

The Stigma of Barrenness: Patriarchy, Infertility, And Female Oppression in Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman*

Dr. P. Padmini

Associate Professor of English

Ethiraj College for Women, Egmore, Chennai – 600 005

Abstract—Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* is a powerful exploration of the intersection between patriarchy, infertility, and social oppression in rural Tamil society. Set in the early twentieth century, the novel narrates the lives of Kali and Ponna, a married couple whose inability to conceive becomes a source of relentless social scrutiny and emotional suffering. While infertility is a shared condition, the burden of blame falls disproportionately upon Ponna, revealing the deeply gendered nature of reproductive expectations within a patriarchal culture. This paper examines how societal norms equate womanhood with motherhood, reducing a woman's identity and worth to her reproductive capacity. Through the experiences of Ponna, Murugan exposes the stigma attached to barrenness, the psychological trauma inflicted by community pressure, and the ways in which patriarchal structures regulate female bodies and desires. The study further analyses the role of family, religion, and cultural traditions in perpetuating female oppression while simultaneously highlighting the limited agency available to women within such social frameworks. By portraying infertility not merely as a personal tragedy but as a socially constructed form of gender discrimination, *One Part Woman* critiques the oppressive mechanisms of patriarchy and underscores the urgent need to challenge traditional notions of femininity and motherhood. The novel thus emerges as a significant commentary on gender injustice, social exclusion, and the lived realities of women in patriarchal societies.

Index Terms—Patriarchy, Infertility, Barrenness, Female Oppression, Gender Discrimination, Motherhood, Perumal Murugan, *One Part Woman*.

I. INTRODUCTION

Perumal Murugan is one of the most significant voices in contemporary Tamil literature. His novels are

deeply rooted in the rural landscape of Tamil Nadu and vividly capture the customs, traditions, and everyday lives of village communities. Murugan's distinctive literary style lies in his realistic portrayal of rural society, particularly the Kongu region, through the use of local dialect, folklore, and cultural practices. His works preserve the rustic essence of Tamil life while simultaneously exposing the social inequalities embedded within it.

One Part Woman is the English translation of Murugan's Tamil novel *Madhorubhagan* (2010), translated by Aniruddhan Vasudevan and published in 2014. While the Tamil version initially received moderate attention, the English translation brought the novel international acclaim as well as intense controversy. Critics accused the author of offending religious sentiments by depicting a traditional custom associated with the Ardhanareeswarar Temple festival at Tiruchengode. Despite the controversy, the novel remains an important literary exploration of gender, fertility, social norms, and individual agency in rural Tamil society.

The novel revolves around Kali and Ponna, a loving married couple who have remained childless for twelve years. Their inability to conceive becomes a source of constant humiliation and emotional suffering. Through their experiences, Murugan exposes the oppressive social structures that place the burden of infertility almost entirely upon women. The novel thus serves as a powerful critique of patriarchal values and societal expectations surrounding motherhood.

II. GENDER ROLES AND THE BURDEN OF CHILDLESSNESS

One of the central concerns of *One Part Woman* is the rigid gender roles imposed upon women in traditional Indian society. Women are expected to fulfill their roles as wives and mothers, and their social worth is often measured by their ability to bear children. Regardless of their personal qualities or contributions, a woman's identity remains incomplete if she fails to become a mother.

Ponna becomes the primary victim of such expectations. Although infertility may arise from either partner, society automatically assumes that the woman is responsible. As a result, Ponna faces constant ridicule, exclusion, and emotional distress. Murugan demonstrates how deeply patriarchal attitudes influence social perceptions, reducing a woman's value to her reproductive capacity.

The novel reveals that childlessness is not merely a personal issue but a social stigma. Ponna and Kali withdraw from family gatherings and community events to avoid the endless questions and insults directed at them. Their childlessness transforms them into social outsiders despite their otherwise harmonious marriage.

