Modernisation and Marginalisation: The Unseen Violence of Displacement in *Rising Heat*

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Abstract:

Displacement is a complex problem that affects the lives of millions worldwide, and these changes often have social, psychological, and economic consequences. To uproot oneself physically from home and land is a process that is not only physical but also deeply emotional and cultural. Perumal Murugan's novel *Rising Heat* (Trans. by Janani Kannan, 2020) portrays a rural family forced to abandon their ancestral land to make way for a city due to the impact of displacement. The novel reveals the painful effects of this change not only on the younger but also on the older generations, showing actions of displacement through identity, community, and family. This paper draws on the interdisciplinary frameworks of trauma studies, postcolonial theory, and ecocritical studies to examine how Murugan's novel reflects the broader social and psychological violence resulting from land loss, which erodes not only a place but also a person's identity and sense of belonging. It also argues that the emotional scars persist over the long term, especially the psychological disintegration experienced by the novel's protagonist, who witnesses the erosion of his community's culture. Moreover, the article discusses the power of the government and corporations in perpetuating these dislocation cycles, providing evidence that such powers exploit vulnerable or marginalised groups under the guise of progress and development.

Keywords: Land Loss, Displacement, Psychological Trauma, Systemic Violence, Cultural Identity.

Land has always been more than just a physical location. It is a vital component of culture, history and society. Urbanisation, economic development, and government policies that displace people from their ancestral land cause deep social, economic, and psychological disturbances. The forcible displacement of people from their land not only ruins their economic stability but also leaves a great emotional and cultural scar. From the past, economic development projects such as urban growth, industrialisation, and infrastructure development have been a common cause of displacement in rural India, especially after independence in 1947. These efforts, intended to stimulate economic development, have affected rural and marginalised communities unevenly and, in most cases, forced them from the land they have inhabited for centuries. The Indian government's enactment of policies, such as the Land Acquisition Acts and Special Economic Zones (SEZs), has further accelerated displacement, usually in favour of corporate interests at the expense of local people. These activities have resulted in significant social instability and severe psychological and economic dislocation, particularly in agrarian societies that depend on ancestral lands for their livelihoods and identity.

In the novel *Rising Heat*, the story examines the effects of land loss on the dispossessed, which aligns with Said's idea of exile. As Edward Said explains in *Reflections on Exile*, displacement is not only geographical movement but also an existential discontinuity in identity that destroys the individual's relationship to his or her past traditions and sense of belonging. According to Said, exile is "the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted" (180). Such existential dislocation often leads people to feel a deep sense of alienation and loss, similar to exile, and Said explores this aspect, writing that exile is "strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience" (180). The quest to belong is

often associated with identification with "triumphant ideology or a restored people," which only underscores the identity loss that comes with displacement (183).

The novel follows a young boy and his family as they are displaced from their ancestral land amid urban expansion. The novel, through Murugan's perspectives and the economic and social realities of rural India, portrays displacement as both an economic crisis and a traumatic experience. It transforms a man's life, his relationships, and family bonds. Land loss, in this case, is not limited to physical space but to the emotional and psychological well-being of the victimised.

Lawrence Buell, in his book *Environmental Imagination*, argues that landscapes are not merely inert settings but are involved in the construction of cultural memory and individual psychology (25). This is evident in Murugan's novel, where land loss becomes a trigger for further identity crisis and emotional collapse. In *Rising Heat*, the protagonist is an unnamed boy who also serves as the narrator, and the story is told from his perspective. In the boy's eyes, the displacement is not only the physical uprooting but also the deep psychological shock that seeps into his sense of self and community. Thus, this trauma of displacement is not an external phenomenon; it is internal and shapes the boy's relations with the world and the people around him.

At the start of the novel, the boy's emotional distress is evident in his repeated desperate calls to his dog, Mani. His cries, "Mani, Mani... Mani, Mani, Mani-i-i, Mani-i-i-i!" represent his desire to be in a stable and controlled world that is becoming unstable (Murugan 15). In her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Cathy Caruth refers to trauma as the experience that overwhelms the individual and is too intense to be properly processed by the individual. Caruth claims that traumas do not come back as an event but as an intrusion of the past event in the form of symptoms, such as the repeated calls by the boy (04). His

desperate calls after his dog are an ultimate expression of the boy's attempt to restore some form of order to the world that has lost its order. The process of calling out to Mani is more than a mere search for the dog; it is an emotional appeal to the lost world of childhood, a world he cannot return to.

