



CAN THE INHUMAN SPEAK? SUBALTERN DISCOURSE AND THE PROBLEM OF AGENCY IN PERUMAL MURUGAN'S *PORK ROAST*

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ABSTRACT

The researchers will attempt to critique Perumal Murugan's short-story "Pork Roast" as a social commentary on the caste divide by using the allegory of an animal's death; a result of anthropocentric views leading to exploitation of animals. The two parallel narratives in the short-story, one of a lower-caste man who is treated in an inhuman manner, and a defenceless animal that becomes the victim of the same lower-caste man and some other men, both lead to a tragic end. The narratives are meant to be juxtaposed against each other to show how the internalised hierarchical power structures in society allow the powerful to exploit the powerless by dehumanising the former and labelling them 'inhuman' and stripping them of agency. The research paper will employ subaltern discourse to study Murugan's tale.

Keywords: Subaltern criticism, subaltern studies, environmental criticism, ecocritical discourse, casteism, speciesism, hierarchy, caste-divide

INTRODUCTION

Peruman Murugan's 'Pork Roast' is taken from the anthology, 'Four Strokes of Luck', published in 2021. The short story revolves around a lower-caste boy called Kumaresan, his grandfather 'Thaathan' and some men on a quest to eat pork. While this might appear fairly innocuous, the cultural and sociological issues surrounding this make this a significant and revelatory event. The stigma surrounding certain kinds of meat and the people who eat such food is also explored. Since subaltern discourse deals with oppressed and marginalised people, it can be applied to Murugan's narrative. The paper will employ Gayatri Spivak's theory as well as Antonio Gramsci's theory to reveal the marginalisation and lack of agency inherent in casteist societies. While Spivak's thrust is on colonialism and thereby the colonised, Gramsci focuses on those under the hegemony of the ruling classes. It is to this category that Dalits and other 'Untouchable' castes belong.

The short-story revolves around a lower caste family that tries to eke out a living by doing various odd jobs and scavenging. Two of the central characters, Thaathan and Kumaresan belong to this family. While Thaathan is an old man who has acclimated himself to his oppression and accepted it, Kumaresan is his grandson who has already known discrimination and oppression but without completely understanding it. The story is set

into motion through Kumaresan. At the beginning of the novel, Kumaresan is an adventurous young boy, who wishes to taste pork. He has grown up hearing about the great pork-feasts his grandfather has attended and wishes to partake of it. Though Thaathan does not take him along with him, Kumaresan finally finds a way to accompany him. But Kumaresan does not know the humiliation and the inherent dangers of this pork-feast that his grandfather has kept hidden from him for so long, and pays a dear price in order to achieve his goal. At the end of the novel, the readers see how Kumaresan has a rude awakening when he finds out the implications of his identity as a person belonging to the lower-classes.

From the beginning, the author makes it clear that the central characters are marginalised as they belong to the lower caste. They were literal outsiders who lived on the outskirts of a village. The men and women had defined roles; with the men hunting various animals like rats, bandicoots and monitor lizards and the women engaging in handiwork. The author points out how the villagers would employ the men to get rid of squirrels. This creates a distance, establishing the villagers as the employers and the Kumaresan's community as employees. This also makes it clear that there are set roles based on gender as well as caste that do not permit social mobility. In addition to this, the fact that Kumaresan and his family ate different kinds of meat makes them objects of ridicule and ostracises them. A testament to this would be the offhand comments made about Kumaresan's eating habits by his school-teacher. The same teacher also strips him of his identity and his dignity by referring to him crudely as 'Thomba payale'.

The teacher would call him, 'Dei, Thomba payale!' - You Thomban boy. Every now and again, he would mock him, saying, 'This guy will eat everything except lizards and chameleons'. (Murugan 68)

The lack of agency becomes apparent when the reader realises that Kumaresan cannot protest this unfair treatment. He does not speak because he cannot speak. He becomes dehumanised when he submits to this degradation, consequently losing his voice. His status can be understood through his interactions with his grandfather. Whenever Kumaresan asks to join Thaathan to eat pork, Thaathan would reply that the 'caste Hindus' would hit him if he did so. This shows that the notion of powerlessness and lack of agency is reinforced in lower-caste communities from a very young age, by others as well as one's own relatives so that over time, it becomes an ingrained trait. The effects of this systematic dehumanisation are so pernicious that they follow one till death with Thaathan serving as a prime example. This is palpable when one compares Kumaresan's behaviour with Thaathan's.

While Kumaresan submits wordlessly to unpleasant nicknames like 'Thomba payale' and 'Eliyaan', Thaathan, has to submit to names like 'Poochi'. He also has to be servile with the younger man, Vellaiyan and other partakers of the pork feast, because they belong to a higher caste. Whenever Vellaiyan says anything to him, Thaathan responds in an obsequious manner. He meekly agrees with anything Vellaiyan says because society does not allow him to speak for himself due to his supposed inferior status.

