

Editor's Note: This is an occasional column where selected readers questions on writing will be addressed, so any question can be sent to the Literature Page Editor at dsliteditor@gmail.com

What makes a writer successful?

FARAH GHUZNAVI

That is a really interesting question, and before answering it, there is another question that needs to be considered: *whose* idea of success are we talking about? Because the truth is, that could be the determining factor in providing an answer to the question being posed. For example, if a publisher is asked this, the definition of success is likely to be almost entirely financially-based, depending upon book sales and the amount of money earned from a publication. And that does of course make sense, because publishing is a business.

By contrast, if a reader is asked this same question the answer is more likely to be related to the content and impact of the book. So

a reader may choose to focus on the effect the book has had on their thinking, or what kind of change it has brought about in the reader's own life. To give an example, the book *To Kill a Mockingbird* was one that I read as a teenager, and the issues of poverty, injustice and the racial attitudes that it portrayed had a huge influence in terms of shaping my own perspectives on these issues.

Interestingly enough, *To Kill a Mockingbird* also happens to be one of the best-selling books of all time, and it is acknowledged that in the 1960s, the novel became a major factor in influencing many United States citizens' views in favour of the Civil Rights Movement - thereby

contributing to the support it received from the American public, and its subsequent success in challenging long held racist attitudes. But that is not the reason why I cherished the book. It meant something to me because of what I learned from it. As a result, Atticus Finch will always be one of my fictional heroes, and the beautifully-drawn character of Scout remains vivid in my memory despite the intervening years since I first read their story.

Another book, which also influenced me greatly, but for the opposite reason, was an all-but-forgotten tale titled *Kathryn Brings Them Home*. This story is set in South Africa, and describes the adventures of a plucky British girl who goes there to fetch her dead sister's children home, and in the process discovers a fascinating, far away country. At age 12, I loved the book, and confidently told my mother, "I'm going to visit South Africa as soon as I grow up."

The thing is, the book was set in apartheid-era South Africa. But this story "whitewashed," turns the oppression and cruelty permeating those times into a simple tale of an English girl's discovery of a joyous and exotic country. So I was immensely distressed when my mother replied, "I'm sorry, but you can't go there. They won't let you in, because they don't like brown people." Her reply mystified me, but my determination to understand what she meant led to a lifelong exploration of the issues of injustice - social, racial, gendered and otherwise - that permeate our world. So in a way, I'm actually glad I read that book, despite the fact that it was so utterly dishonest in terms of its portrayal of South Africa!

I should add that in my view, fiction does not need to be based on actual events, but authenticity in terms of storytelling is a crucial element of what takes a story from being a good one to being a great one.

Returning to the question of a writer's success, there are of course readers who choose to buy a book simply *because* it's popular. They want to be up to date with the next big thing, whether it's a bestseller or a fashion trend. I suspect that these are some of the people who helped to make the atrociously written *Fifty Shades of Grey* such an enormous success. The fact that the book was breaking records for its phenomenal

