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Research Article

## Changing Revered Spaces of Rural Tamil Nadu in Perumal Murugan's "The Last Sacrifice" and "Magamuni": A Spatial Analysis

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### ABSTRACT

The paper examines the transformation and reconfiguration of rural spaces in Tamil Nadu through a close reading of Perumal Murugan's short stories "The Last Sacrifice" and "Magamuni." Drawing on Spatial Theory, particularly the theories of critics such as Henri Lefebvre, Robert T. Tally Jr., and Nigel Thrift, the study examines how Murugan portrays rural space as a site of tension between continuity and disruption. **The** paper also analyses how religious practices and ritualistic beliefs can seep into secular, neutral, everyday spaces in rural Tamil Nadu, revealing how spatial boundaries are constantly negotiated through symbolic power. While "The Last Sacrifice" illuminates the negotiations of power and belief systems within ritualized rural settings, "Magamuni" portrays the psychological and material displacements that accompany the breakdown of traditional social frameworks. Together, these narratives show how Murugan's fiction maps the evolving textures of rural existence, capturing both the resilience and vulnerability of communities confronting transformation. The paper argues that such literary representations provide valuable insight into the lived realities and spatial imaginations of contemporary rural Tamil Nadu.

**KEYWORDS:** local spaces, polyvalency, transformation, power, knowledge



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## **FULL PAPER**

### **Introduction**

Perumal Murugan's fiction offers a rich source to delve into the rural spaces of Tamil Nadu. The locale, surroundings, landscape, flora, and fauna of the region are not just a static geographical setting that mutely witnesses events; instead, they often play a vital role in the story. The space they occupy often influences the characters and their actions, paving the way to understand space not just as a backdrop in Murugan's narratives, but as an active factor that is dynamic, political, transformative, and often disruptive. In the two short stories analysed in this paper, "The Last Sacrifice" and "Magamuni", we examine how spaces transform, evolve, and acquire new significations in response to newer models of societal behaviour and power structures.

Since the spatial turn in the late 1980s, theorists have increasingly understood space not just as a passive backdrop in literature, but as socially constructed and ideologically coded. This shift has been productive, especially in the rethinking of literary traditions where space has carried symbolic and cultural weight. Tamil literature, for example, has never been detached from its spatial grounding. From the Sangam corpus dating back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, Tamil poetic traditions reflect the deep interconnection between emotional states, social life, and the physical landscape. The Sangam poems detail the five-fold *tinai* classification of the Tamil region – Kurinji (hilly tracks), Mullai (pastoral lands), Marudam (agricultural lands), Neydal (coastal area), and Palai (desert regions) – mapping inner life and turmoil to ecological terrains. This sensitivity to the geographical space continues to inform the present authors of Tamil Nadu. Perumal Murugan is one such contemporary author whose fiction presents a space that emerges as an active site of caste conflicts, ritual control, and resistance. His short stories, particularly "The Last Sacrifice" and "Magamuni" from his short story collection *Sandalwood Soap and Other Stories*, reveal how rural landscapes and everyday spaces from fields to factories are infused with multiple meanings and become contested terrains.

### **Methodology**

The spatial turn, which occurred after the Second World War, brought about a shift in critical thought, as referenced by Foucault in a 1967 speech, in which he stated that we are in the "epoch of space" (22). The nineteenth century critical theory which was primarily focused on temporal aspects including history, faced a decline in the postwar era because of the disillusionment with history as "a progressive movement towards ever greater freedom and enlightenment" (Tally 12) Critics like Bertrand Westphal argues that the destruction which was the aftermath of the Second World War made people lose faith in the universal progress of history and made the shift to "valorizing rereading of space". (Westphal, 25) The movements like Postmodernism

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and Poststructuralism also paved the way for discussions about spatial dimensions, as the cultural geographer Denis Cosgrove argues. A widely acknowledged “spatial turn” across arts and sciences corresponds to post-structuralist agnosticism about both naturalistic and universal explanations and about single-voiced historical narratives, and to the concomitant recognition that position and context are centrally and inescapably implicated in all constructions of knowledge. (7)

The Cartesian or Kantian idea of space as an empty vessel or container has changed, and space is now seen as a complex interplay of contingent, shifting, and constantly evolving dimensions. The space that we inhabit does not have a natural, fixed meaning but is imbued or embedded with significations by those who come across it. One of the most influential works of spatial theory *The Production of Space* by Henri Lefebvre presents a conceptual triad of space, which is “spatial practice, representations of space and representational spaces”.(33) These concepts corresponds to perceived, conceived and lived spaces, further foregrounding the argument that space is not just geographical, it is at once social and cultural. Lefebvre sees space as a “social product made possible by human effort”. (Tally, 117) Because of this “dialectically interwoven matrix” (Wegner 182) of human interactions, which constitutes space, it is polyvalent and never a singularity. This paper employs textual analysis, drawing on theories of Spatiality Studies, to examine the selected short stories of Perumal Murugan.

