



Cultural Displacement within Borders: Examining Expatriate Themes in Pyre

Mr. A. Rajesh Kannan¹ & Dr. P. Nainar Sumathi²

¹Ph.D. Research Scholar, PG and Research Department of English, National College (Autonomous)
Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu

²Assistant Professor, PG and Research Department of English, National College (Autonomous)
Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu



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Abstract

Perumal Murugan's Pyre is a searing critique of caste-based social exclusion and the cost of defying cultural expectations within one's homeland. Although traditionally analyzed as a novel of caste and identity, Pyre invites a reading through the lens of expatriate studies, where Saroja, the protagonist, embodies the "expatriate" experience within her own country. Saroja's journey into a hostile and foreign village after her intercaste marriage can be likened to the alienation and cultural displacement encountered by expatriates. This study critically examines how Murugan uses Saroja's outsider status to expose the invisible, yet powerful, borders within her homeland, highlighting how these borders shape identity and social belonging. Through Saroja's condition, Murugan exposes the complex geography of social exclusion that structures rural Tamil society. The village functions as a microcosmic nation-state with its own citizenship requirements, cultural protocols, and exclusionary mechanisms. Saroja's experience of double displacement—as both a caste transgressor and an assertive woman—illuminates how gender intensifies internal expatriation. Her psychological journey through cultural shock, attempted adaptation, and eventual breakdown parallels documented expatriate experiences, while her unique position as someone cut off from both original and adoptive communities reveals the particular trauma of internal displacement. This reading demonstrates how local systems of exclusion connect to broader patterns of human displacement and belonging. By applying expatriate studies to Pyre, we gain insight into how social borders operate within communities and how the expatriate experience—with its themes of cultural displacement, identity crisis, and social marginalization—transcends geographical boundaries. The novel emerges as a universal exploration of belonging and unbelonging, speaking to all those who find themselves expatriated within their own homelands.

Keywords: internal expatriation, caste system, social exclusion, invisible borders, cultural displacement, tamil literature, intercaste marriage, diaspora studies, belonging, identity crisis, social geography, gender and displacement
India. Scholars often discuss expatriation in terms

Introduction

Pyre, a novel by Perumal Murugan, is set in the rural, caste-bound landscapes of Tamil Nadu. The story follows Saroja, a young woman from an urban town, who moves to a traditional village after marrying Kumaresan, a man from a different caste. The villagers' suspicion, alienation, and ultimately violent reaction to her presence foreground the realities of "internal exile" within caste-ridden

of crossing national borders, yet, as Said (2000) suggests, "one does not always have to leave one's homeland to feel estranged" (p. 176). This study proposes that Saroja's journey is, in essence, an "expatriate" experience, wherein her social exclusion and cultural displacement parallel the expatriate's journey into unfamiliar territories.

Cultural Expatriation in Pyre

The concept of expatriation traditionally connotes



the act of moving away from one's homeland to a foreign territory, where the individual navigates new cultural norms and societal expectations. However, expatriation extends beyond mere geographical relocation. As Spivak (1993) points out, expatriation also encompasses "the psychological state of being disconnected from one's culture and the emotional toll of immersion in a foreign setting" (p. 215). This definition allows for a broader understanding of expatriation, one that can be applied to Saroja's experience in Pyre. Although Saroja remains within her native land, her relocation from the urban town to the rural village with Kumaresan represents a form of internalized expatriation. She faces a cultural alienation that mirrors the emotional and psychological toll experienced by expatriates who are physically displaced from their homeland. Saroja's confrontation with a radically different social environment—marked by rigid caste hierarchies, unfamiliar customs, and traditional practices—reveals how cultural boundaries can create a sense of estrangement, even within the same nation.

