



**International Journal of English Literature and  
Literary Theories**

**International Peer Reviewed and Refereed English Journal**

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INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ENGLISH LITERATURE AND LITERARY THEORIES (IJELLT)

ISSN: 3107-6505

Vol.:1: Issue: 4:2025.

(International Peer Reviewed and refereed English Journal)

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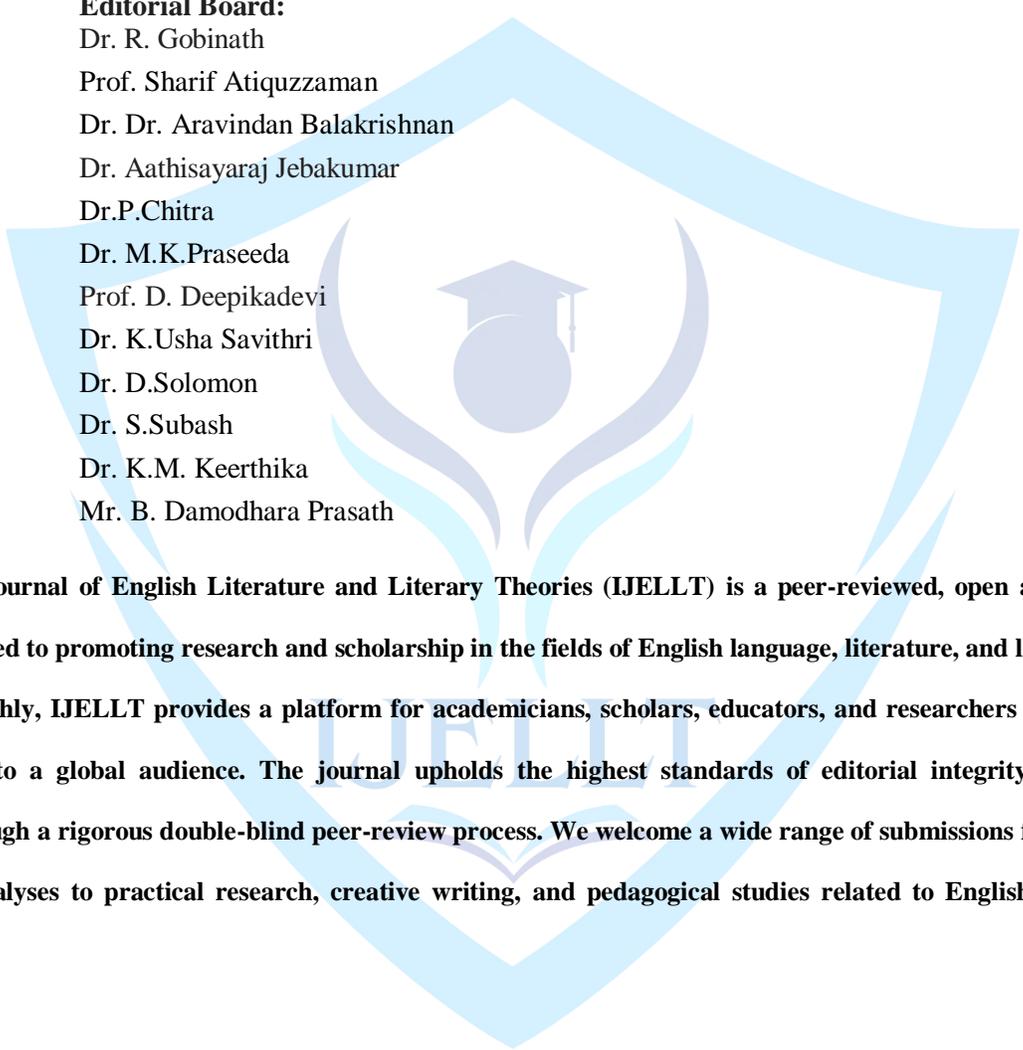
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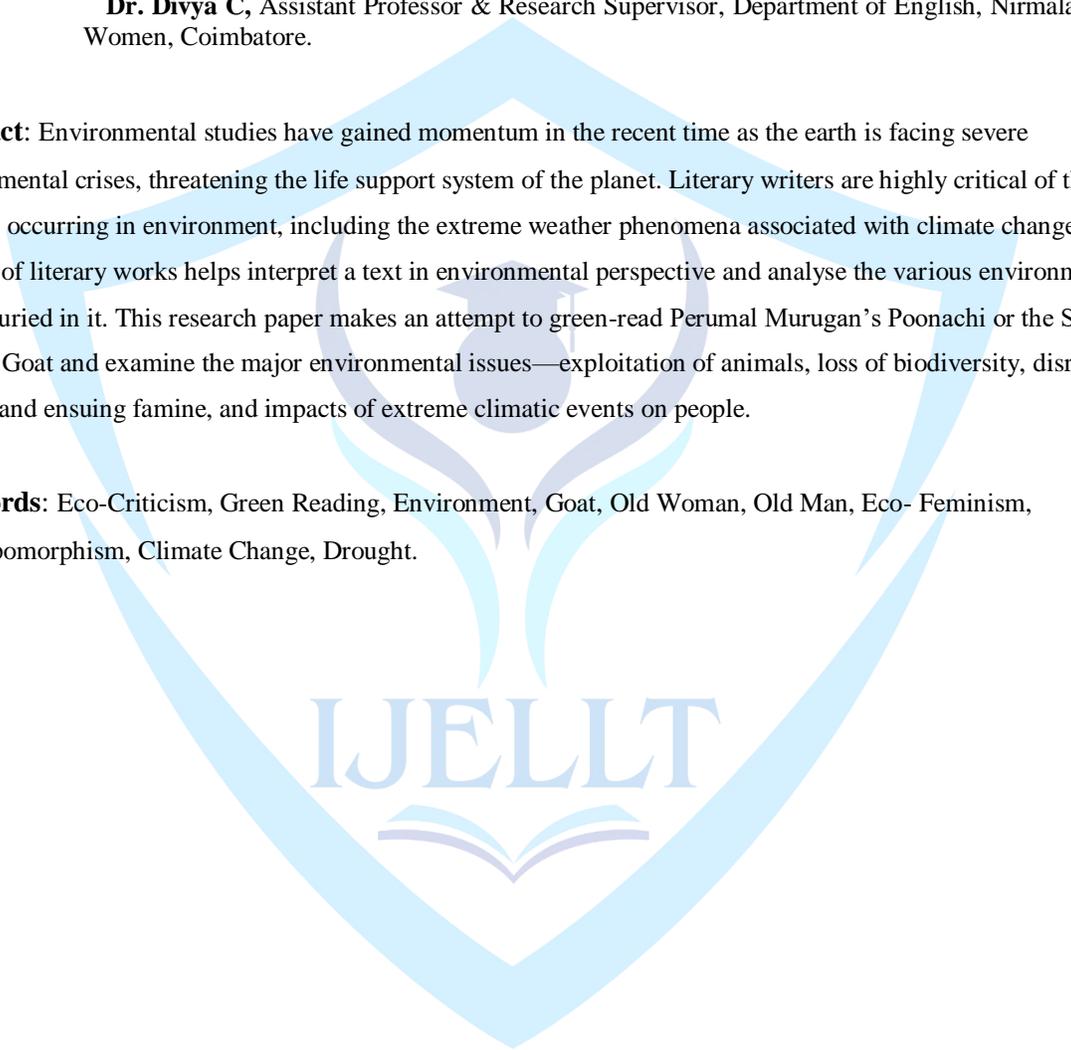
### **Green Reading of Perumal Murugan's Poonachi or the Story of a Black Goat**

**Karthikeyan K**, Research Scholar, Department of English, Nirmala College for Women, Coimbatore.

**Dr. Divya C**, Assistant Professor & Research Supervisor, Department of English, Nirmala College for Women, Coimbatore.

