eldest son's wife has been keeping a fact so that she can walk the fire pit at the temple festival. This might ruin all that. Let them stay on the verandah" (*Pyre* 99). The cultural setting of the caste is explicated. Every human in society is equal; one should not discriminate against anyone based on their caste, religion, or race. These are all things one has learnt in the schools and colleges. Loomba emphasizes that gender and power intersect within colonial and postcolonial contexts to intensify marginalization (161). But the reality is entirely different; everywhere one can see communal problems. If Saroja felt that she was equal to the family members of Kumaresan, she would have opened up; they made her feel that women of other castes are inferior. It is not about men dominating women in society and making her voiceless.

Gender and Caste Intersectionality

Women are subjugated everywhere, whether she belongs to the upper class or the lower class. Saroja is neither poor nor of a lower-class caste in the novel. Though she has a good financial background and a good status in her earlier life, she gets ill-treated by Kumaresan's family in the name of caste. It could be different in the case of a man. There is a common statement that is roaming in the society that women are weaker than men, they have certain restrictions, and they cannot be equal to men. These ideas force them to look on the women as subjugated and inferior. The same thing is happening in the novel.

Subaltern Silence and Symbolic Violence

Pyre studies the silences, a way of thinking that focuses on the people who are ignored by the stories of history and the groups that have power in society. The question that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak asked, "Can the Subaltern

Speak?”, is very important when we think about Saroja being silent. Spivak argues that the subaltern is structurally silenced and cannot be heard within dominant discourse (308). Even though Saroja is a part of the story, she does not have the power to express herself in any way. She is not silent because she wants to be. Because the society she lives in, with its rules based on caste and male dominance, does not allow her to speak.

Pyre shows how Saroja’s silence is a result of the violence and discrimination she faces because of her place in society. The Subaltern Studies help us understand why Saroj’s voice is not heard. This forced silence shows how women who are considered low in society are treated unfairly in two ways. Because of the social class they are born into and, second, because they are women. The women who are seen as low in society are affected by this in a way. The situation of these women is very difficult because they face problems from the class they are born into and also because they are women. Murugan tells the story in a way that shows how Saroja is marginalised. He does this by showing Saroja’s suffering in places like her home rather than in big public scenes. The home is usually a place where people feel safe. In Saroja’s case, her home is a place where she is watched and controlled. She is also punished at home. This is like what Pierre Bourdieu said about violence. Bourdieu notes that symbolic violence is a subtle form of domination that is internalized and perceived as natural (1-2). Symbolic violence is when people in power make others think that it is normal to be treated that way. This makes it hard for people to fight back. Saroja slowly stops talking. This shows how women’s bodies and voices are controlled by the rules of society. Murugan’s story shows how this happens without anyone forcing women to do things. The rules of society are just really strong. They make women behave in certain ways. Saroja’s story is an example of this.

The caste-based hostility in *Pyre* shows that people still believe in marrying within their caste. This is a way to control people in society. B.R. Ambedkar strongly disagreed with this idea. Ambedkar asserts that caste is sustained through strict control over marriage practices (5). When people from different castes get married in the novel, it is seen as a big mistake that deserves a violent punishment. This is especially true when the woman is thought to be carrying the ‘pollution’ of the caste. The woman has to deal with the pressure of keeping her caste pure. This shows how women’s bodies are used to maintain the rules of the community. The caste system is still very much alive in *Pyre*, and it affects women in a big way. Women are seen as the ones who have to keep the caste pure. Murugan does not romanticise suffer because of events, it as a consequence of deeply entrenched socio-cultural structures. By doing so, *Pyre* moves beyond individual tragedy and functions as a social document that interrogates caste pride, patriarchy, and moral policing. The novel urges readers to confront uncomfortable truths about how cultural traditions are weaponised to silence women. Thus, *Pyre* stands as a powerful

critique of societal norms and a literary intervention that demands ethical responsibility from both individuals and institutions.

Conclusion

Perumal Murugan's *Pyre* powerfully exposes the intersection of caste and gender as mechanisms that silence and marginalize women within rigid socio-cultural frameworks. Through the character of Saroja, the novel illustrates how subalternity is not an inherent condition but one that is socially produced and violently enforced. Her inability to speak, act, or resist is shaped by deeply entrenched structures of patriarchy and caste hierarchy, which deny her both agency and identity. By portraying her suffering within the confines of domestic and communal spaces, Murugan reveals how everyday practices normalize oppression and render it invisible. This study underscores that women's voicelessness is sustained not only by overt domination but also by internalized norms and symbolic violence. The novel serves as a critical reminder that cultural traditions, when unexamined, can become instruments of exclusion and brutality. Therefore, dismantling such systems requires collective social transformation, including the promotion of education, gender equality, and inter-caste acceptance. Empowering women to assert their voices and challenging oppressive ideologies are essential steps toward building an inclusive and equitable society. *Pyre*, thus, stands as both a literary critique and a call for ethical and social change.

Works Cited

- Ambedkar, B. R. *Annihilation of Caste*. Verso Books, 2014.
- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. 3rd ed., Routledge, 2013.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Masculine Domination*. Translated by Richard Nice, Stanford University Press, 2001.
- Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, International Publishers, 1971.
- Loomba, Ania. *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. 3rd ed., Routledge, 2015.
- Mukherjee, Meenakshi. *Realism and Reality: The Novel and Society in India*. Oxford University Press, 1985.
- Murugan, Perumal. *Pyre*. Tamil Nadu: Penguin Publications, 2016.
- Mushtaq, Hammad. "Violence and Silence: Sufferings of a Female Subaltern in Qudsiya's Anter Howat Udasi." *ResearchGate*, 2012.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, University of Illinois Press, 1988.