In this context, Pyre presents an exploration of how internal, social borders—particularly those delineated by caste—can create a sense of expatriation for individuals who are already geographically within their homeland. Arjun Appadurai (1996) highlights this phenomenon, noting that even in "small and culturally homogeneous nations," there are forms of exile that exist along "caste and class lines" (p. 101). In Pyre, the village itself serves as a microcosm of this broader societal divide. Saroja's status as a woman of a lower caste, entering a conservative, rural environment that enforces caste-based purity, places her in a position of both cultural and social exile. She is not only an outsider to the community's physical and cultural landscapes but is also perceived as a threat to the established social order. The villagers view her presence as a violation of their traditions and an infringement on their caste boundaries, subjecting her to open hostility and suspicion. This rejection underscores the difficulty of integrating into a community where one's cultural and social capital is considered inadequate or inferior.

This internalized form of expatriation aligns with Edward Said's notion of "interior exile," which

describes a state of perpetual dislocation where one feels "not belonging, not fitting in" (Said, 1999, p. 225). Saroja's emotional experience in the village is deeply shaped by her awareness that she is fundamentally disconnected from the community around her. Despite being physically present within the same country, she cannot reconcile her urban sensibilities, values, and upbringing with the deeply entrenched traditionalism of the village. The villagers' constant surveillance of her actions, their judgmental scrutiny of her behavior, and their exclusionary practices force Saroja into a state of heightened isolation. She becomes hyper-aware of her difference, constantly reminded by the villagers' subtle and overt signs of rejection that she does not belong to their social order.

The sense of exile that Saroja faces is thus not merely a result of physical distance from her home, but the emotional and psychological toll of feeling estranged from the society she inhabits. Said's idea of interior exile, which he argues can be "more profound than external exile" (Said, 1999, p. 225), resonates strongly in Saroja's experience. As she attempts to adapt to the village's cultural norms, her failure to assimilate exacerbates her sense of alienation. The villagers' distrust and eventual rejection reinforce her status as a symbolic expatriate—a figure who exists within a society but is never truly accepted or allowed to integrate. This symbolic expatriation reflects the emotional burden of living in a space where one is constantly reminded of their outsider status, a condition that leads to psychological fragmentation and a fractured sense of identity.

Saroja's experience in Pyre serves as a powerful commentary on the deep divides that persist in Indian society, where social stratification based on caste and class can exile individuals from their own communities. Through Saroja's journey, Perumal Murugan highlights how internal forms of exile—shaped by cultural, social, and ideological boundaries—can be just as disorienting, isolating, and destructive as physical expatriation. Saroja's plight reveals the emotional toll of living in a space where one's identity is not only questioned but actively rejected, creating an experience of perpetual displacement that transcends geographical borders.

Cultural Displacement and the Challenge of Adaptation



Bhabha's concept of "unhomeliness" is crucial in understanding Saroja's alienation within Kumaresan's village. The notion of "unhomeliness," or the feeling of being out of place in one's own surroundings, aptly describes her psychological experience as she grapples with the cultural dissonance between her urban upbringing and the deeply rooted rural traditions of the village. According to Bhabha (1994), unhomeliness refers to "the menace of unfamiliarity," a state in which the individual is confronted with an unsettling sense of estrangement, even when physically present in a space that should feel familiar (p. 13). In Pyre, Saroja's struggle to adapt to the village's customs and social expectations manifests as this unhomely experience, despite her being in the same country, and even within the same cultural and linguistic sphere. What should be "home" to her—Kumaresan's familial environment—turns into a foreign land where her sense of identity is constantly questioned.

The villagers' resistance to accepting Saroja is rooted in their rigid adherence to caste-based norms, which dictate the proper behavior and values for individuals based on their social background. Saroja's own urban, modern sensibilities are in stark contrast to the conservative, tradition-bound customs of the village. Her discomfort with the local practices—particularly the ritualized punishment of animals, which she finds morally repugnant—underscores her cultural dislocation. As Appadurai (1996) notes, such a disconnect between individual values and collective customs highlights the expatriate-like condition of cultural dislocation, where one's values and sense of self are at odds with the dominant culture (p. 103). For Saroja, these cultural rituals are not just unfamiliar, but deeply disturbing, further alienating her and intensifying her sense of being an outsider. The clash between Saroja's values and the village's cultural expectations is a vivid illustration of the emotional and psychological toll of cultural expatriation.

