

The Politics of Forbidden Writing: Caste, Gender, and Marginalized Voices in Contemporary Indian Literature

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Abstract:

This paper examines the politics of forbidden writing in contemporary Indian literature, with particular attention to the representation of caste, gender, social exclusion, and cultural violence in selected works of Perumal Murugan and Meena Kandasamy. Focusing primarily on Perumal Murugan's *Seasons of the Palm* and *One Part Woman*, and with reference to Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess*, the study investigates how literary narratives challenge dominant social structures by giving visibility to marginalized bodies, communities, and experiences. Murugan's representation of Dalit childhood, caste-based humiliation, psychological marginalization, infertility, and gendered social expectations demonstrates how literature can expose forms of violence that are normalized within caste-bound communities. Similarly, Kandasamy's fictional reconstruction of the Kilvenmani massacre foregrounds collective resistance, caste oppression, and the struggle to recover suppressed histories. The paper further considers the controversies surrounding Murugan's *One Part Woman* and his subsequent declaration of authorial death to examine the relationship between literary representation, censorship, community sentiment, and freedom of expression. Drawing upon perspectives from psychoanalysis, intersectionality, ableism, allegory, subaltern studies, and literary censorship, the study argues that forbidden writing does not merely represent marginalized experiences; it actively contests the structures that attempt to silence them. Such writing transforms literature into a space of resistance, memory, testimony, and social intervention, demonstrating the continuing importance of literary freedom in confronting oppressive cultural narratives.

Keywords: Forbidden writing; Caste oppression; Dalit literature; Social exclusion; Cultural violence; Gender; Resistance;

Introduction

Perumal Murugan and Meena Kandasamy are important writers who write about marginalisation. While Murugan frequently utilizes allegorical narration to navigate the constraints of societal orthodoxy and cultural taboos (Kujur), Kandasamy employs a more direct, militant critique of caste-based gender violence. These disparate narrative strategies reveal the nuanced ways in which both authors negotiate the tension between subaltern self-representation and the often-hostile socio-political environments they inhabit (Devaprakash). Furthermore, while Murugan's work often interrogates the internal psychological toll of traditional stigmatization (Jeba and Selvi), Kandasamy's prose aggressively dismantles the power structures that facilitate such systemic exclusions (Divya et al.; Shabin). This comparative framework highlights how these authors employ distinct literary techniques such as allegorical symbolism and metafictional critique to challenge the epistemic erasure and historical revisionism characteristic of contemporary Indian discourse. By interrogating these discursive strategies, the study clarifies how literature functions as an essential site for contesting the fabrication of truth and the militarization of dominant cultural hegemony.

Marginalization in Perumal Murugan novel

Systemic marginalization in the novel is primarily maintained through the **intergenerational trap of debt bondage**, which strips Dalit families of economic self-determination and forces young children into hard labor. The Dalit agricultural laborers—often classified as hereditary serfs or bonded permanent serfs—rely on minimal annual grain payouts from their Masters that are "never enough" to sustain a family for a whole year. To survive, families are forced to take financial advances from landowning Masters, effectively pledging their children's labor as collateral.

This system ensures that the children are treated as commodities, easily substituted to satisfy family debts. For instance, when Stonedeaf attains puberty, her father pulls her from her herding duties because "we can't let a big girl do such work(Murugan 185)". However, because the family remains bound by a hundred-rupee debt to the Master, her eight-year-old sister, **Matchbox**, is immediately sent to replace her in the cowshed. Belly's deep terror of being sent to Vettu Kaattu Master's farm highlights this cycle of perpetual human commodification:

Belly's brother, Bottle Gourd, works for Vettu Kaattu Master and she knows what a hard time he has. Her father and mother want to find a bride for him. But who wants to marry a farmhouse servant, pledged to the Master? So her parents are waiting to get her brother out of the farm and put her in his place. That way, he would be freed to work as a regular labourer in the fields.(Murugan 39)

