

## ***Annam Mata cha Brahma*—Remembering Amma Through Kongu Food Culture: In Conversation with Author Perumal Murugan**

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### **Abstract:**

Perumal Murugan is an acclaimed Indian novelist, essayist, and poet who writes in the Tamil language. He has been hailed by readers and critics for his excellent storytelling, attention to detail, and representations of the brutal realities of the rural agrarian communities of Kongu Nadu.<sup>2</sup> Despite the whirlpool of controversies and threats that surrounded Murugan’s life and writings, nothing has deluded him from his commitment to use writing as a weapon to expose social inequalities. The present interview revolves around the role of food in his creative works. It includes a discussion of the various culinary traditions and food paradigms of his ancestral village, the reverence for food and environment amongst agrarian communities, the difference that food preferences create amongst people, and the arrival of fast-food culture in Tamil Nadu due to globalization. While the interview discusses a range of literary works, it mainly focuses on Murugan’s memoir *Amma*, where he recollects the cherished food memories of his childhood and also of his mother, whose values and love for cooking have shaped both his identity and culinary preferences. Murugan’s narrativizing of these memories through various creative forums has enabled what David Sutton calls “prospective memory”, a process of how people plan to remember meals and what they taste like for the future (163).

**Keywords:** Culinary fiction, *Kongu* cuisine, *Pongal*<sup>3</sup>, community, memory

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<sup>1</sup> Our sincere gratitude to Muthyalu Ashwini, Department of HSS, BITS-Pilani (Hyderabad campus), for her support in conducting the interview.

<sup>2</sup> The commonly used term for the western part of Tamil Nadu. Several works by Murugan are centered around his native city of Tiruchengode.

<sup>3</sup> A four-day long harvest festival celebrated in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu and parts of Sri Lanka

## Introduction

Perumal Murugan is a widely read and prolific Indian author, academician, and a literary chronicler who writes in Tamil. Murugan was born in Thiruchengodu of Namakkal district in Tamil Nadu to a family of farmers. He retired as Principal and Professor of Tamil at Namakkal Government Arts College and is currently a full-time writer. He is also an avid researcher of Kongu folklore. Amongst his ten novels, five collections of short stories, and four poetry anthologies, his most famous and controversial novel remains *Madhurobhagan* or *One Part Woman*, which was published in 2010. It invoked the ire of certain communities for the negative representation of rituals and women in the temple town of Tiruchengode. Deeply disturbed by the outbursts and attacks, Murugan declared his writing “dead.” However, after a brief hiatus of almost two years, Murugan bounced back with greater velocity and more vehement critiques on oppression, surveillance, and societal contradictions through his works.

In creative writing, food is often a trope for expressing a community’s deeply rooted socio-cultural beliefs. Such writing testifies to the fact that it is not just the food we eat, but also how we talk about, exchange, and represent our culinary experiences that matters. The present interview with Murugan gave us an understanding of Kongu food culture, specifically, its reverence for food and the environment, the pride and dignity of its farming communities, the celebrations and socialization processes associated with food, and the rural communities’ healthy, balanced and sustainable way of life.

**Maya Vinai (MV):** Cooking is generally regarded as a gendered activity. In patriarchal agrarian communities, cooking often gets relegated to women. Interestingly, in your family, things were quite different. In your memoir *Amma* you mention that “everyone in my family

knew how to cook” (11). For instance, you and your brother made *murukku*<sup>4</sup>. You also helped your mother in running errands and with household chores. Is it natural for traditional gender roles to be subverted in rural areas?

**Perumal Murugan (PM):** As I mentioned in my memoir *Amma*, helping Amma (mother) was not at all a big deal. In joint families, men helped in household chores. It may be different in case of the rich / upper caste households. But in rural agrarian families like ours, both men and women got involved in all kinds of work. In my house, there were no daughters. It was just me and my brother. Therefore, we used to do several household chores. When Amma worked in the field, my brother and I cooked, ate, and even kept aside food for Amma and Appa (father) before leaving home. Both of us knew cooking really well. Even, my Appa cooked really well. However, his expertise lies in cooking non-vegetarian dishes. So, things at my home were very different from how it is in a present middle-class family.

**Maya Vinai (MV):** Several literary works of yours like *A Lonely Harvest* (2018) and *Trial by Silence* (2018) which are sequels to *One Part Woman* feature little-known regional food preparations. In *Poonachi: Or the Story of a Black Goat* (2019), you focus on rice gruel and likewise, in *Seasons of the Palm* (2017), there is a brief description of ragi porridge and the preservation of pieces of meat for later use. Furthermore, in *Amma*, you highlight the hand-pounded spice powders like *kadalai mizhagu podi* and *ellu mizhagu podi*.<sup>5</sup> What is the role of a creative writer in reviving such rare food cultures and cuisines?

