

Cultural Subordination and Nomadic Subjectivity: A Posthumanist Critique of Casteism in Perumal Murugan's *Seasons of the Palm*

Agnes Jeba S¹  , Dr R. Selvi²  

Abstract

*The apparatus pattern of class consciousness plays a universal role in cultural subordination. In rural Tamil Nadu, the class dimension is ascribed in terms of casteism, subjugating marginalised communities in mental, physical, and moral aspects. Perumal Murugan, a realistic Tamil writer, efficaciously displays the hegemonic influence of landowners over subordinate labourers, especially child labourers. Murugan, through his novel, *Seasons of the Palm*, attempts to expose the embedded violence against untouchables or subordinates within the hierarchical spectrum by giving life to characters like Shorty and his fellow sheep-herd child labourers, who work as slaves to their masters. The research paper is infused with the standpoint of posthumanism theory, a call to the quest for logical cultural homogeneity of humanism attained through a 'zoe-centred' ethical approach. The theoretical premise of posthumanism embodies a pivotal role in defeating the inhumane and violent cultural ideology that prevails consciously in the traditional mentality of so-called 'upper-caste' people in Tamil rural society. The research paper emphasises the nomadic nature of a constructive society based on the radical critique concept of 'Nomadic Subjectivity', which rhetorically rejects the fixed hierarchical idea of a superior human, transcending authenticity from 'being to becoming'.*

Submitted: 23.10.2025

Accepted: 20.12.2025

Published 30.12.2025

¹Agnes Jeba S, Full-Time Research Scholar, Reg. No.: 241112002028, Department of English, Sarah Tucker College (Autonomous) - 627007, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli- 627012, Tamil Nadu, India.

²Dr R. Selvi, Research Supervisor, Associate Professor, Research Department of English Sarah Tucker College (Autonomous) - 627007, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli- 627012, Tamil Nadu, India.

©2025 Agnes Jeba S, Dr R. Selvi. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction, provided the original author and source are credited.

Keywords: Subaltern, Posthumanism, Ecologies, Otherness, Humanism, Cultural homogeneity, social mobility, Nomadic Subjectivity..

Posthumanism deconstructs human-centred, and mediated societies by foregrounding its focus on a zoe-centred ethical approach, which rests on the mutual rationality of humans, animals, nature, and technologies. Posthumanism redefines the self-regulating humanistic creed, critiquing norms of human supremacy such as race, gender, caste, culture, class, masculinity, heterosexuality, and able-bodiedness. An individual's identity, thoughts and feelings are expressed through the context of human society and its dominant structure. In this sense, posthumanism deconstructs these inhabiting structures or norms created by material conditions of humans, including social class, race, gender and economic backgrounds. Posthumanism's profound concern stems from emphasising interconnected community bonds and rational progress, questioning culturally stable concepts such as identity or self, good or evil, and justice or injustice.

The primary objective of this research paper is to investigate the strategies devised by the caste privilege system to degrade the existence of subordinate communities through exploitative relationships and to explore the nomadic and transformative possibilities within the theoretical framework of posthumanism, particularly through the conceptual lenses of nomadic subjectivity and the zoe-centred ethical approach. The poststructuralist feminist thinker Maria Tamboukou, in *Revisiting the Nomadic Subject*, reinterprets the nomadic subject as a subject in transition, prioritising marginal movement and becoming by displacing the fixed identity or modified stability. In *Seasons of the Palm*, the aspect of caste-based oppression is regulated through the relationship between master and slave contexts. Drawing the symptomatic picture of marginalised child labourers, Murugan reacts critically to dominant discourses and practices that generate structurally imposed conditions to their existence.

