
“Who Decides What We Eat”: A Study of Food Politics in Perumal Murugan and Imayam’s Select Novels

M. Nithya¹

Research Scholar, Department of English, Thiruvalluvar University

Dr. C. Anita²

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Thiruvalluvar University

Article Received: 16/02/2025

Article Accepted: 18/03/2025

Published Online: 19/03/2025

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.03.101

Abstract:

This research paper delves into the portrayal of regional food and its significance in the literary work of two prominent Tamil writers, Perumal Murugan, and Imayam, through an in-depth analysis of select novels *Pyre*, *Season of Palm*, and *Beast of Burden*. The paper explores how these authors depict the socio-cultural dynamics surrounding food consumption and the power structures that influence dietary choices in this ethnic society. By way of examining the role of the characters, symbolism, and narrative technique, this study aims to decipher the complexities of food representation in the literary arena and shed light on the power behind culinary decisions.

Keywords: Socio-Cultural, Power, Landscape, Culinary.

Introduction

Food holds a profound significance in Tamil Nadu, shaping not just the culinary landscape but also the cultural, social, and political identities of its communities. In this Tamilnadu region, food extends beyond sustenance, symbolizing pride, tradition, and resistance. The diverse culinary practices of Tamil Nadu are deeply intertwined with the local geography, agricultural practices, and the cultural ethos of its ethnic groups, making food a powerful medium of expression and identity.

Culinary traditions in Tamil Nadu often reflect the region’s religion and caste hierarchies. Ingredients like millet, tamarind, and coconut, along with the use of banana leaves, are not merely culinary choices but markers of cultural and ritual significance. For instance, Pongal, prepared during the harvest festival, embodies both agricultural pride and spiritual devotion. These practices, however, are not uniform; they vary across communities and reflect the stratified social fabric of Tamil Nadu. Certain foods are historically privileged, while others are marginalized, mirroring the rigid hierarchies of caste.

At the same time, food in Tamil Nadu serves as a site of resistance and assertion. The politics of food underscores how dietary practices have been historically weaponized to maintain caste hegemony while also becoming tools for challenging social hierarchies. Writers like Iyayam and Perumal Murugan explore this dynamic in their works, portraying food as a deeply political entity. Their narratives highlight the resilience and dignity of agricultural communities, whose relationship with food is shaped by both arrogance in their labor and the socio-political pressures they endure.

This paper, titled “Who Decides What We Eat: A Study of Food Politics in Select Novels by Iyayam and Perumal Murugan,” delves into the complex interplay between food, caste, and identity in Tamil Nadu. By examining how these authors depict food as both a cultural artifact and a political instrument, the study sheds light on the role of food in shaping rural socialization and community pride. It also explores how food practices are contested and negotiated, offering a lens through which to understand the broader dynamics of Tamil society.

Ultimately, the study argues that food in Tamil Nadu is more than a culinary tradition. It is a site of cultural memory, social resistance, and political discourse. By examining its depiction in literature, this paper seeks to unravel the layers of meaning that food holds in the lives of Tamil Nadu's ethnic communities, offering insights into how it reflects and reshapes their identities and struggles.

Food and Caste Politics in the Novels of Perumal Murugan and Iyayam

Food has always been more than sustenance in Indian society. It embodies power, politics, identity, and deeply ingrained caste dynamics. Perumal Murugan and Iyayam, two of Tamil Nadu's most compelling writers, have masterfully explored the intersections of food and caste in their works. Their novels reveal how food is not merely what we eat but a representation of who we are, how society perceives us, and, often, how it marginalizes us. Kancha Ilaiah's *Why I Am Not a Hindu* states that, “The politics of food in Dalit communities reveal a constant negotiation between maintaining cultural identity and resisting caste-based discrimination, where the everyday choices of what to eat and how to eat are laden with profound social significance” (110) and thus speaks of the complex and multifaceted role that food plays in the lives of Dalits within caste hierarchies. For Dalit communities, food is deeply tied to their cultural identity. The foods they eat and their culinary traditions often carry significant cultural meaning, reflecting their history, heritage, and social practices. These food choices are a form of cultural expression, helping to preserve and assert their identity within a society that has historically marginalized them all along.

In *Pyre*, Perumal Murugan uses food as a recurring motif to expose the rigid caste hierarchies in rural Tamil Nadu. Food in this novel is a marker of identity and a tool of exclusion. Consider the moment when Saroja, a Dalit woman, offers snacks to her neighbors. Her kind gesture is met with disdain: “Another neighbor, Parvati, said to her, ‘Don’t you know Mythili only accepts things from people of certain castes?’” (87). This seemingly

simple act of sharing snacks underscores a harsh reality. For Mythili, accepting food from Saroja would mean breaking a caste taboo, something unthinkable in their rigid social world. Here, food becomes a 'marker of purity,' with its 'acceptance or rejection' reinforcing social divisions. Saroja's naivety in offering the snacks highlights her initial lack of awareness of the deeply entrenched caste prejudices that will shape her life in the village.