'Adhu seri, saami,'. Thaathan replied - That's for sure, sir. His stock response to most of what Vellaiyan said was 'Adhu seri, saami.' Kumaresan thought perhaps it was mandatory to respond in that manner to the landholders. (Murugan 77)

In other words, the hegemonic class has made both Kumaresan and Thaathan lose agency, effectively rendering them incapable of speech, leading one to recognize the potency of Spivak's title, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'. The simple answer to that question is a resounding 'no'. By using the parallel of a helpless animal that ultimately dies as a result of power-structures in society, the author makes the point that the uneven power-dynamics can lead to disastrous consequences for humans also.

Gramsci's proposal of cultural hegemony as a divisive agent is witnessed in this narrative. Cultural Hegemony refers to the dominance of a class or sect that is wrought about by means of ideologies and beliefs. In this short story, members of the lower caste have been indoctrinated in such a way as to make them submissive. They are also afflicted with a sense of their own inferiority as a result. In his "Prison Notebooks", Gramsci goes on to write about the manufacturing of consent. He expounds how the supremacy of certain social classes was maintained through two means. One is through the assertion of dominance, the other way is through

using hegemony to manufacture consent. By means of using culture and ideologies, the social classes manufacture consent and rule over the less privileged. This is witnessed through the way Kumaresan and Thaathan submit to countless humiliations at the hands of the upper-castes. Their consent to unjust treatment is manufactured and maintained by the upper classes, and as a result, they have been made to believe they are inferior and do not protest the unfair treatment.

The economic aspect also plays a huge role here. The poverty of Kumaresan's family is emphasised at the very beginning of the short story.

Patti had a single errand for the day. She would head to the village every evening. Her only possessions were three pots. On the days the pot she carried into the village was filled to the brim, she would say, 'This is a village ruled by prosperous altruists who fill their cooking pots and not their plates.' On the days it wasn't, she would say, 'This is a village of foraging misers who lick their plates clean'. (Murugan 66)

Gramsci writes that certain classes are kept under the control of the powerful by economic means also. But it is those in power who decide the economic pursuits of these classes. Consequently, it does not lie within the power of the underprivileged to attain any upward social mobility as they are circumscribed by their economic status. In addition to this, the culture and ideologies also play a part in making these classes believe that they are only meant for certain kinds of professions or economic activities. A paradigm shift must occur in cultural dimensions in order for the situation to change. Gramsci's theory is very striking in its relevance to the present-day context of India where the division of castes based on their professions still exists and is even encouraged.

These internalised structures of hierarchy dehumanise the protagonists, Thaathan and Kumaresan, to such an extent that the readers can almost draw a parallel between the pig's treatment at the hand of its human masters and the lower caste's treatment at the hand of the upper classes. While Thaathan does not concern himself with the brutality involved in the act of trussing up a helpless animal, and thrusting a stick in its nose to render it submissive while killing it, the upper classes do not concern themselves with the way they treat the lower classes, by giving them insulting nicknames, by side lining them, denying them access to common resources and treating them like pariahs. It is significant that both the pig and Thaathan are killed in a violent manner at the end of the novel. The author is thereby emphasising the inhumanity and cruelty meted out to the less fortunate. This is also a commentary on the hierarchic structures inherent in society that lead to exploitation.

The idea of 'othering' which makes Thaathan and Kumaresan identify as outsiders is also witnessed in the narrative. Throughout the text, these two central characters are in the periphery when they are with other characters. They do not take part in the discussion, they do not voice out their opinions, even the educational setup ostracises them. When Kumaresan helps his grandfather to get the pork roast ready, his grandfather cautions him against touching the water. He believes that Kumaresan's touch will 'dirty' the water and that the villagers would punish him for it. The fact that he is so ready to accept this notion foregrounds the impact of such insidious indoctrinations. Though religion is not explicitly mentioned in the text, it is implied that it plays a major role too, leading the lower classes to accept their supposed inferiority.

The educational system is also of interest in other regards. As a reflection of the colonial legacy, it is also a contributing factor in the plight of the underprivileged.

Spivak's theory focuses on the impacts of colonialism on the colonised. In this novel, the impacts of colonialism are reflected in the educational system also. The meaninglessness of the education left behind by the white overlords become apparent through Perumal Murugan's commentary of the same:

Whatever the teacher had to say, he would say it with kindness. Hitting the students could drive them away. The enrollment record would be affected. The teacher's kindness was due to this consideration. (Murugan 68)

In her essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak quotes several thinkers to make her point. She quotes Deleuze writing about what reality is, and how the subalterns should be allowed to speak. Yet, the irony is that

it is the intellectual or the one in power who decides what the authentic lived experience of the subalterns is. In other words, the intellectual still holds the power by nullifying or validating the reality of the subalterns at will. Intellectuals as used in Spivak's essay is synonymous with power and therefore authority. She writes,

This foreclosing of the necessity of the difficult task of counterhegemonic ideological production has not been salutary. It has helped positivist empiricism - the justifying foundation of advanced capitalist neocolonialism - to define its own arena as 'concrete experience', 'what actually happens'. Indeed the concrete experience that is the guarantor of the political appeal of prisoners, soldiers and schoolchildren is disclosed through the concrete experience of the intellectual, the one who diagnoses the episteme. (Spivak 69)

Two things are to be considered. Firstly, the schoolteacher consolidates power by using the outmoded colonial legacy of servility on the part of the learners, in order to render them powerless. Secondly, he attempts to define the 'concrete experience' of the colonised, in this case, Kumaresan, by using his own words to validate it, thereby making Kumaresan and others like him, voiceless. Spivak also writes about the nature of 'power' in her essay, thereby emphasising how any kind of power depends on the powerlessness of the 'Other'. In this case, the power held by the upper castes comes at the cost of the lower castes. In the same way, the power held by human beings comes at the cost of voiceless animals. Here too, the parallel between the two victims becomes apparent.