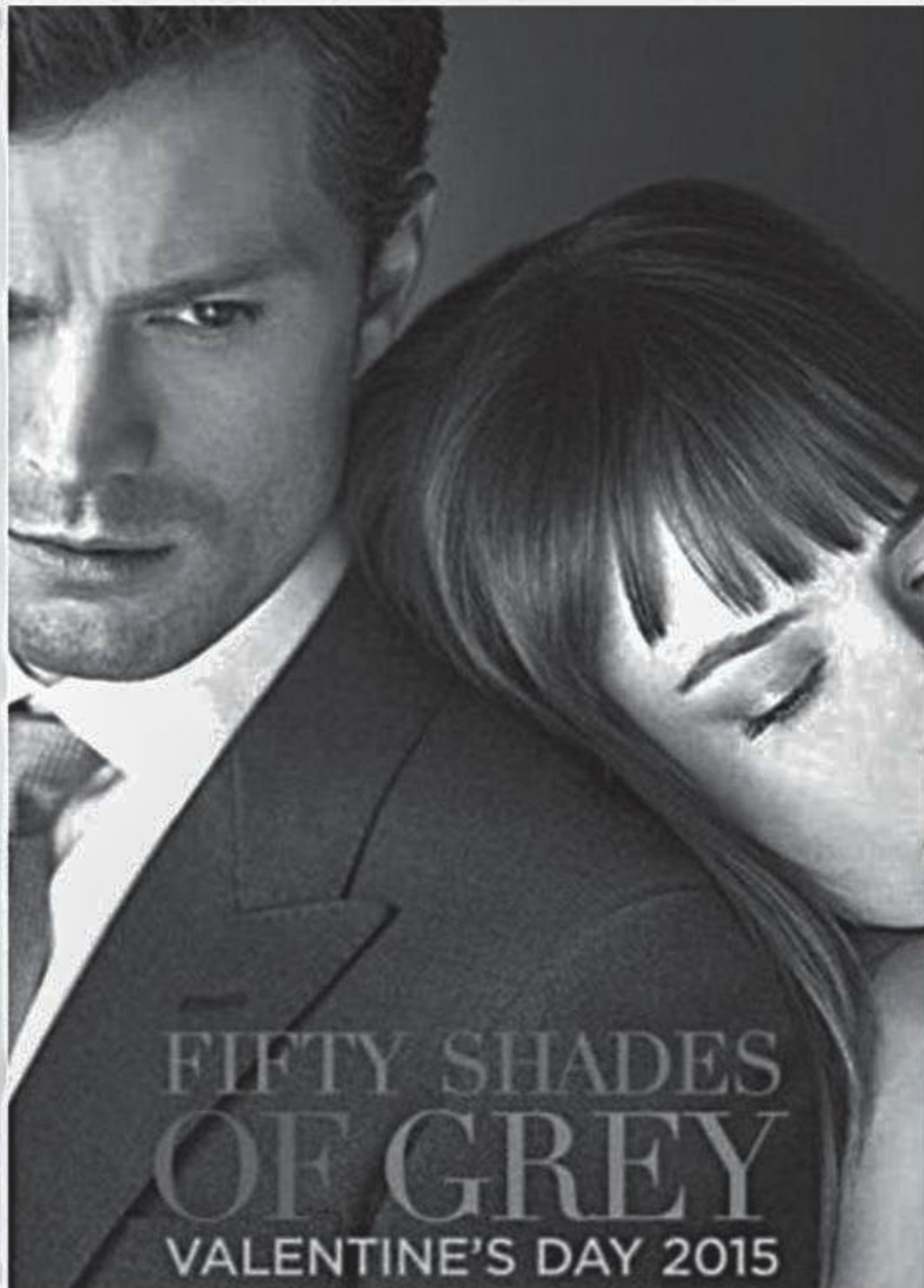
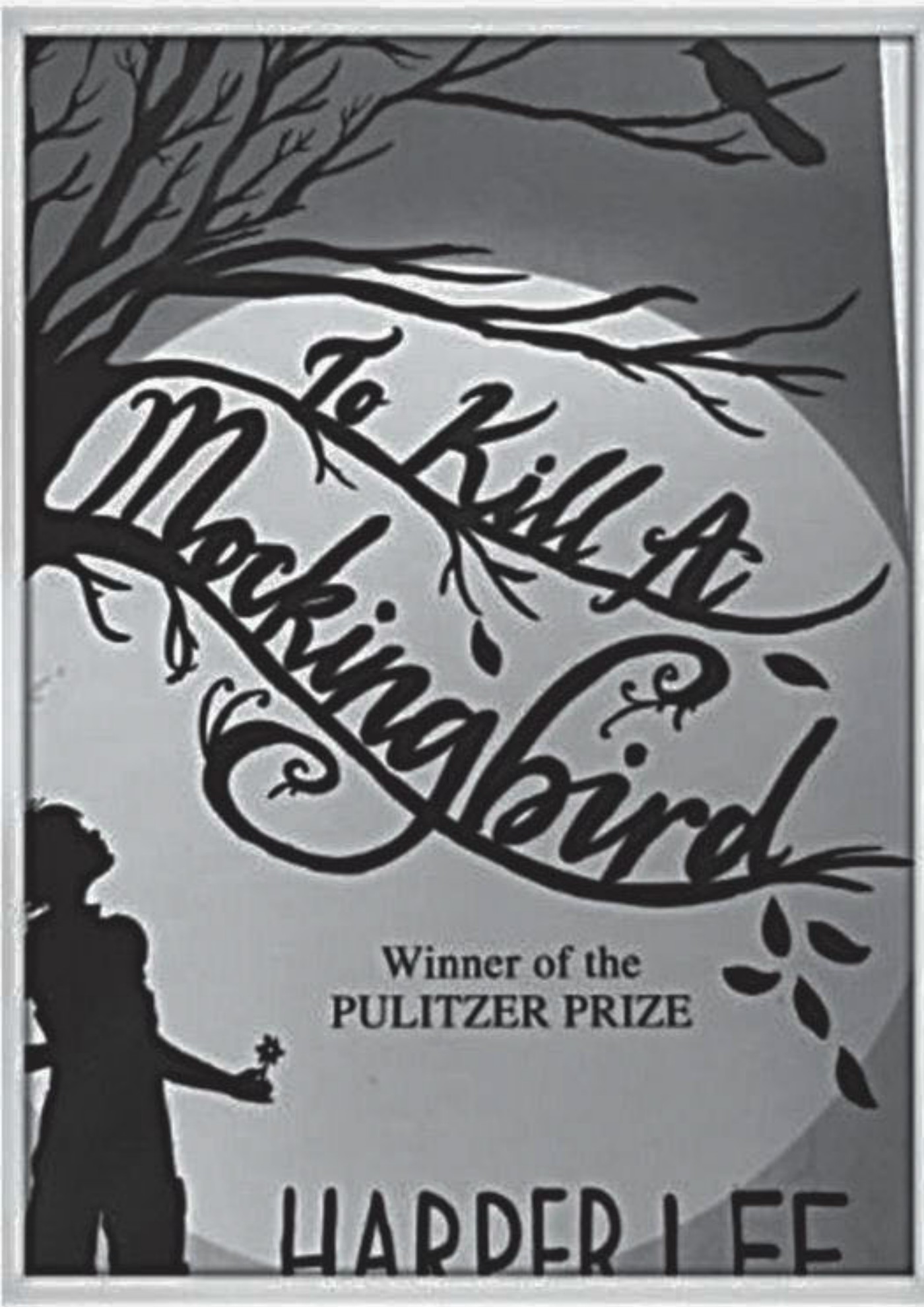
sales became in part a self-fulfilling prophecy.

