

Tracing Rural Realities in the Ethnographic Narrative of Perumal Murugan's *Four Strokes of Luck*

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Abstract

This research article presents an ethnographic analysis of Perumal Murugan's Four Strokes of Luck, exploring its nuanced portrayal of socio-cultural dynamics within a rural Tamil community. By situating the short story as a literary artifact reflective of lived experiences, the study examines how Murugan's narrative intertwines myth, ritual, and everyday practices to illuminate structures of caste, gender, and tradition. Through close textual analysis, the article investigates the protagonists' navigation of societal expectations, agrarian struggles, and communal tensions, revealing the complex interplay between individual agency and entrenched cultural norms. The analysis highlights the short story's critique of patriarchal hierarchies and caste-based marginalization, while also underscoring its depiction of resilience and subtle resistance among marginalized voices. By framing the text within ethnographic methodologies, this study positions literature as a vital lens for understanding the contradictions and continuities in South Indian rural life. The findings emphasize Murugan's role in preserving and contesting cultural narratives, offering insights into how fiction serves as both a mirror and mediator of socio-historical realities. Ultimately, the article is an anthropological inquiry to decode the textures of regional identity and collective memory.

Keywords: Ethnographic study, Perumal Murugan, Ethnographic narratives, regional identity, Tamil community.

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Ethnography as a legitimate form of performing cultural research has spread from anthropology to many social and humanistic disciplines as literary anthropologies – “an exploration of different kinds of genre of expression, and how these genres can be said to have a historical specificity, a cultural evaluation, and a social institutionalism attached to them” (Rapport). As a two-fold method, in the area of content analysis, literature is considered as a record in systemically approaching the analysis of social realities of specific ethnic groups.

This conception of ethnographic narratives was a post-product seminar, a collection of scholarly articles dissecting the intersection of ethnography, cultural theory and textual criticism for reinterpretation of cultural anthropology. With its post-modernistic reflection, the anthology titled *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986) insisted on investing minimal efforts in a credible, dry and objective presentation of ‘facts’ in ethnographical study by including more auto-reflexive and empirical perspectives – that is, through reading fiction. It additionally provided the potential for varied stylistic innovations of metaphors, poetic descriptions, and allegories in dialectical ethnographic narratives (Clifford and Marcus). The erosion of the binary of literature and anthropology is further emphasised by recent publications studying their intersection too, with the field of anthropology turning “to literary conventions in order to further clarify the position of the author and to encourage multivocal authorship, surface vulnerability, reveal silences in standard discourses, and expose the seams in both anthropological and ethnographic practice” (Byler and Iverson).

An important endorsement of this relaxation in claims of authenticity in texts was laid out by Clifford Greetz in *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as an Author* (1988) in its introduction to ‘faction’ – a hybrid style of imaginative writing about real people in real places. The faction produced has multiple facets in the form of biographies, ethnographic novels and poetry, memoirs and various forms that subvert categorisation (Behar 55; Daniel and Peck) as ethnographic expressions.

Considering these implications of ethnography in cultural studies, the short story collection *Four Strokes of Luck* (2021) by Perumal Murugan could be read as an ‘ethnographically informed’ text (Jakimovska 57), owing to its employment of ethnographically specific descriptions representing marginal subjects of the Tamil community that evoke narrative empathy. The short stories communicate the cultural shifts, individual conflicts, and social tensions encountered by the characters that quintessentially depict the realities of the modern Tamil population. The setting of the stories is unspecified as they centre the universal with the mundanity of ordinary people in the Tamil community and their general attitude toward modernity and change.

