



ORIGINAL

Anthropomorphism and Allegorical Illustration: A Reading of Perumal Murugan's Novel Poonachi or The Story of a Black Goat

Antropomorfismo e ilustración alegórica: una lectura de la novela poonachi o la historia de una cabra negra de perumal murugan

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: anthropomorphic representations generally suggests that certain human characteristics are universal and can be shared by all creatures. This paper attempts to study the anthropomorphic effect on human's prosocial behaviour through a metaphorical representation of a black goat named Poonachi in *Poonachi or the Story of a Black Goat* (2017) by Perumal Murugan.

Method: the paper employs qualitative literary analysis and references theories of anthropomorphism, including the frameworks of Theory of mind and Guthrie's Cognitive evolution to examine how Poonachi represents marginalized groups, especially women subjected to discrimination based on gender, caste, and colour. The analysis demonstrates that Murugan's anthropomorphic approach humanises the goat Poonachi, eliciting empathy for marginalized individuals.

Discussion: this study examines the anthropomorphic influence on human prosocial behaviour, concentrating on the metaphorical depiction of Poonachi. It investigates how the ascription of human characteristics to animals cultivates empathy in readers and prompts contemplation about marginalized situations. Poonachi is examined as a symbol of a woman confronting the obstacles of a patriarchal and caste-restricted society. The narrative functions as a metaphor for the challenges faced by Dalit women, immersing readers in the socio-political dynamics of power and discrimination in rural India. Eventually, this story falls into the category of anthropomorphism where the goat reflects the existential reflection of a woman's rural life and it exposes a lot about discrimination and troubled lives.

Results: the outcome indicate that anthropomorphism in *Poonachi* serves as a potent instrument for social commentary, promoting prosocial behaviour and stimulating critical thought on societal inequities, especially concerning caste and gender.

Keywords: Anthropomorphism; Allegory; Discrimination; Rural Life; Patriarchy.

RESUMEN

Introducción: las representaciones antropomórficas generalmente sugieren que ciertas características humanas son universales y pueden ser compartidas por todas las criaturas. Este artículo intenta estudiar el efecto antropomórfico en el comportamiento prosocial de los humanos a través de una representación metafórica de una cabra negra llamada Poonachi en *Poonachi o la historia de una cabra negra* (2017) de Perumal Murugan.

Método: el artículo emplea un análisis literario cualitativo y hace referencia a teorías de la antropomorfización, incluidas las teorías de la “Teoría de la mente”, y la “Evolución cognitiva” de Guthrie, para examinar cómo Poonachi representa a grupos marginados, especialmente a las mujeres sometidas a la discriminación por género, casta y color. El análisis demuestra que el enfoque antropomórfico de Murugan humaniza a la cabra Poonachi, lo que genera empatía hacia los individuos marginados.

Discusión: este estudio examina la influencia antropomórfica en el comportamiento prosocial humano, concentrándose en la representación metafórica de Poonachi. Se investiga cómo la atribución de características humanas a los animales cultiva empatía en los lectores y los lleva a reflexionar sobre las situaciones marginales. Se analiza a Poonachi como símbolo de una mujer que enfrenta los obstáculos de una sociedad patriarcal y limitada por el sistema de castas. La narrativa funciona como una metáfora de los desafíos que enfrentan las mujeres dalit, sumergiendo a los lectores en las dinámicas sociopolíticas del poder y la discriminación en la India rural. Finalmente, esta historia se sitúa en la categoría de antropomorfismo, donde la cabra refleja la vida rural existencial de una mujer, y expone mucho sobre la discriminación y las vidas difíciles.

Resultados: los resultados indican que el antropomorfismo en *Poonachi* sirve como un potente instrumento de comentario social, promoviendo el comportamiento prosocial y estimulando la reflexión crítica sobre las inequidades sociales, especialmente en lo referente a casta y género.

Palabras clave: Antropomorfismo; Alegoría; Discriminación; Vida Rural; Patriarcado.