So much so, that I actually had the experience of a German friend's mother mentioning to me that she had just purchased this novel, and asking me what I thought of it. I said (truthfully) that I had not read it, but I could not imagine how this gracious woman would feel about having mentioned the book to me once she found out what its subject matter consisted of. As it happened, my friend's mother had bought it simply because the sales staff at the bookstore told her that it was the next "must buy" book. She has never brought it up with me since.

Now, coming to the question of what the response might be if this question of success were to be posed to a writer, the truth is that even here, the answer might well vary depending on which writer you ask. There are many authors who are quite forthright about their ambition to make money, and some will admit to it being the main motive behind their writing. This is true of many writers who publish commercial fiction, and some who write genre fiction as well. A well-known writer of literary fiction, my friend Prajwal Parajuly, once quite frankly told an audience at a literary fest where we were both on stage, that if his work had not brought financial rewards with it, he would have stopped writing. As it turned out, he is a gifted writer and something of a publishing phenomenon, so he really is one of the privileged few who have it all!

While most of us need to earn a living, I do think that many writers do not see making money as their primary aim. In any case, earning an income from almost any day job is an easier prospect than making money from writing! For some writers, it is a question of feeling that they have a story to tell, something that they urgently need to share with the wider world. For others, writing satisfies something deep inside them, and the work itself is a source of pleasure. For most, the process is therapeutic. So while is no doubt that money comes in very useful, as the wise author Jane Smiley once put it, "I believe that you either love the work or the rewards. Life is a lot easier if you love the work."

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REVIEWS

The Burden of Miracle in *Poonachi*: or the Story of a Black Goat

Perumal Murugan. ISBN: 9386850494. Westland Books, 2018

REVIEWED BY FATHIMA M.

Perumal Murugan, the Tamil writer who rose to fame with self-declaration of his death as an author following protests by the Right wing against his writing, has resurrected with a forceful new novel, *Poonachi*. The protagonist of the novel is a goat, a safe choice considering how, as he writes in the beginning of the novel, he is fearful of hate-mongering against him. He says, "I am fearful of writing about humans; even more fearful of writing about gods. I can write about demons. Perhaps, I am even used to a bit of the demonic life. I could make it an accompaniment here. Yes, let me write about animals."

Murugan is a writer for the common man and marginalized communities who strive for bare survival in the wake of social hierarchy, natural calamities, and lack of resources. His novels and short stories unleash the pain of the poor and the vulnerable while exposing unjust social systems.

It is interesting to note that the idea of survival in the novel is not merely a struggle against harsh living conditions, but the need for sexual gratification that finds an important expression in Murugan's work. *Poonachi* has a rustic setting- a semi arid land, erratic rain patterns, scarcity of food, but a tenacious will to survive and to love.

The novel has traits of traditional storytelling. The "ONCE, IN A VILLAGE" onset of the novel gives it an aura of children fables like the *Panchatantra* and it goes on to delight and strangle through the art of storytelling. A stranger leaves poonachi, a baby goat, with the old man and reluctantly he

agrees to raise her with all his affection. His wife, who is also reluctant in the beginning, begins to love her. Poonachi is an accidental name the old woman gives to the new black goat as an outburst of sudden affection, and in the memory of her old cat.

The old couple continues to strive to provide for the goats even in dire straits. There are days when Poonachi lives only on rice water simply because there is no milk or food. The drought and the scarcity of food are a constant worry for the old couple but they try hard to make both ends meet. Poonachi also begins to take delight in the company of the old couple and other goats.

There is nothing remarkable about Poonachi's life- her ability to breed multiple progeny at once is a burden on everyone, including Poonachi herself. The novel, however, is not just about survival or the hardships endured by a poor, old couple or their starving goats. Poonachi doesn't have rights on her own body. She is denied any pleasure that life might have to offer her. She lives under the bondage of the old couple and is mated with an old partner, who she thoroughly detests. When she finally fulfils her desire of making love to Poovan, someone she finds sensual, he is killed next day and she is left alone once again. Not even her kids are her own. She cries and grieves when her litter is separated from her. In short, she lives a life of a slave.

In the world of human superiority, what is the worth of a goat's desire? Murugan deals with hard questions pertaining to Indian society with a spe-

cific backdrop of the rural life in Tamil Nadu. In a society where deities are worshipped, women, unfortunately, are constantly abused and marginalized. Murugan challenges everything from patriarchal society to the groundless religious and cultural beliefs, the cult culture, exclusion of marginal communities, and the sheer negligence towards any other form of life. This hypocrisy ingrained in the Indian social system is one of the concerns Murugan wilfully raises in the novel.

A malnourished goat could allegorically represent a malnourished girl or a helpless woman, for more or less all women in the given context of a man's world occupy a subordinate position. Poonachi represents an orphaned, poor, and a feeble being with no one capable of loving her unconditionally. Poonachi is like a woman in a merciless world, for she is both a miracle and a burden at the same time, when needed and treated so.

The English translation by Kalyan Raman is appreciable at many levels. The language is simple and lucid, making the novel a delightful read. It is also capable of translating a rural Indian setting into English language with much ease and ingenuity. It is highly encouraging to see the craftsmanship of literary translation finally being acknowledged as an art with its own standing.

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