The Tamil author Perumal Murugan has made ample contributions to the Tamil literary scene – six short story collections, six poetry anthologies, five collections of short stories, twelve novels and non-fiction works such as memoirs, essays on other writers, on literary history, on Tamil language, literature, folklore, etc.). Many of his

notable works have been translated into English, including *One Part Woman*, *Trial by Silence*, *Poonachi or the Story of a Goat*, *Seasons of Palm*, *Resolve*, *Current Show*, *Estuary*, *Rising Heat*, *Pyre* and *Four Strokes of Luck*. His works follow the tradition of subregional and realistic literature; the stories primarily centring on his community of origin and first-hand experiences. He is celebrated for his vivid depiction of rural Tamil Nadu and its socio-cultural complexities. His works are deeply rooted in the lived experiences of marginalized communities, caste dynamics, and agrarian life, positioning him as a significant ethnic narrator in Indian literature. He critiques societal hierarchies through narratives of inter-caste marriages and gendered oppression (Menon 78-82). His narratives often critically examine identity, tradition, and oppression, reflect an intimate engagement with the ethos of the Kongu Nadu region. Murugan foregrounds subaltern experiences, particularly of agrarian and lower-caste communities (Gunasekaran 315). Thus, positioning him as a literary ethnographer in the Tamil literary scene.

His writing style in this text is minimalist, poignant, and deeply rooted in the cultural and linguistic ethos of Tamil Nadu, the brevity of writing, this genre's convention, is crucial in ethnographic texts as it presents,

an entire world in miniature, a made-up but at the same time a very spirited realm of characters and settings. They feel 'authentic' even though they are not meticulously described – in fact it is exactly the lack of details that we feel stimulated to fill in the gaps, and imagine what is left out. (Jakimovska 60)

This 'thin description' in the concentrated prose marked by its simplicity in his text, however, carries profound emotional and socio-political undertones, making it eligible to be studied as an ethnographic text.

His writing is deeply rooted in the Tamil vernacular, incorporating idioms, proverbs, and folkloric elements unique to the Kongu region of Tamil Nadu. This use of local language and cultural references adds authenticity to his narratives, making them a rich reflection of Tamil agrarian life. He employs Tamil idioms and customs to explore themes of caste oppression, darker aspects of the human psyche, and societal pressures - "Murugan's writing is steeped in the cultural milieu of Tamil Nadu, and his use of vernacular language brings an unparalleled authenticity to his work" (Vasudevan vii). Murugan uses allegory and symbolism to critique social, political, and cultural issues, his usage "of allegory allows him to address complex socio-political issues in a manner that is both subtle and powerful" (Shankar 147)

His writing often centers on marginalized communities, including Dalits, women, and agrarian workers. His narratives give voice to those who are often silenced, shedding light on their struggles, aspirations, and resilience. "Murugan's ability to foreground the voices of the marginalized is a testament to his commitment to social justice" (Srilata 89) His narratives reflect the changing dynamics of rural Tamil Nadu, where traditional practices coexist with modern influences. He "captures the complexities of a society in transition, where tradition

and modernity are in constant dialogue” (Sundar 112).

The collection begins with the story of a village and its inhabitants culturally altered by the introduction of bypass roads in Tamil Nadu. It depicts the uncertainty connected to the expeditiousness of modern development. It traces the story of a couple stranded along the bypass and the village mechanics who attempt to engage in fraudulent actions. It depicts the cultural shift from familiarization within a close-knit community to alienation with the onset of modern advancement (Gupta 76) represented by the by-pass road that is a physical manifestation of the new cultural dynamics. The story adapts a neutral tone toward the movement as he does in all of the stories in the collection, the characters are confronted with distress and exploit the cultural shift while the gender dynamics persist in the modern setting. The character Chinnavan remarks “Since this bypass came, all sorts of activities have been going on” and adds that “Can’t trust a soul. Well, all right, get her on to the vehicle. And include the ticket in your expenses” (21), the irony of the comment reveals the universality of exploitation as a phenomenon, despite the ethnographic specifications with regard to cultural evolution. Through the character of Kumaresan, Murugan writes,

Kumaresan knew the road and town well. But the bypass road confused everyone. The familiar had turned unfamiliar. Thousands of tamarind trees lining the streets had been felled during the construction. There was only one consistent feature: tar. (Murugan 16)

The nostalgic tone adapted by Murugan in his description of the by-pass road is a result of textual embodiment of culture; the “ethnographic pastoral” (Clifford 109).

