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Seasons of the Palm by Perumal Murugan. Translated by V. Geetha

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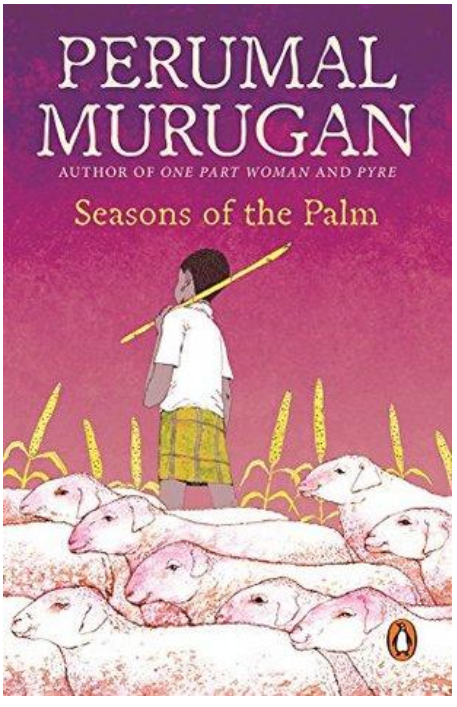

SEASONS OF THE PALM. By Perumal Murugan. Translated by V. Geetha. Haryana: Penguin Random House India, 2017; pp. 344., ₹299. ISBN: 9780143428367

God may be dead but the author most certainly isn't. The aspect of narrativisation inevitably foregrounds the author and brings him under the scanner; the manner and degree of representation, the nature of its politics, and estimations or valuations of authenticity and truthfulness are worked out against the historical, political, social, and individual personhood of the writer. At the heart of this debate lies the question of conferring or denying narratorial authority: who may be deemed the most appropriate to speak, how, on what, and for whom. Such questions elicit concern, and rightly so, with regards representations of the marginalized and the oppressed. Perumal Murugan, a contemporary non-Dalit poet and novelist, writes within this conflict-riddled space; his writing aims to articulate the experiences of the marginalised and to represent, examine, and critique the oppression faced by Dalit communities in contemporary rural and urban Tamil Nadu.

Perumal Murugan is deeply aware of the difficulties inherent in the act of narrativizing and/or representing the other, and of the conflicts that arise owing to the irreconcilable chasm between the nature of his social, political, and historical position and of those whose experiences he attempts to articulate; this awareness informs his writing and lends it a certain sensitivity and clarity. *Seasons of the Palm* (2017) (translated by V. Geetha) has a certain rustic sensibility and is

generously peppered with long descriptions of the countryside, of the villages and their inhabitants, of fields and crops, of temples, rituals, customs, festivals, myths and presiding deities, and of various forms of lives and livelihoods. The lives and stories of several of the central characters are fleshed out in great detail, thereby rescuing them from becoming mere types, devoid of emotion and stripped bare of their humanity. This feature of the narrative, in the lucidity of its conceptualisation and simplicity of its linguistic expression, expands the narratorial horizon and enables a sense of realism.

Seasons of the Palm follows the life of its protagonist, Shorty, and his friends, Belly, Tallfellow, Stonedeaf, and Stumpleg, all of whom belong to the community of untouchables and all of whom are bonded labourers to land-holding farmers. Shorty is a bonded labourer who tends to his master's sheep and is generally responsible for small chores around his master's house. All of the untouchable characters, similarly, are tied to their masters and to their responsibilities, by fear, by societal norms, by conventions and traditions, without the possibility of change or escape. The evolution of the protagonist from a relatively carefree, lively, and enthusiastic child to a teenager resigned to the hardships in his life, broken and scarred by brutal and humiliating experiences at the hands of those to whom he finds himself enslaved, is brought out through the division of the book into three chapters, meaningfully titled 'Dust,' 'Fine Mud,' and 'Dry Earth,' in the order of chronology. The three states of earth denote the three states of Shorty's psychological make-up and the nature of its transformation as he attempts to come to terms with a state of unceasing, unrelenting, inhuman oppression.

Perumal Murugan manages to exploit the complex nexus between caste and religion and the subtle interplay between the traditional and the modern; social laws and cultural norms take upon themselves 'divine' authority with which to justify their continued existence and thereby perpetuate the status quo; this 'authority,' enmeshed in religious doctrine that dictates codes of conduct, is not merely employed by the upper castes to justify their acts of brutality and further cement their positions of superiority but is also employed by the lower castes to acknowledge and resign to what they see as their 'lawfully' mandated stations in life, thereby further cementing their positions of inferiority. The aspect of religion (and the manner in which it determines and structures the individual/social consciousness) in villages and small towns permeates the narrative. Superstitions and myths

regulate the history of a community, constitute the nature of communal remembrance, and colour the individual and public consciousness.

