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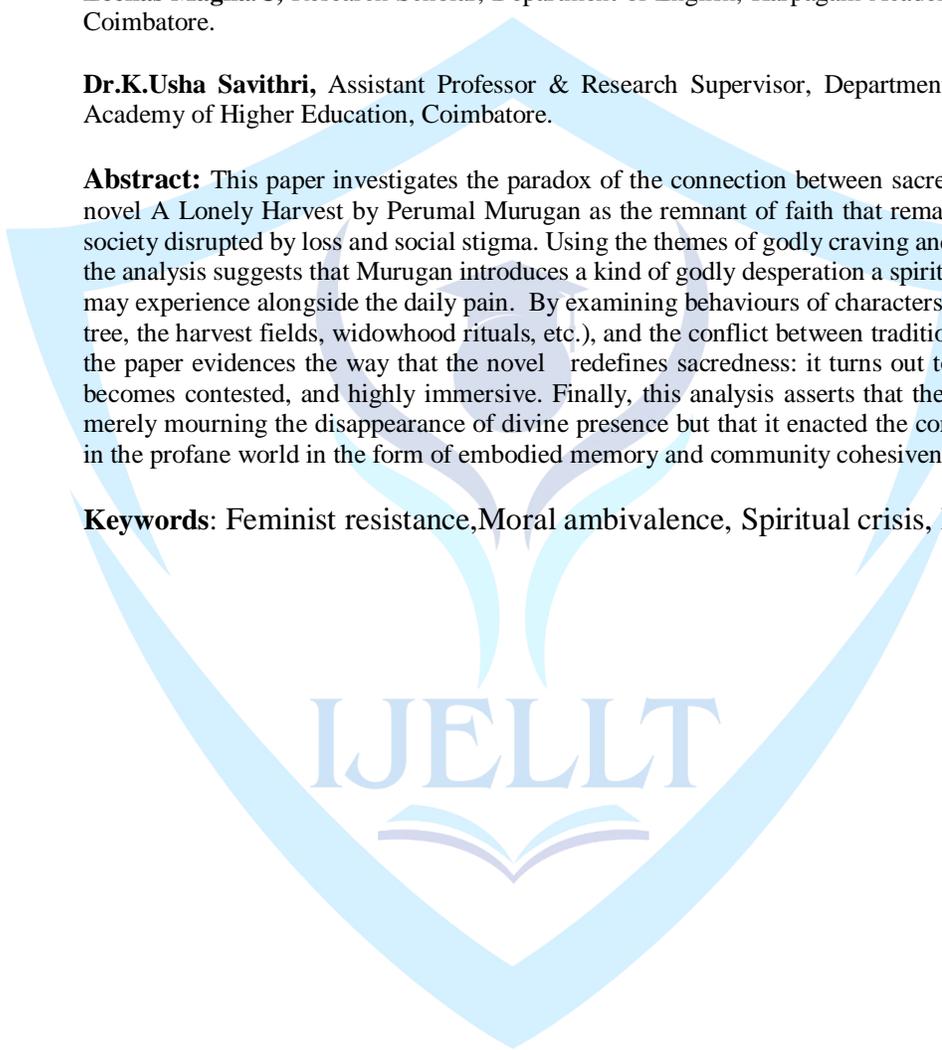
Divine Desperation: The Sacred and the Profane in the Afterlife of Faith in A Lonely Harvest by Perumal Murugan

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Abstract: This paper investigates the paradox of the connection between sacred and the profane in the novel A Lonely Harvest by Perumal Murugan as the remnant of faith that remains even after death in a society disrupted by loss and social stigma. Using the themes of godly craving and mortal disappointment, the analysis suggests that Murugan introduces a kind of godly desperation a spiritual craving that anybody may experience alongside the daily pain. By examining behaviours of characters, symbolic motifs (portia tree, the harvest fields, widowhood rituals, etc.), and the conflict between tradition and personal freedom, the paper evidences the way that the novel redefines sacredness: it turns out to have a weak structure, becomes contested, and highly immersive. Finally, this analysis asserts that the text by Murugan is not merely mourning the disappearance of divine presence but that it enacted the continued presence of faith in the profane world in the form of embodied memory and community cohesiveness.