The aggression towards Mani becomes a release for the boy's frustration and helplessness: "With the pockets filled with stones, he began to throw them in a volley, one after another" (Murugan 20). This is an act of violence, a method through which the boy can externalise the trauma he is unable to cope with. In *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman talks about how, in most cases, trauma results in what she refers to as "disruption in the affective experience," (unpredictable disturbance in individual's emotional mood and response system) and this is the reason why the traumatised person ends up behaving in a manner that is not related to the source of pain (01). The violence of the boy does not go against the real cause of his pain and the deprivation of his home and identity, but against the dog, an innocent character who symbolises his lost past. The dog, like the boy, is torn between the past and the present, unable to comprehend or get rid of the things that displaced them.

Mani's refusal to leave the land underscores the boy's conflict. The dog clings to the land, even though everything around it is destroyed, because it symbolises the boy's inability to sever his ties to the home that once made him who he is. The boy is asking himself, "How could he explain to the dog that they had been completely uprooted from this soil? That they had no claims left on the property... that not even a clump of soil belonged to them anymore" (Murugan 16). This scene depicts the boy's awareness that he is losing his home, his identity, and his memory to forces beyond his control. The dog's attachment to the land reveals that people remain psychologically attached to their environment despite their displacement. This emotional suffering is compounded by the environmental destruction the boy observes. He comes across the landscape, which was known to have been filled with life before, but now it

is bare and empty: "The razed forests were replaced with sprouts of grass. At a distance, more trees lay fallen with their arms spread wide" (15).

Rob Nixon in his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* talks about Slow violence "that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" describing harm that is gradual and often invisible to broader society, effectively captures the boy's experience of witnessing the environmental destruction of his ancestral land (02). The author vividly describes this gradual destruction through the eyes of the boy who watches the forests that used to be beautiful turn into deserted lands one by one, a gradual, inexorable process that the community, which has been displaced from its own place, senses yet remains unnoticed by outsiders.

Nixon's idea of slow violence captures what happens to the boy when he learns that the destruction of his surroundings is not a single disaster but a slow, irreversible transformation. It is a violence that cannot be perceived by an outsider of the community affected, but it is felt immensely by the affected person. The slow, unseen nature of the destruction mirrors the boy's gradual realisation that his childhood, his home, and his attachment to the land are being lost forever.

The community's social fabric is also eroded alongside environmental destruction, revealing modernisation as a mechanism of displacement and alienation. In his masterpiece *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, Nora defines an object of interest as one that, through human desire or the passage of time, has become a symbolic part of a community's memory heritage. These may be either hard or soft, including monuments and museums, as well as events, symbols, or traditions. The formerly central temple in the community's life and cultural rituals is now

deserted, symbolising the disappearance of cultural identity. This loss is marked by the boy's recollections of playful encounters in the now run-down temple.

The boy remembers it as a place where villagers gathered to practise their rituals and share experiences. At this point, "memories of going round and round the room in circles, touching the walls, overcoming his shyness to run around and play catch with other children... all came rushing back to him" (Murugan 16). The temple, like the landscape, no longer has the same meaning it once did. To Nora, these lost places signify a loss of collective memory, a rupture in the relationship between people and their cultural past (12). The boy recalls the temple's significance, underscoring how displacement not only destroys physical sites but also erases the memories and cultural practices associated with them. This is not only the sorrow the boy has over the loss of the temple, but also the loss of a common past that he can no longer retrieve.

As the novel progresses, the boy realises the finality of their displacement. He goes to the ruins of his village and observes the land, the land that was alive and full of meaning, now lying barren, with stretches of it: "Memories alone stagnated like the rainwater that collects in the crevices of rocks" (Murugan 24). This picture of stagnation speaks to the boy's emotional state. The memories that were, at times, a source of solace and belonging have stalled, and they cannot be rekindled in the face of the destruction surrounding him. To the boy, the destruction of his space not only means the loss of physical space but also the loss of his identity, his memories, and his place in the world.

