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DEMYSTIFYING THE 'ANIMAL' LIFE: A READING OF *POONACHI OR THE STORY OF A
BLACK GOAT*

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ABSTRACT

Animal Studies is an emerging field that builds on scholarship in the humanities, social sciences and sciences to investigate past and present relations between human and non-human animals, the representation of those relations, their ethical implications and their social, political and ecological effects in and on the world. Animal studies open up new vistas of thought which undermine the anthropocentric. Theoretical writings about animals often transform them into symbols and metaphors to narrate the disturbing elements. Use of animal figures as a substitute for human concerns abounds in literature though usually in the denigrated label of 'children's literature'. Perumal Murugan's *Poonachi or The Story of a Black Goat* interrogates the stark reality of animal suffering and exploitation, how they are used and abused by humans. Poonachi represents a microcosm of the animal world, a representative of the unequal power dynamics.

Keywords: animal, human, power, anthropomorphism, marginalization.

Human bond with animal life can be traced back to the beginnings of life itself. The relationship is dichotomic though inseparable. The Bible says God created 'the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw it was good. Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth. So God created humankind in his image". There begins the story of dominion and later exploitation over 'everything that has the breath of life'.

Hinduism associate animals with Gods, Ganesh with the elephant, Hanuman with the monkey, Shiva with the snake. Copious amount of animals also serve as the vehicle of the deities. Snake worship and sacred groves abound in India wherein let alone snakes, the choice of deities in temples ranges from dog, cat, rat, monkey, bear, bull, eagle, frog.

Will the species that worship snakes deter from killing one if spotted on their yard? Or restrain from cruel sports like bull-fighting, cock-fighting, hunting? PETA observes that there is nothing 'sporting' about

sports that involve unwilling animal participation. For the animals who are forced to participate in them, these activities are no game – they are about survival. Even the ‘winners’ emerge physically and emotionally scarred – and the losers pay with their lives. Animals used for these sports are drugged, mutilated and the half-dead losers are killed ‘often by being electrocuted, drowned, hanged, burned or shot. Many others are abandoned to die slowly from their injuries.’ Abject conditions prevail in the circus troops as well where animals are kept confined in filthy cages with meagre food for sustenance, mounting pressure to perform, not out of their will but out of fear of violent punishment. Unchecked cruelty is inflicted on the elephants parading in temple festivities.

Animals are commonly judged to be lower in status than humans which opens the premises for the conceptualization and treatment of them. The ‘rational’ man with his capacity for language, reason and ethical judgement sets him apart from nonhuman life according to Aristotle. For Descartes, all animals are considered lesser than even ‘the most unintelligent man.’

Stories with animals as characters are often side-lined as children’s literature. But *Poonachi or The Story of a Black Goat*, says N. Kalyan Raman in the Translator’s Note as not a novel meant for the children. He considers it as the first Tamil novel about animals written for adult readers. The eponymous heroine of the novel is Poonachi, a miracle goat with a cursed life. Perumal Murugan, the nuanced craftsman, fashions Poonachi with emotion, desire, love, disappointment, anger, rumination, and everything human. Poonachi’s ability to cope with difficulties is put to extreme tests which questions the very mettle of her existence. It is then ‘we realise that the author’s real theme is our own fears and longings, primordial urges and survival tactics.’ (172)

The opening sentences begin as any other children’s novel. “Once, in a village, there was a goat. No one knew where she was born. The birth of an ordinary life never leaves a trace, does it?” (1) The old man relaxing atop a hill is approached by an imposing figure, a man out of the world, a Bhakasuran. With a day-old infant goat kid, the imposing figure wanders from village to village trying to sell the goat kid. Unable to find the right buyer, the giant places the kid in the old man’s hand and leaves. There begins the story of a black goat, Poonachi.

Poonachi is no ordinary kid. Her mother birthed six kids and when everybody thought it was over, she contracted her body and pushed hard once more, Poonachi slid out as the seventh. She comes from a line of goats that produces seven kids in a litter. She is truly a miracle. The old man has never seen such a tiny goat kid which resembled a kitten, all black. Trials and tribulations for Poonachi begin right from her journey to the old man’s thatched shed. She barely escapes from being snatched by an eagle, she later encounters a wild cat and endures the pain of ear-piercing where the brute force of the stab leads to profuse bleeding, infection and fever.

