



Research Paper

## Technology as ‘other’: A Lacanian Psychoanalytic Study of Perumal Murugan’s *Estuary*

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper examines the protagonist’s character and his attitude towards technology as portrayed in the Indian novel *Estuary*, originally written in Tamil by Perumal Murugan through the basic theoretical framework of Lacanian psychoanalysis. The novel touches upon many issues experienced by urban middle class people in a traditional social order and portrays the psychological struggles the older generation undergoes to navigate the contemporary technology driven world. The analysis of the relationship between the protagonist Kumarasurar and his son and his ruminations on the changes around him, clearly shows the role of technology as ‘other’ which destabilised his self and caused contradictory emotions like desire and envy in him. Kumarasurar’s character progression also reveals how the reconciliation between ‘other’ (here technology) and the big other takes place.

**KEYWORDS:** Lacanian psychoanalysis, other, big other, symbolic order

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Perumal Murugan, an incisive voice of the contemporary Tamil literature has always painted an authentic picture of the culture and beliefs of the people in the state of Tamil Nadu. Out of his twelve novels, ten has been translated into English. Murugan’s works act as a gateway to the regional literature and culture of the southernmost state of India. While majority of his works are based on the rustic life, his 2018 novel *Kazhimugam*, translated into English by Nandhini Krishnan in 2020 as *Estuary* is considered as his first urban novel. This novel is a biting critique on the contemporary education system, fitness regime and patriarchy. Many reviewers and interviewers have commented on its take on modernity versus tradition as it astutely explores the turmoil in the mind of a tech luddite father while parenting his only son. But the dynamics of the father-son relationship portrayed in it is far more complex than that of the issue of generational gap.

The central conflict of the novel arises when the teenage son Meghas asks for the latest model smartphone through a late-night phone call to his father. This one call drives the protagonist Kumarasurar into a spiral which almost ends in a complete mental breakdown. He sees Meghas’ immersion into the world of technology as a deviation from the chartered path of Meghas’ life and the beginning of his doom. We can examine this fear of Kumarasurar towards the alien technology through Jacques Lacan’s concept of other. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the ‘other’ represents the external force that disrupts one’s stable identity, introducing anxiety, desire, and alienation. In the novel, technology serves as this ‘other,’ displacing the father’s authority and destabilizing his perception of self. This paper aims at examining how technology; mobile phone to be exact, act as the Lacanian other in the novel *Estuary*, threatening the role and authority of the ‘father’ Kumarasurar and how it forced him into a crisis of identity. The conflict between the ‘other’ and the Big Other pushes him towards a near insane condition. By applying Lacan’s framework, we can uncover the deeper psychological struggles embedded in Kumarasurar’s fear of modernity, ultimately revealing the novel’s commentary on the broader societal shifts in contemporary India.

### II. CONTENT

Murugan sets his novel in the kingdom of ‘Asurapuri’ where every asura is like any other earthling. Struggling to fit into the world they live in and survive with what they have got. Kumarasurar, the protagonist is a typical government employee who wants the best for his son Meghas. He works in the most neglected department in the system where he is just an irrelevant cog but still enjoys the pomp and glory of a government

employee. Kumarasurar is aloof in his nature and a stickler for habits, laws and norms. His cautiousness in life has even resulted in a mechanical relationship with his only son whom he actually adores. "Having ruled out all other options, Kumarasurar decided that his conversation with his son had to remain restricted to the same seven questions" (Murugan 16).

Kumarasurar belonged to a social stratum that is still bound by old traditions and beliefs in a rapidly changing world. As per Lacanian Psychoanalysis,

"individual subjects are what they are in and through the mediation of the socio-linguistic arrangements and constellations of the register of the Symbolic. Tied to natural languages as characterized by Saussure and specific post-Saussurians, this register also refers to the customs, institutions, laws, mores, norms, practices, rituals, rules, traditions, and so on of cultures and societies (with these things being entwined in various ways with language)" (Johnston).

Lacan calls it as the "symbolic order" and he uses the concept of the "Big Other" to represent the symbolic order as a whole. We act and speak as if the Big Other knows and validates our actions and beliefs. Kumarasurar thrives in the symbolic order. His thoughts, actions, responsibility and authority as a father stem from the very same.

