

**Polyphony of the Marginalized: Narrative Strategies in Perumal Murugan's  
Fiction**

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**Abstract**

This article undertakes a critical exploration of Dalit literature as it emerges in the literary works of Tamil writer Perumal Murugan, focusing on the articulation of subaltern identity, lived experience, and resistance within caste structures. Applying Postcolonial and Subaltern Theory, especially the frameworks of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Frantz Fanon, this study contends that Murugan's narratives transcend mere representation to perform a radical re-imagining of caste, agency, and voice. Central to the analysis are Murugan's novels *One Part Woman (Madhorubhagan)* and *Current Show*, stories that foreground intersecting dimensions of caste, gender, language, and marginalization.

Through close reading, this article demonstrates how Murugan disrupts normative epistemologies, foregrounds subaltern speech, and destabilizes hegemonic power narratives while retaining complexity and ambiguity. This study concludes that Murugan's fiction not only enriches Dalit literary discourse within India but also contributes to global postcolonial debates on voice, agency, and resistance.

**Keywords:** Dalit Literature, Subalternity, Perumal Murugan, Postcolonial Theory, Caste, Voice, Resistance, Tamil Literature, Identity, Representation.

**Introduction**

Dalit literature has emerged as one of the most dynamic and politically charged domains within Indian literary studies. Rooted in the lived realities of caste oppression, Dalit writing aims to reclaim voice, rewrite history, and confront the structures of domination integral to caste society. While Dalit literature is often associated with authors from Dalit backgrounds such as Bama, Om Prakash Valmiki, Arun Kamble, and Namdeo Dhasal an expanded understanding recognizes texts by non-Dalit authors that critically engage caste structures and subalternity.

Perumal Murugan, a distinguished Tamil writer, has generated critical debate for his sensitive portrayal of caste, gender, desire, and marginalization in rural Tamil contexts. His narratives, often rooted in the village life of Tamil Nadu, interrogate how caste structures

shape bodies, relationships, and subjectivities. Although Murugan is not Dalit by caste, his fiction consistently engages subaltern struggles, giving voice to those who are rendered invisible within dominant discourses. Through his representation of Dalit characters and marginalized communities, Murugan destabilizes normative frameworks of caste privilege and interrogates power relations through narrative strategies.

This article undertakes a postcolonial and subaltern theoretical reading of Murugan's major works, emphasizing how his narratives reconstruct Dalit sensibilities, amplify marginalized voices, and challenge hegemonic norms.

### **Postcolonialism and Subaltern Theory**

Postcolonial theory critiques the epistemic and material legacies of colonialism, extending its concern to other structures of domination, including caste. Frantz Fanon and Edward Said laid foundations for examining how power, language, and identity intersect in oppressed populations. Meanwhile, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" interrogates whether marginalized groups can truly articulate agency within hegemonic systems that systematically silence them.

For Spivak, the subaltern is the Other who lacks access to institutional power and discursive legitimacy. Importantly, this concept transcends colonial contexts and can be applied to internal social hierarchies like caste. Therefore, examining Murugan through a subaltern lens allows engagement with how caste, patriarchy, and economic inequalities structure subjectivity.

### **Dalit Literary Theory**

Dalit literary theory foregrounds the intersection of caste, resistance, and narrative. It emphasizes testimony, lived experience, and the politics of representation. Scholars like Gopal Guru and Sharmila Rege highlight how Dalit texts perform a counter-discourse to Brahmanical epistemology. Dalit writing disrupts the sanitized narratives of nation, religion, and culture, foregrounding pain, protest, and possibility.

Therefore, applying Dalit literary theory intertwined with subaltern and postcolonial frameworks enables a multidimensional reading of Murugan's socio-political imagination.

### **Perumal Murugan: Voice, Context, and Controversy**

Perumal Murugan inhabits rural Tamil Nadu's landscapes and communities within his fiction. His works are rooted in agrarian life, caste hierarchies, and embodied experiences of longing and exclusion. His novel *Madhorubhagan (One Part Woman)* provoked national debate in 2014 for its nuanced portrayal of a married couple navigating societal pressures to

conceive a child. Though not explicitly a Dalit novel, it engages with caste norms that circumscribe sexuality, honour, and social belonging.

Another important work, *Current Show* (set in a rural town during a film screening), foregrounds quotidian life interwoven with caste and economic divides. Murugan's capacity to render characters with psychological depth and moral complexity positions him as a narrative voice deeply attuned to subaltern struggles and contradictions.

Murugan's own experiences as a teacher, writer, and public intellectual situate him at a crossroads between marginality and cultural privilege. His skepticism toward normative nationalism and casteism reflects a broader ethical commitment to interrogating structures of domination.

### **Dalit Consciousness in *One Part Woman***

#### **Narrative and Social Context**

*One Part Woman* portrays Kali and Ponna, a childless couple living in a caste-stratified village. The novel's poignant rendering of their intimate struggles exposes how caste and patriarchy intersect to exacerbate social anxieties. The couple's infertility becomes a site where community judgment, masculine ego, and ritualistic prescriptions converge.