**Abstract:** Environmental studies have gained momentum in the recent time as the earth is facing severe environmental crises, threatening the life support system of the planet. Literary writers are highly critical of the changes occurring in environment, including the extreme weather phenomena associated with climate change. Green reading of literary works helps interpret a text in environmental perspective and analyse the various environmental issues buried in it. This research paper makes an attempt to green-read Perumal Murugan's Poonachi or the Story of a Black Goat and examine the major environmental issues—exploitation of animals, loss of biodiversity, disrupted rainfall and ensuing famine, and impacts of extreme climatic events on people.

**Keywords:** Eco-Criticism, Green Reading, Environment, Goat, Old Woman, Old Man, Eco- Feminism, Anthropomorphism, Climate Change, Drought.



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## Introduction

Planet earth is the only place in the universe to accommodate and nurture life in all forms, including human beings. Therefore, it is the responsibility of every individual to protect the planet from the environmental harm being meted out to it by humans over the centuries, particularly in the last two centuries. Today, the environment is under tremendous stress due to various human activities. Extreme environmental problems such as climate change, pollution, deforestation, loss of biodiversity, depletion of resources, land degradation etc. have awakened mankind from their indifference towards nature and have driven them to swiftly find remedy to the large-scale damages caused to it. Today, every branch of human knowledge has been desperately endeavouring to bridge the huge chasm developed between human civilization and nature. In line with this, literature has also been doing its contributions in spreading and better informing the society about the pressing environmental issues and consequently, ecocriticism has emerged as a fast-growing field in literature in the late twentieth century to critically study human-nature relationship. M.H. Abrams defines green reading as an eco-critical analysis of a literary text for its environmental concerns and calls for actions to safeguard nature (Glossary 100). Thus, green reading, draws from ecocriticism, reflects on the implications of literary texts in representing the environmental issues and kindles the conscience of the readers to take decisive actions towards preserving the nature and meeting the environmental goals.

In India, writings in Indian languages and English have been critically conscious of the contemporary environment in their narratives. In this respect, some prominent Indian examples in English are Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938), R.K. Narayan's *Malgudi* novels, and recently, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), Amita Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), are some of the best examples for their portrayal of environment and environmental issues in their works. In Tamil literature as well, environment has largely been a part of the literary writings since the Sangam period. Contemporary fiction writers in Tamil are also highly vocal in incorporating eco-critical views in their stories. Some best Tamil novels in this genre are *Saayavanam* (1964) by Sa. Kandasamy, *Kaadu* (2003) by Jeyamohan, and *Oru Nathiyin Kadhai* (2009) by Kannadasan and *Sool* (2016) by Cho Dharman. Perumal Murugan, an eminent contemporary Tamil writer, is well-known for setting his stories in rural Tamil Nadu and foregrounding nature in his narratives. He is an author of twelve novels, and is widely known for his *One-Part Woman* (2013). He is also a professor in Tamil, short story writer, poet, essayist, and linguist.

In environmental perspective, Perumal Murugan's *Poonachi* or *The Story of a Black Goat* (*Poonachi Alladhu Oru Vellatin Kadhai* in Tamil in 2016, translated into English by N. Kalyan Raman in 2017) is unique that only goats are given names by the novelist while the human characters are nameless. Through the life of a black goat, Murugan deals with major environment issues such as exploitation of animals, ecofeminism, climate change, species loss, ordeals of animals and human beings in adverse climatic events.