Keywords: Feminist resistance, Moral ambivalence, Spiritual crisis, Embodied memory.



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In *A Lonely Harvest*, Perumal Murugan reinvents faith to be not a source of refuge but a landscape of suffering, and the sacred is even a burden which people have to carry over their heads. The setting of the novel is the agrarian setting in the countryside of Tamil Nadu which cuts across the moral economy of belief in a society of intense interlaced religious ritual and social custom. The sacred in the world described by Murugan cannot exist outside of the processes of control through which gender, grief and belonging are mediated. It serves as a compass in the world, a compass of morality, and it is oppressive, a kind of mode of shaping lives with references to divine decrees that make suffering holy.

The main character of the novel, Ponna, lives in a world where religion is not an option but an inheritance, fertility and devotion are the two currencies of gender being a woman. “No matter how much you bother it, the tree will endure it all patiently. It is only humans who are unable to withstand even the smallest of troubles”(LH 5). The paradox of sacredness revealed by Murugan is that Ponna faces an emotional and ethical dilemma, though the sacredness promises transcendence, it causes earthly pain. Even rituals that are supposed to heal, namely the offerings in the temple, pilgrimages, and prayers to the ancestors, serve only to make her feel ever more alien, revealing the emptiness of divine guarantees in the world where patriarchal piety rules.

Using the novel, Murugan questions the limits between the sacred and the profane, which implies that even the divinity is polluted by the social systems that purport to support it. His characters are in search of meaning in faith but they find none but silence, absence, and futility. The holy place turns into a place of bargaining the human desire to transcendence and the materiality of loss, desire and despair. This devotion/desolation relationship creates what can be called alienation to God; a hopeless grasping at faith following the redemptive ability that has already disintegrated.

In the novel faith functions not merely as a source of solace but as an imposed moral structure that can exacerbate suffering. As S. Rajendran observes, Murugan’s narrative captures the agony of those who are trapped between inherited religious expectations and the harsh realities of social life. In *A*

Lonely Harvest, faith is not merely a source of comfort but a relentless moral structure that punishes the body and spirit. The characters’ desperation is not solely psychological but deeply cultural, revealing how spiritual longing can become entwined with social oppression (Rajendran 45–46).

This analysis illuminates the concept of divine desperation, showing how Murugan's characters endure the dual pressures of social expectation and spiritual yearning. The novel challenges its readers to observe the postmodern life of faith- after faith has been played out, but its remnants persist in ritual, memory and emotion. Sacred, therefore, is not just a metaphysical ideal but a lived load, which is strained in the flesh and the words of its victims. There is a presence and absence of the divine, a promise as well as a curse in this ethical terrain- a paradox which constitutes the essence of Murugan vision of spiritual survival in an impious world. Murugan's depiction of ritual underscores that faith persists even when divine presence is absent. As K. Shanmugam notes, Even after divine presence recedes or fails, Murugan demonstrates that ritual acts, gestures, and cultural habits continue to shape the moral imagination of his characters. The temple bells, offerings, and pilgrimages persist, not because of belief, but because of memory. In this way, the afterlife of faith is constituted not by gods but by human continuity and the persistence of cultural consciousness (Shanmugam 102-104).

This perspective illuminates how the sacred does not vanish with the silence of the divine; rather, it transforms into a cultural and moral force.

This novel that takes place in a spiritual world that is filled with loss a loss of life, a loss of meaning and most importantly a loss of faith. The novel preserves the trash of faith which remains after its demise, dramatizing what can be termed the divine desperation: the desire of the sacred, which lingers even when the divinity no longer stands in reply. The characters of Murugan are not atheists, they are faithful people who are neglected by their gods. It is not the abandonment of the faith, just that it is a desperate afterlife of the faith, a state where faith is a scream of silence. "The temple bell rang, but no one was there to hear it. The priest had died, and the villagers had stopped coming" (LH 32). This passage illustrates the persistence of ritual after faith has dissipated and sets up the theme of the afterlife of faith in the novel.

