

## UNVEILING SOCIO-CULTURAL LAYERS IN PERUMAL MURUGAN'S ONE PART WOMAN

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### Abstract

The pain of childlessness felt by Kali and Ponna, the chief characters of the novel living in a rural farming community is hard enough as it is and the worse thing is that their happiness is based on fulfilling the dictates of the society. Even love and desire must meet the standards of the system and the social expectations and the stringent norms of caste and custom limit the opportunity and happiness of the couple. The paper examines the relationship of the couple with the society and how their enthralling tale of love takes a horrifying turn after Ponna's visit to the annual chariot festival's eighteenth night where consensual sex between unmarried men and women are accepted because all males are revered as gods. The paper dwells into the psyche of the couple and their sufferings and how the society is a threat to an individual's happiness.

**Keywords:** Society, Sufferings, Social expectations, Customs

Perumal Murugan in his *One Part Woman* employs with vivid and crisp description of the rural Tamil society and he crafts with great care and accuracy, to pierce the complex webs of customs and traditions. This novel's investigation of traditions, family, and gender in South India and its roles and consequence are fierce.

Kali and Ponna are the prime focus of *One Part Woman*. Ponna is the sister of Kali's childhood friend Muthu and Ponna joined Kali in matrimony when she was sixteen. Kali and Ponna are inseparable and content in their relationship. But since the beginning of their marriage, a pleased relationship with the society is marred by their inability to have children. The paper surveys intricacy and how being childless has affected them and how they are socially deprived even in the eyes of their friends and family. On seeing their troubles and frustrations, the family intervenes to put an end to their misery and they make one last desperate attempt to fix the problem they were forced into.

Despite a few disagreements in their relationship, Ponna and Kali are depicted as a loving and committed couple. Kali is a hardworking sincere man and does his best to make his family happy but being a married man with no heir is hard to pass by in the society. The most difficult thing for Kali is all the pressure from outside to remarry, and there were direct and indirect suggestions for Kali to get a second wife to secure an heir. Both Kali and Ponna suffers from the pangs of the society enduring insults and hateful words. On a fine day, Kali's friend casually remarks Ponna as a cow and asked Kali to remarry right in front of Ponna. Kali's condition is pathetic that he is unable to react to that ridiculous stance against his wife. His friend says, "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" (Murugan 14).

Ponna worries a great deal about the possibility of Kali remarrying, and Kali tenderly prods her about it, yet Kali would truly do not consider it. But there seems to be no escaping the taunts of the world. "For seven years now, there had been a talk of second marriage; both openly and secretly. As a result, many people had become the objects of Ponnayi's hatred" (Murugan 10). Ponna is defenceless without her words and she uses it effectively to escape the

arrows thrown by the society. Kali on the other hand has nothing in his power to defend his own family. He silently suffers.

Childlessness affects both the husband and wife, but Ponna is more affected. She believes she is cursed, which makes it difficult for her to communicate with other people, particularly children. Over the course of her life, she has experienced numerous humiliations as a result of the treatment she has received from others due to the fact that she has not given birth. Even the casual everyday activities are associated with having children. When a relative child got hurt in the presence of Ponna in her house, the child's mother scolds her and says, "She would know only if she had a child of her own! She had taken such good care that my boy's head is broken, would any mother allow it to happen?" (Murugan 15). These kinds of horrible statements became part and parcel of the life of Ponna and Kali.

The story has a sense of immediacy mixed with the far-off idealism of a kinder, slower, nicer society. Murugan deftly analyses the impact on relationship of Kali and Ponna because of the pressure to have a child. Everyday she faces one problem or the other in the fields, market and even at her own house. she also faces sexual advancements from Kali's friends and other men of the village. She cries, "Isn't it because I have no children that people look at I like this way?... If I had the blessing, would I have to suffer this disgrace? Every dog thinks I am just a stone standing at the street corner that it can rub itself against me" (Murugan 101). But she can only cry as there seems to be no way out of her misery.

Seeing the agony of the couple, the family comes forward to help them of their distress. The clever plan is set up that was not considered before as it was not an option for Kali. The plan is basically unfathomable and it is a one final frantic attempt at conceiving a child. The grand eighteenth day celebration finishes when the gods go back up the hill and the standard sexual rules don't make a difference as long as there is consent. The family proposes Ponna

ought to go, and allow herself to be impregnated in the chariot festival. The reasoning behind the suggestion is that she would not be laying down with just another man but with a god and if she is lucky, she shall conceive a child with a blessing of god. “All men who set their foot in Karattur on the eighteenth day are gods. It is sGod who is giving this. Who knows which god comes with what face? It is the nature of gods not to reveal their faces” and thus she would be laying down with what could be compared to a divine nature (Murugan 96). As a young man, Kali even partook in this festivity as it was a way for young fellows to acquire insight yet it’s by and large not something any married man would consider for his better half to partake in.