The readers can see the effects of the caste system pervading every aspect of life, right from culture, education to food. People like Thaathan and Kumaresan are looked down upon simply because they eat certain kinds of food. And even among the 'caste-Hindus' those who eat pork are considered unclean or filthy. It is revealed that the women belonging to the community of the 'caste-Hindus' neither cooked nor ate pork. But the men seemed to have a fondness for it. This also shows the hypocrisy of the 'caste-Hindus' who could overlook barriers when it suited them. Though they eat the same kind of meat that is considered unclean and unfit for consumption and fit only for the lower-castes, they do not feel that they are debased by it.

But it also shows that these discriminatory attitudes are a result of the strict laws that govern what certain castes can and cannot do. Those who break these rules seem to be more accepting and tolerant of differences. Vellaiyan is an example of an upper-class man who does not knowingly engage in casteist behaviour. He is also one of the characters who has embraced diverse eating habits, perhaps, this is a manifestation of his progressive attitude. When his wife calls him names for his eating habits, he retorts, 'Will any farmer's wife refer to a muruvaan as a panni?' (Murugan 69). This seems to imply that Vellaiyan is different from his peers. The readers can also see the difference in his treatment of the lower-caste Thaathan and Kumaresan. He treats Thaathan with more respect than the other caste-Hindus and he is the first one to offer Kumaresan some of the curry.

But even so, Thaathan does not speak freely in his presence but rather agrees with whatever Vellaiyan says. In addition to this, there is also a marked difference in the way the two men dress. Though both Thaathan and Vellaiyan were tall, Vellaiyan seems aware of his own superiority in this regard, as he chooses to dress differently when he has to go outside his own vicinity.

The only difference between his form and that of Thaathan was the veshti. For as long as he was within his own territory, Vellaiyan would wear only a loincloth, which hung down to his knees. But if he had to go out somewhere, he would throw a veshti on over the loincloth and toss a thundu over one shoulder. Thaathan would wear only the loincloth wherever he went. (Murugan 74)

Thaathan's helplessness, and by extension, the helplessness and the isolation of his community is expressed at the climax of the play. When Vellaiyan is about to be stabbed by Chellaiyan, Thaathan intercepts the attack, and gets himself gravely injured. Yet, Vellaiyan does not help Thaathan or defend him. The readers are told that Vellaiyan had run away in fear and only Kumaresan remained to catch him. Through this the author makes a commentary regarding the persecution of the marginalised and the impotence or indifference of the privileged few who appear to treat them fairly.

Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak?* brought up the question of agency. Spivak discoursed on how the women who were forced to take part in the ritual of Sati were never able to voice out their feelings. Their voice

was supplanted with that of the white overlords. Though they were seen as victims, denying them a voice, denied them their agency. In the same way, Murugan shows how people belonging to the lower-caste are either treated as victims or tragic figures while some upper-class characters are shown in a heroic light, thereby denying the marginalised any agency. In this short-story, however, it is the marginalised, those on the periphery, who are at the centre of the discourse, and from the narration, it becomes clear that it is society and the power-structures inherent in society that contribute to this lack of agency. The short-story also reinforces this lack of agency by providing graphic descriptions on the handling and butchering of a helpless animal, and helps the readers understand that the same power-dynamics that render the lower-classes voiceless, are the ones that render those lower on the food-chain voiceless. By dehumanising the powerless, the powerful rob them of agency, and therefore create a cycle of pain and suffering. It is through the demolition of these power-structures that a better social atmosphere could be created for humans and non-humans alike.

Murugan is skilled at employing metaphors and analogies to convey his point in his works. In *Seasons of the Palm*, he uses the analogy of a palm tree to show the plight of the downtrodden.

The palm is used as a metaphor and it dominates the landscape of the novel through its characteristics. The palm is a type of tree that can withstand drought throughout the year and it can produce fruit, root, nut, juice and toddy in every season. (G Naveen Kumar and Dr. K Ravichandran 106)

In the same way, in this short story, Murugan brilliantly uses the analogy of the pork roast to summarise the situation of the marginalised in society. Murugan himself had written a paper in 1999 with the aim of chronicling the stories of the marginalised. Though he does not state this in such words, he admits that he is “a detached observer and an involved narrator” (Murugan, Perumal, and Venkat Swaminathan 94), and one influenced by Marxist ideologies. This makes it clear that Murugan wishes to be a voice for the voiceless, and to balance the skewed power-dynamics that currently exist in society.

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