Until the recent past, nature has always been distinguished from human and is treated as an entity for the benefits of humankind. This anthropocentric approach to nature has led to overexploitation, thereby causing grave damage to its sustainability. About the magnitude of damage brought on to the environment, Robert Macfarlane, a British writer and professor, writes in *The Guardian* that we are living in a time in which the activities of the human caused "a powerful influence on the environment, climate and ecology of the planet that it will leave a long-time signature" in the recorded history. Such is the scale of damage caused to the environment by way of deforestation, developmental activities, ensuing extinction of species, land degradation, pollution, draining of ground water, among others.

In the novel *Poonachi*, Perumal Murugan deliberates on the exploitative nature of human through man-animal relationship. As the title of the novel depicts, it is the story of a black she-goat named *Poonachi*. Similar to the implications of the scriptures of various religions and cultures that God created the planet and its elements are for human, here, a God-like-giant gifts the goat, *Poonachi*, to a nameless old couple, who live in a semi-arid village that "had a very large number of goats and cattle" as livelihood (*Poonachi* 20). The old couple appropriate the goats and cattle for their needs—goat milk to reduce body heat, selling goats and cattle for money, killing them for meat and sacrificing them to God (15, 147). Thus, animals are taken for granted by human beings for consumption or cashing it at times of need.

Human civilization, from the beginning, has tried to tame and wield their control over nature, particularly wild animals for their uses. It started with the hunting and domestication of wild animals and today human wield almost total control over the planet and is trying to occupy other planets as well. In doing so, he uses all means—fair or foul. In *Poonachi*, the goatherds always keep a strict watch over the goats so as to have the goats under their control. Otherwise "they'll become arrogant and do anything they want" (36). To keep exact number of them for the "government needs" (36), registration of goats and cattle is conducted in the form of "ear-piercing" and assigning each animal a number (28).

To bring down the wild behavior, goats are castrated and ropes tied around their “neck and forelegs as close together as possible” (91).

The unabated development projects of the human society have caused “the relentless extinction of plant and animal species” (Glossary 99). According to UN Climate Action, development and infrastructure activities of the human beings have already changed over seventy percent of land globally, thereby leading to the extinction of large number of species. In this novel, Perumal Murugan is mindful of the loss of biodiversity due to human activities. On the day when Poonachi goes missing in a forest during the old couple’s journey to their daughter’s house, the old woman who stays behind to retrieve Poonachi learns through another old woman of the village that in the past the forest had been teeming with “wild hounds, jackals, leopards, and herds of deer” and “now, there were only wild boars” (85). The extinction of species from their natural habitats not only affects the ecosystem but threatens the delicate life supporting system of the planet earth. In Poonachi, the writer raises a daunting question on the disappearance of species from the wilderness that if the mindless destruction to the environment is let continue unabated, “How then can anything or anyone survive here apart from human being? In the end, can even people survive for very long?”(85)

### **Women and Poonachi**

Kathryn Miles, a contributor to Britannica, defines the term eco-feminism as a “branch of feminism that examines the connections between women and nature.” As in his other novels, Prumal Murugan critically exposes the tribulations of women in men dominated rural society and that of animals like Poonachi under human.

The old woman’s life is not as easy as the old man. It is the duty of the old woman to keep their thatched mud hut neat, to clean the goat and cattle sheds, to milk the goats, and also to serve the old man. When the old man brings Poonachi to their house first time, on seeing it, the old woman laments that “the old wretch has brought this kitten to take the life out of me” since the old woman’s burden of household works increases by taking care of the motherless “puny creature” (Poonachi 17, 26). The life of the old woman’s daughter is no better either. As the keeper of her house and mother of five children, it is the old woman’s daughter who “worked tirelessly day and night and had little children to bring up. The family-owned goats and cattle as well. Though they had very little land, the work was endless.

The problems faced by women in particular were endless. How many lives could her daughter possibly look after?" (132)

Similar to the old woman and her daughter, Poonachi, as a mother goat, undergoes tremendous hardships to give birth to seven goat kids and feed them. During her motherhood, Poonachi wonders if "her teats had actually been torn off because of all the grabbing and pulling by her kids. Her udder was so inflamed that she imagined that blood, not milk dropped from her teats" (130).

