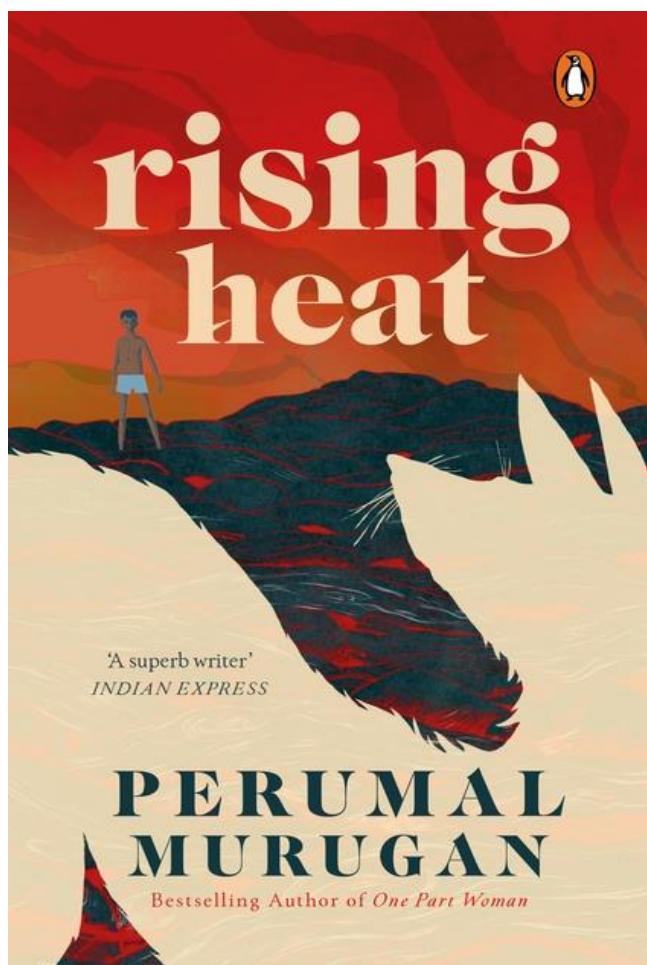


Perumal Murugan, *Rising Heat*. Trans. Janani Kannan. Hamish Hamilton: Penguin Random House India, 2020. Pp. i-xiv+319. ISBN: 9780670093663.



Perumal Murugan is a prominent voice in Tamil literature. His works started garnering national acclaim after some of his novels were translated into English. His novel *Seasons of the Palm* (translation of *Koolla Madari*, 2001) was shortlisted for the Kiriya Prize in 2005. However, he was hounded by right-wing political groups for *One Part Woman* (2013), his most critically acclaimed novel and translation of *Maadhorubaagan* (2010). The novel depicts a religious festival where childless women were free to choose their mates from among the men in the crowd. Though this was a socio-cultural reality of the Konga Nadu region in Tamil Nadu which formed the backdrop of his novel, he was persecuted

relentlessly for portraying it. The international coverage of this incident brought Murugan to the limelight and English translations of his works became much in demand.

Rising Heat (2020), the book under review, is the translation of *Yeru Veyil* (1991), Murugan's first novel written in Tamil. It depicts the effects of relentless urbanisation of contemporary times. Narrated from the perspective of Selvan, a boy from a farming family and a tenth standard student, the novel narrates how his ancestral lands are acquired by the state government to make way for a housing colony against meagre compensation. It goes on to represent the family's various vicissitudes after their displacement and depicts the various challenges posed by the unaccustomed surroundings and how they cope with these. The novel opens with Selvan, who goes back to his lands in search of his dog Mani. The dog initially refuses to leave the land and move to the dingy *valavu* (colony) of houses where families such as Selvan's have been rehabilitated. It still considers the original land as its home. Selvan and his family, however, have little choice but to accept the government's coercive behaviour. So while a merchant, who owned two acres adjoining their lands had the wherewithal to file a lawsuit against the government, the boy muses on their own helplessness. Selvan is stunned and horrified at the changed view of the lands. The bulldozers had assaulted and bruised his home beyond recognition. A terrified Selvan feels as if the bulldozer "was an image of juggernaut that swallowed anything and everything on its way..." (23).

Murugan's poignantly realistic portrayal of the devastation befalling families that are forced to sever their ties with ancestral lands is unique. These families have dwelled for generations in close proximity to the land, having derived from it not only economic sustenance but socio-cultural standing as well. The land is the context that provides meaning to their lives. Hence uprooting them from a familiar anchor and exposing them to a rapidly changing external world, definitely give rise to identity crisis and adaptation issues – all of which Murugan skilfully handles in the novel. Perhaps his astute understanding of this sense of loss and its consequent implications stem from the fact that he had lost his own farmlands in a similar urbanising project. The realisation that land could mean much more than a source of survival is reiterated in the narrative. He charts the changes in all characters in the family, irrespective of the life-stages they are in or other markers such as gender. As pointed out earlier, Murugan even represents the changes that Mani the dog undergoes due to the family's sudden change of circumstances. Expectedly, the most vulnerable characters in the novel are also the most affected ones. Thatha and Paati, Selvan's aged grandparents, take the worst hit. Aged and without shelter, they cannot work or make themselves useful in their sons' families. Unskilled in anything other than farm-related work, they cannot contribute economically. In families that already grapple with resource scarcity, it is easy to gauge why such people are treated as

burdens. The farmhands Kuppan and his daughter Ramayi, are reduced to dire straits and barely manage to feed themselves. Later in the novel, Selvan discovers that Ramayi works as a prostitute to feed herself and her aged father.