The patron deity of the village, Munisami, is claimed by the upper castes as their own, with the untouchables actively denied from taking any part in temple festivals and even barred from entering the temple premises; if an untouchable dared to get close to the temple festivities, they would be chased away. This secondary status is internalised by the untouchable community; if Shorty or Belly were to climb into the grove where the idols of the deities are kept they would hastily clear out of the area, terrified of having done something wrong, of having unlawfully laid claim to a divine grace that did not, and could never, belong to them. The heavy burden of custom and tradition dictate the actions both of the adults and the children, driving them to internalise and perform/act out their inherited roles, whether of a 'master' or of a 'slave.' Although Selvan and Mani often ignore their elders who caution them against any manner of interaction with the 'untouchable' children, the qualities of brutality or of servility are enacted in the lives of these children, in their self-estimations and in their interactions with, and understanding of, each other. One may, nevertheless, perceive a certain ambiguity with regards certain social and cultural roles in the instance of children; Shorty is neither completely servile to Selvan, his master's son, nor is Selvan completely a tyrant to Shorty even as he tries to ape his father in the wilful exertion of the inherited authority.

The impossibility of escape from one's fate, and the futility of such efforts, pervades the length of the narrative in *Seasons of the Palm*. The sheer inhumanity that surrounds the central characters serves the function of chaining their minds and modulating their beliefs. The nature of this enslavement is poignantly highlighted through the names the author confers upon the principle characters, all of whom are denied proper names and are instead addressed by terms or labels such as Shorty or Belly, the former on account of being of short stature and the latter on account of having a big, round belly, while those characters who belong to the community of farmers, such as Selvan or Mani, are granted proper names and are addressed as 'Masters' by Shorty and his friends. The body is the sole means of sustenance for Murugan's characters. It is the body that plays an integral part in social politics, from which is derived life and towards which is directed death, an entity that both creates and destroys. The naming of untouchable characters in accordance with their particular physical characteristics thereby foregrounds the importance of the human body, both in its literal and symbolic manifestations.

The untouchable is allowed neither voice nor agency. The untouchable is duty bound to endure the trials of his/her life without the space or the possibility to register his/her protest. Although Shorty tries to get back at Selvan and makes fun of him when an opportunity presents itself, as when he keeps an increasingly furious Selvan waiting for his share of pilfered toddy while he sits on top of the tree, drinking to his heart's content, it is, nevertheless, a pyrrhic victory, the only kind Perumal Murugan will allow his central characters, as their resistance is shown to be futile, invisible, lacking in teeth, and resolve. The futility and absurdity of life, and of the struggle to live, is brought to a close towards the end of the novel with the deaths of Selvan and Shorty, with Shorty's suicide resulting from an overwhelming sense of terror and despair at having inadvertently caused Selvan's death in a disused well. Shorty slowly moves towards his death, deeper and deeper into the well, utterly overcome by despair; in this manner, he experiences a certain sense of liberation, a feeling that eggs him onward through the promise of a freedom, unalloyed and absolute, that accompanies self-annihilation.

Perumal Murugan's writing meanders on, moving from scene to scene, from character to character, from story to story, from thoughts to reflections to observations, even as it constantly shuttles between the past and the present, bordering the thin line between reality and fictionality. His writing flows with a certain ease, whether it is painstakingly sketching the history of, and detailing the traditions and customs around a particular god, locality or ritual, or carefully shadowing, and faithfully capturing, a character's thoughts and sentiments as it moves from despair to joy to fear to hope to resignation. The fairly non-dramatic nature of his narratives, robed in the unaffected simplicity of its linguistic expression, is occasionally contrasted with instances of terrifyingly raw honesty that hits its readers with the force of its expression, deeply unsettling them. Although his writings bear the marks of a stark, uncompromising realism, every work of art and every instance of representation, nevertheless, is but a re-presentation of a thing, entity, or event; this brings to the fore questions not merely regarding the nature of the representation itself but also regarding the validity/authenticity of the narratorial voice. The perceived authenticity of a particular narrative is contingent upon the manner in which one determines the validity of the particular vantage point of the narrator, and although Murugan's representations of Dalits in his works have mostly invited praise, the fact of his birth as a non-Dalit might be discomfiting to some.

