

# Unveiling the Place as Presence: A Geo-critical Analysis of Perumal Murugan's *Pyre*

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## Abstract

This study investigates how geographical places in Perumal Murugan's novel, *Pyre*, function as a constant presence like a character. To achieve this end, Bertrand Westphal's 'multifocalization framework' is employed to examine the geographical setting of Murugan's novel not only as a passive backdrop but as a shaping factor of narrative. Through the perspectives of Saroja, Kumaresan, and Marayi – representing endogenous, exogenous, and allogenuous viewpoints respectively – the paper highlights the intricate interplay of place, identity, and societal norms. Moreover, the research also foregrounds the environmental consciousness within the narrative and portrays nature as a communicative entity that interacts with the protagonists. This study aims to introduce a new critical standpoint on Murugan's *Pyre* from a geocritical perspective. It also offers a comprehensive understanding of geocriticism and strengthens the discourse on the complex interaction between people and their environments, particularly in rural Indian contexts.

**Keywords:** Geocriticism; Identity; Multifocalization; Perumal Murugan; Place.

## Introduction:

The study of place as a central presence received its impetus from Geocriticism. The field of Geocriticism emerged by collaborating literary significance of geographical locations mentioned in a literary work. It becomes an approach to literature that focuses on place as the axis of argument. Hence, it can be considered an advanced approach to literary works since it gives special prominence to place and spatiality which Tally believes "have become more prominent in social, cultural, and literary criticism in the last 50 years" (Tally Interviewed 2015). This approach mainly focuses

on the literary setting of a work and shifts the focus from the author to the place depending on diverse and multiple points of view since the different representations of a place change the way it is perceived.

Geocriticism approaches the place by reflecting on the meaning, identity or depiction of a place based on comparison. Bertrand Westphal pays great attention to the representation of the place by promoting “a multiplicity of heterogeneous points of view, which all converge in a place” (Westphal 122). Therefore, this paper aims to highlight the implication of place by contextualising a literary work within a specific geographical landscape. Overall, this paper discusses ‘geocriticism’ as a contemporary approach to place-writing that challenges dominant subject-centred perspectives and gives the landscape a voice and presence.

### **Theoretical Background:**

Space and Time are the two essential concepts for human existence. Throughout the nineteenth century, the discourses of time, space, and history – along with modern aesthetics and individual psychology – have dominated critical attention. Meanwhile, Place seems to have been relegated, as it received trivial attention from critics before the twentieth century. However, a theoretical shift known as ‘spatial turn’ came into being in the 1980s that emphasised the importance of space and place in understanding cultural and social phenomena. As defined by Bertrand Westphal, geocriticism takes its conceptual lead from the ‘spatial turn’ of the 1980s, but the emphasis now is on place-centred criticism rather than on mapping the subject in an era of globalization. According to Bertrand Westphal, spatial turn provided the conceptual incentive for geocriticism which explores how the place functions more than a static setting and becomes an active contributor to the narrative.

Therefore, distinguishing between place and space is crucial for defining the goal of a geocritical study. Although, place and space appear to be synonymous. However, there are certain distinctions between them. Some definitions of space distinguish it from place. Richardson defines, “To take up space is to have a location facing toward or away from other places. Space is, in that sense, relative to place, a location from which and toward which it is” (21). He defines space and place showing how they are interconnected. Following this, space is that which is borderless, limitless, and directionless.

Meanwhile, place then is a segment of space that is particularised and lo-

calised based on an individual's more intense attachment formed through ascribing meanings, projecting ideas and making interpretations. Therefore, the place is "a setting to which individuals are emotionally and culturally attached" (Altman and Low 5), a section of space "enriched with human experience and understanding; an organized world of meaning" (Tuan 179). Thus, place has a much more immediate impact on our existence and identity than space. In effect, these prove more influential for the significance of place than its actual physical and historical attributes.