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<sup>4</sup> A crunchy snack made of rice and flour, black or white sesame seeds which is deep fried in oil. It is especially made during festive occasions like Diwali and Pongal in South India.

<sup>5</sup> Both *kadalai mizhagu podi* and *ellu mizhagu podi* can be consumed with rice or south Indian dishes like idli or dosa and simultaneously it can be used to enhance the texture and flavour of the curries.

**PM:** Most of my novels feature regional cuisine. For instance, food plays an important role in the novel *Seasons of the Palm*. I do not write purposely with the aim of saving or restoring a particular food culture. However, when I write about the old rustic life, the food patterns prevalent during that time creep into my works. In the novels, *A Lonely Harvest* and *Trial by Silence*, the inclusion of the cooking of an eggplant dish helped me to further develop the plot. This eggplant recipe was also featured in a calendar published by Kalachuvadu<sup>6</sup> on regional cuisines in creative literature. This is how food culture assiduously enters the creative process.

**MV:** Very often, your literary works celebrate the ingredients and flavours of regional food. However, you seem to be apprehensive on how globalization has transformed some of these culinary patterns. For example, in one of your poems titled, “*They Toil*” from *Songs of A Coward: Poems of Exile (2017)*, the lines “They have learnt to eat / with spoons / elegantly, politely / without touching food with their hands”, you dexterously bring forth the impact of modernisation (83). What has led to a drastic overhaul of these traditional food cultures which are slowly becoming extinct?

**PM:** Globalization is the reason why food cultures are getting juxtaposed and radically transformed. Indigenous ways of living have undergone significant changes, thanks to globalization. Even the transportation facilities have improved tremendously, which has accelerated the change. Earlier, cooking was considered a part of everyday life. However, at present, quick preparation and consumption of fast-food is trending. The mantra of today's generation is “spend more time on dining and less time for cooking”. People do not spare time to cook. In the current scenario, food cultures cannot avoid transforming and juxtaposing. I do not think of it as “extinction”; rather, I call it “blending”. There has never been such a thing as

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<sup>6</sup> A publishing house in Tamil Nadu that has published many of Murugan’s works.

“common food”. This concept has evolved recently. It is time for food researchers and creative writers to explore the commonalities in diets and classify what comes from which food culture.

**MV:** Are the food rituals and community meals represented in *One Part Woman* drawn from real-life instances? What were the unique dishes served during these celebrations?

**PM:** Yes, several instances of my works are drawn from real life experiences. In village life, what is referred to as community meals is partaken during ceremonies, celebrations, and festivals. It is also consumed during times of laborious agricultural work. Every occasion has a unique cuisine. For instance, let us look at the Tamil month of *Puratasi*,<sup>7</sup> which is an auspicious month for Perumal, the main deity of Vaishnavism<sup>8</sup>. Interestingly, Perumal also has several other folk worship traditions. On the third Saturday of the month of *Puratasi*, men of our village visit the nearby Perumal Hills. Before the men return, the women cook together as a group. They cook *ven-pongal*,<sup>9</sup> lentil gravy, *rasam*<sup>10</sup>, pumpkin, and ridge gourd using local vegetables. There is a big difference between cooking on normal occasions and cooking on this special occasion. In fact, there are some strict food practices which are to be followed. Among pulses (i.e. dried legumes), only green lentils are to be used and *rasam* is generally not seasoned. Only chilies can be used for a pumpkin dish, which makes the taste unique and appealing. There are various occasions like these and many unique varieties of food are associated with them. All these food practices resonate with the solidarity of the

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<sup>7</sup> An important month in Tamil calendar which is dedicated to God Perumal.

<sup>8</sup> A branch of Hinduism that worships Lord Vishnu as the Supreme God.

<sup>9</sup> A popular breakfast dish in Tamil Nadu that is traditionally prepared during the harvest festival, which is also called *Pongal*. It is prepared with rice and lentils, and cooked in ghee.

<sup>10</sup> A spicy soup that is famous in South India.

villagers. In a way, it can be said that they are remnants of the old rustic life where people live together as a community.

**MV:** In *Amma* and *One Part Woman*, you depict how the food served to the divine or village deities were quite different. Could you elaborate on those unique cuisines?