Murugan's writing occupies the interstices of historical, cultural, social, epistemological, and phenomenological modes of seeing and perceiving. Although his writing is located within certain geographical and socio-cultural domains within which it opens up debates on caste hierarchies, questions social, cultural, and traditional norms that justify and perpetuate a system of oppression and inequality, and critiques the insidious manner in which such notions and norms, when internalised, influence and condition the modes of thought and behaviour, his writing is primarily concerned with questioning and representing what it means to be human. Every individual operates in relation to another; an understanding, of an entity or idea, is arrived at against another; a thought, act, or belief shapes itself in relation to another thought, act, or belief. Murugan's writing, in this fashion, is concerned primarily with stories and the manner in which stories are formed, understood, or articulated in relation to other stories. It transcends, even as it works with, historical, social, and cultural frameworks and occupies itself with the distinctly, singularly, and yet transcendentally human. Shorty's individual suffering is not only representative of the suffering endured by the victims of history, by those who find themselves at its receiving end, but it is also, rather poignantly, emblematic of the suffering inherent in the human condition. There exists in the narrative, simultaneously, both a sense of defiance and helplessness; the central characters in the text exist and operate within this liminal space between the possibility of agency and its impossibility, which forms and informs their understanding of themselves and of the nature of their relationship to the world around them. This complex ambivalence finds its expression in Murugan's writing, making it more than a mere critique of caste and social politics.

This concern with an insight into the ambivalent nature of individual motivation, critical yet sensitive consciousness of the contradictory desires that often underlie most human thoughts and actions, finds a certain parallel in the works of non-Dalit writers—such as U.R. Ananthamurthy in *Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man* (1965) or Mulk Raj Anand in *The Untouchable* (1935)—who, like Murugan, were deeply engaged in articulating and representing the condition of the marginalised; this self-consciousness, to a certain degree, differentiates it from texts such as *Mallapalli* (1935) by Unnavu Laxmi Narayana, where the characters are mostly one-dimensional entities with fairly uncomplicated and straight-forward intents and aims, idealistic, and employed primarily for the purposes of critiquing the social and cultural frameworks of caste oppression. The social context is foregrounded, against which possibilities of redemption and social mobility are suggested,

primarily through education and other social reforms. A detached criticality, alongside a deep understanding of the fragility of human beings and of the values and belief systems that condition and shape their transient existences, informs their writing and their texts. The character of Bakha in Mulk Raj Anand's *The Untouchable* (1935) struggles with deep internal conflicts throughout the length of the narrative, alternating between states of helplessness and resignation, between rage and acceptance; this is paralleled, to a certain degree, in and through the character of Shorty, although less emphatically than in the instance of Bakha, owing to latter being a mere child and therefore not yet being in possession of the vocabulary with which to adequately articulate the world to himself. The degree to which the locus of the narrative is grounded in the protagonist (along with certain other characters), Murugan's work bears a greater resemblance to the aforementioned works than to other contemporary non-Dalit writers—Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things* (1997) and Manu Joseph's *Serious Men* (2010)—who have explored similar themes in their works.

Murugan's writing, while powerful in the elegant simplicity of the mirror it props up for its society, is also sympathetic in its understanding of the fragmented, fractured, wounded nature of human existence, constituted in the unceasing and irreconcilable clash of fears and aspirations, dreams and destinies, and it must therefore be read, primarily, in the light of its introspective, sympathetic, and self-reflective tendencies and not merely the critical. It is this simple, generous humanity, an unalloyed awareness of itself and its failings, of the impossibility of forgetting and of the possibilities for forgiveness, of the fragility of human understanding, of the ambiguous and splintered nature of human agency, and of the price entailed by the human desire for redemption, that lends Murugan's writing a wisdom that is at once forceful in its insights and understanding in its judgements, at once imaginatively within and without the narrativized experience, thereby marking out a special place for his works in the cannon of Dalit literature. Although he is only too aware of the history of oppression which his works navigate, his writing, while concerned with the primacy of stories and the manner in which they are constituted, is primarily reflecting on the idea of human dignity against the monotony of the everyday, undignified human struggle for survival. With brutal honesty and simplicity, he explores the human quest for dignity, for redemption, and it is this inquisitive, deeply reflective sensibility that makes *Seasons of the Palm* an important and thought-provoking work for the ages.