After the displacement, every member of the family has to earn to survive. This in turn exposes them as prey to the machinations of the outside world. Selvan's sister elopes with a mason she believes herself to be in love with. She is recovered later and married off to a much older widower. Annan, his elder brother, changes from a good-natured obedient boy to a habitual drunkard and a heartless selfish man. His parents' marital bliss is destroyed because of the constant bickering about money. His father resorts to beating his mother frequently out of frustration. His mother has to devise ingenious ways of making some extra money, which very frequently fail. His father invests his savings in a dubious finance company that shuts down. They not only lose their money but have to repay people who had invested in the company through them. Even before this ultimate downfall, the atmosphere at home becomes so toxic that Selvan chooses a college far away from home.

Murugan does not create pathetic, unidimensional, unlayered characters that evoke mere sympathy or pity. He peoples his novel with characters that display broad spectrums of positive and negative shades. They come alive with the various ranges of emotions that they evoke in the reader. Murugan is a master in depicting human emotions, a characteristic feature that peaks in his recent masterpieces. The beginning of the trait can be traced back to *Rising Heat*. Here, as well as in later novels, he engages with raw and uncontrolled emotions that surge after a catastrophe strikes. Though in this respect *Rising Heat* cannot be categorised with *One Part Woman*, his powerful skills at portraying human emotion is quite evident. The novel ends significantly with the death of the dog Mani. The only existing link that reminds Selvan of a life in his ancestral homestead, snaps. Selvan reflects back on Mani's life and its attachment to the land, and the reader cannot but help marvelling at the irony with which Murugan equates the predicament of a dog with that of Selvan and his family. He says "uprooting the little dog that was content in its little world... and asking it to breathe had overwhelmed it. It struggled... tried various ways to stabilize itself but it just couldn't" (310).

Murugan's novel under review bears striking similarity with Vishwas Patil's (1959-) Sahitya Akademi winning Marathi novel *Zadazadati* (1991), the translated version of which was published in 2014 as *A Dirge for the Dammed* (Gurgaon: Hachette India, 2014). It was translated by Keerti Ramachandra. Interestingly, both were originally written around the same time – between 1991 and 1992. The latter is thematically similar, depicting displacement and its after-effects on the lives of the villagers of Jambhili. Their homes are submerged because of the dam-building process on the river Vaghjai. Both novels focus on

issues such as displacement and unequal development which benefit only a select population.

Murugan, Patil and other regional writers were responding to the changing economic scenario – deregulation of the economy – of the time. With foreign capital flowing in, rapid urbanisation was afoot. The thriving, embedded, place-based culture of living practised by people such as peasants, farmers, and other indigenous communities faced threats of erasure. In *Ecology and Equity: The Use and Abuse of Nature in Contemporary India* (Gurgaon: Penguin Books, 1995), Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha use the term “ecosystem people” to refer to them. These people “depend on the natural environments of their own locality to meet most of their material needs” (3). It is the polar opposite of the category of the “omnivores” by which they mean resource-rich consumers, who are the primary beneficiaries of these developmental projects (4). The policy of “development” devastates the lives of the most vulnerable section of the population – the poor farmers – who can never be the beneficiaries of such a system. Apart from being a compelling depiction of loss, destruction and displacement, *Rising Heat* is also a faithful record of the time it depicts.

Murugan’s novel is also relevant as an exemplary specimen of contemporary Indian environmental fiction. It foregrounds a particular strain of state-sponsored violence on a section of its people who lose their natural habitat. In his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2011), Rob Nixon calls this “slow violence” which he defines as “a violence that occurs gradually... a violence of delayed destruction... an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all... a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive...” (2). Murugan captured this reality creatively in *Rising Heat* as early as in 1991. He brings up an extremely pertinent issue that is currently relevant in countries of the Global South. The translation of *Yeru Veyil* in 2020 again problematises the concept of national development and its human casualties. It also brings to the notice of global readers the rich contributions of the writers of Bhasha literature. Janani Kannan’s translation brings alive Selvan’s world, located in a remote region of Tamil Nadu, for readers from all over the world. The translation makes the setting seem real and palpable, at the same time effectively conveying the sensibilities and modalities of the culture. It is important that more works of Bhasha literature are translated into English for the benefit of a wider audience, for there is a significant difference in the nature of issues with which authors from these two distinct streams engage. There is limited focus on indigenous life worlds and the threats it faces in the works of Anglophone Indian literature. However, these issues are very much part of the changing topography of the postcolonial nation-state and need to be addressed more frequently. Making available more regional literature in translation is an effective way to bridge this existing gap.

Gargi Dutta
PhD Scholar, Department of English
University of North Bengal
Former Assistant Professor, St Joseph's College Bangalore
Email: gargi84dutta@gmail.com