INTRODUCTION

Anthropomorphism is an act of giving human characteristics to non-humans or objects.⁽¹⁾ People frequently use animals, inanimate objects, or even imaginary entities to explain their experiences and behaviours by giving them human-like motives. It's a typical method of looking at and interacting with the world, where stories about animals or items stay clear in the mind and enable people to go back and recall memories and experiences from the past. Humans are social animals with a cognitive capacity for swift comprehension of social interactions and circumstances. The tendency to see non-humans as having human-like characteristics is regarded to be a by-product of that evolution. Thus, the aim of anthropomorphism is to make an animal or object behave and appear like it is a person.⁽²⁾

Numerous studies indicate that people who are lonely, under stress, or who are susceptible to social interactions are more likely to attribute human-like feelings and traits to their pets. The presence of mental states constitutes both a necessary and sufficient condition for humanness, as the presence of a humanlike face or humanlike body movement generally implies the presence of humanlike mental states as well.⁽³⁾ Anthropomorphism may foster human empathy towards non-human animals and consequently promote a positive attitude towards animal welfare, on the other hand, it may have deleterious effects on companion animals' emotional well-being. The Story of a Goat also aligns with the growing scholarship on positive animal welfare, defined as ‘mental and physical states that exceed what is strictly necessary for short-term survival’.⁽⁴⁾ Even though humans and other animals have some mental abilities in common, people who view animal behavior from a human perspective can exaggerate these similarities, misinterpret the actual significance of what the animals are doing, or even project their own psychological characteristics onto the animals. When humans anthropomorphize animals, they attribute to them their own traits, emotions, or intentions. In 1872, Charles Darwin⁽⁵⁾ described this in detail in his work ‘The expression of the emotions in man and animals’, pointing out the natural tendency of some people to describe non-human animals as ‘humanlike’ beings. Several goals are achieved through anthropomorphism, such as changing people’s viewpoints, highlighting systemic flaws, resolving political disenchantment, and averting conflicts during sensitive times. ‘I am fearful of writing about humans; even more fearful of writing about gods,⁽⁶⁾ Murugan writes in his preface to the novel, shows his choice to use animal characters in his novel can be interpreted as a way to address complex human themes and emotions in a safer, more symbolic, and creative manner, potentially creating a more accessible and relatable experience for his readers. Murugan required a ‘deep familiarity’ with the animal he chose to write about. The representation of animals in his novel are inextricable from real animals and grow from his experience growing up an living in small agricultural towns in Tamil Nadu, with a host of animals, such as buffaloes, sheep, dogs, and goats.⁽⁷⁾ Animals, at least outside of cows or pigs, will do less damage, where he expresses his fear of using this technique. ‘Goats are problem-free, harmless and above all, energetic’.⁽⁸⁾

METHOD

This study explores the anthropomorphic effect on human prosocial behavior by analyzing the metaphorical representation of a black goat named Poonachi in Perumal Murugan’s novel, “*Poonachi or the Story of a Black*

Goat” (2017). It utilises a qualitative methodology, particularly a close reading technique, to examine the anthropomorphic and allegorical components of the work. This approach entails a thorough analysis of the text to reveal its profound meanings and the ramifications of its literary techniques, emphasizing how the anthropomorphic depiction of characters, especially Poonachi, the black goat, functions as a lens to examine human emotions, societal dynamics, and the intricate relationships between humans and animals. The story has evolved from an animal fable to a political satire. The plot jumps from fantasy to reality where the allegorical figure of a goat serves as a careful representation of a girl morphing into a woman. The little goat possesses woman-like emotions and it goes through the ordeals an Indian woman has to face in a patriarchal society. The allegorical character Poonachi is a moving depiction of a girl coming of age, experiencing human emotions, and overcoming the obstacles that Indian women in a patriarchal society encounter. To explain how women living under patriarchy strategize to maximize security and optimize their life options....women’s responses to male dominance vary widely, according to the objective opportunities available under each particular variant of patriarchy... women act as devout guardians of patriarchal mores and values, to skilful maneuvering to make gains while avoiding overt conflict, to different levels of passive and active resistance.⁽⁹⁾ It deftly interweaves themes of caste, colour, and gender discrimination with unequal power dynamics, offering a symbolic prism through which society concerns are viewed. As it progresses, the narrative embraces anthropomorphism, presenting Poonachi as an existential mirror of a rural woman’s existence. Several reviews of *The Story of a Goat* state that it is a story about ‘the oppression of caste and colourism, government surveillance, the abuse of women’.⁽¹⁰⁾ The novel contributes to a better understanding of prosocial behaviour and the connections between the lives of humans and animals by shedding light on the complexity of prejudice and the challenges experienced by members of marginalized populations.