The world of Murugan does not believe in faith but is a cultural inheritance. It is entrenched in the land, the practices and the ethics of the Tamil rural community. Religion organizes all spheres of life, including fertility or grieving, and determines who was allowed to pray, who was allowed to speak, and who was required to remain silent. But even this inherited faith is not of much help when tragedy occurs. The religious activities of Ponna change to become a devotional ritual to a desperate one after the death of her husband, Kali.

The divine is transacted: sacrifices are brought, vows are mumbled, gods are bartered with. But the divine has become dumb, and they are only left with ritual without revelation. Murugan therefore reveals the performative aspect of faith in a society that equates ritual practice to spiritualism. The deities who used to organize the community life turn into apathetic observers of human suffering. This apathy is a desperate effort of god a need to keep on praying in times when faith became empty.

The loss of faith in the novel is gradual but build-up, lost through a series of betrayals of anticipation. Moral and religious structures of the village that once seem holy, turn out to be social control. The purity of tradition is an additional burden, particularly to the women who have the burden of religious purity. The fact that Ponna is infertile a physical condition turns into a moral judgement, and the divine will turns out to be a defence of patriarchy.

In this light, divine is pushed off his throne of goodwill. Gods are no longer merciful; they are involved in perpetuation of injustice. Murugan uses such disappointment to reveal the hypocrisy of the religious institutions, whereby faith does not serve as a means of liberation but rather as a means of control. It is not the death of faith in this instance but the realization of its moral bankruptcy.

Ironically, Murugan makes despair into agency. “She had learned to live with the absence of his voice, his touch, his presence. In that silence, she found a new way to love”(LH 78).Ponna does not lose his spiritual faith to nihilism but to self-realization. Faith dead, she starts to explain her sufferings as not a divine punishment or a moral failure but a human one. Her prayers that are not being answered are desperate and they drive her towards some kind of an inward battle against grief.

At this point, godly desperation turns into divine self-sufficiency a silent form of resistance to both Godly silence and societal suppression. This humanization of despair is a rearrangement of the sacred by Murugan. Divine, having lost its transcendence, is immanent in enduring, empathetic, and recalling actions. What is left when faith dies is nothing empty but a renewed spirituality based on human relationship and self-reflectiveness. The holy is transferred out of temple to body, out of deity to conscience.

In *A Lonely Harvest*, religion does not stop with the lack of faith; it turns into the memory. The characters play rituals to behave as they do not believe, but because they recall once believing. This performance residue of faith, which is empty and yet needed, is what Murugan describes as the life after belief. Religion is a cultural relic, a culture of hope that is not going away. So the state of divine desperation is not only emotional, it is a state of philosophy: hunger of the spirit and Divine deficiency. According to the novel of Murugan faith is ultimately dead not in the disappearance of gods, but in the discovery that the sacred was human, always imperfect and always sordid.

In case the novel mourns about the death of faith, it also glorifies what grows out of its funeral ashes the rediscovery of the profane as the place of redemption. Salvation in the Murugan vision no longer is an object of temples or deities but is born of the beats of daily existence, of human strength, of bodily ability to live and to recall. The profane which initially was part of the impure or the sinful embedded in the moral codes of religion, is the foundation upon which a new morality of compassion and survival is established.

The divine in the fiction of Murugan is deprived of the divine allure and transferred to the material realms of ordinary living. The grieving by Ponna is not resolved in the divine ceremonies but in the silence of cultivating the land, attending to the memory, and loneliness. With labour and emotional truthfulness, redemption comes in small ways to her, constrained life by codes of patriarchy. This temple, which used to be the center of her spiritual identity is sidelined and the field, the kitchen and the village path are now her new sacred areas. In the reconfiguration of Murugan, the soil takes the place of the shrine and even making a living is a liturgy.

When redemption is based in the profane, Murugan disputes the hierarchy that has been inherited between the spiritual and the bodily. The same things that were considered impure, sexuality, grief, desire are re-formed as genuine manifestations of the human wholeness. The divine loses its divinity and becomes very human.