This struggle to adapt to a hostile cultural environment also aligns with sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "cultural capital," which refers to the cultural knowledge, practices, and behaviors that are valued by a particular social group. In Pyre, Saroja's lack of the cultural capital that the villagers

hold in high esteem—specifically, her absence of proper caste credentials and her unfamiliarity with rural customs—marks her as an outsider. Bourdieu (1990) explains that those who lack the cultural resources of the dominant group are systematically marginalized and excluded (p. 67). This theory is particularly relevant to Saroja, whose perceived deficiency in the cultural capital necessary to belong in the village reinforces her social exclusion. The villagers' rejection is not just based on her caste, but on her inability to embody the cultural practices they deem essential for full participation in their community. Saroja's exclusion from this community reflects Bhabha's (1994) assertion that "belonging is never guaranteed, particularly in spaces guarded by invisible boundaries" (p. 16). These invisible boundaries—defined by caste, tradition, and local customs—remain impenetrable for Saroja, no matter how much she tries to adapt.

Her emotional state, marked by frustration and sadness, reveals the psychological isolation of expatriation, even within one's own country. As Saroja comes to terms with her inability to assimilate into the village, her sense of identity fractures, leading to a profound sense of displacement. This complex negotiation between belonging and exclusion highlights the harsh realities faced by individuals who find themselves on the margins of social systems defined by rigid cultural codes. Saroja's predicament is a powerful commentary on the emotional and social costs of adaptation in a world where belonging is tied to conformity with strict cultural expectations.

The Outsider's Burden: Rejection and Hostility

Saroja's experience in Pyre is marked by profound rejection and hostility, reflecting the burden of being an outsider in a tightly knit, insular community. As Saroja's attempts to integrate into Kumaresan's village are met with suspicion and resistance, the village itself becomes a hostile environment, defined by an unwelcoming atmosphere that excludes her at every turn. This rejection underscores the challenges faced by those who are marked as "outsiders" within a community, especially when their presence threatens the established social order. The villagers' hostility toward Saroja, despite her willingness to



adjust to their norms, highlights the psychological toll of being an outsider in a society governed by rigid boundaries, particularly caste.

Bhabha's (1994) concept of "cultural claustrophobia" is particularly resonant in describing Saroja's situation. He argues that in some communities, the unfamiliarity is not something that invites curiosity or integration, but rather "stifles" and excludes (p. 15). In *Pyre*, Saroja's attempts to engage with the village are met not with openness, but with a suffocating atmosphere of suspicion and rejection. Despite her desire to adapt and fit in, Saroja is immediately marked as a threat to the village's established social norms, particularly its caste-based hierarchy. The villagers' treatment of her as an outsider reflects the idea of cultural claustrophobia—a scenario where cultural and social boundaries are tightly guarded and any attempt to cross them is seen as a violation. Saroja's very presence in the village becomes a challenge to the caste purity that the community holds dear, and she is thus rejected in a manner that feels both personal and deeply systemic.

Appadurai (1996) further elaborates on the ways in which the violence inflicted upon outsiders often stems from the community's own fear of contamination. He writes that "the violence inflicted upon the outsider is often a measure of the community's own fear of contamination" (p. 109). This fear of contamination is evident in the villagers' treatment of Saroja, who, because of her lower caste background, is perceived as a "pollutant" capable of disrupting the village's social order. The villagers' anxiety over maintaining caste boundaries results in their harsh treatment of Saroja, who is seen not just as a person, but as a symbolic threat to the very fabric of their social system. This violence—whether physical, emotional, or social—reflects a deep-seated fear of change and a need to protect the "purity" of the community by excluding those perceived as different.