In *Rising Heat*, the problem of displacement affects not only the young boy but also the older generation, whose emotional and social decay highlights the deep-seated effects of displacement on personal identity and on the family's identity. Thatha (the grandfather) and Paati (the grandmother) were formerly revered members of society; however, forced migration

has left them without their former status or meaning. This transition from social power to social invisibility is indicative of broader concerns about marginalisation and the loss of cultural identity.

The loss of status of Thatha and Paati resembles what Homi K. Bhabha describes in his theory of the "third space," where people who have lost their original habitat find themselves in an in-between space that disrupts their identity. Their role and identity in this third space are fluid, and they are alienated and disconnected from their past just as Bhabha describes cultural dislocation (qtd. in Nagendra Bahadur Bhandari 172). In the case of Thatha and Paati, displacement leaves them without a sense of place, undermining their identity and leading to emotional disintegration. Their feeling of alienation, as evidenced by withdrawal, silence, and helplessness, is a direct consequence of being uprooted from a place that provided a sense of purpose, history, and belonging.

The deterioration of Thatha and Paati's emotions becomes clear when a flood hits their temporary home and displaces them once more. "As soon as we placed our feet outside, the water crashed upon us in waves... The water level was above our knees. We could barely get in and wade through it" (Murugan 65). The flood is a powerful metaphor for the unremitting force of displacement, which continues to upset and destabilise the already weak lives of the elders. The flood is not only a physical danger but also a symbolic one, symbolising the emotional and psychological overpowering of the elders, whose lives are becoming increasingly marked by loss and powerlessness. The physical way they are pushed aside, combined with the emotional damage of their diminishing roles in the family, is a symptom of a more fundamental existential crisis, in which they find it difficult to balance their past importance with their present helplessness.

When they reach the house of the son, drenched and shivering, Thatha and Paati have been brought down to the level of uninvited visitors, who depend on the good graces of their children:

> It was an ungodly hour. Must have been twelve or one at night. There was a knocking on the door. Appa(father) would wake up to the smallest sound. He got up and opened the door. It was Thatha and Paati. 'Amma...!' he burst out in disbelief and everyone woke up then. The two of them were standing drenched to their bones and shivering like fledglings. (64).

This scene stands in stark contrast to the family's social structure. Thatha and Paati were once the pillars of the house, wise and authoritative. They have now become passive, pathetic creatures whose dignity has been taken away by the events of their displacement. This inversion of roles is a key element of psychological violence of displacement: it not only physically uproots people, but also destroys the order of power and respect that ruled their lives.

The psychological impact of the displacement on the elders is also emphasised by the fact that they are growing more and more reliant on their children. Paati, who was formerly a powerful and practical character, begins to withdraw into silence. Her withdrawal into silence is an indication of internalisation of trauma; the words are not enough to communicate how much she is hurting. According to Cathy Caruth, the trauma "establishes itself in the unprocessed, overwhelming experience of an event that cannot be fully known at the time of its occurrence." She also says, this processing lag causes a traumatic reaction which is re-enacted in the disjunctive form, silence or fractured language as the person attempts to work out the unspeakable (04). The silence of Paati is not, therefore, the lack of speech, but a way of coping with the massive emotional fallout of her displacement. In this regard, silence is her means of holding the trauma. She cannot discuss her pain because it lies beyond the sphere of

expression, which is a repetition of how Caruth argues that, in most cases, trauma can be manifested in a manner that cannot be directly expressed (Caruth 5).

Instead, Thatha is more overtly traumatised when it comes to his aggression. He, who was once an esteemed member of the authority, is now venting his anger, complaining about the food, feeling he has lost control, and feeling helpless. He would not speak to anyone and would shout at Paati in an irritated manner. "The food is terrible! The stew is tasteless!', and a thousand more such complaints" (Murugan 34). The emotional violence that displacement causes in individuals is reflected in Thatha's behaviour. Judith Herman believes that once individuals lose the feeling of importance and control, they tend to work out their trauma in the form of irritability, withdrawal, and aggression, manifestations of the deep psychological wounds brought about by displacement (60).

The other effect of displacement that Murugan depicts is a change in the family's economic structure. The transition from a self-sufficient agrarian life to unstable wage labour, coupled with the absence of economic independence and security, accentuates the broader socio-economic dynamics that dislocated people and eroded their economic power. Uprooted from their ancestral land, the family must adjust to an uncertain, unstable economic reality that significantly alters their identity and position within the wider socio-economic order.