Ponna is tricked into going to the festival by her family members. She was told that her husband has no problem with her visit to the chariot festival. But the reality is different and Kali is extremely possessive of Ponna. When Kali realises that Ponna has visited the chariot festival he screams, “You whore! You have cheated me! You will not be happy. You have cheated me, you whore” (Murugan 240). This is indeed a complex situation considering the fact that Kali has been to the festival several times before his marriage but he judges his tricked wife as a whore for going there to conceive a child that would put an end to their misery.

In terms of sexuality men and women have different rules and it is unconsciously embarked in our minds. Wade, L in “The New Science of Sex Difference” remarks, “Hormones, then, are not part of a biological program that influences us to act out the desires of our ancestors. They are a dynamic part of our biology designed to give us the ability to respond to the physical, social, and cultural environment” (284). Socially men and women have different standards and often one points finger at another individual but the patriarchy is to be blamed and not any individual. Everyone partakes in the patriarchy and enriches it. But *The Nature and Evolution of Female Sexuality* states,

Couched in superstitious, religious and rationalized terms, behind the subjugation of women's sexuality lay the inexorable economics of cultural evolution which finally forced men to impose it and women to endure it.... Generally, men have never accepted strict monogamy except in principle. Women have been forced to accept it. (145)

This explains Kali's frantic behaviour and his hypocritic acts as he finds about his wife's venture. On patriarchy, Singh explains, "Patriarchy is not just the ascendancy of the father in a family; it rather encompasses all the symbols of the imposed tradition, culture and power, which affects both men and women equally" (8). Countless men and women suffer in the world because of the patriarchal beliefs. It is rooted and nourishes itself in every household in everyday activities. Patriarchal beliefs are imposed as soon as a child is born and the parents force the life of the children to the set patriarchal standards. Patriarchal beliefs vary from one place to another as culture and traditions play a major role in it. In an interview with UN News Centre, Paulo Coelho, the Brazilian novelist explains

Culture makes people understand each other better. And if they understand each other better in their soul, it is easier to overcome the economic and political barriers. But first they have to understand that their neighbour is, in the end, just like them, with the same problems, with the same questions.

To have empathy is essential to overcome the strong patriarchal rules as it is hard to escape from the set norms. The novel pinpoints many gender inequalities and questions the society for their injustices. Though it is predetermined by culture, there are many instances even in the ancient times where our society considers equality of sexes. Even religions have great examples for that. The god in the Ardhnareeshwara temple has a chief importance as the

got goes by many names such as Pavatha and Devadha but the speciality of the god is explained by the author in the voice of Kali's mother as:

The male and female together make the world. To show that to us, the Lord stands here combined with the Goddess. In other temples, you would see separate shrines for Eeswaran and Ambal. But here they stand together as one. He has given her the left half of his body. It is only when we give half of ourselves; both body and mind; to the woman that we can be good husbands. Even though we are born male, we also have feminine qualities within us. Considering all this, elders have called him One Part Woman. There is no female without the male, and no male without the female. The world goes on only when they come together. (36)

Through the example of Ardhnareshwara, one could understand equality of the sexes in a pleasant and an effective way. The need for equality between sexes is conveniently found everywhere around us but one chooses to ignore the voice. Because of that countless women like Ponna suffer and Ponna's search for a happy life ends in a tragedy. Ponna sorrowfully says, "In seeking a life we have pawned our lives" (OPW 56). This is the state of many men and women who suffer from the pressures of tradition and stigma. With intense introspection, one can find the problems of the society but the hopes for a better world sprout everywhere. Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche in her *We Should all be Feminists* claims. "But in addition of being angry, I am also hopeful, because I believe deeply in the ability of human beings to make and remake themselves for the better" (11).

There is hope for the world we live in irrespective of the chaos that emerges all around. Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* has a vivid and terse and acts as an instrument through which one could learn the nuances of the rural Tamil social life. With great care and

precision, the author has cut through the dense meshes of the complex society and the life of a married couple. The crystalline gaze of the author allows on to understand customs, norms, traditions, rituals, social practises and the intricacies of a simple story. Rather than understanding, one could culminate in their heart empathy as the story gives a powerful insight. Overall, *One Part Woman* by Perumal Murugan is a wonderful tale that ignites an awakening with a collision of hatred, jealousy, greed as well as kindness, love, and desire.

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