### **Analysis**

When we look at the short story “The Last Sacrifice” by Perumal Murugan, the idea of a constructed space that evolves through the ages with shifting human perceptions and lived realities can be analysed. The field or land in a village in Tamil Nadu has, over generations, imbued it with a variety of significations. Before the idea of borders and private fixed lands came into practice, an ancestor of Kumarasu had “cleared the bushes on a rough strip of land, tilled the soil and begun to farm.”(Murugan 22) In this case, the land was perceived as suitable for agricultural purposes and as a means of livelihood. When the British surveyed and taxed the land, Kumarasu’s ancestors became the official owners of the 35 acres. The Britishers’ ideas of land, private ownership, and the monetary benefits attached to it were imbibed by future generations of Kumarasu’s family, including the protagonist, Kumarasu, who associated land with wealth, prosperity, and societal status. In the case of Kumarasu’s son, Megasu, the significations have changed again as he sees the land as a quick-profit means. Megasu didn’t want to “suffer the rest of his life with a handful of land, two oxen and four sheep” (Murugan 30) but instead wanted to sell the property and start a business. The changing meanings associated with the land’s geographical space over generations reveal the shifting, evolving nature of space. The significations associated with space are also governed by memory, history, and repeated practice. As the theorist

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Nigel Thrift puts it, social activity in any region takes place as a continuous discourse, rooted in a staggered series of shared material situations that constantly arise out of one another in a dialectically linked distribution of opportunity and constraint, presence and absence. A region is lived through, not in. (79)

In "The Last Sacrifice", the space attains a new meaning when the actions become habitual and taken for granted. Space also plays a significant role in the perception of what is within or what it encompasses. For example, the space occupied by the deity under the khirni tree at the corner of the land is described by Murugan in a way that conveys the god's timelessness. He stood witness to rain, sun, snow, cold, and more. The khirni tree's family multiplied in the same spot. What currently existed was different from the original tree, and no one could tell which generation of its offspring now stood there. The tree had grown sharply and let its aerial roots spread. Insects lived in abundance on the scales of the trunks. Ants lined up and climbed all over it. As the flowers began to emit their scent, beetles and flies swarming to the tree would make constant screeching sounds. When the fruits would hang in clusters, and the leaves would fall, the tree stood like a skeleton, evoking sympathy. The fruits would eventually ripen, then explode, the seeds scattering with little fluffs of cotton that looked like petite chicks. (22) This elaborate description of the space that the god occupies ties him closely with the earth and the inhabitants of nature. Though man consecrated the stone and the ideas associated with it are man-made, it stands surrounded by the rawness of the non-human landscape.

In Lefebvre's words, "absolute space", or untouched spaces of nature, later evolved to "a space which was relativized and historical." (Lefebvre 48) In Murugan's short story, too, the ancestor who discovered a round stone in the absolute space of the field made it a "representational space" when he consecrated it by giving it symbolic meaning associated with the God Karuppasurasamy. When we look at the physical space of the land, there was not much alteration that happened when he "washed the stone and placed it in the northern corner of the fields, beneath a new khirni tree, on a small mound made of sand." (22) But the way that the space is perceived for generations to come altered and transformed with that one action which ascribed symbolic and religious significations to an absolute space.

This brings us to the notion that a space is never singular; it is at once imbued with multiple meanings, which often merge and overlap. The field is at once a land for cultivation and a place of worship on specific days when the puja is held. The land can be seen as a heterotopia which "is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible." (Foucault 27) In Murugan's short story "Magamuni", the loom mill transforms into a place of worship when a worker is possessed by the god Magamuni on every Friday. She performs her dance amidst the looms in the space meant for manufacturing and production, and people

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stop working and gather around offering incense and prayers. The strict, disciplined space of the mill shifts to encompass a fluid, dynamic, and volatile space of the unknown.