The existing research approaches on Perumal Murugan's *Seasons of the Palm* have predominantly focused on the insights of anthropological and socio-political realities of caste-based oppression and marginalisation in rural Tamil Nadu. For instance, Vasanth Devan and Prajeesh Tomy in "Demystifying the Nexus of Land and Caste in *Season of the Palm*" critique the background of economic exploitation and material-based dislocation within the cultural representation of caste-based social order. Similarly, the research scholar, Anusha, in her article "Unknown Identity in Perumal Murugan's *Season of the Palm*", explores the invisibility of marginalised characters, who remain passive under the mask of untouchables within the caste-based social structure. By identifying the significant gap in the analyses of posthumanist theory, the present study fills the research gap by engaging with posthumanist theoretical frameworks, particularly Rosi Braidotti's zoe-centred ethical approach and nomadic subjectivity, as well as Guattari's three principles of ecologies. This analytical approach enables the researcher to revisit the

interpretation of *Seasons of the Palm* from a posthumanist perspective, examining how zoe-centred ethics and nomadic subjectivity open a feasible way to see the possible transformation of a marginalised character like Shorty from his socially imposed identity to authentic liberation through the connection of nature.

The phenomenon of casteism and class structure pervades human life beyond social interactions. In India, the central ideology of casteism functions as a cultural expression of the elite or the bourgeois. The society's internal affairs are partially managed through the manifesto of caste consciousness. The ideological construction of 'Untouchable' is discursively perceived as a prolonged existence at the root of the Indian historiographical social structure. Perumal Murugan, a realistic Tamil writer, in the novel *Seasons of the Palm*, uncovers the horrible presence of hegemonic consciousness between oppressors and marginalised communities in rural Tamil Nadu. The Tamil society, being bound by oppressive hegemony and caste-based territory, embodies a false power consciousness of power that feeds upon, incorporates, and continually transforms human, social, and environmental factors.

In the novel *Seasons of the Palm*, Murugan seeks to unearth the rallying cries of the untouchable by distinguishing the dichotomous relationships between domination and subordination, upper-caste and lower-caste, highborn and lowborn, and master and slave. The landless labourers are spelt out of the hegemonic, systemised standards of the caste-based structure and pushed into a fixed sphere of marginalisation within a constructive power structure. Further, these marginalised groups are forced to embrace the socially imposed identity as servants, labourers, slaves, and outcasts within the broader dogmatic socio-cultural system.

Posthuman theorist Braidotti denounces the active dichotomy of self and other, revealing how Eurocentric binaries impose false inferior ideologies grounded in the humanistic universal binary logic of identity and otherness. According to her,

The Eurocentric paradigm implies the dialectics of self and other and the binary logic of identity and otherness as, respectively, the motor for and the cultural logic of universal humanism... Subjectivity is equated with consciousness, universal rationality, and self-regulating ethical behaviour, whereas otherness is defined as its negative and spectacular counterpart. Insofar as difference spells inferiority, it acquires both essentialist and lethal connotations for people who get branded as 'others'. (Braidotti 15)

Braidotti's posthuman concept of 'Nomadic Subjectivity' envisions transcending the 'negativity of otherness' from being to becoming in the contemporary terrain of the ethical discourse. As Braidotti states, "The key notion of posthuman nomadic ethics is the transcendence of negativity" (Braidotti 191). In *Seasons of the Palm*, casteism splits the nomadic nature of humanity and is stuck in the rigid notion of otherness, thereby disengaging the oppressed people from ethical sensibility. Murugan articulates the untouchable characters like Shorty and his fellow child labourers to expose their systematic, real-life oppression as "others", their exclusion

from the public sphere, and the reduction of identities to an infrahuman moral status within a hegemonic power structure. Through this testimonial narrative framework, Murugan provokes a sense of ethical progression towards a rational, possible future of mutually equitable lives, aligning with a nomadic vision of posthuman subjectivity.

