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Vaadivaasal's Visual Storylines in the Graphic Novel Adaptation

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Abstract

The graphic novel *Vaadivaasal* offers a striking entry point into questions of masculinity in Tamil culture. Originally told by C. S. Chellappa and recently given a visual reworking by Appupen, with Perumal Murugan's commentary, the story returns to the setting of jallikattu, the bull taming contest that has long served as both sport and ritual. What the novel makes immediately clear is that masculinity here is not a private matter of strength or courage. It is bound to performance, to the gaze of the crowd, and to the weight of family memory. The images sharpen this point. The body of the man pitched against the bull is all endurance and aggression, but it is also duty and an insistence that the son must step where the father once stood. At the same time, the visual field does not hide the cracks. Fear flickers across a face; hesitation halts the body mid gesture; silence hangs over a panel. These moments interrupt the spectacle and expose how fragile the performance of masculinity can be, how much it depends on recognition and validation from the community that surrounds it. This paper argues that the *Vaadivaasal* adaptation stages masculinity in two registers at once. It celebrates the violence, pride, and ancestral honour associated with jallikattu,

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but it also unsettles those very terms. Masculinity appears not simply as prowess but as a trial of existence itself, a space where glory and vulnerability are inseparably bound.

Keywords: Graphic Novel, Jallikattu, Masculinity, Tamil Culture, Vaadivaasal, Visual Narrative

The graphic novel version of C. S. Chellappa's classic Tamil tale *Vaadivaasal* provides a critical lens into the construction, visualisation, and contestation of masculinity in modern narrative forms, in addition to a chance to examine the textures of Tamil cultural practice. Appupen's visual reimagining, along with Perumal Murugan's commentary and contextual guidance, is a powerful illustration of how stories rooted in local histories of ritual, sport, and performance can be retranslated into a visual medium that places a fresh focus on the body, violence, heritage, and vulnerability.

The central theme of this novel is Jallikattu, a bull-taming sport that is exclusive to Tamil Nadu and involves men pursuing, holding, and trying to conquer fierce bulls as displays of skill, bravery, and endurance. Jallikattu is intricately linked to issues of honour, group identity, and intergenerational masculinity; it is not only an athletic or celebratory occasion. By addressing this topic through a graphic novel, Appupen highlights the visual and performative facets of masculinity, posing queries about what it means for men to be aggressive, courageous, and in control, while also exposing fears, silences, and anxieties that undermine strict patriarchal norms.

This paper examines how masculinity is portrayed in the *Vaadivaasal* graphic novel, placing it within the framework of visual narrative analysis, masculinity studies, and Tamil cultural discourse. It seeks to show that although the adaptation emphasises traditional ideas of masculinity that are based on physical strength, filial piety, and social approval, it also undermines these ideas by highlighting vulnerability, ambiguity, and the existential danger associated with masculine performance.

Jallikattu is a cultural theatre performed in rural Tamil Nadu during the Pongal festival, not just an individualistic sport. For a long time, academics have highlighted how the sport functions as a ritualised display of bravery, virility, and patriarchal control over the environment and society. The centuries-old tradition involves not only the domestication of animal strength but also the staging of collective memory and male endurance.

In the *Vaadivaasal* novella, Chellappa's protagonist, Picchi, embodies the weight of intergenerational expectation: he is the son of a man who once faced the legendary "Kaari" bull, and his masculinity is therefore framed as incomplete unless he too can confront and subdue such an animal. Honour here is hereditary; sons must prove themselves to uphold a father's name. Raewyn Connell's idea of "hegemonic masculinity," in which masculine identities are socially

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rooted in hierarchy and expectation, is reflected in this interaction (Connell 77). These expectations, which frame masculinity as a cultural obligation rather than merely an individual identity, are closely associated with community memory and familial honour (maanam) in the Tamil setting.

The graphic novel amplifies this by emphasising physical confrontation. Panels depicting the bull charge not only highlight human-animal struggle but also portray the sheer scale and power imbalance between man and beast. Masculinity, therefore, is represented as both arrogance, the presumption that the human body can withstand animal force, and fragility, in that failure leads to shame, humiliation, or physical destruction.

The multimodality of graphic novels sets them apart from standard prose; they increase meaning, especially in relation to the body and motion, by combining word and image. Given how closely masculine stereotypes are tied to the visual, muscles, scars, gestures, and the aesthetics of confrontation, this medium seems oddly suited to examining masculinity.

In *Vaadivaasal*, Appupen renders Tamil masculinity in stark black and white ink drawings. Black and white comics often evoke mythic timelessness, a mode that suits Chellappa's original narrative of tradition and ritual. More importantly, the medium starkly configures contrasts between body and beast, light and shadow, vulnerability and dominance. The contours of the male body, straining, sweating, leaping against the bull, are made into a kind of performance for the reader's gaze, mirroring the performative nature of masculinity itself in the arena.