The "expatriate burden" that Saroja carries is emblematic of the emotional and psychological weight that outsiders must bear when attempting to prove their worth in a hostile environment. This burden is compounded by the villagers' aggression, which stems from their collective fear of social contamination. For Saroja, the village becomes

an inhospitable space, one where she is forced to contend not only with her alienation, but with the active hostility that makes integration seem impossible. Murugan's portrayal of Saroja's plight thus illustrates the ways in which communities, like nations, often reinforce their own social borders by excluding and marginalizing those who do not conform to the accepted norms. In doing so, the villagers perpetuate a cycle of rejection and hostility that leaves Saroja, and others like her, trapped in a state of perpetual exile, both literal and emotional.

Consequences of Cultural Expatriation

The narrative of *Pyre* starkly illustrates the devastating consequences of cultural expatriation, particularly the emotional and social toll on those who are forced to exist outside the bounds of their community. As Saroja's experience unfolds, it becomes evident that internal expatriation does not only manifest as a state of psychological alienation, but as a real and tangible threat to one's safety and well-being. The community's treatment of Saroja exemplifies Bhabha's (1994) concept of "the othered exile," wherein the outsider is marginalized through both symbolic violence and systemic rejection. Bhabha writes that the "othered exile" is created when communities actively construct the outsider as a threat, subjecting them to exclusionary practices and social isolation (p. 25). In *Pyre*, Saroja is continuously marked as an outsider due to her caste, gender, and urban background, which renders her vulnerable to both social and physical harm.

The escalation of hostility that Saroja faces in the village is an embodiment of the extreme consequences of cultural expatriation. Her alienation intensifies as the villagers view her as a disruptive force, a transgressor who threatens their established social order. The community's rejection becomes more pronounced, moving from emotional and psychological exclusion to actual physical threats. Saroja's experience mirrors what Edward Said (2000) describes as the fate of "those deemed foreign, even if close in blood or kinship, [who] often meet with the worst kind of exclusion" (p. 191). Despite the fact that Saroja is physically within her homeland, her caste status and the social boundaries that separate her from the villagers place her in the position of a foreigner. The villagers' treatment of her—marked by



disdain, suspicion, and violence-reveals the intensity of their fear and hostility toward her perceived “foreignness,” even though she is not geographically distant from them. The cruelty Saroja endures is not simply a rejection of her as an individual, but an expression of the community’s anxiety over the perceived threat to their social fabric.

The tragic conclusion of *Pyre* underscores the brutal cost of defying cultural norms. Saroja’s refusal to conform to the expectations of the village, along with her violation of the social rules dictated by caste and tradition, ultimately makes her vulnerable to violence. Murugan’s portrayal of Saroja’s fate highlights how cultural expatriation can expose individuals to danger, not only as outsiders, but as transgressors who challenge the very foundation of the community’s identity. Saroja’s “internal expatriate” status, in which she is disconnected from both her own cultural identity and the society that rejects her, leaves her in an especially precarious position. The villagers see her not only as an outsider but as someone who has defied their norms, thus making her an expendable target for the collective wrath of the community. The violence that ensues reflects the harsh realities faced by those who are caught between conflicting cultural worlds-unable to fully belong to either. Through Saroja’s tragic end, *Pyre* poignantly illustrates the devastating consequences of cultural expatriation, where the individual’s attempt to bridge the gap between differing cultural realities leads to an irreversible

rupture, both personal and social.

Conclusion

Viewed through the expatriate lens, *Pyre* becomes a profound exploration of cultural displacement within one’s own country. Saroja’s journey mirrors the experiences of expatriates who struggle to navigate unfamiliar social landscapes, facing hostility and alienation. By framing Saroja’s struggle as a form of internal expatriation, *Pyre* underscores the costs of crossing deeply embedded cultural borders and the psychological toll of living as an outsider. This internalized experience of displacement highlights the invisible yet impenetrable borders within society, making *Pyre* a compelling study in internal exile and cultural alienation.

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