The novel exposes the absolute lack of agency experienced by the marginalized. In this setting, familial progression is structured entirely around trading the freedom of one

child for another.(Eligedi et al.) To allow Bottle Gourd a chance at a "respectable marriage" and regular wage labor, his younger sister Belly must sacrifice her relative freedom of grazing sheep in the open fields and enter the brutal confinement of farmhouse service. The economic system functions as a vehicle for total exploitation, where Dalit bodies are utilized to clear debts they did not personally incur, cementing their exclusion from educational opportunities and social mobility

Futhermore, A primary mechanism of social marginalization is the enforcement of spatial segregation and purity-pollution codes. Untouchability is not merely a abstract concept but a physically mapped reality where marginalized groups are confined to the *cheri* (outcaste quarters) and barred from entering caste-Hindu spaces, public schools, or using common wells.

Throughout the novel, the child laborers must carefully navigate spaces dominated by caste-Hindus. Shorty's daily morning chore of delivering milk to the Nadar neighborhood is tightly governed by rigid rules of physical contact. Similarly, the simple act of eating and drinking is marked by caste-based degradation.

Shorty describes the daily humiliation of receiving his morning coffee:

She pours thick milky coffee into the coconut shell that serves as his bowl and he sits by the kitchen door, leaning on it. He sips from his bowl, slowly, carefully, not wanting to lose out on a single drop. He cherishes this moment and wants it to never end. (Murugan 22)

This scene beautifully and painfully highlights the normalization of indignity. Shorty is excluded from using proper household vessels, forced instead to drink from a designated "coconut shell" kept outdoors by the kitchen door. The tragedy of his marginalization lies in his internalization of this treatment; he cherishes this moment, finding joy in a routine explicitly designed to mark him as physically polluting.

This social distance is reinforced from childhood. Caste-Hindu schoolgoing children like Mani and Selvan routinely avoid playing with the herders. They are strictly warned by their mothers: "*Don't rolling about in the fields with those low-born varmints*" (Murugan and Geetha 95)and are asked if they washed after touching them. This early enforcement of spatial and physical segregation solidifies a matrix of domination that keeps the Dalit children locked in a state of absolute social alienation

Marginalization in Meena Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess*

In this narrative, Kandasamy utilizes the 1968 Kilvenmani massacre as a focal point to analyze how spatial production functions as an instrument of caste-based dominance. The primary axis of social exclusion in *The Gypsy Goddess* is the rigid enforcement of spatial segregation, where caste hierarchies are geographically mapped onto the physical landscape. In rural Tanjore, the feudal mode of production divides society cleanly between the landowning caste-Hindus (mirasdars, primarily Brahmins, Naidus, and Mudaliars) and the landless untouchable laborers (primarily Pallars, Paraiyars, and Chakkiliyars). This structural

inequality is geographically reinforced by confining the Dalits to the *cheri*—dilapidated outcaste quarters situated completely outside the main village boundary.

The *cheri* functions as an instrument of spatial quarantine and social rupture, ensuring that untouchables are kept at a constant physical and social distance. They are systematically barred from public institutions, shared wells, and caste-Hindu streets under the guise of ritual pollution.

The collective voice of the Kilvenmani survivors reflects on this deeply entrenched spatial apartheid:

"That explained the separate wells and the separate graveyards and the separate streets. That explained why we had to stay out of the schools. That explained why we had to stay outside their homes. That explained why our homes were in the *cheri*, outside their villages. That explained why our people had been killed."(Kandasamy 164)

This quote illustrates how marginalization operates through absolute physical exclusion. The separate wells and graveyards signify that the Dalits' exclusion is total governing both their lives and their deaths. The spatial confinement to the *cheri* serves a dual economic purpose: it isolates the laborers to prevent them from organizing, while ensuring they remain a captive, highly vulnerable pool of cheap labor. When the untouchable laborers attempt to transgress these boundaries such as pulling a temple chariot or marching their funeral processions through caste-Hindu streets they are met with violent retaliation. By keeping Dalits outside the village and out of schools, the mirasdars deny them "equal opportunity" and social mobility, locking them into a cycle of intergenerational serfdom where they must work the fields for a pittance.