**PM:** In our village, the folk gods include vegetarian *samis*<sup>11</sup> as well as non-vegetarian *samis*. The food offered to God is called “*papadipu*”, and the preparation of food is according to the deity’s preferences. For example, for *Mariamman*<sup>12</sup>, we mash both *pongal* and banana to make *papadipu*. Whereas for *Muniyappan*,<sup>13</sup> *pongal* rice is mixed with blood and curry pieces made of the sacrificed goat and chicken. The offering is served in a large bowl and devotees leave the temple premises without looking back. It is followed by the customary utterance “*Inda Budichukko*” (“here, please accept this”) by the devotees. However, even if the devotees turn back, they are aware that *Muniyappan* would not actually consume the offering.

**MV:** Most of your works like *One Part Woman* are centered around farming communities. How do the farmers or villagers express their gratitude to the divine and nature for the crops?

**PM:** The festival of thanksgiving is *Thai Pongal* which is held annually for one week and ten days in the month of *Thai*.<sup>14</sup> It is celebrated all over Tamil Nadu. We call it “Tamil Thirunal”. Various events are held on these days like *Pongal* to the sun and *Pongal* for sheep. This great harvest festival transgresses religion, caste, and class, and everyone comes together for a grand celebration.

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<sup>11</sup> Tamil word for “God”.

<sup>12</sup> Hindu goddess of rain.

<sup>13</sup> A deity associated with farming and agriculture.

<sup>14</sup> The tenth month in the Tamil calendar.

**MV:** As depicted in your memoir *Amma*, despite several limitations and shortcomings in terms of availability of resources, Amma succeeds in creating the feeling of abundance. With the least of the ingredients and resources, Amma could put together a delicious meal. A sense of lack is never felt in Amma's kitchen. She had a unique *kaipavakam*<sup>15</sup> and her kitchen shelves were full of alternatives. How did she weave that magic?

**PM:** These days, we have supermarkets and grocery stores near our houses. But for someone who lived in a village some thirty or forty years ago, grocery stores were not easily accessible or affordable. Back then even a tea shop was a luxury. In fact, one had to travel to a nearby town even to get groceries. From my village, the nearest town Thiruchengode town was almost seven kilometers away. Hence, we used to depend upon the weekly market, which was located at a walking distance of five kilometers from our home. This market was quite affordable when compared to the shops in town. We had to make sure that items we bought from the market lasted till the next week. Some families had the privilege to borrow from their neighbours. In our case, we had no neighbours since our house was in the middle of our large farmland. Thus, the tendency to complain regarding a lack of things never really developed in us.

**MV:** We see an inextricable link between caste and certain food patterns or habits in your works such as *Black Coffee in a Coconut Shell: Caste as Lived Experience* (2017), and “Pork Roast” from *Four Strokes of Luck* (2021). What is the role that food plays as a marker or signifier of caste?

**PM:** Caste is like God; it is omnipresent and it can be easily discerned through food preferences. There is a certain preference when it comes to the consumption of food among different castes living in the same region, which can either be vegetarian or non-vegetarian. A vegetarian diet

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<sup>15</sup> Dexterity or the unique skill with hands in doing certain tasks. Here, Murugan is referring to the ‘magic’ in Amma’s cooking.

does not make much of a difference. However, a non-vegetarian diet does. It is also not common to include meat in daily meals in our village. Meat is cooked and eaten once a week or once every two weeks. Chicken and mutton are consumed by all castes. However, several castes do not cook or consume beef or pork in their homes. The consumption of food reflects the caste and class differences amongst people.

The manner in which caste operates in food preferences, especially in terms of consumption of beef and pork, is reflected in my short stories. My short story "Varukari", which is based on the above theme, has been made into a movie and released under the title, *Sethuman*. Thus, food plays a crucial role in my works.

MV: Along with portraying the food culture of humans, your works explore the intricate animal world and its food chain. In *Poonachi: Or the Story of a Black Goat* (2016) and the short story, "Seemaatti the Buffalo" in your collection, *Four Strokes of Luck* (2021), the protagonists' lives are inevitably attached to the animal world through food. Often, the characters starve, and so do their pets and cattle. They struggle to feed themselves and their pets. How do you see this connection between humans and animals forged through food?

PM: The concern for food lies not with humans alone. All living beings on this planet face problems related to food. When famine strikes, humans are not the only ones affected. It impacts the animals too. Natural calamities disrupt the availability and consumption of food. It is interesting to note how humans are not just concerned about their food, but also the food of domesticated animals which can be the income source of their lives. Agriculture in our area is largely dependent on sheep/goat. Land and cattle are the wealth of the cultivators. I depict this connection very clearly in my writings.