In the edited volume of *Process and Difference*, Catherine Keller and Anne Daniell figure a process of creative transformation from subjectivity through the stance of nomadism. Keller discusses that, “Like Braidotti’s nomadic concept, which is comprised of both a more universal aspect – the ideal of transformation, including yearning for change and not becoming mired in rigid identities” (Keller and Daniel 155). The character Shorty has two facets of life. His enslaved life within the caste-based hierarchical system and his authenticity from a disorienting social atmosphere toward finding nature as his home perfectly represent the concept of nomadic subjectivity. Shorty does not fix his social identity as a subaltern labourer in relation to his master; rather, he deconstructs this imposed identity by choosing freedom in nature. Shorty’s fate is “There is no minute to be lost between his various duties. Just as he finishes with the animals, the mistress shouts for him. Dai, Shorty! The voice never fails to startle him. Every day. It grabs him by the neck and shakes him up” (12). Here, Shorty’s life as a child labourer and his social identity as an ‘untouchable’ are heavily imposed by the fixed hegemonic force of caste structure. Another facet is Shorty’s ideal transformation in the aspect of nature. He refuses to be confined by this dominant definition of his social identity, and instead, he inhabits his freedom in nature. “It is nice to be back in the fields,” thinks Shorty. There are many wonderful things to be seen in the world, but there is a certain comfort in coming home, an ineffable joy in returning to what holds you, night and day” (193).

Felix Guattari’s *Three Ecologies* contributes a significant aspect to the field of posthumanism. He stresses an aesthetic paradigm that aimed at reconstructing the antagonistic, deathly repetition of traditional social and individual hegemonic practices, which he classifies into three factors of ecosophy under the complementary heading of the ethico-aesthetic aegis: social ecology, mental ecology and environmental ecology. Guattari asserts that,

The increasing deterioration of human relations with the socius, the psyche and ‘nature’ is due not only to environmental and objective pollution but is also the result of a certain incomprehension and fatalistic passivity towards these issues as a whole among both individuals and governments. Catastrophic or not, negative developments (evolutions) are simply accepted without question. (Guattari 41)

The degenerating human connection with the psyche, nature and socius are equally evident in the novel *Seasons of the Palm*. The setting of the village, which Murugan describes, is structured by caste boundaries, sustained by violence and exploitation of marginalised labour communities. The pollution in the village is not solely based on environmental factors; rather, the systematic structure of the village

is polluted by the constructive fallacy of practising caste-orientated subversion, a subjectivity of master and labour. The subaltern labourers remain fatally passive in the face of this horrible exploitation within the human-centred hierarchical order.

According to Guattari, “Spontaneous social ecology works towards the constitution of existential territories that replace, more or less, the former religious and ritualised gridings of the socius... Social ecology will ultimately always be dominated by reactionary nationalist enterprises hostile to any innovation, oppressing women, children and the marginalised” (Guattari 64). In the novel *Seasons of the Palm*, the ‘ritual gridding of the socius’ is embedded in the form of caste antagonism, and the oppressed occupy a passive position within their existential territories, remaining largely indifferent to their inexorable subjugation.

Kirankumar Jeevagar, a socio-literary researcher, points out in his article, “A Socio-literary Inquiry on Perumal Murugan’s *Seasons of the Palm*”, that “Although the work portrays the happy life inside the sensational natural landscape of the particular province, it also emphasises that Dalit childhood has been dehumanised by caste and class violence” (Jeevagar and Baskar 927). In the novel, suppressed characters like Shorty, Tallfellow, Belly, Stonedeaf, and Stumpleg are extremely abused through verbal and physical assaults. For instance, the character Belly’s verbally abusive experiences in her mistress’s house evidently express the subjectivity of social subordination. Belly’s mistress assaults her as ‘untouchable whore! What a time to come! Can’t get up? Of course, you’ll snore into the day if you gorge yourself like a pregnant sow!’ (28). In the mentioned incident, Belly remains passive toward her mistress’s discriminatory assault due to her social identity as a subordinate, which is ultimately governed by the reactionary, traditionalist ideology of caste-based privilege.