Furthermore, When the landless laborers of Tanjore begin to organize under the red flag of the Communist Party to demand a liveable wage (specifically six measures of paddy), the landowners employ extreme, normalized physical violence to re-assert control. Marginalization is not maintained merely through economic contracts; it is written directly onto the bodies of the oppressed through theatrical displays of feudal torture.

To crush the laborers' strike, the Paddy Producers' Association—led by the sadistic landlord Gopalakrishna Naidu—deploys armed rowdies to pillage the *cheri*, loot homes, burn roofs, and physically attack any laborer who asserts their dignity. The subjugation of the Dalit body is highly spectacular and gendered, designed to enforce absolute submission.

Maayi, an elderly survivor, traces the history of these highly localized, violent tools of caste enforcement:

"Since food was followed by drink, saanippaal would be waiting for the beaten woman or man – cow-dung mixed in water – a concoction that would drain them to death... She traces the history of feudal torture: being forced to drink diluted cow-dung was soon replaced by being forced to drink a cocktail of fertilizer, so disobedience brought no disgrace, but death."(Kandasamy and Whyte 176)

The practice of forcing Dalit laborers to ingest *saanippaal* (cow-dung mixed in water) is a grotesque manifestation of systemic dehumanization. By physically forcing the marginalized to consume animal waste, the landlords symbolically reduce them to the status of beasts. The transition from *saanippaal* to "fertilizer cocktails" highlights how modern agricultural "development" is weaponized to enhance the efficiency of feudal torture. This physical violence operates as a tool of total social control: women are stripped naked, tied to trees, and whipped in front of the village to crush their collective morale. This violence enforces a state of perpetual fear, ensuring that the Dalit community remains a disenfranchised underclass, unable to escape their bonded labor or assert their fundamental human rights.

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that forbidden writing occupies a significant position in contemporary Indian literature because it confronts experiences that dominant social structures often seek to conceal, normalize, or silence. Perumal Murugan's *Seasons of the Palm* reveals the psychological and social consequences of caste discrimination through its representation of Dalit childhood, humiliation, labour, and identity formation. The experience of marginalization in the novel is not restricted to external discrimination; caste becomes internalized and shapes the consciousness, relationships, and possibilities of the marginalized subject.

In *One Part Woman*, Murugan extends his critique to the intersection of gender, infertility, cultural expectations, and bodily autonomy. The social construction of infertility as a form of inadequacy exposes how cultural traditions can become instruments of violence against individuals whose bodies do not conform to socially prescribed ideals. The experiences of Ponna and Kali reveal the psychological trauma produced when reproductive expectations become more important than individual dignity and agency.

The discussion of *The Gypsy Goddess* further establishes the importance of literature as a medium for recovering suppressed histories. Kandasamy's fictional treatment of the Kilvenmani massacre brings caste oppression, feudal exploitation, collective resistance, and historical violence into literary consciousness. Rather than presenting marginalized communities as passive victims, the novel foregrounds solidarity and resistance, thereby transforming historical trauma into a narrative of collective memory and political assertion. The question of forbidden writing becomes particularly significant when representation itself is contested. Murugan's experience following the controversy surrounding *One Part Woman*, culminating in his declaration of authorial death, demonstrates the unstable relationship between the writer, text, community, and reader. His literary "death" can consequently be understood not simply as an act of withdrawal but as a provocative response to censorship and an attempt to reclaim authorial agency. The controversy also reinforces the larger argument that literature becomes politically consequential when it enters spaces where cultural identity, religious belief, caste, gender, and communal authority intersect.

The selected critical studies collectively suggest that marginalized writing can employ different strategies, including testimony, psychological representation, allegory, historical reconstruction, and experimental narrative forms. Allegory, for instance, can enable writers to approach controversial subjects while opening them to multiple interpretations and preserving possibilities for freedom of expression. Thus, forbidden writing should not be understood merely as literature that has been censored or prohibited. It also refers to writing that enters socially restricted territories, questions accepted truths, and gives narrative presence to experiences that dominant discourse would prefer to remain invisible.

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