Often, breeders do not feed the cattle the type of food they want; they neither allow them to eat for as long as they want. Humans restrict the feeding freedom of domesticated animals. Animals and birds, which are free, have a habit of waking up early in the morning to look for food and later they rest in the sun. However, domesticated animals do not have that opportunity because their food largely depends on humans. This theme of dependence of domesticated animals on humans for their food is embedded in my works.

**MV:** In *Amma*, you focus highly on *Kongu* food culture. However, these days, food cultures are transforming rapidly. Could you elaborate on this recent shift in culinary practices?

**PM:** I find it interesting that these days, food gets delivered at a particular address in no time. In Chennai, there is a shop that serves *idli*<sup>16</sup> and chicken curry. They have expanded that business and have over ten shops currently. Similarly, there is a dish called “pallipalayam chicken”<sup>17</sup>, which is prepared with long thin pieces of coconut in it. This food is unique in my area, Namakkal<sup>18</sup>. Now, with the new delivery services, others also can enjoy it. I welcome this opportunity where people from across towns can taste each other's dishes. However, with the tiffin culture and hotel business blooming, it is impossible to find eateries at night these days. Tamil Nadu had a food culture where one could find places to eat throughout the night. The disappearance of such roadside night eateries may be linked to the monopolization of certain hotel chains. To cite from my own life, I never got rice during my lunch hours in college. During that time, the canteen and eateries generally provided dishes like *idli* and *dosa*.<sup>19</sup> So, if

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<sup>16</sup> A popular breakfast dish in South India and Sri Lanka made from fermented rice and lentil batter in the form of a steamed cake.

<sup>17</sup> A special dish originating from the town of Pallipalayam in Tamil Nadu. This chicken dish is mixed with long coconut slices, shallots and red chillies.

<sup>18</sup> A district in the state of Tamil Nadu famous for its hilltop temples.

<sup>19</sup> Like *idli*, *dosa* is made from fermented rice and lentil batter. It resembles a thick form of pancake.

you wanted to eat rice, you have to visit big hotels. Earlier we used to have rice all the time. *Idli* and *dosa* were limited to special occasions like festivals. There are both good and bad sides to this. The option to try a wide variety of food is definitely a good thing. I do not subscribe to the idea that everything from the past is good and all that is new is bad.

**MV:** Your memoir states that Amma changed certain superstitious beliefs concerning food production and farming that existed in the village such as the belief that seeds do not sprout when sowed by widows. She was the one who showed the society that an orthodox mindset should change with contemporary times. Were there similar examples like this? How did she become a model for the community?

**PM:** Perhaps, necessity was the reason why Amma undertook certain activities which changed these superstitions. There was a dearth of people to get involved in farming activities like sowing seeds. Everyone in the family had to contribute towards a successful harvest. One cannot get sufficient food if they do not sow seeds on time, especially during monsoons. So, the question of whether the seed will sprout or not was not important. When necessity arises, a decision has to be taken. Moreover, the role of women in farming was very important. So, it was important to address and subvert such superstitions about widows.

In a similar way, Amma did not give much significance to *thali*<sup>20</sup> although several women attach a lot of sentimental value to it. She would not wear it at home, at times. It is only when she had to go outside that she tied it on a yellow thread and wore it on her neck. Several such traditions or formalities were not considered much necessary or entertained in my family.

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<sup>20</sup> *Thali* or *Mangalsutra* is a necklace that the husband places around the wife's neck. It is considered sacred and symbolises the continuance of marriage. Wives usually remove *thali* only after their husbands' death.

**MV:** In your memoir *Amma*, you state that Amma did all the work by herself such as taking care of the paddy fields and feeding the labourers as well her family. You specifically mention that your father was seldom involved in agriculture. So, how was it that Amma single-handedly manage the entire show?

**PM:** Women in working-class family are generally overworked. It does not imply that men do not work. However, work done by women are significantly more regardless of day or night. Their work is not time-bound like office hours. Since agrarian families also reared chickens and cattles, managing them was also part of their work. Hence, it is nearly impossible to distinguish sleeping time and working hours. For women like my Amma, work is life. I have noticed how Amma gets upset at times she could not work. On the other hand, my Appa used to run a soda shop all by himself. He also worked hard in his own way. I have written more about Appa in another book in Tamil. It has not been translated to English yet.

### **Conclusion**

Perumal Murugan's engagement with his intensely personal culinary experiences and food ways showcases the unique role that food plays in his literary works. It highlights how food is inextricably linked to moments of nostalgia, local festivities, solidarity, rituals, and caste, class and gender dynamics in a society. This interview also exemplifies how gastronomic experiences transcend beyond the ostentatious processes of narrativization of food acquisition, preservation, preparation, presentation, and individual identity formation to understanding the social fabric of a community, locale and nation.

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