



# Reimagining the Cinematic Memories: An Analysis of Perumal Murugan's *The Land and the Shadows*

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Perumal Murugan, a celebrated Tamil writer, is regarded as one of the most significant voices in contemporary Indian Literature. His writing is known for its rootedness signifying his intimate connection to the land and customs. His *The Land and the Shadows*, described as part memoir and part ethnography, was translated from Tamil (Nilamum Nizhalum) into English by Gita Subramanian. In *The Land and the Shadows*, he returns to the theatres of his youth where Tamil cinema became inseparable from the life of the people. This book is a collection of memories and reflections, blending autobiographical anecdotes with his observations on both classic and contemporary films.

In Tamil Nadu, cinema has become a deeply ingrained, almost universal aspect of daily life and culture. From the 1950s onward, Tamil cinema became the primary form of mass entertainment, bridging gaps across caste, gender, and social status. Even in rural areas, the 'tent cinema' concept brought movies to the masses, making it an accessible, popular medium. By the end of the twentieth century, Tamil cinema solidified its place as a cornerstone of Tamil identity.

Cinema, in particular, as an institution which makes available images for mass consumption, has long been aware of its ability to generate experiences and to install memories of them – memories which become experiences that film consumers both possess and feel possessed by. (Landsberg, 176)

Retrieving childhood memories through the reminiscences of watching movies provides Perumal Murugan a poignant and emotional reconnection with his early life. His earlier memories of cinema are often linked to his intense childhood emotions, such as the comfort of watching with parents or the fear of a specific scene. He remembered watching *Nadodi Mannan*, sitting on his mother's lap at the Om Murugan Town Talkies in his village, when he was five years old. The scene, in which the actor Chandrababu pulling live chicks out of his mouth, was strongly etched in his memory. After watching this movie, he refused to eat raw eggs anymore, and his brother happily took his share. Whenever this movie got re-released, he would not miss it.

The movie's success lies in M.G.R.'s storytelling- simple, clear, and universally appealing. Even today, it remains engaging. For me, *Nadodi Mannan* is forever tied to my childhood memories of Bhanumathi's cheeks, the chicks that Chandrababu brings out of his mouth, back bench tickets, of course, my mother's lap. (Murugan 212)

His grandparents had never been to a cinema as their life revolved entirely around their work. When Perumal Murugan was in the ninth standard, he expressed his longing to see a film to his grandfather. He allowed his grandson to take a short cut to the village, Kollur, where the theatre Anna Thiraiarangam was located, to watch

the movie *Makkalai Petra Maharasi*. He liked the film which marked a linguistic shift in Tamil cinema. It was the first film to use the local dialect of Tamil Nadu's Kongu region throughout.

*Makkalai Petra Maharasi* remains a landmark for its bold integration of a regional dialect into mainstream Tamil Cinema. Its dialogues feel more organic and grounded than many later films attempting to capture rural Tamil Nadu's essence. (Murugan 266)

His father ran a Soda shop in a local theatre where he had a chance to watch many films. His father denied permission to watch movies in other theatres. Bhagyaraj's films were a favourite among the women in his village, including his mother and Akka, a close female neighbour. He watched *Mounageethangal* with his mother, and close sister. The story was built around a grave mistake made by the husband in a moment of weakness, leading to many conflicts in his life, and concluded with the reconciliation with his wife. The trope of wives forgiving husbands for infidelity is a complex reflection of social norms, and cultural values, portraying women's forgiveness as a necessary noble sacrifice, rather than a choice.

*Mounageethangal* was created before feminist ideas gained traction in Tamil Nadu. From a modern perspective, Bhagyaraj's films could be considered dismissive of women's rights, yet it's notable that they were immensely popular among women. (Murugan 317)

Perumal Murugan's college life was marked by financial hardships, balancing studies with working in his father's soda supply business in Coimbatore. At that time, he felt much relieved of humdrum reality after watching movies in theatres.

During my college years, films provided me much-needed escape from the monotony of hostel life. After watching a movie, I'd return feeling energized in both body and mind. I've even gone to late-night shows when I had exams the next morning. Oddly enough, I always did well in those exams. (Murugan 198)

He pursued his maters' degree in Tamil Literature at PSG College of Arts and Science, in Coimbatore during 1986-1988. He considered these two years the happiest of his life, despite the challenges. The encouraging faculty and the vast library with impressive collection, contributed much to his creative and artistic fervour. The enriching intellectual atmosphere helped him to present articles and engage in debates. The hostel life made him understand the value of life experience, independence, and responsibility. It was a college that balanced excellent academic facilities with ample opportunities for recreation. (Murugan 244)

He enjoyed watching movies and songs in TV. It took months or years for films to appear on TV after their theatrical run. It is in sharp contrast to the present time movies often arriving on OTT platforms within four or six weeks of their theatrical debut. There were no 24-hour music channels, YouTube, or other streaming services. He and his friends used to wait all week for Friday to watch Tamil songs.

