

CASTE, GENDER, AND RITUALS: INTERSECTIONS OF PATRIARCHY IN *ONE PART WOMAN*

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Abstract

This paper explores how patriarchy oppresses female sexuality by reducing its purpose solely to motherhood in Perumal Murugan's novel *One Part Woman*. Set in Tiruchengode, a rural village in Tamil Nadu, the story follows the poignant struggles of Kali and Ponna, a childless couple. In their desperate attempts to conceive, they pursue every possible means, even at the risk of compromising their marital harmony. Within their community, motherhood is viewed as the ultimate marker of a woman's worth, while childlessness is perceived as a failure. As a result, their inability to fulfil these socially prescribed roles invites constant criticism and stigmatization, placing significant strain on their relationship and personal identities.

Keywords: Caste, gender role, oppression, patriarchy.

Perumal Murugan, a contemporary Tamil writer and poet, is a Professor of Tamil. He has written six novels, four short story collections, and four poetry anthologies, all rich in the aromas and tastes of the settings he depicts. His works are deeply infused with the culture of his home state. Three of his books have been translated into English, which include *Seasons of the Palm*, *The Goat Thief*, and *One Part Woman*. His *One Part Woman*, published in Tamil in 2010 as *Maadhorubaagan*, was translated into English by AniruddhanVsudevan and published in 2013.

While being a work of translation, the book is rich with elements of rural life in the heart of Tamil Nadu. The title holds significant meaning in reflecting the culture that has been observed, both in reality for a time and eternally in mythology. The novel is titled *Maadhorubaagan*, which can be divided into “*Maadhuorubaagan*.” “*Maadhu*” translates to woman in Tamil, “*oru*” means one, and “*baagan*” signifies side. Myths have consistently influenced human existence. Each myth, despite being distant from harsh realities, illustrates that both partners in a relationship have equal responsibilities. A prevalent belief in religious circles is that Lord Shiva offered his left side to his wife Shakthi, highlighting the equality between men and women. The title of the novel also refers to the form of Shiva and Shakthi known as *Ardhanareeswara*, which translates to *One Part Woman*.

According to *The Caravan Magazine*, “There are numerous idols on the Thiruchengodu hill, each capable of granting a specific boon. One of these is the Ardhanareeswarar, a representation of Shiva who has given his left side to his consort, Parvathi.” The plot thickens when Kali desires his wife to join him and fulfill her role as his equal counterpart, while societal beliefs and customs compel her to ascend the hill during the chariot festival to select the divine form she prefers, leading to a controversy.

The novel tells the story of a couple from a specific community in Tamil Nadu who are unable to have children. Kali and his wife Ponna engage in numerous pooja ceremonies and make many offerings to God. Although the couple shares a deep love for one another, they are in search of an extreme solution to their inability to conceive. Ridiculed by their relatives and friends, they explore every possible herb and seek out every deity. The narrative culminates on the night of the chariot festival at the temple of Maadhorubaagan. This festival night brings hope to married women facing childlessness, as societal norms are loosened, allowing a woman to select a man for a consensual encounter. If a woman become pregnant, her child is viewed as a divine blessing, known as Sami Pillai, meaning the child of God. The infants born on this occasion receive this name due to the belief that the

men wandering the hills during the procession of the deities returning to the temple are incarnations of God.

Kali and Ponna, although they share a loving and fulfilling marriage, face haunting judgments and backlashes from friends, family, and relatives regarding their inability to conceive a child. In a patriarchal society, a woman's worth is often defined by her ability to be a mother, and Ponna is caught in this belief, facing continuous pressure to validate her role. Kali is also subjected to constant demands from friends and relatives to consider remarrying, saying that the problem lies with Ponna. At one point in the novel, Chinnapa Gounder, a fellow villager with whom Kali plans to sell a cow that cannot produce a calf, says in *One Part Woman*: “That is how some cows are. No matter what you do, they never get pregnant, just change the cow. If you say yes, I can fetch you right away.” (14)

In contrast, Ponna experiences significant rejection from her community, being labelled as ‘barren’ and often urged to stay away from social gatherings due to the belief that her presence brings bad luck. She faces continuous ridicule from neighbours and relatives, becoming a target for blame during any misfortunes. A situation arises when Kadhiravel’s son injures himself while staying at Ponna’s home, prompting his mother to angrily accuse her, stating,

“She would understand only if she had a child of her own! She took such good care, yet my boy’s head is broken; would any mother allow that?” (15). This event not only highlights the severe criticism Ponna faces but also strengthens the societal belief that a woman’s value is intrinsically tied to her capacity to bear children.

Ponna and Kali engage in prayers and participate in various rituals with the hope of becoming pregnant; Ponna even takes bitter medicines recommended by her mother-in-law for this purpose. Kali and Ponna make a goat sacrifice, light a lamp, and circle a rock, risking everything. The ongoing pressure from her family and mother-in-law compels Ponna to join the fourteen-day chariot festival at Ardhanareeswara Temple, where the norms are ‘flexible’ and unions between men and women are permitted. Kali is completely distraught by the idea; when he confronts Ponna and asks for her thoughts, she says, “If you want me to do this for the sake of this miserable child, I will” (86).

This response shocks Kali; Ponna feels societal pressure to conceive and believes that they will be seen as failures as a ‘man’ and ‘woman’ if they are unable to reproduce. The couple's inability to have children is connected to their social standing, as they belong to the Gounder caste, where their influence is measured by the number of male offspring. Ponna experiences

pressure to provide an heir to inherit their property. There is a moment when Ponna and Pottupatti go to a market and get peanuts, at which point Pottupatti says that,

You have bought so little. Do you have a child Crying at home? Your husband and you are protecting an inheritance that God knows which wretched dogs will claim later. Why don't you eat what you like? Whom are you being miserly for? A woman without a husband and inheritance without heir are the same, they say. (52)

Perumal Murugan profoundly examines the deeply established patriarchy within the system and its imposition on individuals, revealing how status, culture, and religion further reinforce these roles. Ponna's desire to conceive a child threatens their loving marriage, as Kali opposes her involvement in the Chariot festival and having relations with another man, whom he fears might be of an untouchable caste. If Ponna were to become pregnant, it would challenge Kali's sense of 'Masculinity' and show his impotency. On the other hand, Ponna's 'Female essence' is often examined, her ability to conceive is necessary to declare her femininity and bear an heir, thus preserving their influence and authority. Gender identities are socially constructed, and failure to adhere to these roles will result in harsh criticism.

The novel explores the issue of how patriarchal views suppress female sexuality, primarily by perceiving it as a tool for reproduction.

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