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MARGINALITY, PERFORMANCE, AND THE SUBALTERN AESTHETIC IN PERUMAL MURUGAN'S *CURRENT SHOW*

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Abstract
Perumal Murugan's Current Show (2004), the English translation of Nizhal Muttram (1993), presents a searing portrayal of subaltern life in 1960s–70s rural Tamil Nadu, centered on the decaying space of a village theatre that functions as both setting and socio-political metaphor. This paper examines how Murugan articulates a distinct "subaltern aesthetic" through themes of marginality, performative survival, and affective dislocation. Moving beyond conventional representations of poverty, the novel renders visible the everyday rhythms of caste-inflected precarity, where identity is shaped not by agency but by endurance, surveillance, and fleeting intimacies. Through close textual analysis and engagement with critical frameworks from Anupama Rao, Veena Das, and G. J. V. Prasad, the study explores how Murugan's vernacular prose, embodied gestures, and material detailing—of labor, addiction, and cinematic devotion—forge a poetics of the ordinary. Ultimately, Current Show emerges not as a narrative of redemption but as an act of ethical witnessing, offering a profound meditation on dignity, refusal, and relationality among the dispossessed in postcolonial India.

Keywords: Subalternity, Marginality, Vernacular aesthetics, Caste, Everyday Survival

Introduction:

Perumal Murugan's *Nizhal Muttram* (1993), translated into English as *Current Show* (2004), is more than a regional chronicle of 1960s–70s rural Tamil Nadu; it is a meticulously rendered anatomy of subaltern life, where economic precarity, caste hierarchy, and affective desolation converge within the decaying space of a village theatre. Far from serving merely as a backdrop, the theatre operates as both a literal and symbolic microcosm—one that encapsulates the structural immobility, performative survival, and fractured intimacies of those consigned to the margins of society. Through characters like Sathivel (Sathi)—an

orphaned youth estranged from his leprosy-afflicted father and abandoned by his mother—Murugan crafts not a narrative of uplift or redemption, but a visceral ethnography of the dispossessed, wherein identity is less a product of agency than of endurance under conditions of systemic abandonment.

From its opening pages, *Current Show* establishes an environment saturated with stasis. The dilapidated yet stubbornly functional cinema hall—its cracked plaster, flickering projectors, and dust-laden aisles—functions as what Homi K. Bhabha might term a "third space" of ambivalent belonging: neither fully public nor private, neither abandoned nor thriving, but suspended in a liminal temporality that mirrors the lives of its denizens. The theatre's workers—projectionists, cleaners, ticket collectors—exist in what Priyamvada Gopal has described as "the everydayness of marginality," a condition wherein exclusion becomes so normalized that it ceases to register as crisis (Gopal 72). Their lives are governed not by aspiration but by the rhythms of subsistence: the next show, the next smoke, the next wage, however meager.

Consider the haunting tableau of Hulk (Boothan), found early in the novel "slumped in a pile of dead insects," fixated on a cone of peanuts that gleam "like a still mess of tiny worms" in the lamplight (CS 1). His physical inertia mirrors a deeper existential paralysis—one imposed not by personal failure but by a socio-economic order that offers neither futures nor exits. Theft, when it occurs, is not framed as moral transgression but as a logic of survival within a zero-sum economy. As Anupama Rao observes, "subaltern ethics often emerge in the interstices of legality and deprivation," where necessity reconfigures what constitutes right action (Rao 114). In Murugan's world, the law is not neutral; it is an instrument of the propertied, and survival demands operating outside its bounds.

Murugan's linguistic choices are central to his subaltern aesthetic. The novel's dialogue bristles with vulgarity—"That bastard manager's going to bring in some other fucker's film" (CS 10)—not as literary ornamentation, but as a linguistic index of social fracture. As S. Anand argues, Murugan "refuses the sanitizing impulse of literary Tamil," instead deploying a raw, vernacular register that embodies the lived speech of the rural poor (Anand 89). This linguistic authenticity is political: it resists the Brahmanical and bourgeois norms that equate "proper" language with moral integrity. When the theatre manager hurls epithets—"Leftovers-eating dog! Bloody motherfucker!" (CS 14)—the insult functions not merely as interpersonal cruelty but as a performative act of caste-marking, reinforcing hierarchies through the very syntax of contempt.

Language here is both wound and weapon. It reveals how dignity is systematically stripped from laboring bodies, yet it also becomes a site of fleeting camaraderie. The boys' raucous banter, laced with obscenities, functions as a code of belonging—a way to assert presence in a world that renders them invisible. Murugan thus stages language not as

transparent communication but as a charged social practice, deeply embedded in relations of power and identity.