Another instance of a violent form of subordinate exploitation is when Tallfellow, while herding the sheep, relaxes his guarding for a minute, which leads his sheep to feed on the corn stalks and die. Upon seeing the sheep’s plight, Tallfellow flees from the field. When Tallfellow’s master comes to know about the death of his sheep, he hunts down Tallfellow and explicitly beats him: “The master lashed at his ankle with his whip. A searing pain shot through his foot and spread all the way up his leg” (245). The hideous cruelty of the Tallfellow’s master shows how the subordinate caste labourers are gravely exploited under the fabricated persuasion of a systematic caste-based social order.

The second ecosophy concept of Guattari is mental ecosophy. According to him, “The principle specific to mental ecology is that its approach to existential territories are derived from a pre-objectal and pre-personal logic... One could call this logic of the ‘included middle’, where black and white are indistinct, where the beautiful coexists with the ugly, the inside with the outside, the ‘good’ object with the ‘bad’” (54). The concept of mental ecology of ‘pre-objectal’ and ‘pre-personal’ logic seems to be evident through Shorty’s emotional phantasm in the novel *Seasons of the Palm*.

A profound instance illustrating the concept of 'pre-objectal' and 'pre-personal' logic is connoted through the traumatic experiences of Shorty. While herding the sheep in another master's field, Shorty desires to have a coconut for himself and his friends. This desire of Shorty manifests the logic 'pre-objectal', in which Shorty unconsciously becomes ignorant of the differences associated with his identity as a subaltern labourer and is instead intensely driven by the innocent desire to relish the tender coconut with his labourer friends. 'Pre-personal', on the other hand, is consciously incorporated with Shorty's outcast identity. In the framework of cultural subordination, Shorty's individuality as a human has disappeared in the heterogeneous elements of the caste system. In between these natural desires and caste affiliation, Shorty neglects his structural identity as a subordinate labourer.

In the 'included-middle' mental ecosophy, Shorty's innocent desire is transversed with class antagonism. Shorty's dignity as a human is erased when his master gravely punishes him, hanging him upside down in the well. "Careful now! I'm going to drop you into the well. Stay still... I'm going to hang you upside down until the evening" (289). Shorty's subjugation to physical and epistemic violence does not evaporate from his ignorant actions, but it surfaces in the enmity among landowners. As Shorty's master mourns, "Can't you see what he's done? He's humiliated me! Me, a man who to this day has not put his hand out to anyone for anything! I've had plenty of others asking me" (288). Possessed by pride, Vayakattu Master and Shorty's Master turn Shorty into prey of their aggressive violence, torturing the innocent Shorty to maintain their systematised standard of ethnic life. Within Shorty's mental ecology, desire coexists with inhumanity, pleasure with fear, and his experiences are subversively struggled and swallowed by the evil atrocities of the hegemonic caste dimension.

The third concept of ecosophy is environmental ecology. According to Guattari, environmental ecology aims to "radically decentre social struggles and ways of coming to one's own psyche... Ecology must stop being associated with the image of a small nature-loving minority or with qualified specialists. Ecology, in my sense, questions the whole of subjectivity and capitalist power formation, whose sweeping progress cannot be guaranteed to continue as it has for the past decade" (52). Guattari argues that environmental ecology does not only rest with issues of deforestation and pollution, but it also embodies the crisis of economic and financial systems, which leads to the upheaval of the social status quo.

In *Seasons of the Palm*, the dominant caste power formations shape the mental, social, and ecological lives of the subordinate caste people. The prime quest of posthumanism relies on the spectacular space for subalterns' existence, in Guattari's words, 'Existential Territory'. The novel effectively traces how the subordinates are cruelly disconnected from their environment or space and reduced to a subhuman ontological status within the superordinate power structure. For instance, the character Shorty is denied the right to sleep in a better place and is forced to sleep in the dehumanising environment – a sheep shed filled with animal waste. "Many nights he has woken up feeling a spray of piss wet his face. On rainy nights, he has

no choice and has to seek shelter under the stilts. At other times, though, he prefers field-broad, dark, and inviting” (123).