The depiction of Ponna body by Murugan is a radical change in the religious imagination where the body of women is considered to be the carrier of sin or fertility. Her ailing body, which was previously criticized due to its sterility, turns into a revelation text. Her resolution makes Murugan a secular, tender, grounded theology of pain which is based on human experience. Redemption is not gift of divinity, though, but a physical process-process of living in despair, of living in brokenness.

This representation of redemption also criticizes the economic system of purity that rules the rural religious life. The female body, which has long been scarcely relieved of expectations of sanctity, becomes an object of knowledge and rekindling. The novel of Murugan emphasizes that the liberation can be achieved only when a person is able to learn to look at the profane body without shame.

The demise of divine faith leaves an empty hole which Murugan then covers with ethics of compassion. Human compassion comes to the fore instead of divine justice. The surviving characters, those who arrive at loss through solidarity, memory or forgiveness, show redemption to be relational and not transcendental. As soon as Ponna starts perceiving pain of others as a reflection of her own, she gets in a spiritual awakening which does not pertain to gods.

This transformation of divine interdependence into human interconnection is an indication of Murugan of a bigger project, the re-sacralization of the human. The secular world, with all its blemishes, becomes the final haven of holiness. Even in its dust, hunger, and loneliness, Murugan can see some extent of the divine- not as a metaphysical presence, but as a moral possibility.

The novel suggests the idea that redemption is not something that should be done by God. It is born when people take back control of their lives in the face of subjugated thought systems and discover purpose in the present of their lived experience. The profane is thus not the opposite of the sacred but it represents the continuation of the sacred using other tools. The illusion of divine authority which Murugan deconstructs in his novel is only to see that divinity has always been in the human ability to endure, empathize and love.

Murugan's narrative also emphasizes that redemption is not confined to the sacred or to divine intervention; it can emerge within the realm of the profane. As Ananya Ramesh observes, Murugan's fiction repeatedly foregrounds the tension between the sacred and the profane, suggesting that redemption can be found in everyday life when traditional religious structures fail. Characters like Ponna find meaning through labor, care, and human connection.

The profane world once considered mundane or even impure becomes a space for moral growth resilience, and spiritual awakening, challenging the notion that the divine is necessary for ethical or emotional fulfillment (Ramesh 88–90).

This insight captures Murugan's radical reconfiguration of sanctity. Ponna's labor in the fields, her care for others, and her quiet endurance transform everyday acts into sites of ethical and spiritual significance.

Murugan writes a hymn to the mundane through novel the religion that does not have any gods, the sanctity that does not have heaven. The sacred is not coming back as transcendence but as tenderness, not as doctrine but as the mute majesty of survival. When Murugan turns the profane into a ship of redemption he asks us to attend to the fact that in the shambles of faith life itself is the final prayer.

In *A Lonely Harvest*, Perumal Murugan thinks of a world where faith does not cease with disbelief, but it continues in discontinuity, in transfigured forms. This continuation of faith even after its demise, its afterlife, is the key to the spiritual and emotional structure of the novel. The echoes of the divine even when it has stopped is felt in memory, ritual and moral imagination. Murugan describes a society that is obsessed with belief and the gods do not exist but their absence continues to organize human condition.

Faith in Murugan that exists after death is not transient into piety or a slip into nihilism. It is a transitional position- a border between, devotion and disillusionment. His characters never just drop their gods; they live in the space that they have left behind. In this silence they are going to face more of what faith has been: not the promise of salvation, but the perseverance of purpose under divine indifference. Religion is no longer about the divine as a metaphysical presence but about a moral disposition to life- a devotion to the hope, compassion and persistence in the face of loss.

In the novel, faith is left behind as cultural debris, as a set of habits, gestures and rituals that are performed even after their theological relevance has been lost. Lighting the lamp, murmuring the prayer or going to temple is not the manifestation of belief but a recollection of belief. This aspect of continuation without belief depicts that faith has turned into memory. What used to be sacred is now what we have as a cultural reflex, as a means of preserving the past in the present. The characters in the works by Murugan still engage in these inherited forms, however not because they believe in divine intervention, but because these are continuity in the world that is discontinued by death and change.