III. CULTURAL TRADITIONS AND WOMEN'S AGENCY

The narrative is set against the backdrop of the annual chariot festival at Tiruchengode, where an ancient custom allows childless women to engage in consensual sexual relations with unknown men on a particular night in the belief that conception through this act would be divinely sanctioned. This custom highlights the desperation of childless couples and the immense pressure exerted by society. At the same time, it raises important questions about women's agency, consent, and the extent to which cultural traditions perpetuate gender inequalities.

Kali's mother, Marayi, strongly advocates this solution for Kali and Ponna. Unable to bear the humiliation inflicted upon her family, she persuades Ponna to participate in the ritual. In her attempt to convince Kali, she argues: "We don't know whether the problem is with you or her. But we know there is a problem,

and there is a way out of it. Why don't we give it a try?" (95–96)

Marayi's words reveal how social pressure can compel individuals to accept practices that conflict with their personal values. Although Ponna eventually agrees, stating, "If you want me to go for the sake of this wretched child, I will" (108), her consent emerges not from personal desire but from years of social coercion. The tragic consequences of this decision ultimately destroy the couple's relationship and lead to Kali's death. Through this narrative, Murugan demonstrates the devastating impact of societal expectations on individual lives.

IV. SOCIAL DISCRIMINATION AGAINST PONNA

Throughout the novel, Ponna experiences various forms of discrimination because of her inability to conceive. Her exclusion from social and religious practices illustrates the extent to which infertility becomes associated with impurity and bad fortune.

One notable incident occurs during the puberty ceremony of a relative's daughter. As part of the ritual, married women are expected to perform auspicious ceremonies for the young girl. However, Ponna is prevented from participating: "You stay away." If a childless woman did the ritual, would it make the girl barren? Was she that inauspicious? (112) This moment demonstrates how infertility transforms Ponna into a symbol of misfortune in the eyes of the community. Her exclusion from a women's ritual reveals the deep-rooted prejudices that govern social interactions.

Similarly, when a neighbouring farmer experiences poor crop yields after Ponna assists in sowing seeds, villagers attribute the failure not to environmental conditions but to her infertility, "That barren woman ran up and down carrying seeds. How can you expect them to grow once she has touched them?" (115) Such incidents expose the irrational superstitions that reinforce discrimination against women who fail to conform to societal expectations.

V. REMEDIES, RITUALS, AND THE SEARCH FOR MOTHERHOOD

Driven by desperation, Kali and Ponna pursue numerous remedies and rituals in the hope of conceiving a child. Most of these efforts, however,

place a disproportionate burden on Ponna. Marayi constantly monitors Ponna's menstrual cycle and subjects her to various traditional treatments. Ponna consumes bitter herbal medicines and undergoes physically demanding rituals despite the absence of any scientific basis for their effectiveness.

Murugan writes:

"Ponna got used to eating different shoots and drinking different potions. Her tongue became numb to all the bitterness. The goal was to beget a child, and she was ready to do anything to attain the goal." (43–44)

Ponna's willingness to endure suffering reflects the immense psychological pressure imposed by society. Motherhood becomes not merely a desire but an obligation that demands sacrifice. Her devotion extends to dangerous religious practices. She attempts the perilous ritual of circling the *maladikkal* or barren rock, believing that divine intervention might bless her with a child. The ritual is so dangerous that lives have been lost attempting it, yet Ponna remains willing to risk her own life for motherhood.

VI. PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF SOCIAL PRESSURE

The constant humiliation endured by Ponna leaves deep emotional scars. People repeatedly remind her that she has no child to inherit her property or carry on the family lineage.

An elderly woman comments: "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 dog will claim later." (63) Likewise, casual remarks from neighbours often trigger painful confrontations. When a neighbour jokingly asks whether Ponna was delayed by getting her daughters ready, Ponna responds with anger, exposing her frustration with the constant reminders of her childlessness.

These outbursts reveal not only her emotional suffering but also her resistance to social oppression. Rather than silently accepting humiliation, Ponna challenges those who judge her, asserting her dignity against a society determined to marginalize her.