When Kumaresan's mother and Saroja encounter a quarrel. She faints during an argument a neighbor hesitantly offers her water in a lead tumbler:

"She offered it to Saroja but then pulled her hand back. She went inside again and returned with a lead tumbler. Pouring some water into it, she handed the tumbler to Saroja and gave Kumaresan the jug." (100)

Even in an emergency, the politics of vessels comes into play. The lead tumbler signifies a caste boundary. Saroja, perceived as "lower," cannot drink from the same jug as her husband. This act is emblematic of the pervasive discrimination where even the act of quenching thirst is dictated by caste-based notions of purity and pollution. Murugan poignantly portrays how caste operates in the most mundane aspects of life, embedding itself into the very vessels from which we drink.

In *Season of the Palm*, Perumal Murugan shifts his focus to lower caste bonded laborers like Shorty and Belly, who navigate hunger and oppression daily. The landlords control not only their labor but also their access to food, treating them as expendable. Shorty's life revolves around scraps, leftover millet balls, rotting food, and occasional palm roots:

"Most days, the mistress packs his tin pail with kombu balls from the day before. Thin, shriveled, and smelling faintly of rot... He waits every morning, resigned and eager, for the rotten balls, like a dog." (6)

This line captures the indignity of hunger. Despite knowing the food is spoiled, Shorty eats it because he has no choice. His dehumanization is mirrored in the way food is given to him, much like feeding an animal. Even the vessels used to serve him coconut shells become symbols of his lower status.

Belly, his fellow laborer, also faces similar indignities. When she shares a spoiled palm root with Shorty, their hunger overrides their awareness of its staleness: "He rubs his thumb and forefingers together. They feel sticky. He smells his thumb and wrinkles his nose. He shrugs his shoulders and eats up the root." (27) Through these vivid depictions, Perumal Murugan reveals the systemic oppression faced by the marginalized. The landlords' control over food symbolizes their larger control over the lives of the laborers, perpetuating a cycle of dependency and exploitation.

Imayam, like Murugan, uses food as a central theme in *Beast of Burden*, but with a focus on resistance. Arokkayam, the protagonist, is a lower-caste woman who survives by

performing various tasks for the upper castes in her village. Her remuneration? Leftover food. Arokkayam's daughter-in-law, Sahayam, resists this humiliating tradition of collecting food from upper-caste households: "Are you asking me to go and stand in front of each house, with the rice-pot on my hip and the vessel for the curry on my head, calling out, 'Ammov, it's the vanity, give me food?'" (104-5) Sahayam's refusal to accept this degrading practice challenges the entrenched norms of her community. Her objection symbolizes a larger fight against a system that perpetuates inequality through food politics. By questioning these customs, Sahayam asserts her dignity and sparks a conversation about alternative forms of labor and remuneration.

Imayam also highlights the politics of waste. Arokkayam reflects on how the upper castes would discard meat from dead cattle, which the lower castes would then consume: "Nowadays, if a cow dies, they bury it. In those days they would give it away to the chakli. It's the strength I got from the beef I ate in those days that keeps this body on earth even today." (174) This argument encapsulates the harsh reality of how food, even in its discarded form, is weaponized to sustain the caste system. The upper castes decide what is "fit" for the marginalized to eat, reinforcing their dominance while ensuring the latter's survival depends on their scraps.

Both Murugan and Imayam reveal the intricate relationship between food and caste. Their works illustrate how food is not merely about survival; it is about power, purity, and identity. In their novels, food becomes a site of oppression, a symbol of resistance, and a medium through which societal structures are both upheld and challenged.

For marginalized communities, the act of eating often carries political significance. Whether it is Sahayam refusing to collect leftovers or Shorty consuming spoiled millet balls, these moments highlight the dehumanization and resilience of the oppressed. Both authors remind us that food politics is not just about hunger it is about dignity, equality, and justice.

Conclusion

Perumal Murugan and Imayam offer a searing critique of caste and its impact on food politics. Through their narratives, they expose the structural inequalities that govern access to food, the politics of purity and pollution, and the ways in which the marginalized resist these injustices. Their works induce us to reconsider the socio-cultural dimensions of food and its role in perpetuating or dismantling power hierarchies. Food, in their hands, becomes a lens through which we can better understand the intersection of caste, tradition, and resistance in South Indian society. By bringing these issues to light, they challenge readers to envision a more equitable future where food is a right, not a privilege, and where dignity is not determined by one's caste.

References:

Imayam. *Beast of Burden*. Translated by Lakshmi Holmstrom, Niyogi Books, 2019.

Murugan, Perumal. *Pyre*. Translated by Aniruddhan Vasudevan, Penguin Random House,

2017.

Murugan, Perumal. *Season of Palm*. Translated by V. Geetha, Penguin Random House, 2017.
Ilaiah, Kancha. *Why I Am Not a Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy*. Samya, 1996.

Citation:

M. Nithya & Dr. C. Anita“Who Decides What We Eat”: A Study of Food Politics in Perumal Murugan and Ilayam’s Select Novels”*International Journal of English and Studies (IJOES)*, vol. 7, no. 3, 2025, pp. 97-101. DOI: 10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.03.101.