The family of the protagonist, who were once landowners and worked their own fields, is thrown into a world in which its labour is commodified and its survival depends on temporary, exploitative labour. This economic change brings out what Karl Marx outlines *in Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* as "the alienation of labour." According to Marx, labour in capitalist societies is a commodity that can be bought and sold, and this commodification depersonalises people with respect to the product of their labour and their identity (29). In the case of the displaced family in *Rising Heat*, the direct connection they had

to the land, where the results of their labour were concrete and attached to their identity, is lost. Their labour is no longer a way of expressing themselves or defining themselves, but a way of surviving in an economic system that dehumanises them as labourers.

The transition from landownership to wage labour is illustrated in Akka (elder sister), the protagonist's elder sister, who starts working on a construction site where new housing units are being built. With the construction project coming to an end, Akka's economic status is threatened. By the time construction was nearly complete, the number of workers began to decline, and many had left to seek alternative employment. This workforce uncertainty highlights the precarity of rural labour in India, where people are frequently compelled to accept temporary, unstable employment that offers little security and few future opportunities. This economic insecurity further intensifies the sense of loss associated with displacement, as the family can no longer rely on the self-sufficiency and land ownership that were previously available.

The family clash comes to a head when Sevathaan, a former friend, arrives and claims to be a powerful person with the means to manipulate others. The fact that he visited on a momentous occasion, during the economic crisis, is an indication that the family is at a crux of a crossroad when Sevathaan offers to sell two acres of their land (which the family bought after selling the ancestral land during the construction) at a good amount: "These days, the land value is pretty good. Right now, they will offer to pay forty thousand even for your land. I will get you fifty. If you give two acres, that will make it a lakh." (Murugan 145). This proposal marks a turning point in the novel and reveals the family's desperate economic situation. The moral dilemma of selling the land that has supported generations of livelihoods and identity is challenging.

The economic violence associated with displacement can be illustrated through the concept of "accumulation by dispossession" developed by David Harvey. Harvey is convinced that structured economic development in any capitalist economy is associated with the coercive displacement of populations to facilitate urbanisation or industrial growth, thereby commodifying land and resources (Bailey). In the novel, the family's land is taken by forces they cannot control, and they are now left to survive in a world where they are no longer the owners of the land that constituted their economic and social lives. Their landmarks are not only lost; they also mark the beginning of an economic and existential crisis, as they deprive them of the main source of their livelihood and of their attachment to the land, which had sustained them over the centuries.

Thatha, the older member of the family, strongly objects to selling the land, as he insists on its invaluable role in the family's legacy and even in their existence. He speaks to Sevathaan, "Maaple . . . you were the one who got us this field. We don't deny that. But that doesn't mean we have to give it up because you say so...Please don't snatch that away from me . . . Maaple" demonstrates the deep emotional and psychological toll that the thought of selling the land inflicts on him (Murugan 144). Thatha's connection to the land represents the traditional farming lifestyle, which is being destroyed before our very eyes amid urbanisation and development.

Although Thatha is protesting, the younger generation, symbolised by Annan, is motivated by a desire for quick money and thus views land as a commodity to be sold for immediate profit, rather than as a means of sustenance over the long term. The inhuman attitude that Annan shows Thatha when he refers to him as "You miserable old man! Why can't you just lie on your cot and wait to be taken away? Why are you here sucking my life out?" highlights the widening generation gap and the loss of traditional values under modernity and economic pressures. (144). The boy's gut-wrenching anger toward Annan, stemming from

Annan's disrespect toward his grandfather, brings to the surface underlying family tensions, with financial demands exacerbating existing divides.

When Appa ultimately resorts to disposing of the land, even after he has fought against it, this indicates the overwhelming power of economic vulnerability. He is not making this choice out of personal preference but because of the harsh reality that the family can no longer feed itself without compromising its family ties. The boy observes the emotional breakdown of his father: "Appa nodded his head up and down. He was afraid to look up in case the tears crashed out, breaking the dams. He swallowed, wetting his throat with his saliva." (146). When Appa, however, signs the papers to sell the land, a clear change of fortune takes place, and it is not merely a loss of material wealth; it is also the loss of cultural and emotional attachment to the land which had characterised the family.