The study of how the place is portrayed in literary works has been enhanced and given new impetus in recent years with the emergence of geocriticism. The theoretical foundation of this study is based on the works of Bachelard, Tuan, Relph, Westphal and Tally. Bachelard's studies delineate the associations a reader makes to their own lived places, in reading about the literary places: "The reader who is "reading a room" leaves off reading and starts to think of some place in his own past" (14). Moreover, E. Relph in his work *Place and Placelessness* states, "Places are not abstractions or concepts but are directly experienced phenomena of the lived world, and hence are full of meanings, with real objects, and with ongoing activities" (141). This perspective aligns with the idea that the study of places goes beyond abstract analysis, requiring an understanding of the lived realities and subjective experiences that shape our connection to specific locations. Thereby it suggests that place is a dynamic force that affects people's lives on an individual and community level. As Yi-Fu Tuan demonstrates in *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, "Place emerges from the almost inchoate or chaotic proliferation of relations associated with space" (161-62). According to Tuan, places are created by humans interacting with the intricate web of relationships that exist inside a location, rather than being predetermined or fixed entities. This dynamic idea is moulded by social interactions, culture, experience, and human perception.

Moreover, an important contribution was made by Bertrand Westphal's *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces* (2007), which advocated a geo-centred approach that describes, "Unlike most literary approaches to space, geocriticism tends to favour a geocentered approach, which places place at the centre" (112). This book also inspired *Ecocriticism and Geocriticism: Overlapping Territories in Environmental and Spatial Literary Studies* by Tally Jr. and Battista who draw upon the basic principles of Westphal's theory of geocriticism. They summarized these four principles as "geocentrism, multifocalization, polysensoriality, and stratigraphic perspective" (24). Westphal's geocentric approach is based on an exploration of 'place study' with a primary focus on 'location' which would examine as many

textual representations of a single location (such as Paris, Venice, or the Mediterranean) as possible.

Both Robert T. Tally Jr. and Bertrand Westphal are the major theorists of geocriticism who have interrogated the role of spatiality in literary studies. Tally Jr. in his book, *Spatiality* (2013), deals with the relationship between literary geography and cartography. Therefore, Geocriticism emerged as a field of literary studies that focuses on geographical places in literary settings. The field of geocriticism draws elements from several disciplines, as Tally Jr. further states, "Geocriticism allows us to emphasize the ways that literature interacts with the world" (x). The relations between the "real" and the "fictional" spaces are thus key to the field of geocriticism. The function of a geo-critic can be said to "approach analysing a text by first focusing on its specific place—geographic location, landscape, bioregion, or environmental—instead of on a writer, text, or historical context" (qtd. in Tally Jr. and Battista 39). Moreover, the geocritical exploration of the place brought about a corresponding change in the perception of the place. The place here is not just a background entity but is foregrounded and becomes the voice of the character's identity.

The existing discourses of geocriticism are more likely to be concerned about the representation of space or place. There are very scarce attempts to explore the depths of geocriticism in the context of literary writings. Only a few papers exist that capture peripheral nuances of place as an entity in a literary work. For example, Peng Zhao-na and Peng Shi-yu in their research paper "Geocriticism of *The Old Man and the Sea*" highlight how the sea serves as both a physical setting and a symbolic geography, influencing Santiago's identity and actions. However, Maria Margariti's paper "Literary Geography: Applying Geocriticism in *The Mermaid Madonna* by Stratis Myrivilis" demonstrates how the setting of Skala Skamnias symbolises Greek identity, resilience, and cultural synthesis. Margariti's study also highlights the novel's geographical realism and explores themes of transgression and boundary navigation, reflecting broader themes of adaptation and resistance. Similarly, Dilek Inan's paper "A Geocritical Reading of Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders*" reveals how the protagonist's navigation of diverse spatial landscapes becomes a means of asserting agency challenging societal norms, and negotiating complex power structures. Inan elucidates how spatial mobility becomes a tool for survival, empowerment, and resistance against societal constraints. Whereas, Amany Abdullah's in his paper "A Geocritical Reading of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*" examines the symbolic significance of the Lowland as a character in the novel and explores its transformation following a pivotal event and its

reverberating impact on the characters' lives.

This aspect of the analysis offers a compelling insight into the role of geographical features as dynamic entities that shape the narrative trajectory and characters' identities. Therefore, in literature, the implication of place has consistently transcended its traditional role as a backdrop or setting. The place does not confine merely to the meaning common people associate it with. It has many connotations that impart shades of meaning to characters and their actions.