Poonachi is more than just a story; it’s a profound investigation of the story of humanity as a whole, which is one of birth, violation, redemption, and burial. In this work, the author uses an intriguing anthropomorphic and symbolic combination to give his characters—especially Poonachi, the black goat—a vivid sense of personality. Guthrie’s ‘cognitive evolution’ theory posits that humans anthropomorphise non-human entities to comprehend their surroundings, elucidating how Poonachi’s metamorphosis into a relatable, human-like figure critiques societal hierarchies, especially those founded on caste, gender, and colour. Readers can explore the inner thoughts and feelings of these creatures, this anthropomorphic portrayal, which provides a fresh perspective on the story. Using this lens, the novel reveals an insightful social reflection that throws light on various human experiences and hardships. Poonachi’s journey reflects the difficulties experienced by people in a complicated society and resonates with more prominent societal themes. Similarly, the concept of ‘The Theory of Mind’ enables readers to attribute human feelings and experiences to Poonachi, cultivating empathy for her marginalized circumstances. This cognitive process allows readers to perceive Poonachi’s problems as emblematic of the systemic oppression faced by women and Dalit folks. The use of anthropomorphism to create narrative depth not only makes the reader more engaged but also helps them comprehend the complex themes and feelings.

In addition, the novel explores the complex dynamics of interactions between humans and animals, which are significantly impacted by the anthropomorphic portrayal of the characters. As Hayward reflects ‘Interests of humans must always take precedence over the interests of nonhumans.’⁽¹¹⁾ These exchanges provide a microcosm to study human interactions and the intricate relationships between vulnerability, power, and empathy. *Poonachi* invites viewers to consider the wider literary and philosophical ramifications of anthropomorphic storytelling in addition to the story’s immediate focus. If we are always evaluating the degree to which the author presents the animal ‘in itself’ we will continue to miss, reduce, and fail to understand the nuances in how the human and relationships to humanness shape animal representations.⁽¹²⁾ It draws attention to how these kinds of tales have the power to impart important moral and philosophical lessons, provoking us to consider our place in and relationship to the animal kingdom. By looking at these critical areas, this study project advances knowledge of the literary devices of anthropomorphism and allegory, particularly their ability to critique and contemplate human society and the human experience.

DISCUSSION

An elderly man on top of a hill is shown a day-old baby goat by the mysterious Bhakasuran, who makes unsuccessful attempts to sell it. The story begins when the giant, unable to find a buyer, leaves the goat baby in the care of the old man. In a poignant twist of fate, a young, undernourished goat unexpectedly enters the life of an old couple, beginning an unforgettable journey. The family takes all necessary precautions to guarantee the creature’s life because they are committed to raising it. Enchanted by the caprine wonder’s singularity, the old couple gladly adopts her and gives her the name ‘Poonachi.’ The novel compels readers to contemplate their treatment of living beings and acts as a reflection of a rural woman’s existence, revealing the stark truths of discrimination and hardship. It articulates the concerns of the marginalized, compelling readers to reflect on their role in perpetuating an inequitable society. The intricate complexities of human-animal connections are elucidated through Poonachi’s interactions with diverse human personalities, depicted as interlaced threads

that evoke profound emotional significance.

Poonachi can be visualized as a colourful tapestry that effectively conveys the complex themes and characters of the novel. It is the focal point of this tapestry. The discourse centres on the anthropomorphic and allegorical representations in the novel and their significance for comprehending human society and the human experience. The novel is regarded as a profound examination of humanity, narrated via the existence of a black goat. The narrative employs anthropomorphism to imbue its characters with distinct personalities, facilitating reader empathy and comprehension of the story's intricate topics. *Poonachi* is anthropomorphically depicted with human-like characteristics and emotions, signifying the depth and resiliency of her personality. Smaller segments surrounding her introduce the other anthropomorphically expressive human and animal characters from the novel, highlighting their distinct roles and contributions to the overall meaning. The words and paragraphs are intensely scrutinized 'that it becomes impossible to sustain a univocal reading and the language explodes into multiplicities of meaning'.⁽¹³⁾ Key ideas are represented by symbols woven throughout the tapestry, such as the lush pasture signifying freedom and the chain symbolizing enslavement. These symbols engage with the anthropomorphized characters in ways that show how symbols and textures work together to express the deep meaning of the novel. A complex web of narrative strategies is evident in how anthropomorphism and symbolism interact, as shown by the thin threads that bind the characters and symbols together.

Poonachi is a gripping tale fusing an interesting animal tale with symbolic meanings regarding the significant influence of situation, skin tone, and power relationships. The story's genius is in its deft use of humour to highlight the harsh reality of unequal power dynamics, especially as it relates to the exploitation of marginalized groups including women, the underprivileged, people of colour, and the ignorant. The narrative opens with the unexplained birth of a goat in a typical community, highlighting the commonplace beginnings of what eventually turns into an exceptional existence. *Poonachi*'s journey illustrates the challenges faced by individuals in a complex society and echoes broader socioeconomic problems. The narrative's anthropomorphic and symbolic amalgamation offers a novel viewpoint, illuminating a profound social commentary that highlights many human experiences and adversities. Employing anthropomorphism to enhance narrative depth not only increases reader engagement but also aids in the understanding of intricate concepts and emotions.