The initial scepticism of the old woman gives way to a determination that she must somehow raise this kid to adulthood. She brings it up as though it was her own child. Poonachi leads the privileged life of a domesticated pet animal. She brings meaning to the futile life of the old man and his wife. The old woman takes charge of Poonachi by feeding it from their nanny goat which recently delivered her litter. But the goat stops yielding milk when Poonachi tries to suckle and the old woman feeds it on ‘bland-tasting rice water’ and oil-cake. The old man and his wife try to keep their tiny miracle, the centre of their life, alive. The old woman takes the vow to sacrifice the first male goat if Poonachi delivers a litter.

The void in the lives of the old man and woman after their only daughter got married was filled by Poonachi. Now both of them hardly quarrelled. ‘She served him food with love. The old man, too, spoke a couple of sweet words to her while eating.’ (49) Poonachi slept beside the old woman on her cot. ‘Every night Poonachi told the old woman everything that had happened that day in the pasture.’ (65) The old woman would cradle Poonachi’s face and plant a kiss on it.

Poonachi bonds with Oothan and Uzhumban, Semmi’s kids but Kalli’s kids Kaduvayan, Peethan and Porumi never bothered about her. Kaduvayan was constantly up to mischief, caressing other female kids that

come to graze. He is let to mate with a doe, 'Let him fuck at least one doe. Then we can castrate him' (64) and castrated the very next day along with Peethan. 'Neither of the kids came to the pasture for the next four days. They kept standing in the goat hut all day. Poonachi felt dejected. The whole pasture seemed to be deserted. She lay in the shade, trying to figure out why it had come to this. She couldn't think of anything.' (75) The animals that we frequently encounter are either livestock or pets. The lives of such animals have been tamed to benefit humans in some way. Any aberration from the expected trajectory of behaviour means confinement within a domestic area where it is either sterilized or sexually isolated.

The old man and woman's journey to visit their daughter provides Poonachi with a glimpse of the outside world. The couple followed the custom of taking their goats with them. On the journey, Poonachi gets lost in a forest and experiences freedom for the first time. The old woman spends her night calling out to Poonachi 'without sleeping a wink.' (83) The mother and the daughter get reunited the very next day.

During the week-long stay at the house, Poonachi falls in love with Poovan the buck kid. Porumi constantly tries to attract his attention, but he chose to roam around only with Poonachi. When it's time to leave, the old woman's daughter suggests leaving Poonachi there. But the old woman wouldn't heed, for her 'Poonachi is like another child. She is in my arms or near my feet all the time. I simply can't live without her. I didn't search for her all over, inside the forest, and bring her back only to leave her here, did I? (90) She lets Porumi stay there and 'From that moment on, Poonachi began to dislike the old woman.' (90) Poonachi reluctantly joins her herd when it was time to leave. 'Poovan was gazing at her with tears in his eyes. Her eyes filled with tears too. The old man whacked her on the back with a long twig. She moved slowly away'. (91) Poovan tugs at his tether, snap the rope and runs towards her. 'For a minute, both of them stood still, next to each other.' (91) Poovan is pulled back, Poonachi's neck is tied around with a rope for the first time 'once tied, it was never undone.' (91) The relationship between human and animal becomes that of ownership and control.

On the journey back, her crying subsided gradually but a layer of sorrow permanently inhabited her face. Between the silence that invades everyone, Kaduvayan touched her face as if to say 'That's how it is with everything.' Uzhumban is killed on the way when a farmer flings a stone at him when he saw the goat feeding on his crops. Left with no other option Uzhumban's carcass is cut, hacked and divided into portions. He is butchered for meat. Out of the severed head, Uzhumban's eyes stared at the stunned herd of goats. 'Unable to look at those eyes or look away, Poonachi stood still, feeling a great emptiness within. As she watched one who had always run with them being reduced gradually to a few portions of meat, she asked herself seriously, Why should I live anymore? (98)