For the present study, Perumal Murugan's novel is taken for a detailed analysis of geographical places and their significance. Murugan is celebrated for his insightful works chiefly centred around the Kongunadu region in Tamil Nadu, India. His works feature real-life characters - both human and nonhuman - in a dynamic relationship with each other. They mainly focus on the mundane life and how it is resisted by torrid socio-cultural conditions, environmental concerns, and an emotional landscape. Murugan makes an imaginative recreation of his community's inner life and the challenges continually confronted by the inhabitants to bring the terrain and people alive and give them dignity and legitimacy by fostering an intimate familiarity. His literary prowess lies in his ability to make readers deeply understand the intricacies of the inner life in the Kongunadu region.

His novel *Pyre* is the first Tamil novel to be nominated for the 2023 International Booker Prize. This novel was originally written in Tamil in 2013 and later translated into English by Aniruddhan Vasudevan in 2016. It has been analyzed by G. Naveen Kumar who in his paper "An Ignorant Protagonist in Perumal Murugan's *Pyre*" examines the conquerable complications Saroja faces due to inter-caste marriage. However, Jayshri Ramnath Chopade in the article "Thematic Study of Perumal Murugan's *Pyre*" dichotomizes the fictitious dissections of society into relevant social, political, economic, and cultural concerns as well as their root causes. Whereas, Utsarga Ghosh in "The Novels of Margaret Atwood and Perumal Murugan: A Dystopian Journey" delineates the horrific present and future situations through the illustration of social dystopia in the present context and later disagreement with the family. Thus, as far as Perumal Murugan's writing is concerned, there is a dearth of research on his works from a geo-critical perspective.

The narrative of this novel revolves around Saroja and Kumaresan, a young couple who elope in rural southern India. They have optimistic

expectations about their inter-caste marriage yet they have to encounter familial disapproval and societal constraints in the village. Building the arguments based on this foundation, this study employs the frameworks of Westphal's geocriticism to explore the setting of Kattuppati as an active participant that embodies the socio-cultural landscape, gender dynamics, and the environmental concerns of characters.

### **Research Gap**

Despite these valuable contributions, there is a notable absence of in-depth geocritical analysis that specifically explores the significance of place in Perumal Murugan's *Pyre*. The narrative of the novel challenges societal truths and sheds light on caste-based discrimination and social intolerance that characters have to face in the region. Through the struggle of the protagonist navigating these contrasting places, Murugan foregrounds displacement, modernity, and the clash between urban and rural places. While previous research has effectively highlighted how place functions beyond mere settings, there is a lack of focus on how place actively participates in the narrative, shaping themes and environmental concerns within rural Indian settings.

### **Research Objective and Scope**

This research aims to address this gap by employing the frameworks of Westphal's geocriticism to examine how the setting in *Pyre* is not just a backdrop but an active, dynamic participant in the narrative. By exploring the interplay between the geographical landscape of Kattuppati and the socio-cultural, gender, and environmental challenges faced by the characters, this study seeks to unveil the multifocal ways in which place influences the characters in Murugan's novel. Through a detailed examination of specific geographical locations and their symbolic significance, this research aims to shed light on the broader themes and messages conveyed in *Pyre* contributing to the field of geocriticism and enriching our appreciation of the intricate relationship between literature and place. Moreover, the analysis will contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of place in shaping narratives and characters' identities in Indian literature, thus expanding the scope of geocritical studies to include more diverse cultural contexts.

### **Research methodology**

The research methodology employed in this study is multifocalization,

a notion that encourages different points of view and may be the most significant defining element of geocriticism. For Westphal, any attempt to present a subjective point of view of a place or to relate to a specific nation or ethnicity would result in labelling that place. Subjectivity, regardless of the intention of the viewer, limits its meaning to the social, gender, and environmental dimensions to which the characters in the narrative fit. The multiplicity of points of view delivers a deeper and more comprehensive survey of how this place is perceived and conceived. Hence, the geocritic should try to include the multi-layered role of place. Westphal introduces three variations for multifocalization: endogenous (a viewer with an internal cause or who is of the same origin of the place), exogenous (an exterior viewer/foreigner), and allogenous (a viewer who stands in between, like a foreigner who has settled in a place for a time long enough to be familiar with all its cultural characteristics). All three perspectives should be taken into consideration when studying a multifocal approach to a literary text to produce a subjective, symbolic, and thematic representation of the place with all its complexities and its gender, environmental, and social dimensions.