The ironically titled story “Saraswati” follows the character named the same, and her infatuation with the Tamil actor Aravind Swamy. The disparity experienced by a dark-skinned woman in an ethnographically dark-skinned people’s culture debriefs the rampant colourism within modern, post-colonial Tamil Nadu. The narration reflects the elusive nature of colourism in everyday aspects of the region (Penmetsa 6; Thayalan). Saraswati’s infatuation with Aravind Swami surpasses general admiration for an actor, it reflects the rampant colourism embedded in Tamil cinema (Priyanka) and the cultural shift in terms of the expectations it creates in the marital aspect of the general population’s lives (rt_admin). It distorts the ethnic identity of the individuals, affecting their concepts of beauty and view of their ethnic features. Her migration to the city, which felt like “living in a demon’s mouth, fighting not to be swallowed by its greed” (32) comments on the harsher reality of an alienated modern space, where she experiences intense harassment based on her skin tone.

The sentimental Amma and her beloved Seemaatti the buffalo’s relationship highlights the andromorphic dimension of Tamil culture, relating to animals, especially cows/buffalos. They are revered for their contributions to the house, “Seemaatti had ensured the home she has moved into never suffered for want of anything” (52). Despite its cultural significance, the economic condition of Amma’s

family propels them to sell the buffalo. Amma's decision for the buffalo to be returned by the buyer centralizes the role of animals in the lives of the Tamil ethnic group in the Kongu region. The ethnic-specific custom of giving the girl-child a buffalo as a dowry and the emotional connection between the aged animal and the woman who brought it down is explored in this short story. The cultural heritage of the region is preserved in the narration in its representation of the custom and its impact on the ethnic group, the buffalo as a means to "inscribe their world in ritual acts" (Clifford 117).

The social disparity in the Kongu region and its consequence on the lower caste is explored in the story on the consumption of pork roast by some men in the upper caste community (Narayanan 2192). Among the Tamil ethnic group, partaking in pork is considered a social stigma as higher castes typically avoid it under religious pretexts. Vellaiyan is cursed as "Shit eater" (124) by his wife for secretly eating pork once every three months. The politics of food is scrutinized and casteism is foreground as the story ends with the dispute between the upper-caste men resulting in the murder of Thaathan, a muruvan. "Pork Roast" narrates events leading up to Thaathan's death over a pre-existing dispute between two upper-caste men in the village. The men gather to feast on pork prepared by the lower-caste members of the village as the meat is considered taboo to consume.

The temperamental character of Kumaresan, a government employee obsessed with discipline is tested when he is unable to extend it towards his infant in *Four Strokes of Luck*. Kumaresan's family members find his obsession to be intolerable and are relieved by his marriage. However, his wife experiences the same treatment, until his daughter introduces him to the chaos of existence. Thus, serves as an ethnographic entry for its representation of humanness, "not only a 'systemic study' or 'description of people' but also about the immersion into their world, which through writing becomes our own" (Jakimovska 60). The strained relationship between Murugesu and his father as he viewed his children as "excess baggage" (131), regardless of the gender of the child. Amma narrates a different story whenever asked about when they stopped communicating with each other. His father's incessant drunken curses at Murugesu as usual, however, things escalate when he lays hands on his wife. The story depicts the shift in the power dynamics within the house, especially in a community where masculinity is associated with strength and not shared empathy toward the women in the family.

"Ice Apple" comments on the irony of pursuing a low-paying desk job by modern men in Tamil Nadu with the aim of finding a prospective bride. Murugesu decides to drop out of college to carry on his father's job of herding sheep, creating tension with his father for conforming with the majority. The allegorical portrayal of young modern men in the Tamil community serves as a morally and culturally informed commentary on mass migration toward metropolitan cities in the persuasion of illusory capitalistic dreams and the social image of becoming a 'city-dwelling' prospective groom. As ethnographic texts are inherently allegorical; prompting "us to say of any cultural description not 'this represents, or symbolises,

that’ but rather ‘this is a (morally charged) story about that’ (Clifford 100).