Amid this bleakness, Murugan locates moments of fragile, unsentimental solidarity. The bond between Sathivel and Natesan—two rootless men bound by silence rather than speech—forms the emotional nucleus of the novel. After Sathi is brutally beaten, Natesan lifts him "slowly off the ground" and walks with him "past the stairway to the front office" (CS 13). Their connection is articulated not through dialogue but through gesture: a palm gently cradling a bruised cheek, evoking in Sathi the sensation that his "heart [has] dissolved into a heap of ash" (CS 21). This moment exemplifies what G. J. V. Prasad calls "subaltern relationality"—a form of intimacy that "thrives outside institutional frameworks, in the cracks of official history" (Prasad 63).

Crucially, Murugan avoids romanticizing this bond. It is not redemptive; it does not transform their material conditions. Yet it is profoundly humanizing. In a world where they are seen only as labor or nuisance, their silent care constitutes a quiet resistance—a refusal to be wholly consumed by dehumanization.

The novel's portrayal of drug use—ganja, sleeping pills, alcohol—is neither moralistic nor celebratory. Instead, Murugan frames addiction as a symptom of abandonment. "Siva's gift, he calls it," one character jokes darkly, adding, "even God's gifts don't last forever, and you've got to pay" (CS 18). Substance use is not rebellion but habituated escape—a way to endure a present with no horizon. The boys gamble and smoke not because they are reckless, but because they are bereft of alternatives. Their awareness that they are "not a rupee for fucking food" yet still seek fleeting thrills (CS 19) reflects what Veena Das terms the "aesthetics of endurance": a mode of being wherein survival is less about thriving than about weathering chronic vulnerability (Das 207).

Murugan's refusal to pathologize these behaviors is key to his ethical vision. He locates agency not in resistance alone, but in the mundane acts of getting through the day—what anthropologists might call "the work of staying alive."

Significantly, Murugan complicates narratives of rescue. When the soda man—a local "master" figure—offers Sathi work on his farm, promising food and small savings, Sathi refuses. His rejection is not born of laziness, but of a deep intuition that such "honest labor" would entail entering a system of debt, obligation, and surveillance that replicates, rather than remedies, his subordination. The soda man's retort—"Spoilt. Don't want to do an honest day's work" (CS 32)—reveals the moral economy of caste capitalism, which equates poverty with moral failing. Sathi's silence, then, becomes a form of quiet defiance: a refusal to trade autonomy for conditional dignity.

Murugan's attention to material detail elevates the mundane into the mnemonic. His meticulous description of soda-making—the gas cylinder "sunk into the ground," the "web of wires," the marble balls sealing bottles (CS 36)—transforms labor into ritual. This focus on the "texture of things" aligns with R. S. Khanna's insight that Murugan practices an "archaeology of the ordinary," wherein everyday objects become vessels of collective memory and cultural continuity (Khanna 152). In documenting how refreshment was once crafted with patience and care, Murugan mourns not just a lost technology, but a lost sociality—one predating the commodification and alienation of late capitalism.

The theatre's audience, particularly figures like Muthamma—a transgender devotee of M. G. Ramachandran (MGR)—reveals cinema's dual function as escapism and identity-formation. Muthamma's unwavering attendance is not about plot or performance but about presence: "Who else should I watch?" she retorts when questioned (CS 38). Her devotion illustrates how marginalized subjects project desire onto cinematic icons, transforming stardom into sanctuary. As S. Theodore Baskaran notes, "In Tamil cinema's golden age, the hero was not just actor but deity—a figure through whom the powerless imagined agency" (Baskaran 112). For Muthamma, cinema is not illusion but affective refuge—a space where she can exist as a desiring subject, however temporarily.

In *Current Show,* Murugan constructs a world where the boundary between reel and reality dissolves—not through fantasy, but through the material conditions of longing. The theatre is not an escape from life but its distilled essence: a space where poverty, desire, cruelty, and care coexist in unresolved, unmediated tension. Murugan offers no catharsis, no resolution, no heroism. Instead, he offers witness—an unflinching gaze that renders visible the aesthetics of subaltern survival. His novel stands as a testament to those whose lives are deemed unworthy of documentation, insisting that their endurance, their vulgarity, their silence, and their fleeting intimacies are not just worthy of attention, but central to understanding the cultural and political fabric of postcolonial India.

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