### **Analysis**

Geocriticism, according to Westphal, is never gratified with a singular perspective in the representation of a place. The endogenous perspective of characters like Marayi and Kumaresan, who are deeply rooted in their environment, contrasts with the exogenous viewpoint of Saroja, an outsider struggling to adapt. This exogenous perspective of Saroja will fade out when she, having lived in the place and mingled with its environment long enough, turns into an allogenous viewer. This viewpoint comes from characters who, though originally an outsider, have assimilated into the place over time. It provides a unique transitional perspective, bridging the gap between endogenous and exogenous viewpoints. This approach enriches the narrative and offers a comprehensive portrayal of place as a complex and multifaceted entity. Throughout *Pyre*, there are various symbolic representations of place which signify that the personality of places is not simply a location but “an organised world of meaning” (Tuan 179). The place has many connotations that impart shades of meaning to characters and their actions. It illuminates the diverse and dynamic role of place in shaping characters’ experiences and perceptions.

Endogenous perspective: It provides a profound understanding of the place through the eyes of characters like Marayi and Kumaresan. This perspective is essential for appreciating the cultural, social, gender and

environmental complexities of the place. The rock, where Marayi and Kumaresan lived after his father's death, symbolises resilience and the ability to withstand challenges. Marayi's familiarity with agricultural practices, the seasonal cycles, and the land's fertility highlights her intimate connection with the environment. As delineated, "Marayi did not even need a person to talk to. She could speak to the goats, the trees, and the plants, even while staring into vacant space." (138). Nature as a Communicative Outlet: Marayi's tendency to speak with the goats, trees, and plants suggests a desire for communication and expression. Nature becomes a receptive outlet for her need to communicate. As she lives on the rock, she may lack regular human companionship. In the absence of direct human interaction, she turns to nature for the sake of interaction.

Kumaresan's endogenous perspective is vital for understanding his character and the broader social dynamics in *Pyre*. His deep connection to the land, cultural immersion, and integration into the community highlight the richness and complexity of rural life. The barren landscape, initially devoid of life and fertility symbolises a state of stagnation or desolation. Kumaresan's enthusiastic communication with the land conveys a sense of hope and optimism. It turns nature into a symbolic character that plays a role in the unfolding narrative. "He spent very little time actually sleeping under the Indian beech tree. He would simply lie there, hoping for a glimpse of her" (64). The Indian beech tree under which Kumaresan lies becomes a symbol of his unspoken desires and longing for Saroja. The tree serves as a silent witness to Kumaresan's internal struggles. The beech tree might carry an element of foreshadowing or act as an omen as it could signal the challenges and conflicts that Kumaresan and Saroja will face in their relationship, suggesting that their love may not unfold smoothly. However, his perspective also reveals the challenges of adhering to traditional norms in the face of personal desires and external influences. By presenting the perspectives of both Marayi and Kumaresan, Murugan offers a layered and multifaceted portrayal of the place. Their endogenous viewpoints provide insights into the cultural, social, and environmental aspects of the village, creating a rich and textured narrative.

Exogenous perspective: The 'exogenous' viewer, according to Westphal, gives a generalized sometimes superior, opinion of the place and the people she encounters. This perspective refers to the viewpoint of an outsider who is unfamiliar with the local customs, environment, and social norms. It often involves a sense of alienation, confusion, and the challenge of adapting to new surroundings. Upon arriving in Kumaresan's village, Saroja feels a profound sense of alienation. Arid land, devoid of houses