In the beginning of the novel, we find that the physical and mental distance from his son was taking a toll on Kumarasurar and he is critical and apprehensive about the changes happening in his teenage son's life. But then the direct call of his son, for the first time after he went to the far away college, asking for a replacement to his months old mobile phone with the latest one aggravates Kumarasurar's condition. It challenges his beliefs and disrupts the order around him. This common demand from Meghas pushes him to an onslaught of different thoughts about the varied aspects of their life. Initially plagued by the monetary cost of the demanded phone, Kumarasurar's thoughts wander into the 'audacity' of his son's demand, his excessive need to change his phone and the changes it might bring to his life.

"Kumarasurar was engulfed by anxiety. How had Meghas worked up the courage to ask for such an expensive phone? And to ask him directly?... Kumarasurar had planned out Meghas' future, and new mobile phones did not feature in these plans. How was he to defeat this demon that had materialized from nowhere?" (27-28)

Adhering to the traditional role of the parents on this side of the world, Kumarasurar and his wife Mangasuri had planned out their son's entire life and dreamt of achieving higher social status and financial prospects through him. Time and again, Meghas had challenged his parents' plans and chose a different path i.e. the course and college for his higher studies, defying their ideals and societal expectations. Kumarasurar and Mangasuri compromised on these as they believed their son would not 'stray' and will finish the course in four years and will become an engineer with an MNC. But the sudden demand for the mobile phone causes cracks in the trust and authority Kumarasurar had over his son. He fears that the use of this technology will deviate Meghas from the path that he chartered and its potential for negative influence.

Every other man whom Kumarasurar meets thereafter tells him tales about youngsters who has gone astray due to the new age technology. Stories of boys getting addicted to online gaming, committing crimes against women and the girls, using phones for money and the alarming trend of youngsters risking their lives for selfies manifest in Kumarasurar's sleep repeatedly. Plagued by these thoughts he starts worrying about his son's wellbeing and future. Kumarasurar's reaction underscores his discomfort and unfamiliarity with the rapidly evolving technological landscape that his son readily navigates. He notes, "This generation had its various shortcomings - they didn't respect older people, they weren't polite, they couldn't make conversation, their manners were deplorable - but they knew everything about gadgets." (131). This highlights the widening chasm between the generations and the anxieties experienced by a parent struggling to comprehend the modern world inhabited by their child.

While Kumarasurar is representative of the symbolic order, technology (mobile phone here) emerges as the 'little other' of the imaginary order of the Lacanian psychoanalysis. It is "the counterpart and specular image of the subject, with whom the ego is identified. The other is thus the locus of imaginary alienation and méconnaissance. The other is both the image in the mirror and other similar beings (semblables)" (Evans,131). Relationships with the little other are characterized by duality, rivalry, and identification. We see ourselves reflected in the other, leading to feelings of similarity but also potential competition and envy. Technology at Meghas's hands constantly give rise to contradictory emotions and thoughts in Kumarasurar. On one hand he deeply resents the hold it has over his son. He views the mobile phone as an object that fosters detachment, creating an emotional barrier between himself and his son. He did not understand what magic lay in that small screen that made his son so indifferent to everything else. Kumarasurar also envies the influence it has on Meghas. His anxiety about the loss of parental control can be clearly seen when Meghas uses the mobile phone and its apps to counter his decisions and suggestions in everyday life. A father's words should be final, yet here was a device that spoke louder than him. This struggle mirrors a broader societal anxiety about the digital world to which the new generation is born into.

While being completely rattled by the changes that technology has brought into their lives and society in general, Kumarasurar is at the same time attracted by the possibilities it offers. During the start of the digital era, Kumarasurar was so tech averse, so much so that he was adamant on using his trusted typewriter and letters even when the government issued a computer to each office. He received the parcel, logged the information in ten different registers and placed it under lock and key until the new junior clerk arrived years later. When Kumarasurar found his wife and son dancing to the music played on the computer on the first day it was brought home, he “stood with his mouth open from shock and horror” (59). But technology made its presence known in his life through his son. When Meghas easily collected information through his mobile phone, played his favourite song through earphones for the first time during a bus ride, Kumarasurar was mesmerised by what technology can do. After that brief moment, the anxiety and fear come back and he reverts to the original apprehensive attitude but it sparked a desire in him to know the ‘other’ more.