VII. PATRIARCHY AND REPRODUCTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

The novel illustrates how patriarchal societies place reproductive responsibility almost entirely upon women. Through the experiences of Ponna and Kali, the novel reveals the social, cultural, and psychological mechanisms that lead to the stigmatization of women when a couple remains childless. Several factors contribute to Ponna being blamed for the couple's infertility.

The village society depicted in the novel is deeply patriarchal, where men enjoy greater social authority while women are expected to fulfill domestic and reproductive roles. As a result, when Ponna and Kali remain childless after many years of marriage, it is Ponna who becomes the primary target of criticism and humiliation. Neighbours and relatives refer to her as "barren" and view her inability to conceive as a personal failure. Although infertility could originate from either partner, society never openly questions Kali's fertility. Instead, Ponna bears the emotional burden of the couple's childlessness.

A striking example occurs during social gatherings and family functions where Ponna is subjected to indirect insults and pity. Women around her discuss fertility remedies and childbirth, constantly reminding her of her perceived inadequacy. Her identity gradually becomes reduced to her inability to produce a child, illustrating how patriarchal values define a woman's worth through motherhood.

Traditional beliefs and superstitions further reinforce the assumption that childbearing is exclusively a woman's responsibility. Throughout the novel, Ponna is taken to various temples and rituals believed to enhance fertility. Family members insist on prayers, vows, offerings, and religious ceremonies as solutions to the problem. These practices are directed almost entirely at Ponna, suggesting that she alone must correct the perceived deficiency.

For instance, Ponna participates in numerous fertility rituals and visits sacred shrines in the hope of conceiving. Society believes that divine intervention can cure her childlessness, thereby strengthening the notion that the problem resides within her body. Such beliefs prevent any critical examination of the husband's role and make Ponna an easy scapegoat. The annual temple festival, which eventually becomes

central to the plot, emerges from these cultural beliefs surrounding fertility and divine blessing.

Another important factor contributing to Ponna's suffering is the lack of scientific knowledge regarding infertility. The rural community possesses little understanding of reproductive health and has no access to medical explanations that recognize infertility as a condition involving both partners. Consequently, social prejudice fills the gap left by ignorance.

At no point do family members seriously consider the possibility that Kali might also contribute to the couple's childlessness. Instead, the community relies on hearsay, folk wisdom, and superstition. Because infertility is not viewed as a shared biological issue, blame automatically falls on Ponna. The absence of medical awareness allows deeply rooted gender biases to flourish unchecked.

VIII. MURUGAN'S CRITIQUE OF GENDER INEQUALITY

Through Ponna's experiences, Murugan exposes the interconnected forces of patriarchy, superstition, and ignorance that marginalize women. The emotional pain she endures is not caused merely by childlessness but by the constant social judgment attached to it. The novel demonstrates how society measures a woman's value through her reproductive capacity while excusing men from similar scrutiny.

By highlighting Ponna's humiliation, isolation, and psychological distress, Murugan critiques the gender inequalities embedded within traditional social structures. He reveals that infertility is transformed from a private concern into a public stigma, disproportionately affecting women and reinforcing their subordinate position in society. Thus, *One Part Woman* becomes a powerful commentary on the patriarchal attitudes that continue to shape women's lives and identities.

IX. CONCLUSION

One Part Woman offers a profound exploration of gender discrimination, infertility, and social oppression in rural Tamil society. Through the experiences of Ponna and Kali, Perumal Murugan reveals how patriarchal values and cultural traditions place an unjust burden upon women, reducing their

worth to their reproductive capacity. Ponna's struggles with stigma, exclusion, and emotional suffering highlight the harsh realities faced by countless women whose identities are defined by societal expectations of motherhood.

By portraying these issues with remarkable sensitivity and realism, Murugan challenges deeply entrenched social norms and invites readers to reconsider prevailing attitudes toward gender, fertility, and women's agency. The novel remains a powerful critique of patriarchal society and a compelling testament to the resilience of women confronting social injustice.

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