This loss is the most psychologically devastating when the boy witnesses his father being drunk. The boy meets Appa at the temple festival. When the community gathers to celebrate, the boy encounters Appa in a state of drunkenness: "… eyes were the colour of red earth. Sweat covered his now loose and limp face and dripped down it" (Murugan 151). The symbol of this image of his father, who was once a hardworking person, is now a wretched one, signifying a greater degree of disillusionment and an economic breakdown. The fact that the boy is disgusted by his father's condition indicates the psychologically devastating effects of the land sale not only on Appa but on the whole family. The erosion of familial cohesiveness has been caused by the loss of the land, and the boy understands that his family is no longer safe.

The soft-drink shop started by Annan and financed by the sale of the final piece of family land rapidly becomes an icon of economic revitalisation and a symbol of waste and destruction. Although there is some ray of hope in the sale, the result is anything but stability.

The room of this shop becomes a place for lazy drinking and the abandonment of family responsibilities. Rather than improving the family's situation, the shop hastens its dissolution by using the compensation gained for something short-lived and devastating. The land that once provided food and meaning is now an indirect sponsor of further alienation and indulgence.

Within this shanty stall, the once-pride of the family, Appa, is sitting idle, drunk and unrecognisable. The process of corrosion of his body is the reflection of the breakdown of authority and identity: "His eyes were red with alcohol, his face bloated and drenched in sweat" (212). He is not a figure of resistance, even of conflict, simply a man who has lost whatever power or dignity he had remaining. The boy who remains silent on the spot does not regard this as a time of melancholy but of ultimate clarity: "The boy felt disgusted to even look at him. He turned his gaze to the road and the bench" (151). Such a realisation condenses the emotional and moral rot that has resulted from their displacement. They are not merely poor; rather, poverty entails the loss of trust, responsibility, and identity.

The most powerful effect of this moment is the contrast with previous scenes in which Appa protested bitterly against the land sale. Although farming is not easy, the land remains valuable; he once had to insist: "If the fields aren't worked on, they aren't going to go anywhere" (147). That was not just an economic value, though. Land to him was a symbol of continuity, self-sufficiency, and honour. After being sold, there was no longer development, but disintegration.

Although the trauma, financial instability, and disconnection the characters endure are mostly psychological and personal, it is important to note that their personal tragedies are merely a byproduct of a broader, systemic process driven by government policies and corporate interests. The role of the state-sponsored dispossession is made very clear as the family tries to

adjust to their new reality. Their violence is not only emotional but also systemic and is organised by forces that do not care much about human lives and cultures, but rather focus on economic development.

As the novel progresses, Perumal Murugan offers an incisive critique of systemic violence as the pillar of displacement, focusing primarily on the state and corporate interests that enable the annihilation of communities. The migration in the novel is not something that has naturally or inevitably followed modernisation, but rather a premeditated, planned action resulting from governmental policies and corporate land grabs. In the novel, Murugan describes state and corporate dominance over marginalised rural communities as a process of coercion and consent, which aligns with Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony.

The concept of hegemony developed by Gramsci is a key to the realisation of a state that does not dominate the people solely by force but also persuades them of the interests of the ruling class. Gramsci, in his *Prison Notebooks*, describes the state as existing in two spheres, connected by political society and civil society. The nature of political society is primarily based on coercion, which involves the use of force, law, and institutions such as the military and police. Nevertheless, there is also a civil society that governs the state and is essential to the perpetuation of hegemony, as it operates by consent and shapes beliefs and values through media, education, religion, and other cultural mechanisms (Martin). This concept is evident in the case of *Rising Heat*, where state-sponsored displacement is introduced as a desirable and inevitable process of modernisation and progress. The demolition of rural societies is not presented as exploitative but as a form of development that will benefit the whole country.

Gramsci's theory holds that the ruling class employs not only political institutions but also cultural institutions to gain control over society. Ideological leadership is a central element

of his theory, in which the ruling class constructs a narrative that justifies its supremacy. This story is projected as a universal truth that becomes so ingrained in the culture that even the oppressed start to accept and internalise the forms of oppression. *In Rising Heat*, the community is not merely forced to relocate but ideologically coerced into doing so. The state and corporate forces present urbanisation and industrialisation as the natural way of progress. This ideological framing compels the marginalised rural groups to take their dispossession as part of the need to undergo modernisation.