The last three stories of the collection are amorous representations and the complications it constitutes in a rigid patriarchal community like the Tamil ethnic group (Srivastava and Willoughby 51). Even with the onset of modernization – the characters being educated, employed and migrating to cities- the traditional practice of union of individuals based on caste, religion, and social status persists. The ostracism of inter-caste marriages psychologically stunts the characters from choosing their partners. Kumaresu, a manager at an egg company decides to pursue his middle-school love after they are adults in “This Will Do”. The story reflects the possible impediments of inter-caste marriages and the cultural threat it posits on the familial structure of the woman involved in the Tamil community; serving as an ethnographic account of the larger socio-political structure in “correspond(ing) at least to some extent to events outside the text” (Heikkila 7). Although Kumaresu is employed as the manager of a company, his social standing is lower than that of his lover owing to his caste. The narrator notes “He was a rung below in the caste hierarchy. Her parents would not agree to this” (158). In “Pondatti”, the character of Murugesu working on a construction site is invited by his lover for a rendezvous at her place. As they imagine and foreplay their future after their possible wedding, the scene is interrupted by the sudden return of her sister, aggravating pre-existing misunderstandings. The final story of the collection deals with the constructed shame surrounding love and displaying of affection (Khan) in the Tamil community, especially in the Kongu region where the author originates. Murugesu exploits this social stigma by engaging in robbery, he targets young couples who visit the isolated temple and share a moment of intimacy. The poverty of the young people he captures with nothing to offer each other or to him makes him reconsider his actions.

The stories are a larger commentary on the Tamil community’s fixation on preserving caste purity by enforcing stringent laws on love, a natural phenomenon. Many ethnographic narratives incorporate bilingualism, code-switching or vernacular language to authentically represent the community, as this approach in writing the ethnographic text enables depiction of “local knowledge, concerns, meanings, modes of arguments, value schemes, logics, and the like shared among ordinary people” (Hauser 164). This linguistic richness adds depth to the narrative. Nandini Krishnan has effectively translated the essence of Tamil culture and its linguistic expression by integrating accents and colloquialisms in Indian English. The usage of the expression that stresses the Tamil accent “saar” (23), the character’s ethnographically specific speech repetition “I’ll leave, I’ll leave” (23), and including Tamil compound words “Karuppazhagi” (33), Tamil echo words “*mona-mona*” (204), Tamil addresses “da” (55), Tamil customs “seer” (50) in the translation retains the culture in translating the work to a wider audience. The untranslated words and phrases from the Tamil language challenges the readers to engage with cultural specificity, as a form of establishing linguistic autonomy (Gates 51).

In writing, he retains his characteristic ethnic narration and explores the multi-dimensional societal issues specific to the region. The stories in the collection are set against the agrarian landscapes with vivid descriptions of lifestyle adaptations to the land and its consequential difference in the personality of his characters. The characters in the stories are complex and encounter moral dilemmas that reflect broader societal issues. His writing style is simplistic in engaging with difficult themes, reflecting on the harshness of the realism in his depiction.

Through the lens of Murugan's storytelling, the short story captures the socio-cultural intricacies, caste dynamics, and the interplay of tradition and modernity in Tamil society. Thus, *Four Strokes of Luck* serves as a rich ethnographic text, documenting the lived experiences of the Tamil agrarian community. Murugan meticulously details the rituals, labor practices, and interpersonal relationships that define rural Tamil Nadu. For instance, the novel portrays the attitudinal change toward agricultural work, highlighting the dependence on metropolitan desk jobs for marriage, reflecting the broader socio-economic realities of the region (45). The narrative also provides insights into caste hierarchies and the marginalization of lower-caste individuals, as seen in the interactions between characters like Thatthhaan and Velliyan (78). The short story's focus on the peasant community aligns with anthropological studies of rural India, where caste and occupation are deeply intertwined.

Murugan's narrative explores the tension between tradition and modernity, a recurring theme in ethnographic literature. The protagonists embody the conflict as they navigate the pressures of societal expectations while grappling with personal desires. The novel's depiction of land disputes and the commercialization of agriculture reflects the broader changes in rural Tamil Nadu, where traditional agrarian practices are increasingly threatened by urbanization and economic shifts (167).

Four Strokes of Luck is a compelling ethnographic narrative that offers a window into the Tamil community's cultural and social fabric. Murugan's nuanced portrayal of rural life, caste dynamics, and the interplay of tradition and modernity makes the short story a valuable resource for understanding the complexities of Tamil society.

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