Environmental ecology aims to radically decentre the social struggles of marginalised communities by not only exposing the dehumanising environmental space imposed on ethnic minorities but also by enlightening the incalculable manifesto of transcendental nature. As Stevens E. Alford’s *Culture and Ethics*, particularly in the chapter “Pathways to a New Environmental Ethics”, explains, “The acquisition of self is gradual...” One begins with the identification of oneself with one’s family, then neighbourhood, then community...until one reaches the ultimate form of selfhood, the identification of oneself with one’s environment, acquiring the ecological self (Alford 77). Likewise, though the marginalised character Shorty submissively struggled within the dynamic of the oppressive hegemony imposed upon him based on caste consciousness, nature actively demolishes the burdensome social order. “He is excited – the fields lie invitingly before him, broad swathes of land that he is happy to roam at night without fear” (150). Thus, nature acts as an instrument of resistance to overthrow the systematic caste identities and facilitate a transformation from essentialist identity to a homogeneous, equilibrium sphere.

The posthumanism theorist Rosi Braidotti’s ethical approach of ‘Zoe-centred ethics’ is seen as an evolving sense of interconnectedness between human and non-human beings, resisting stigmatised identities based on gender, class, caste, race, ethnicity, and species. This vital ethical approach of zoe-egalitarianism deconstructs the hierarchical order, promoting interconnection beyond the superimposed human-centred norms. Braidotti argues that “The posthuman is the sense of post-anthropocentrism that displaces the dialectical scheme of opposition, replacing well-established dualism with the recognition of deep zoe-egalitarianism between humans and animals. The vitality of the bond is based on sharing the planet, territory or environment on terms that are no longer clearly hierarchical nor self-evident” (Braidotti 71).

In the concluding observation of the novel *Seasons of the Palm*, Murugan highlights the barbaric underpinnings of caste hegemonic norms while simultaneously mapping pathways of ethical and ecological resistance. Through the subdued sufferings of Shorty and other marginalised characters, the novel juxtaposes the principles of Braidotti’s zoe-centred ethics and Guattari’s three ecologies, revealing the significant fact of how human and non-human interconnectness can subvert unified norms of caste mechanisms. Shorty’s authentic connection with nature dissolves the rigid humanistic notion of ‘otherness’ and envisions a life of zoe-centred equality, where the interconnection of ecology and ethical equilibrium potentially transcends caste and class consciousness. The researcher’s approach to analysing Braidotti’s ethical framework and Guattari’s three ecologies critiques the infiltrated caste ideology of social subjugation and offers an interdisciplinary lens to understand nomadic subjectivity, epitomised in the findings of Shorty’s progressive transformation from systematic subordination to a liberated solidarity experience with nature.

Works Cited

- Alford, Steven E. "Pathways to a New Environmental Ethics: Decentering the Human Subject." *Ethics and Culture*, edited by James M. Okapal, McFarland & Company, Inc., 2024.
- Braidotti, Rosi. *The Posthuman*. Polity Press, 2013.
- Guattari, Felix. *The Three Ecologies*. Translated by Ian Pindae and Paul Sutton, Bloomsbury Academic, 2005.
- Jeevagan, Kirankumar, and G. Baskaran. "A Socio-Literary Inquiry on Perumal Murugan's *Seasons of the Palm*. International Journal of Scientific Research and Engineering Development, vol.5, no.4, July-Aug. 2022, pp.926-928.
- Keller, Catherine, and Anne Daniel, editors. *Process and Difference: Between Cosmological and Poststructuralist Postmodernisms*. State University of New York Press, 2002.
- Murugan, Perumal. *Seasons of the Palm*. Translated by V.Geetha, Penguin Books, 2017.