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**Literary Theories**

**Labour, Marginalised Identity and Cultural Neglect in Perumal Murugan's Seasons of The Palm**

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**Abstract:** Perumal Murugan's Seasons of the Palm gives a penetrating portrayal of rural labourers whose lives are formed by exploitation and sustained neglect. Focusing on toddy tappers bound to caste-based totally occupations, the novel exposes how physical labour is rendered invisible no matter being crucial to rural survival. This article examines interrelated issues in the text: the exploitation of guide labour and the absence of social justice mechanisms that would shield marginalised communities. Murugan depicts labour not merely as financial activity however as a situation that dehumanises the frame, normalises threat, and erases dignity. Equally good sized is the silence of social and institutional structures like law, welfare, and community ethics which lets in struggling to persist unquestioned. The study argues that social neglect functions as a form of structural violence, reinforcing exploitation without overt coercion. By foregrounding staying power rather than resistance, Seasons of the Palm evaluations a social order that depends on invisible labour even as denying labourers recognition and safety. The novel consequently becomes an effective observation on rural marginality and the ethical indifference embedded inside hierarchical social systems.

**Keywords:** Exploitation, Social neglect, Rural marginality, Caste, Invisibility.

Contemporary Indian author Perumal Murugan is highly regarded for his uncompromising depictions of rural Tamil society in literature. In his works of fiction, Murugan repeatedly focuses on marginalised groups who continue to live on the outskirts of mainstream society's stories about progress and development. His novel *Seasons of the Palm* is an example of Murugan's focus on the community of toddy tappers (the people who harvest sap from palm trees) through their hard and dangerous labour. Murugan does not romanticise the rural lifestyle. Instead, he depicts the difficulties associated with living in rural areas while illustrating how labourers are systemically oppressed and abandoned by the institutions charged with caring for them.

Using Marxist, Subaltern, and Labour Studies frameworks, this paper analyses the ways in which structural neglect create conditions through which labour exploitation continues. From a Marxist perspective, labourers are reduced to mere tools for production, their bodies treated as commodities, and their surplus value appropriated from them with no provision for providing workers social security or dignity. Using Subaltern Studies as a lens, Murugan voices the subaltern community's stories, highlighting how those members experience oppression and accept suffering as their fate. Labour Studies helps to reveal the precarious nature of informal rural work and how informal rural workers live outside of the laws that protect workers and provide them with access to benefits.

These theoretical viewpoints into the analysis, this paper argues that Murugan embodies a critique both of individual suffering and of a wider socio-economic system reliant on hidden labour and unaccountable. In Murugan's fictive world, the labour force is portrayed as vital to, yet expendable by, the larger society; they are seen performing their assigned roles, but are not acknowledged in larger society.

In *Seasons of the Palm*, labour appears everywhere but is not often acknowledged as such. Toddy tapping is the primary livelihood activity in the story and the backbone of the rural economy; however, those who do this work often live on the edge of society due to the dangers associated with climbing palm trees and working under extremely unsafe conditions. Additionally, the routine nature of their work—having it just be part of the daily life that is simply ignored by society—means that the dangers they face are not often regarded as serious enough to warrant any recognition.

The invisibility of labour exists on several levels. Economically speaking, the labourers earn minimal wages that do not provide enough food or shelter. The lack of respect for the job they do excludes labourers from social acceptance as a result of the extreme marginality of their existence. The way these individuals are viewed as 'labourers' creates a repetitive cycle of maintaining a position of marginality within the village.

Murugan offers a view of how society gains from the labour done by these workers while simultaneously distancing itself from the hardships that they encounter. Caste is vital to the ongoing exploitation of labour in *Seasons of the Palm*. The act of toddy tapping is seen to be an occupation handed down through generations (hereditary). This employment fixity keeps social mobility from being a possibility for this group; it ensures that their children will inherit not only their parents' work but also their parents' hardships.