The goat is anthropomorphized throughout, transcends her role as a black goat to represent the hardships and obstacles that marginalized people encounter. Murugan skilfully crafts a story that, in addition to captivating with its charming animal theme, offers a significant commentary on societal concerns by bringing to light the exploitation that those who are frequently disregarded and underserved in society experience. *Poonachi*'s journey goes beyond simple narrative to become a potent tool for delving into the complexity of power dynamics and the depths of human experience. she traverses the difficulties of the wild, coming into contact with a wildcat, an eagle, and the dangers of the jungle while being watched after by her adoptive family. The goat not only makes it through, but flourishes, overcoming obstacles like an infected wound and ultimately growing into a strong animal. This story neatly crafts a workable animal allegory that addresses important social justice issues, even though it may not explicitly explore political topics. Like George Orwell's⁽¹⁴⁾ '*Animal Farm*,' this anthropomorphic story functions on two levels: a literal, surface-level understanding, and a symbolic, deeper level understanding. *Poonachi* serves as a powerful reminder of modern gender-based abuse because of her upbringing and her identity as a female goat. *Poonachi* in spite of her individuality, becomes into a symbol of social norms and the brutality and violence that characterise a corrupt society.

Perumal Murugan uses metaphor in a subtle way, humanising his creatures without taking away from their natural vibrancy. Goats themselves have a host of symbolic meanings across the world but they rarely feature as main characters.⁽¹⁵⁾ Despite having a goat as its centre, the story develops into a moving examination of shared pain and resiliency, showing how societal expectations shape even goats' lives and reflecting T.S. Eliot's moving description of 'sorrow without foreboding.' *Poonachi*, the little dark she-goat, finds love in a nearby village, but her preferred mate dies. She is then taken by the old farmer to be mated with an elderly billy-goat, which the little goat finds repulsive and degrading. In order for her to be impregnated, the old farmer must also pay a hefty fee and it is compelled to give birth. They struggle to feed new-borns just as their human master despair of making ends meet. This appears to be a reference to power imbalances in societies that encourage arranged marriages at the expense of young women and place a low value on female autonomy.

Social reflection through anthropomorphic narrative depth

Murugan fashions *Poonachi* with emotion, desire, love, disappointment, anger, rumination, and everything human. Her 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.'⁽¹⁶⁾ In the later stages of her life, the abandoned black goat, clings desperately to life, like a hardy little crab fighting against the anguish and hunger to maintain her uniqueness. As she shares her everyday experiences with the elderly woman, the author's intense storytelling allows *Poonachi* to become a lens through which we view the world, complicating the distinctions between animal and human experience.

The narrative takes a surprising turn when Poonachi momentarily flees, enticed by the promise of freedom in a far-off forest, and falls in love with a young deer. Even though the story is centred around a goat, she ends up serving as a moving metaphor for the innocence and difficulties that the nation's daughters encounter. Murugan carefully blends social and political criticism, evoking comparisons between the mentality that pervades rural India and Poonachi's changing obligations and expectations. Her responsibilities grow as she gets older, reflecting sentiments in rural India and matching society expectations. The story takes a miraculous turn when Poonachi gives birth to seven children—more than any other goat has ever given birth to—becoming her mother's seventh offspring. Her little, black kitten-like look conceals the difficulties she faces in surviving and thriving. As she navigates the trials similar of those faced by Indian women in a patriarchal culture, she not only emerges as an ideal female form but also as a carrier of feminine trauma. Her perfect upbringing gives way to a harsh adulthood filled with adolescence, desire, and violence. Poonachi struggles with her brothers' castration, the death of her partner, and the heartbreaking experience of witnessing her children being taken away and killed. Her surroundings change from lush to desolate, illustrating the brutality of a society where people struggle to survive on limited resources. A light hearted indictment of authoritarian rule is laced throughout the story, offering a devastating yet enjoyable observation. Murugan expertly depicts the difficulties encountered by the subjugated animals, making comparisons to humanity's battles for independence and power as Poonachi's consciousness declines towards the inevitable climax.