According to Vandana Shiva, an eminent Indian environmental activist, women are more vulnerable to extreme environmental events (Oxford 537). It is Poonachi, the old woman and the old woman's daughter who face the extreme hardships of rural life in the drought and the ensuing famine. The old woman leaves no stone unturned to save Poonachi in the famine, her daughter skips a meal to reduce her intake and struggles a lot to feed her five children along with attending to the family, while Poonachi, whose case is badly off, is unable to find any green grass in the entire village, so she chews barks, sticks and twigs to calm her ravenous pregnancy appetite. As a result, she looks famished and a "bag of bones" (Poonachi 164). But, the old patriarch, on the other hand, prepares to slaughter even his "prime asset" Poonachi for meat as he has already done to her two male goat kids to survive the famine (164). However, the considerate and motherly old woman stops her husband from killing Poonachi for meat.

### **Anthropomorphized Goats**

Perumal Murugan wants the readers to see through the life of goats to better understand their world. To give effect to this, the novelist has given the human attributes like speech, thoughts, emotions, and body language to goats. The application of such human characteristics to God, animals, things, is described as anthropomorphism. In an interview to The Quint, an online news channel, the writer admits that "That (Ponnachi) too is a living being."

When Poonachi as a goat kid is taken to the outside world for grazing, she feels so happy. With great excitement, she tells the old woman “I’ll be back” after grazing outside with other goats (Poonachi 55). Similarly, Poonachi feels “terribly shy” when the old woman tells the goat kid that she needs someone like the old woman to take care of when the goat delivers seven goat-kids as foretold (78). Perumal Murugan also brings out the instinctive thoughts of the goat when she briefly makes a sojourn in a forest. On seeing the beautiful “spectacle” of the forest and its wilderness”(82), teeming with wild boars, the goat kid Poonachi likes to live in the forestland forever and also feels that she is finally back “in her real home” (80).

In the old woman’s daughter’s house, Poonachi meets Poovan, a buck kid, and falls in love with him. However, she is not allowed to stay with him for long and is taken back to the house of the old couple. When she is separated from Poovan, she curses the old woman, saying “I would have spent my time happily (in the forest), eating wild creepers and loitering around with wild boars. She didn’t let that happen. Now she won’t allow me to stay with Poovan either. The old wretch” (Poonachi 90).

Similarly, when she attains puberty, the old couple decides to make Poonachi mate with a buck. Poonchi is in dream that they are planning to get her mate with Poovan or a buck like him, as her mind is preoccupied with the thoughts of Poovan. However, when she is forced to mate with a huge old ram, she feels “small and humiliated” (Poonachi 104). From then on, Poonachi leads her life “with a subdued heart and body” (105). She also feels disgusted to remember that “a dried-up old goat had invaded her body” (105). During Poonachi’s labor pain, Kalli, a mother goat in the old couple’s herd and the one that never permitted Poonachi come near her when Poonachi was a kid, understands the severe pain of Poonachi as it is her first delivery and expresses her consolation to Ponnachi with gentle gestures. Perumal Murugan is so moving that he vividly describes the mental agony of Poonachi when her seven kids are sold to a merchant even before they are weaned. On seeing her kids being loaded into a cart and taken away, “she ran crying towards them (kids). The kids, too, called out feebly to her” (138). That night the “grief-stricken Poonachi couldn’t sleep” a wink (141).

The writer has reached the zenith in describing the anguish of animals when Poonachi meets Poovan second time and exchange the ordeals of being born as goats. Poovan tells Poonachi that “I don’t think I would stay alive myself. Death can come to a buck kid at any time. We die for meat, we die for sacrifice” (Poonachi 147). In response to that, Poonachi asks him “Do you think a female has it any better? It’s better to die than to go through the ordeal of birthing and bringing up kids” (147) and the very next day Poovan is sacrificed to a God. On seeing Poovan’s severed head, Poonachi asks herself “why did people who had nothing to do with them get to decide who should interact with whom and who should stay with whom” (149). About Perumal Murugan’s art of storytelling, Richa Battarai writes in *The Kathmadhu Post*, an English daily in Nepal, the novelist anthropomorphized his goats “much like Premchand’s or Tagore’s animals.”