Poonachi attains puberty and is forced to mate with an old ram. 'Poonachi was disgusted with the whole world. What was the connection between a faceless old ram and her body? It was beyond her understanding ... Why was I born into this world? Poonachi wondered for the first time. (105) Poonachi becomes pregnant and the old woman takes care of her as her own child. To meet the expenses of looking after Poonachi the old man sells Kaduvayan and Peethan to a butcher. She delivers a litter of seven goats. 'Seven kids in a litter is a miracle.' (116-117)

The toil of bringing up Poonachi and her kids strikes the old couple. 'Poonachi Kannu' the affectionate call subsides to 'wretched creature' (128) and 'cursed thing.' (129) They sell all the seven kids to a stranger who quotes the high price. Poonachi passes the night in a pool of tears and wonders why such things happen to her. 'For the past few months, being with the kids had become her whole world. There was finally some meaning to her existence. Now it had all come crashing down. (139-140) With the money brought in by Poonachi's kids the old man buys studs and gold chain for his wife, gold bangles for his daughter, necklaces for his granddaughters and a gold waist-string for his grandson. The old woman 'thought of them as gifts from Poonachi and caressed her that night with great affection. The old couple was so overwhelmed by their own good fortune that they were unable to sleep. Grief-stricken at having lost all her kids at one stroke, Poonachi couldn't sleep either.' (141)

The family's journey to their daughter's next year is different from the previous year. During the journey, they discover yet another 'use' of their black goat. They sell the goat's milk at villages along the way and only then did they realize that she was of a high milk-yielding breed. Her 'milk tasted so good, like it had been boiled with jaggery...This was not the milk that gave off a rancid odour; it was the nectar that had been denied to the Asuras...They thought now that Poonachi was indeed a miracle.' (143)

Poonachi comes in terms with the vile machinations of her owners. 'All the love the couple showed had shrunk to the length of this rope, Poonachi thought. When the old woman found it difficult to look after the kids, she had 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... As soon as she had drunk Poonachi's milk, the old woman would coo fondly to her' (144) but all she could do was to walk in obedience to the pull of the rope. She never ran short of memories of Poovan.

Chances of finding him alive were nearer to zero. 'By now they would have sold him for meat. Else, they would have castrated him and turned him into an inert lump.' (144) Contrary to Poonachi's fears, Poovan was still alive. Poovan says 'Death can come to a buck kid at any time. We die for meat. We die for sacrifice.' The life of a female goat is no better since their ordeal is birthing and bringing up kids. They consummate their love and longing for each other. Misfortune strikes Poonachi again as they drag Poovan away. 'Poovan came back the next morning as a lifeless carcass. They had crammed his body into a basket and carried him home. Poonachi saw it only when they tossed it on top of the thatched roof above the front yard. His head was missing. It was lying inside the basket perhaps. (149) Poovan was sacrificed to God.

Poonachi delivers a litter of seven again. They sell four kids to the same stranger who bought the litter last year, gifts a doe to their daughter, sacrifices one, butchers one. Poonachi's third pregnancy coincides with the famine. The old man showers curses on Poonachi holds her responsible for the destitution and decides to slaughter her for meat once she delivers. With the burden of the long wearisome life and nothing to nourish herself Poonachi loses the battle. When the old woman touches her 'What lay there was not Poonachi, but a stone idol.' (170)

The novel paints the dark reality that awaits animals who display non-anthropomorphic behaviour. They become creatures of their owners' way of life. Whenever there is a mismatch or incompatibility between an animal's behaviour and its owner's anthropomorphic expectations, the animal risks either being punished and abused for its perceived misbehaviour or being disposed of. This detachment, view of animals as mere automata denigrates them as inferior, gives human a claim for the cruelty perpetrated on animals. Any animal, that depends on human cultural practices for its well-being does not truly have an animal identity, opines Berger. The life of Poonachi thus enters the mind of human moral consideration. 'Poonachi forces us gently to look at ourselves and our contribution to an unequal world.' The animal becomes all that the human is not and in them, we often find the voice of the marginal. Thus rather than focusing on Animal as Human, it would be advisable to start thinking about Human as Animal.

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