The narrative tackles the sensitive subject of anthropomorphism and issues a warning against projecting human feelings onto actual animals. Poonachi gently challenges readers to reflect on their treatment of living things. Theoretically, Poonachi develops into a potent mirror of a rural woman's life, exposing the harsh facts of prejudice and a difficult living. She speaks for the voiceless, forcing readers to consider how they have contributed to an unfair society. The combination between deep storytelling and societal reflection creates an anthropomorphic storytelling that is both intriguing and mesmerising. Anthropomorphically depicted, Poonachi herself emerges as a moving representation of fortitude in the face of these human-like hardships. Another strand of literary animals presents a more nuanced sense of representation as: to make present again and to stand in place of ⁽¹⁷⁾ The Story of a Goat aligns with this sense because Poonachi is simultaneously represented as an animal and by toying. Her interactions with a wide range of human personalities are at the centre of this web. The complex dynamics of human-animal relationships are unravelled by these encounters, which are represented as interwoven threads and resonate with deep emotional meanings expressed through gestures and facial expressions.

The visual notion of a dynamic, interwoven web representing several facets of Poonachi and its investigation of anthropomorphism, interactions, and philosophical ramifications can be easily incorporated with the Theory of Mind which is the invisible thread weaving together the innermost feelings and ideas portrayed in thought bubbles or reflections surrounding anthropomorphized individuals in this complex narrative tapestry. Although humans may not be the only agents with sophisticated mental capacities, both philosophical and lay theories of personhood focus on mental states as the defining feature that distinguishes humans from other agents. ⁽¹⁸⁾ It is essential to comprehend how readers give these animal characters sophisticated, human-like mental states, which fosters a strong emotional bond and empathy. The Theory of Morality serves as a means of transportation for readers, linking the anthropomorphic portrayal to wider literary and philosophical implications. This indicates that anthropomorphism is a tool for storytelling, but also a means of delving into the complexities of relationships between humans and animals and social reflection. This idea sheds light on how readers' natural ability to assign mental states enhances the narrative experience in *Poonachi*, exposing the richness and depth of the novel's subjects as well as the deep bond that exists between readers and characters. With this, the book transforms into a profound meditation on the complex interactions that exist between people and animals in social contexts, providing insightful perspectives into the human condition. The narrative's brilliance resides in its skilful employment of humour to underscore the stark reality of unequal power dynamics, particularly concerning the exploitation of marginalized populations, including women, the disadvantaged, people of colour, and the uninformed.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

Murugan humanises Poonachi through the anthropomorphic lens without sacrificing any of her natural energy, giving rise to a compelling character that embodies the hardships, aspirations, and resilience shared by the nation's females. The use of anthropomorphism in *Poonachi* gives the goat life and serves as a potent metaphor for the hardships that many people in rural India, especially women, endure. The story gently but effectively criticizes the harsh reality of a violent and corrupt world while negotiating between the actual world of the impoverished village and the figurative world of symbolic representation. Allegorical motifs present in the novel gently addresses gender-based violence, societal expectations, and the harsh reality of a corrupt world. Poonachi represents the changing social mores and expectations in rural India as she grows up, takes on duties, and confronts problems like violence and desire. Murugan boldly confronts established patriarchal conventions,

religious and cultural beliefs, and the widespread hypocrisy that sustains systemic injustice and disregard for non-human life forms. His work intertwines themes of bondage, desire, and perseverance to encourage readers to reflect on their role in maintaining oppressive systems and to imagine a fairer and more empathetic society. *Poonachi* demonstrates how literature may reveal societal inequities and motivate people to work together for a fairer and more comprehensive society. He uses anthropomorphism and allegory to push readers to rethink their views on power, agency, and the intrinsic value of all living creatures. This enhances our comprehension of the human experience and our relationship with the environment. The study indicates that 'Poonachi' is a compelling novel that employs anthropomorphism and allegory to encourage readers to re-evaluate their perceptions of power, agency, and the inherent worth of all living beings. It prompts readers to contemplate their involvement in perpetuating oppressive structures and to envision a more equitable and compassionate world. The story functions as a compelling metaphor for the adversities faced by several individuals in rural India, particularly women, and as a catalyst for societal transformation. Poonachi turns into a heartbreaking representation of the rapidly changing social scene, her journey reflecting the struggles and changes women experience as they negotiate altering roles, contend with social expectations, and face the harsh realities of daily life. In the end, *Poonachi* goes beyond its simple story to evoke strong feelings of empathy in the reader as well as a persistent question: Can we, like Poonachi, find the courage to overcome hardship and carve out our own pathways despite the complexity of a changing world?

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