Panels freeze moments of hesitation as well as bravado. Close-up sequences of eyes staring down the bull or sweat trickling down a face highlight not only aggression but also fear. Silence, as represented by wordless panels of confrontation, becomes as powerful as cries of triumph. In this reading, the visual medium provides a grammar for analysing masculinity not only as visible strength but also as concealed vulnerability.

The intergenerational aspect of *Vaadivaasal* makes masculinity not just an individual condition but a filial inheritance. Picchi faces the trial of proving his worth by equaling or surpassing his father's exploits. Here, masculinity functions as a script handed down through heritage, rather than something autonomously chosen. This theme aligns with David Gilmore's anthropological study *Manhood in the Making*, in which he argues that across cultures, masculinity is often tested through ritual challenges that require sons to embody familial and communal ideals (Gilmore 23). In Tamil Nadu's rural milieu, failure in the trial of jallikattu would not only mark an individual's weakness but dishonour the hereditary line.

The graphic novel accentuates this generational burden through symbolic motifs. Shadows of bulls loom across the frames even when they are unseen, signifying an ancestral weight pressing upon the protagonist. Similarly, murmurings or watchful gazes of villagers at the edge of the arena visually transpose the social gaze of ancestral expectation onto Picchi. Masculinity here becomes

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a trial watched, judged, and validated by the community, making personal identity inseparable from communal honour.

A striking paradox in Jallikattu and even more so in its graphic representation is how the same act that defines honour also risks annihilation. The battlefield of masculinity in motion is the body, which serves as both a weapon and a susceptible surface. The vulnerability of masculinity in the face of ruthless animal strength is highlighted by graphic scenes showing men being gored, tossed, or stomped by bulls. However, these images are not failures in the traditional sense; rather, they raise the stakes for bravery and show that the existential edge of masculine honour comes from the very threat of destruction.

Scholars of gender have emphasised this contradiction between ideals of strength and the reality of fragility. Judith Butler has theorised gender as performative acts continually reiterated under social surveillance (Butler 191). In *Vaadivaasal*, masculinity is enacted in the arena of performance but confronted by the ever-present threat that the male body can be undone. This dichotomy is encapsulated in the panels that depict both the pain of damage and the perspiration of effort: vulnerability is the only thing that gives heroism its significance.

Vaadivaasal questions the boundaries of masculine bravery while simultaneously celebrating it. Moments of hesitation, when Picchi doubtfully faces the bull, or when men recoil from its charge, allow silence to envelop the frames. These silences speak with eloquence: masculinity is less stable than its outward rituals suggest. It is subject to fear, uncertainty, and the haunting awareness that communal gaze can transform bravery into humiliation in seconds.

The graphic novel's use of stillness makes this fragility palpable. Entire panels devoid of text allow bodily posture to signify internal struggle. As a result, masculinity emerges as a precarious negotiation that is always in danger of collapsing rather than as an essence. This perspective is consistent with current scholarship in masculinities, which highlights insecurity as a structural element of masculine identities rather than an anomaly (Kimmel 48).

Vaadivaasal must be positioned within the larger Tamil cultural politics of any research. Jallikattu has been entangled in discussions about Tamil identity and animal welfare, particularly in the last several decades. Defenders of Jallikattu highlighted the practice as representative of Tamil history and resistance to homogenising national legal frameworks during protests in the 2010s, especially in 2017. Therefore, in this discourse, masculinity is linked to claims of Tamil pride and is not just personal and family but also ethno-national.

The graphic novel, adapted amid this cultural climate, plays into and complicates these debates. By visualising Jallikattu as both valorous and violent, it resists simplistic glorifications. Instead, it opens space for questioning: What does it mean that Tamil masculinity is tied to a dangerous, sometimes deadly performance? What effects does the demand for ancestral honour have on gender dynamics today? The cultural practice is visually staged as a contested place of

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memory, power, and vulnerability in the novel, yet it is neither completely dismissed nor celebrated.

A complex, conflicting, and intensely visual experience, masculinity is constructed in the Vaadivaasal graphic novel. On one level, it honours the traditional bravery of Tamil men facing bulls by encoding endurance and bravery into physical movements and visual signals. At another, it undermines this bravery by emphasising vulnerability, quiet, and group pressure. In this context, masculinity is ultimately a performance rather than a fixed identity, a constant experiment in which honour and vulnerability coexist dangerously. By reading the novel not merely as retelling but as visual reinterpretation, we see how Appupen and Murugan navigate masculinity as both cultural inheritance and existential question. Masculinity in motion, whether leaping against bulls or faltering under fear, is depicted not as a static essence but as a live contestation, encoded in image and performance, echoing across Tamil cultural history while speaking to pressing gender discourses today.

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