The divine silence which is so common in the novel is not absence, but a new form of communication. Within the silent areas where the gods are silent, the characters of Murugan begin to hear each other and to hear themselves mourning. The afterimage of the sacred is a kind of reverence which is no longer based upon ritual or doctrine. Ponna and others are able to recover an interiority that religion had deprived them of through silence. Murugan turns quietness into a religious language - a place of grief, perseverance and rebirth.

Human relationships also portray the afterlife of faith. With the disintegration of conventional faith, compassion comes to its exalted moral substitute. The characters of Murugan become the gods to one another and find in mutual suffering some spiritual kinship. It is this change to humanity that is the moral transformation of faith metaphysical to relational. And what endures the failure of belief is not desperation but compassion, not theology but sympathy. In this reorientation, Murugan alludes to the fact that the divine has been present in the heart of man and has been waiting to be discovered once again by attending to them through care and connection.

The vision of faith afterlife by Murugan declines the alternatives of faith and unfaith. Rather, it displays faith as the evolving, changing consciousness that responds to the loss and re-invents the sacred in the lived experience. God might have withdrawn, although its residues can be found in the human desire- the desire to hope that something will happen, to seek purpose in pain and to love even when alone. The continuation of faith in the afterlife is not nothingness but the metamorphosis of faith deprived of its dogma, refined by despair, and re-celebrated as the moral endurance.

In *A Lonely Harvest*, Murugan writes an elegy of the lost faith that turns out to be the hymn to its survival. Weighed down by solemn anticipation, desperate in divine desperation, his characters are redeemed by the profane, and live in a world in which faith does not bring salvation, but at least gives sense. The novel finally confirms the fact that faith does not perish, but it transforms, and shifts, shifting between heaven and earth, between god and man, between prayer and pity. Sacred in this afterlife is not the authority of the divine but the tender, radiant gesture of going on to live.

The novel is a deep insight into the topic of faith, loss, and resilience of human beings. Throughout the novel the sacred has been seen as a curse and an object of desire and is shown to be a restraint, a punishment and a loneliness to those who do not conform to its demands. The novel follows the trajectory of divine desperation, which is the desire of a god who is not listening to the response to the failure of traditional faith and finally the development of the profane as the place of redemption. Murugan demonstrates that in case the divine authority fails, meaning is not lost, it is recovered with the help of human experience, memory and compassion.

The novel highlights the fact that faith is not just the belief process, it is a process that is embodied in life that is influenced by social, cultural and emotional forces. Murugan uses Ponna and other characters to examine how the sacred persists in its ritual, habit and remembrance even when the metaphysical guarantees of the sacred have disappeared. The continuation of faith after death, then, is not so much in theological certitude as it is in the continuity of morals and feelings.

Conclusively, *A Lonely Harvest* implies that sacred exists within the profane. One of the things that is assumed to be sanctified by God comes through human perseverance, compassion, and moral will. The work by Murugan defies the traditional interpretations of spirituality by demonstrating how belief despite its fractures may be turned into an ethical action, human connection, and personal resilience. In its post-mortem existence, faith has not been lost or given up; it is resurrected within the mundane, frail and highly human exercises of life.

Murugan's exploration of faith is marked by ambiguity and liminality, highlighting the human experience of devotion in the absence of divine certainty. As M. Iyer observes,

Faith in Murugan's work is never absolute; it exists in the interstices between belief and disillusionment, presence and absence. The 'divine desperation' his characters experience is emblematic of a liminal spirituality one that does not require proof, reward, or visible intervention. This liminality makes his exploration of faith profoundly human: devotion survives in the form of endurance, ethical responsibility, and relational empathy, rather than in miraculous affirmation (Iyer 23–25).

This insight foregrounds the concept of divine desperation as a deeply human condition rather than a purely theological or metaphysical one. In doing so, Murugan gives us an image of spirituality that is both chilling and encouraging: chilling because of its recognition of the inadequacy of divine intervention, and encouraging in its recognition of the human ability to make a meaning, maintain love, and redeem with suffering. The holy and the unholy, hopelessness and pity, nothingness and something all come together in a real-world examination of the ever shifting and unchanging power of faith.

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