In his misguided attempt to understand the allure and functionality of mobile phones and the broader realm of technology, Kumarasurar stumbles upon pornography on the internet, an encounter facilitated by the young junior clerk Kumbhas. This sudden exposure profoundly impacts him, leading to a sense of deep disgust and alienation from the world he perceives around him. Kumbhas’ revelation that “the entire world watches” pornography through mobile phones and the fact that it is “the fastest-growing and most profitable industry in the world” (177) cracks the order and beliefs of Kumarasurar. This incident pushes him into a complete melt down. The presence of technology(other) has changed the structure that upheld the symbolic order he was familiar with. Kumarasurar couldn’t reconcile with the new order and when the pornography incident happens it triggers his mental breakdown. He couldn’t face the new world and kept his head bowed. Whenever he looked up, he saw people standing naked, out in the streets and buses and he also hallucinates himself naked. Kumarasurar felt that his eyes were burning and unclean, so that he washed it incessantly with hot drinking water. In the short spells of sleep, he dreamt of Meghas watching porn. The fear of his son turning to a mobile phone addict like many others in the news and stories he hears, Kumarasurar rashly decides to move, to be near Meghas and to check upon him. His actions and accusations about the behaviour sours the relationship between the father and son. The conflict between the ‘other’ and the existing symbolic order i.e. the ‘Big Other’ gave rise to extreme emotions and actions in him. Due to the unreasonable anxiety and hallucinations that stemmed from this conflict, Kumarasurar ‘cries’ multiple times and shuts him away from the world; even taking unexplained leave from the office where he has diligently worked ever since he got the job. Fearing for the sanity of her husband, Mangasuri places a call for help to her husband’s close friend Adhigasurar, a college professor who lived in a far-off city. Adhigasurar’s invitation to stay with him brings back some kind of normalcy to Kumarasurar’s condition.

During the vacation, Adhigasurar slowly and strategically reintroduces Kumarasurar to technology. In that different space, Adhigasurar prompted Kumarasurar to explore the world of internet, mobile phones and computers without the biased tales of his social group burdening him. Adhigasurar takes him to visit an estuary and shows him how the river and sea meets. The tranquil merging of the river and sea helps Kumarasurar regain a sense of balance reminding him that new and old can merge and exist. The entire experience leads him to a sense of understanding and inner peace. Then after his vacation, Kumarasurar makes an impromptu visit to see Meghas at college quite happily and asks his son to order the latest smartphone for him, deciding finally to fully embrace the technology as Meghas asked him to multiple times.

Technology as an ‘other’ has brought unimaginable changes to the order that Kumarasurar had believed in. The society underwent a reconstruction to accommodate technology and now it expects every member of that society to accept and engage in it regardless of their personal apprehensions. According to Lacan, our desire is not simply our own but is always mediated by the desire of the Big Other. In Kumarasurar’s case, this reconciliation between the ‘other’ and ‘big other’ reaches its fulfilment through Adhigasurar. Through the gentle interventions of Adhigasurar, he let go of the rivalry and envy for technology and became more receptive towards technology. Being at the estuary where both river and sea exists, he becomes part of the new symbolic order accepting the ‘other’ in the way Big Other wants him to.

### III. CONCLUSION

Perumal Murugan’s *Estuary* vividly depicts the tales of fluctuating human relationships in a technology powered world. Through the imaginary world of ‘Asuralokam’ Murugan conspicuously blended in the reality to fiction and thereby made the reader defamiliarized in the world he created. It caused a better understanding and empathy towards the characters and the struggle the protagonist Kumarasurar undergoes as a father and a member of the contemporary age. By applying the Lacanian psychoanalytic framework, we can effectively understand the deeper psychological struggles, older generation go through to understand and accept the current generation as portrayed through the relationship between Kumarasurar and his son Meghas.

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