#### **Caste and Gendered Shame**

The novel presents caste as a pervasive force shaping personal identity: fertility is not merely biological but socially validated through community recognition. The fear of dishonor, gossip, and exclusion underscores how caste infuses the private sphere with public surveillance. The community's suggestion for the annual festival in *Panguni* where sexual unions are temporarily sanctioned is laden with ritual ambivalence, revealing how caste norms regulate desire.

A postcolonial reading posits that the narrative exposes how caste hierarchies operate as internal colonization, disciplining bodies and relationality. Kali and Ponna's suffering is not isolated; it reflects systemic exclusions rooted in Brahmanical social codes.

#### **Subaltern Speech and Narrative Strategy**

Although Kali and Ponna are not Dalit, the novel registers subaltern agency in how they negotiate community expectations. Their subjective interiority rendered through free indirect discourse- reveals resistance to normative dictates. In accordance with Spivak's critique ("Can the Subaltern Speak?"), the novel legitimates previously censored experiences by embedding them in narrative form. In the moments of silence, failed desires, and reluctant compliance, Murugan captures subaltern speech that destabilizes hegemonic norms.

### ***Current Show: Casteed Public Sphere and Everyday Resistance***

*Current Show* unfolds in a small town where a temporary film screening becomes a microcosm for caste dynamics. The narrative weaves multiple characters each representing varied social strata whose interactions reveal normative prejudices and marginalized resistances.

### **Spatial Politics and Caste Boundaries**

The public sphere of the cinema hall becomes a metaphor for contested spaces. Dalit characters and lower caste vendors exist on the periphery, their bodily presence marking zones of acceptance and exclusion. The spectatorship itself is classed and casteed; whose gaze counts and whose silence is tolerated becomes a representation of social hierarchies.

From a Fanonian perspective, the cinema becomes a site of colonial introjection where desires, fantasies, and anxieties converge and replicate dominant ideologies. Murugan's narrative situates caste not as static identity but as lived experience shaped by access, mobility, and exclusion.

### **Disrupting Normative Subjectivity through Collective Voice**

*Current Show* amplifies subaltern perspectives through polyphonic narration. The interlacing of voices street vendors, spectators, and workers foregrounds collective subjectivity. Murugan's stylistic choice to decentralize narrative authority represents a democratic aesthetic, resonant with Dalit literary practices that aim to disperse the authoritative narrator and privilege multiple modes of expression.

This polyphony contrasts Brahmanical narrative coherence that privileges singular perspectives over collective realities. Through multiplicity, Murugan creates a narrative democracy aligned with subaltern literatures.

### **Tamil, Vernacularity, and Literary Authority**

Murugan's use of Tamil-its dialects, proverbs, and cultural idioms situates his fiction within a vernacular aesthetic that privileges local knowledge systems over hegemonic literary standards. This deployment of language destabilizes elitist literary canons that have historically marginalized non-standard linguistic forms.

The vernacular functions as resistance: it embodies subaltern epistemologies that challenge Brahmanical and colonial linguistic hierarchies. Murugan's textual choices align with a broader Dalit literary tradition that valorizes speech and narrative forms rooted in lived experience.

### **Embodied Experience and Caste Pain**

Murugan's narratives often linger on embodied realities bodily shame, desire, physical labor, injury, and fatigue. These corporeal resonances capture caste suffering as material and affective phenomena. In Dalit studies, the body is a critical site of inscription for caste violence and resistance. Murugan's attentive rendering of such experiences contributes to a discourse that refuses abstraction and demands ethical engagement.

### **Critiques and Limitations**

While Murugan's work resonates with subaltern concerns, scholars have debated the

positionality of a non-Dalit author writing about casteed marginalization. Does his narrative risk appropriation? Can non-Dalit writers truly capture Dalit subjectivity?

A critical engagement acknowledges this tension, emphasizing that ethical representation requires reflexivity, accountability, and engagement with community voices. Murugan's literary ethics, manifested through empathetic immersion and critical interrogation of caste norms, offer one model for inclusive writing. Yet, acknowledging the limits of representation remains vital to avoid co-optation of Dalit voices.

### **Conclusion**

Perumal Murugan's fiction occupies a significant position within contemporary Indian literary discourse, particularly in its engagement with casteed marginalization and subaltern experience. Through *One Part Woman* and *Current Show*, Murugan destabilizes normative structures spatial, linguistic, and narrative that have historically sidelined subaltern voices. His use of vernacular language, narrative plurality, and psychological depth aligns with both Dalit and postcolonial theoretical frameworks.

By engaging caste not merely as social category but as lived practice shaping identity and agency, Murugan offers readers a compelling model of how literature can resist, reframe, and recompose social hierarchies. In doing so, his work contributes to expanding Dalit literary discourse and enriches global conversations about subalternity, voice, and representation.

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