### **Drought in Asuralogam**

Adverse weather events such as global warming, disrupted rainfall, drought, famine, fast melting of glaciers and sea level rise, urban flooding, desertification and consequent species extinction and poverty are associated with climate change. Climate change refers to “long-term shifts in temperatures and weather patterns” and the driving force behind these extreme weather phenomena is “human activities” (United Nations Climate Action). Over the last two decades, literary writers have been conscious of observing such climatic occurrences and have been highlighting climate change related issues in their writings. Consequently, a new genre, climate fiction (cli-fi), has emerged in fiction writing.

Perumal Murugan has always been critical observant of the environment related events and their impacts on rural life. In *Poonachi*, the writer portrays the pathetic existence of an Asura village in drought years. From the very beginning, the writer underscores the decrease of rainfall that “every year the water we get from rainfall keeps going down. If this continues, famine will surely set in” (Poonachi 37). Rural people and farmers across the world have faced such scenario, especially the migration to urban areas in search of better wages and livelihood. The UN climate agency predicts that “unpredictable water sources have exacerbated” lives of farmers and herding communities in several countries (UNCA). Even in the urban areas, it is the poor who suffer the most by the adverse weather events such as pollution, flood, heat waves, etc. But the impacts of disrupted weather events are more visible in rural areas whenever the rain plays “hid-and-seek with them” (Poonachi 85).

As a result of no rainfall in the entire “Asura” world (Poonachi 159), people are pushed to sell their goats and cattle for meager prices to reduce their burden and to migrate to other places. It is predicted that climate related weather phenomena would push large number of people to poverty and extreme hunger and starvation, as Perumal Murugan says “till it rains again, we can skip a meal every day and tie a wet cloth on our belly to keep it cool”(101). In such times, human beings have to suffer largely from hunger and starvation and animals have to live on barks, sticks and twigs as Poonachi does, and the availability of drinking water will be a rare commodity that “Poonachi is not even able to fill her stomach with water” (166), let alone any green to feed on. Eventually, she dies of utter starvation.

### **Conclusion**

It is a proven fact that the earth is in peril due to various human activities. Environmental issues are major concerns of human society today. Therefore, it is imperative upon every human being to better understand the problems concerning environment. First step towards dealing with the environment crises is creating awareness among the mass. Writers like Perumal Murugan always include environmental themes in their works. Through the life journey of Poonachi and other animals and loss of biodiversity in the forest, the writer reminds that the material greed of the humankind is insatiable and warns that humankind must stop exploitation of nature and animals. With the portrayal of women characters and Poonachi’s motherhood, he exposes how women, like animals and nature, are dominated in the patriarchal society and encounter immense troubles in the face of extreme weather events. Perumal Murugan makes the reader to better understand the agonies of animals by applying the characteristics of speech, emotions and thoughts to Poonachi and other goats. Finally the impacts of adverse climate events such as disrupted rainfall, crop failure, ensuing famine and hardships of human beings managing livestock, internal migration, scarcity of drinking water availability and the very survival of the human beings are eco-critically looked into. It is quite clear that if the collective humanity fails to protect nature and continue to exploit it as usual, like Poonachi is exploited until she yields “only blood from” her body (Poonachi 162), the earth will certainly turn into a barren land and eventually will not only “clean out all the live animals” but will eventually “wipe out the humans too” (162). All the important environmental issues studied in this paper are vital for better understanding and conservation of nature and wake-up calls for the human society to take actions without further delay to safeguard the environment.

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