As Lefebvre notes, space contains an “illusion of transparency” which makes the space be viewed as “innocent, free of traps or secret places.” (27) This is the case in both of the short stories taken for analysis where we see space of the field and the loom mill encompassing a variety of meanings which are different from the illusion of the single meaning associated with them. To explicate, the field in “The Last Sacrifice” is viewed as a place of cultivation and livelihood from the external point of view. The sacred spot in the field is considered a blessing by those who perceive it. However, the family's lived reality is different, as the sacred space proves a burden and an obstacle to their objective of selling the plot. Similarly, in “Magamuni”, the mill is never just a place of work and production, even before Velaatha’s possession by the god. Pictures of Gods lined the factory walls, and the owner used to burn incense and wave it around the mill every Friday. “He would do this for all the eighty looms there, and it would take at least fifteen minutes for him to finish this rite.” (169) This shows that the industrial space gets transformed into a ritualistic space, and they are never disjunct or separate from one another.

In these manifold layers of a space, the presence of a power dimension cannot be ignored. In his later years, Foucault studied the relation between space and the dispersion of power in depth, especially in his analysis of the Panopticon. Power relations are exercised through spaces and how they are organised and signified. Lefebvre agrees with Foucault in this regard when he says “space in addition to being a means of production, it is also a means of control and hence of domination, of power.” (26) In the short story “Magamuni”, the sprawling courtyard of the loom mill coupled with the owner’s living quarters above the building make it perfect for surveillance and control of the workers. The rough concrete floors symbolize the harsh conditions endured by workers, who are often exploited in dismal conditions. The rows of looms running continuously every day except Diwali and Pongal show the consuming nature of the work. However, when this organized space is made haphazard by Velaatha’s possessed dance, the structures of power are subverted. This can be understood by the loom owner’s dismay at the transformation of his mill to a religious sanctum. The owner is more concerned about not being able to exert his power over the worker. His concerns are that “he could no longer chide her as usual and felt like he was committing a mistake when he called her in alone. He had to give her money when she came asking for it. He couldn’t even admonish her when she took a day off without informing him.” (172)

In “The Last Sacrifice”, the power structures are laid out by the invisible god, revered and feared by locals and buyers alike. Though the physical space is attractive

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to prospective buyers, the symbolic meaning it carries because of the presence of the angry god Karuppan discourages them. Though it was a good property in a prime location between the municipality and the panchayat near the mud road, because of its association with the god, the space remained unsold. The protagonist Kumarasu's autonomy is stripped away, and he has no power over the land he owns. The piece of land had become a "landscape of fear" because of the human constructions that are associated with it. The text *Landscapes of Fear* argues that "every human construction—whether mental or material—is a component in a landscape of fear because it exists to contain chaos." (Tuan 6) In this case, too, the human construction of the god was as a guardian of the field, protecting it from the volatile, chaotic elements of nature. This can be understood from the following account in the short story "Last Sacrifice",

It was Karuppan's duty to protect the field. When the winds howled in anger to destroy the crops, He would slow them down and turn them into a breeze. When it rained, and water overflowed from the wells, leaving the roots to rot, He would break the furrows and let the water out. When the crops needed to grow, He would breed insects and worms. If the insects multiplied and began to destroy the crops, He would summon the birds. Spear in hand, he would drive away the pigs digging for groundnuts. He would set off a pack of dogs to drive away the jackals that came looking for a bite out of the throats of the lambs. He would protect the cows and give herbs to cure the rare diseases they contracted. Karuppan had endless jobs. (Murugan, 23)

The description shows the troubles a farmer may face from the physical space he uses for cultivation. In order to combat these forces of nature, humans, who, according to Lefebvre, are the "actors" (57) of a space, ascribe a particular signification, which in this case is a higher power that protects and guards. Though "every space is already in place before the appearance of its actors" (Lefebvre 57), it changes and evolves based on the actors who inhabit the space and inscribe it with cultural codes and symbols. It is through this "reproduction of social relations of production" (Lefebvre 35) over a span of time that a particular ideology or construct is formed and imbued in the space. This leads to the existence of a "practical knowledge" (Thrift 102) that is local and spread through daily human interaction. "Such (practical) knowledge is deeply imbued with both historical and geographical specificity, taking its cues from local contexts each with their own particular ensemble of practices and associated linguistic usages." (Thrift, 102)

Thus, the local spaces in Perumal Murugan's fiction transform, underscoring the multidimensional and polyvalent nature of space. The rural spaces of Tamil Nadu, be it the agricultural field in "The Last Sacrifice" or the loom mill in "Magamuni," constantly shift, evolve, and subvert the structures and boundaries of the spaces and what they denote. The stories portray the blurring of boundaries and the seepage of

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religious and ritualistic ideologies into secular, everyday spaces, raising important questions about faith, autonomy, and structures of control.

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