Friday evenings also brought another much-anticipated event – the airing of *Oliyum Oliyum* (Light and Sound), a popular TV programme featuring film song videos. Wherever we were, we'd return in time to watch it. The TV room would be packed to the point where there wasn't even standing space. (Murugan 244)

With his friends, he frequented a village cinema, near Chinniyampalayam, about four miles from the college. "Taking a break to do something entirely different can refresh the soul. That's what the theatre meant to me – a momentary escape that recharged my spirit". (195). He watched many movies such as *Maaveeran*, *Manithan*, *Oor Kavalan*, and *Velaikaran*. He recalled the immense popularity enjoyed by the actors, Rajinikanth and Kamal Hassan in the late 1980s among the students. The cinema halls overflowed even with the humble 16mm projector.

There is something undeniably special about the communal experience of a movie theatre: the collective gasp at a plot twist, the laughter rippling through a crowd, the shared silence after a powerful scene. Streaming can never fully replicate that. (libraries.indiana.edu)

With fewer options, watching a movie became a special event rather than a casual activity. Many students watched the same thing simultaneously. This created a communal experience where everyone was talking about a specific film or a TV programme the next day, a phenomenon last in today's fragmented streaming landscape.

Perumal Murugan recounted his experience of watching the film *Thanga Meenkal* by Ram with his friend K.Anbarasan. Despite the director's attempt to portray the deep love in father-daughter relationship with emotional realism, the film failed to connect with the audience. As film reviewer, he thought the film lacked the real word settings with the use of standard Tamil. It failed to incorporate the local dialect, and it prioritized its message over relatability.

He wrote about watching a film, *Vidukathai*, with his wife. It explored a rare theme, the love between a young girl and a middle-aged man, their marriage, and the conflicts. He liked the director Agathyan's approach of the sensitive theme in the film with empathy, portraying the characters' struggles with realism and depth. He also had high appreciation for the film, *Kadhal Kottai*, directed by the same director. The hero and the heroine fell in love without ever meeting, similar to the extraordinary friendship between the King Koperuncholan and the poet Pisiranthaiyar.

In interviews, Agathyan often mentioned that this tale inspired *Kadhal Kottai*. His references to Sangam Literature not only revived interest in the classics but elevated his reputation as a filmmaker with literary depth. Whether or not he truly delved deeply into Tamil Literature, his works proved useful to teachers like me. We used films such as *Kadhal Kottai* to instil pride in our students and show them the relevance of Tamil Literature. (Murugan 275)

Once he visited a theatre to watch a film, *Paradesi*, with his son who had just finished his twelfth standard examinations. After spending two years as virtual prisoners in hostels, focussed on studies and marks, students needed a meaningful outlet, which would provide them with the temporary respite from the pressures of reality. The theatre was packed, and the atmosphere was electric with college and school students cheering, whistling, and addressing each other in colloquial terms. As a minute observer of society, he could understand the behaviour of the students as a reflection of societal pressures, and their need for emotional catharsis.

The routine of rising at dawn and studying until late at night is unrelenting. Theatres, in contrast, serve as sanctuaries for students, providing a rare chance to express themselves without restraint. They can shout, whistle, laugh and be unapologetically themselves. (Murugan 256, 257)

While Perumal Murugan faced multiple instances of discrimination throughout his life, a prominent humiliation by a senior lecturer upset him deeply. At that time, he wanted to watch a movie, *Kathalikka Neramillai*. Though he had already seen it several times, he wanted to watch it again to immerse himself in its humour. He first saw the movie as an undergraduate with his friends. But every time, his perception about the movie was changing. After watching the movie, he understood that 'no problem lasts forever, it will get resolved in time'.

Art has the power to deliver us from sorrow, even if only for a while. *Kathalikka Neramillai* is a shining example of such art – a film that brings joy with every viewing, reminding us that laughter is one of the greatest remedies for the soul. (Murugan 356)

His cinematic memory helped him process complex emotions and transitions. Watching a film at different stages of life allowed him to track his own growth, as his changing perspective on the same story revealed how his identity had evolved. Cinematic memories are memories derived from movies, often blending with actual experience. Perumal Murugan used the movies as touchstones for identifying his past emotions and

experience. Thus, he adopted a reflective approach by viewing the films not only as entertainments, but as catalysts for his personal growth and emotional development. He incorporated flashbacks, non-linear narratives, and episodic structures, highlighting the fragmented nature of memory.

*The Land and the Shadows* relates Perumal Murugan's life sketches with his insightful perspectives on theatres and movies. Movies and life are inseparable to him as cinema serves as both a profound reflection of human experience and a powerful source of creative inspiration. His cinematic memories were deeply linked to his important life events and his personal and intellectual growth. His memories of cinema helped him for rewinding and strengthening relationships, fostering emotional connection, and reinforcing shared history between family and friends.

#### Works Cited

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