
Stolen Childhood: The Social Construction of Childhood in *Seasons of the Palm*

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Abstract:

Perumal Murugan's *Seasons of the Palm* is a portrait of (Koolaiyan) protagonist, bonded child labour in rural Tamil Nadu, emphasis the generic realities of children whose lives are shaped by poverty, caste system and economic distress. This novel has been approached on the basis of caste studies, only less attention has been paid to the construction of childhood experience. Through the experiences of Shorty and his fellow bonded child labourers, Perumal Murugan shows how their childhood is trapped into a period of work, hardship, work field and survival. Simultaneously, it shows the resilience, emotional intelligence and entrepreneurship of the children despite radical and oppressive social conditions. By analyzing the social construction of childhood in *Seasons of the Palm*, this study shows how Perumal Murugan does not limit his scope only to criticise the bonded child labourer but also questions the social system which refuses the children's education, preservation and self-respect. It is a powerful novel describing the brutal realities of caste oppression, bonded child labour and rural feudal life in the Kongu region of Tamil Nadu through the stories of few Dalit children.

Keywords: Erosion of innocence, Exploitation, Generation trap, Lost childhood, Loss of Identity.

Introduction:

Childhood has long been understood as a first innocent stage of life characterized by innocence, dependence, learning and emotional security. Traditional theories of development consider childhood as a biologically and genetically committed phase that exists similarly in all societies. However, child studies have challenged this assumption by arguing that childhood is constructed by socio-cultural factors rather than it is a constant and a universal

one. In *Theorizing Childhood (1998)*, Alison James, Chris Jenks and Alan Prout argue that childhood is shaped by cultural traditions and practices, historical contexts, economic structures and social foundations. They started approaching children as active social beings who have various experiences across different contexts. Instead of approaching them as passive recipients of adult care. This theoretical approach is particularly applicable to literary representations of marginalized children. In societies marked by inequality, poverty, and social exclusion, childhood could be a setting of labour, responsibility and survival rather than invincibility.

Perumal Murugan is one of the most influential contemporary Tamil writers in discovering the complexities and social inequalities of rural landscapes of Tamil culture especially in Kongu region. His stories consistently portray communities whose existence is determined through poverty, caste hierarchy and unequal access to resources of life. Instead of romanticizing the village, Perumal Murugan describes it as a place where economic hardships and social strains affect lives. His idealization is unique due to its attention to the experiences of the ordinary people and emphasizing the marginalized voices by making them the core of his interpretations.

Seasons of the Palm focuses the entire lives of bonded child labourers. Similar to the other children living under similar circumstances, Shorty, a young goat-herd is bonded to a landlord by his own family due to their extreme poverty and caste hierarchy. He faces physical strain, hunger, punishment, fear and emotional deprivation at this young age. His childhood is exploited by social systems which demand productivity and unconditional conformity.

This novel, emphasis that the traditional customs and ideas on childhood by showing that children's experiences are inseparable from the socio-economic structure. Daily routine is driven by work, responsibility and survival rather than education, entertainment, personal growth and mental well-being. Childhood cannot be understood only as a biological stage, but must be studied as a social classification influenced by labour, poverty and power. Through its clear portrayal of children's life, *Seasons of the Palm* challenges dominant cultural assumptions about the conditions of childhood and invites readers to consider how social systems construct identities, relationships and possibilities for a child's destiny.

This paper employs the childhood studies developed by Alison James, Chris Jenks and Alan Prout to study the significance of the representation of childhood in *Seasons of the Palm*. It argues that the author portrays childhood as socially assembled experiences determined by financial, cultural and political conditions and inequality rather than condition of innocence. Moreover, the novel reidentifies children as active social subjects who negotiate, interpret and respond to their circumstances with resilience and emotional intelligence. By foregrounding the experiences of Shorty and other bonded child labourers

like Tallfellow, Belly, Stonedeaf and Stumpleg, *Seasons of the Palm* extends contemporary impressions of childhood and exposes the social structure in which childhood is denied, reconstructed and exploited.

In *Theorizing Childhood* (1998), James, Jenks and Prout highlight that childhood must be understood in the context of the social conditions in which children live. They do not accept the notion that all children enjoy their early life equally and argue that elements of elegance, poverty, kinship, education, labour and social institutions have a significant impact on children's lives. "Childhood is understood as a social construction" (James, Jenks, and Prout 8). Perumal Murugan's *Seasons of the Palm*, in contrast to the traditional understanding of childhood, depicts that childhood is constructed by a social condition created through poverty, caste system and unequal social relations through the experiences of Shorty and various bonded child workers which is in contrast to the traditional understanding.

Shorty's childhood is bound to the labour rather than having education, amusement, or enjoying parental care. He spends his days herding, protecting and maintaining the goat and sheep of his landlord. He is forced to do this physical work. Murugan describes his physical exhaustion: "His body aches from working since dawn. He has been up for a long time, since the cock's first crow" (11). This is enforced due to his family's poverty which is also constructed by the caste hierarchy. His childhood is shaped by economic need, and oppression. Perumal Murugan suggests that childhood is socially produced, with poverty determining the experiences of children from marginalized communities.

The novel also depicts how bonded labourers transformed children into financial contributors to their family at a young age. Shorty is valued for his usefulness as a child labourer instead of for his personal, emotional and intellectual improvement. His identity is constructed through responsibility, benefactor, obedience and productivity, which alters the ideals of independence and basic needs of children that usually define childhood. Perumal Murugan does not give this transformation as a mere individual tragedy but as a result of the social system in which childhood is exhausted to exist.