While he does use overtly conflictual forms of oppression, Murugan also illustrates the many ways that caste creates oppressive environments through tradition and expectation. Workers who internalise what they do are accepting their suffering as part of their destiny. This level of internalisation constitutes one of the most powerful mechanisms of control; once someone has accepted their suffering as part of their fate, there is no longer any need to enforce compliance by means of an external party.

In this book, social neglect is a recurring and harmful influence. Neglect happens in a more discreet way than direct oppression; it is generally less overtly expressed to a labourer than through silence and lack of action or acceptance of the hardships experienced by those working. Labourers have very little opportunity to address the risks and losses sustained as a result of working, as they are isolated from everyone else who may have been able to provide aid through some type of support.

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Because of this lack of recognition and support, the labourers can never hope to successfully contend with their situations. It is conveyed to the reader by Murugan's descriptions of neglect that it has a far greater negative impact upon a labourer than physical violence, in that it completely removes the validity of the hardship that a labourer may have experienced.

Murugan's portrayal of the lack of organised resistance among labourers, who live in economic dependency, caste conditioned and socially neglected states, is noteworthy in *Seasons of the Palm*. They have chosen to endure, or put up with their circumstances, rather than rebel against them, and Murugan does not romanticise endurance; he sees it as a tragic necessity. Enduring marginalisation demonstrates the extreme level of marginalisation. In order to resist, you need to be seen and have collective support from others - two things that are not available to labourers. Thus, Murugan draws on enduring experiences to demonstrate the limits of agency in an oppressive social structure.

Murugan, in his book *Seasons of the Palm*, examines the ways that rural society sustains labour exploitation through social neglect, thereby providing a strong critique of the rural community. By viewing the novel from a Marxist, Subaltern, and Labour Studies perspective, little exposes the social mechanisms that entrap marginalised workers in perpetual cycles of deprivation. This occurs because workers are alienated from the value of their work, are denied access to institutional support, and are rendered voiceless within the dominant social structure.

The book depicts the precariousness that exists for cattle herders who work on upper-caste farms, as they are bound into a state of servitude through various means: debt, obligation and intimidation. For Murugan, these cattle herders are completely bound to the land that they work to serve, with their entire existence and form of social being (as humans) spent in a spatially confined area. Their labour starts at daylight and finishes at night; however, they receive very little pay for their work and are not acknowledged in society as individuals. Even though they live on the fringes of upper-caste farms, with no decision-making power regarding their employment or animals, they play a very important role in filling the pockets of upper-caste farmers (the source of agrarian wealth) and are completely dehumanised in the hierarchical society they exist within.

From the perspective of labour studies, cattle pastoralists are engaged in informal/unregulated forms of bound labour which do not exist within any legal framework. Wages are generally not defined, hours of work are not established, and there is no recourse for termination, or for abuse. This lack of regulation allows the landowner/cattle pastoralist to extract continuous labour from the pastoralist while avoiding accountability. In effect, the body of the labourer becomes part of the property of the farm, thus continuing to reduce the dignity of the labourer as a person.

When viewed through a subaltern lens, pastoralists are an example of silenced subjects who's suffering rarely enters into public discourse. Their experience of "endurance" is often misinterpreted as "consent", and their silence is interpreted to be "loyalty." In particular, Murugan illustrates the ways in which the conditions of socialization prevent pastoralists from resisting, because of how their dependence on upper-caste patrons has become a prerequisite for survival. The existence of bound pastoral labour will therefore maintain caste dominance for future generations.

Murugan employs the theme of endurance instead of resistance to illustrate how deeply embedded structural oppression has affected the lives of subaltern communities. Social neglect is a form of silent violence that is much more harmful than overtly coercive forms of violence because it normalises suffering and inflicts a denial of recognition. By highlighting invisible labour and lives of the abandoned, Murugan makes us consider the ethical failure of social and institutional systems. Thus, *Seasons of the Palm* presents a powerful intervention in Indian labour narratives, demanding dignity, visibility, and justice for rural working-class communities.

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