Murugan's portrayal of the forest's destruction is a powerful symbol of this systemic violence. Big trees, which are part of the community's way of life, are felled without the locals' consent or consultation. The narrator tells us: "The coloured bulbs all around were smashed to smithereens. Whatever things were left outside all became dust" (Murugan 210). The picture of the trees being cut down is not merely a metaphor for environmental destruction, which goes hand in hand with displacement, but also for the destruction of the community's memory. The cutting of these trees symbolises the loss of group memory, as the community's bond with the land is broken and eroded by modernisation.

The erosion of cultural identity is further exacerbated by environmental destruction associated with development, aligning with Robert Bullard's account of environmental justice, in which poorer communities are disproportionately exposed to environmental hazards, thereby increasing their susceptibility. According to Bullard, environmental justice refers to the fair treatment of all individuals (regardless of race, colour, nation of origin, or income) and to their meaningful engagement in the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws (*Chapter 2: What Is Environmental Justice?*). The state's complicity in this violence is also evident when a local minister, Kandhasamy, steals the land using counterfeit ownership papers and transfers it to himself to develop. This injustice is felt by the people of the village, yet they have no way to halt the development machine that is displacing them. The

villagers' inability to articulate their grievances and their subjugation to this system of dispossession put them in the position of subalterns. Subaltern or marginalised groups are usually unable to express themselves within dominant discourses, and their voices are deliberately suppressed. This powerlessness is manifested in *Rising Heat*, whereby the villagers are unable to confront the acts of the state because they are not given the room to oppose or voice their opinions against the state-backed violence.

The involvement of the state in the displacement goes beyond the acquisition of land to the social and cultural annihilation of the displaced communities. This process is symbolised by the bulldozers in the novel, which clear the fields. "The laughter of the cotton flowers. The strength of the groundnuts. Everything had turned lifeless. Edifices sprang everywhere from a land where crops once flourished" (Murugan 22). This picture of bulldozers smoothing out the land is not only a literal process of demolition but also the systematic demolition of a way of life and of a community's attachment to the land it inhabits. The violence that is perpetrated by the destruction of the fields is not limited to the physical world but spreads through the social, cultural, and emotional structure of the displaced community. This violence is also perpetrated by the state in its quest to achieve urbanisation and economic growth because it is interested in profit and not the lives and livelihoods of the people it is displacing.

The villagers' managing to oppose this violence, even though to no avail, shows how frustrated and angry people can be when they are denied their own environment in the context of systematic oppression. Veeran is part of the displaced society and leads a dramatic revolt against those who have destroyed the land. The axe-wielding and staff-wielding inhabitants in the village attack the woodcutters and go ahead to tear the property of the corrupted minister who enabled them to take the land: "One more cut and the next will be one of your heads." (Murugan 210). Although this gesture of defiance is short-lived, it is ultimately suppressed when the police arrive, and the bulldozers continue. When the villagers seek to take back their

land and oppose the dispossession, they are ruthlessly beaten up, which enhances the perception that it is not only hard to resist the forces of state-sanctioned violence, but it also punishes those who do it. The concepts of power expressed by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* are relevant in this case. According to Foucault, "this power is not exercised simply as an obligation or a prohibition on those who 'do not have it'; it invests them, is transmitted by them and through them; it exerts pressure upon them, just as they themselves, in their struggle against it, resist the grip it has on them" (27). The villagers' opposition in *Rising Heat* is not only suppressed by direct physical force but also by the state's sheer, omnipresent power, backed by economic motives and law enforcement. The way Foucault thinks about the functioning of power in both individuals and society brings to the fore the systemic aspect of the violence that they are subject to, in which the state not only exerts direct coercive power over them but also has an influence on the very actions or ideas of that person or people that the state is oppressing.

In sum, *Rising Heat* is a powerful novel that explores the emotional, psychological, and cultural consequences of displacement. As the novel depicts, the annihilation of territory and society, fuelled by state and corporate agendas, is presented as a form of progress that covers the bloodshed it causes. The novel explores the depth of the loss of identity, memory, and sense of belonging that accompany forced migration through the plight of its displaced characters. Murugan condemns the dreadful human toll of development, questions the concept of progress, and advocates a more inclusive, considerate model of modernisation that respects the community and its past.

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