Family plays a considerable role in shaping childhood. Shorty's parents pawned him to the landlord due to the monetary strain leaving them with few choices. Belly, Stonedeaf and Tallfellow were also enslaved to the landlords by their family. They get paid at the beginning and given food everyday which is not nutritious and clean. The females are allowed to go home at night and asked to come at dawn. But the males have to stay on the farm. They can join their family only on festival times or for condolences. "He gets a yearly wage and is fed three times a day. For this, he is expected to stay at the Master's house and do whatever work there is to be done. He does not go home to his parents often-maybe on festival days or if someone dies." (Murugan 28). Sometimes they will be relieved and

replaced by their siblings. Especially after puberty, the girls are not allowed to continue as bonded laborers but can be paid daily wages. In contrast the boys do not have this kind of redemption. They have to prove themselves as an efficient bonded labourer and make their duty permanent to get married. Typically regarded as a place of care and security, their own family becomes a group that participates in the reproduction of bonded child labourers. Perumal Murugan highlights how poverty forces families to spare their children's life from their childhood rights and enjoyment. This is how childhood is constructed by economic conditions that collapse individual choice and rights.

Children experience harsh working conditions in this novel. Perumal Murugan portrays them as active participants in their social world but not as passive victims. "There is not a minute to be lost between his various duties. Just as he finishes with the animals, the Mistress shouts for him" (Murugan12). Shorty develops friendships, observes and studies his environment with curiosity and responds creatively to the challenges he faces. His interactions with other child labourers reveal moments of togetherness, fun and emotional resilience. His fellow children also have similar circumstances with unique complexities.

Hunger is his major struggle. While Shorty has more work, he is fed little. Tallfellow's condition is totally different. He has to do personal hygiene assistance to his great landlord when he is abandoned by his three sons at his old age. He hates this part of his labour and feels like hell. Stonedeaf has to nurture her anaemic female landlord's baby. She carries the baby even when she is in the pasture. Her hip becomes numb. After reaching home she has to assist her in household works. Belly is threatened by her family whenever she is playful and mischievous to be enslaved to another landlord in whose farm, she will have tougher labours. These experiences support the statement of James, Jenks and Prout that children possess, actively negotiate the circumstances of their lives, even those conditions built by oppression.

The pasture is playing an important role in these children's lives. These children are free from the surveillance of the adults, especially of their landlords and enjoying the moments of freedom, imagination, power, status and friendship. "They play for a long time, sneaking away with stones, screeching, laughing and kicking up red dust." (Murugan 112). It is a place where they can express their emotions, form relationships, escape the imposed disciplines while their labour remains demanding. They also collect palmyra fruit to eat and to make palmyra sprout tuber by burying the palmyra seeds. When they sell the palmyra sprout tuber they can have a little money to spend. The author presents childhood as a complex experience in which hardship and joy exist together.

The significant aspect of the novel is the contrast portrait of universal model childhood. Shorty's experiences are different from the idealized image of childhood correlated with education, protections and pleasure. Selvan and Mani both are from the upper

caste who have contradictory childhood to the bonded labourers. As they are the heirs of the landlords, they have the typical and universal model of childhood. They pursue education. They are free to amuse themselves by playing games and going to the movies. They can roam wherever they like as they do not have any duties on the farm. At a stage, Selvan is asked to stay with Shorty to guard the goat farm when it is set in the middle of the dryland. But the whole responsibility of guarding the farm is on Shorty's shoulder. Now he has to protect his landlord's son too while facing the severe climate conditions, loneliness and fear of darkness with no proper shelter given. Meanwhile Selvan has a protective space there.

Shorty is forced to pay a fine when a lamb is stolen meanwhile Selvan who is the reason for this trouble is excused genuinely. Even his age is not considered at that time. The landlord asked, "So? I agree. He's a small boy. Then why the hell do you send him to work?" (Murugan 238). The novel supports the central argument of Childhood Studies that there is no uniformity in childhood. Alternatively, there are multiple childhoods that exist, as James, Jenks, and Prout state: "a focus on one childhood rather than many childhoods does offer a broad perspective from which to address the process of comparative childhood structural change" (134). Each of them is constructed by its own historical and social context.

Seasons of the Palm reveals the gap between the cultural ideal of childhood and the living reality of the marginalized poor children through Shorty's experiences. A notable aspect is, the novel neither sentimentalizes childhood nor depicts a mere suffering. Instead, it presents childhood as a various social experience built by labour, family, poverty, friendship and resilience.

Conclusively, *Seasons of the Palm* declares the central arguments of childhood studies that childhood is not a fixed biological stage, but a social reality produced through historical economic and social values. Perumal Murugan's portrait of the character Shorty shows that once poverty and bonded labour dominate a child's life, the childhood is entirely transformed. The novel becomes an effective literary critique of social structures that exploit childhood.

Seasons of the Palm depicts the hardships of bonded child labourers within the socio-financial realities of rural Tamil Nadu especially Kongu region. Through various childhood experiences of Shorty and his fellow labourers, the novel questions the fundamental ideas of childhood as a stage of innocence, education, freedom and protection. Drafting on the theoretical perspectives of Alison James, Chris Jenks and Alan Prout, this paper has proven that radical childhood offers two dimensions. Shorty's childhood is defined by labour and responsibility rather than amusement and education, demonstrating how economic shortage reconstructs the early lives of marginalized children and the author does not simply portray the children as passive victims of oppression. Their companionship, emotional flexibility, interests and ability to handle routine barriers reinforce the argument in child studies that

children are living contributors to shaping their social worlds. The novel also highlights the role of family, poverty and rural social structure in producing an unequal childhood. Bonded child labourers have not emerged as an isolated tragedy but as the result of broader socio-economic conditions that deprive children of education, security and opportunities for personal improvement.

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