and seemingly inhospitable, serves as a challenging and unfamiliar terrain for Saroja. It creates a sense of isolation and emptiness, contributing to Saroja's hesitation and unease as she steps into this new environment. Moreover, "Saroja stood up in fear. Marayi pointed at her and started her dirge, 'I have one son only – one son to continue my family line. After destroying his life and burying him alive, here she stands on top of his grave, lush like the erukku shrub'" (62). Marayi's dirge suggests a sense of destruction and burial, indicating that Saroja's presence has harmed her son and by extension, the family. Saroja hopes for some guidance or reassurance from Marayi, especially during her initial days in the village. However, Marayi's silence and disapproval intensify Saroja's feelings of isolation. The erukku shrub becomes a symbolic element, representing Marayi's disapproval and disdain for Saroja. The tension between Saroja and Marayi exemplifies the clash between exogenous and endogenous perspectives. Marayi's suspicion and hostility towards Saroja underscore the difficulty of bridging cultural divides. It delineates how different socio-cultural backgrounds and identities, such as class and caste, influence characters' perceptions and responses to specific settings.

The stark differences between the character's original culture and the new one lead to cultural disorientation. This includes difficulty in understanding and adapting to new customs, languages, and social expectations. The desolate setting of Kattuppati in *Pyre* prompts a sense of loneliness and despair, which is reflected in the brooding and tormented nature of Saroja in contrast to the vibrant and lively cityscape of Tholur, which evokes excitement and ambition, leading the characters Saroja and Kumaresan to pursue their dreams relentlessly. The story unfolds in different locations, each with its own social norms and expectations. The couple visited Kumaresan's grandparents in Virichipalayam. His grandparents' house, initially perceived as a refugee, turns out to be a place of estrangement and hostility. The physical space that was supposed to symbolise warmth and familial bonds becomes a site of conflict and rejection. Virichipalayam highlights the social constraints and expectations associated with different geographical locations. This indicates that the implication of place is tied to social stratification and caste dynamics. Different places may have distinct social structures and attitudes towards caste, and individuals may be perceived and treated based on these factors. Casteism, is a deeply ingrained social structure, within the context of the village councils' decision. It is the practice of social hierarchy and discrimination based on one's caste or social class. Saroja, originally from Tholur, faces a cultural clash upon arriving in Kumaresan's village.

Allogenuous perspective: This exogenous perspective appears to be less subjective when the character's perception of the place develops and when Saroja, who lives in the place and mingles with its people long enough, turns into an allogenuous viewer. Her outsider status illuminates the cultural clashes and complexities of adaptation in a traditional community, while also symbolizing the potential for growth and transformation. Initially, Saroja's evolving perception of the rock encapsulates her journey from feeling oppressed and isolated to finding emotional comfort and belonging. "The only thing she found comforting about this place was the rock" (46). Rock serves as a symbol of stability and permanence. In the context of the narrative, where characters undergo numerous transitions, the rock becomes a place where she has found solace or associated it with memories.

Meanwhile, the dark bush becomes a secret refugee for Saroja. It is a place where she can escape from the harsh realities of her life, shed tears in privacy, and distance herself from the troubles in her married life. It symbolises her determination to survive and resist the impending danger. Saroja's attempt to move further into the bush despite the obstacles reflects her desperation and resolution to avoid capture. It evolves to symbolise the clash between her desire for safety and the external threats she faces. Towards the end, the bush and the fire take on a dreamlike quality. She contemplates the possibility of waking up from this nightmare, emphasising the blurred lines between reality and the dream world.

## **Conclusion**

The research paper explores a geocritical analysis of Perumal Murugan's novel *Pyre*, emphasizing the multifocal role of place in shaping narrative themes, character development, and socio-cultural dynamics. Through the perspectives of Saroja, Kumaresan, and Marayi, this study represents diverse viewpoints by depicting how specific geographical settings—such as barren landscapes and rock—symbolically influence the novel's mood and characters. It highlights the intricate connections between place, identity, and societal norms, revealing deeper insights into caste-based societies and rural Indian life. Moreover, Murugan's portrayal of nature as a communicative entity adds an environmental dimension, underscoring how natural surroundings interact with and shape the intentions of the protagonists. Ultimately, this analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of Murugan's literary work and enriches critical discourse on the interplay between place, culture, and literature in contemporary Indian fiction.

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