# No Act Will Do: Precarious Manhood and The Limits of Restoration in Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman*

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***Abstract*—Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* (2010; trans. 2013) is usually read as the story of a childless couple worn down by a pronatalist village. This paper reads Kali, the husband, through Precarious Manhood Theory (PMT), the social-psychological account developed by Joseph Vandello and Jennifer Bosson, which holds that manhood is a status that must be earned, can be lost, and is restored through public action. The novel confirms the first two propositions with unusual precision. Fatherhood is the test, and the village is the examiner. It breaks the third. Every route to restoration the theory anticipates, from confrontation and withdrawal to drink, a second marriage and adoption, is either closed off or made useless, because no act can prove what the village wants proved. The family's remedy, the fourteenth night of the chariot festival, secures the lineage only by giving up Kali's claim to manhood. The paper argues that the novel stages a case PMT does not model: a manhood that is precarious and also beyond repair. It also argues that the novel unsettles the theory's central asymmetry, since in this lineage-bound world Ponna's womanhood is put at risk as surely as Kali's manhood.**

***Index Terms*—precarious manhood, masculinity, infertility, lineage, Perumal Murugan, Tamil fiction in translation**

## I. INTRODUCTION

Early in *One Part Woman*, Kali joins a group of young men teasing a clumsy dancer at the temple dance in the town square. He offers his own jibe, that the man "looks like a doll but moves like a corpse." The dancer turns on him with an obscene gesture and a single line: "Work is not about this. Work is about this" (Murugan 73). Nobody laughs, and Kali "shrank with shame" (73). The novel's narrator then explains what everyone in the crowd already knew. In this village "only the man who induced morning sickness in his wife in the very second month of marriage was a real man" (73). A childless husband's "work" is assumed to be faulty, and Kali's friends have long since given him a name for it: "the impotent one" (74).

The scene compresses the problem this paper takes up. Kali is a capable farmer, a former leader among the young men of his village, and by the novel's own account a devoted husband. None of these counts. Manhood here is granted by others, it is granted on a single condition, and it can be taken away in public by anyone who chooses to remind him that the condition has not been met. That is very close to the account of masculinity that Joseph Vandello, Jennifer Bosson and their colleagues have called precarious manhood: a status that is "hard won and easily lost" and that must be shown, again and again, through action (Vandello and Bosson 1).

The fit is close, but not complete, and the places where it gives way are the paper's subject. PMT predicts that a man whose status is threatened will act to win it back, usually through some public, risky or aggressive display. Murugan's novel tests that prediction against a threat no display can answer. My argument is that *One Part Woman* confirms PMT's account of how manhood is conferred and withdrawn, but refuses its account of how manhood is restored. Every act of restoration open to Kali is blocked, discredited in advance, or turned against him. The only remedy the community offers, Ponna's attendance on the fourteenth night of the Tiruchengode chariot festival, would save the lineage by spending the man.

Public discussion of the novel has been shaped largely by the controversy that followed it. The book became the target of organised protest and, eventually, of a case before the Madras High Court, decided in 2016. In her study of that trial, Anushmita Mohanty observes that "the episodes of mob violence and the subsequent ban on the book were in response to the mention of this ritual," the fourteenth-night custom at the centre of the plot (Mohanty). This paper sets the controversy aside and turns to Kali. His suffering is plain enough. What needs explaining is its logic: why the village's verdict carries such force, and why he cannot simply act his way out of it. A status-based reading lets us ask those questions directly.

The paper proceeds in five steps. Section 2 sets out PMT and the adjustments needed to carry it into a Tamil agrarian setting. Section 3 shows how fatherhood works as the conferring test. Section 4 follows Kali's attempts at restoration and the reasons each one fails. Section 5 reads the festival as the point where lineage and manhood come apart. Section 6 turns to Ponna and to the theory's claim that womanhood, unlike manhood, is secure. All quotations are from Aniruddhan Vasudevan's 2013 English translation, cited by the pagination of the electronic edition used.

## II. PRECARIOUS MANHOOD THEORY AND THE TERMS OF ITS TRAVEL

PMT rests on three claims. Manhood is an achieved status rather than an ascribed one; once achieved it remains tenuous and can be lost; and because it is confirmed by others, it requires public proof (Vandello and Bosson 1-2). The theory's founding study puts the contrast with womanhood sharply. Manhood, "in contrast to womanhood, is seen as a precarious state requiring continual social proof and validation" (Vandello et al. 1325). The authors draw here on David Gilmore's anthropological survey, which found that across very different societies "real manhood" is "a precarious or artificial state that boys must win against powerful odds" (qtd. in Vandello et al. 1326).

Two further propositions matter for a reading of Murugan. The first concerns restoration. Because manhood can be lost, men who feel it slipping will act to win it back, and the most effective acts are "public and exclusive," risky, and hard to fake (Vandello et al. 1327). Physical aggression is the theory's privileged example, but the authors list others, among them "drinking heavily," "bragging about their sexual exploits," and "fathering many children" (1327). They also note a second, quieter response: men "will avoid situations or activities that put their manhood status at risk" (Vandello and Bosson 5). The second proposition concerns audience. Precarious manhood is "a fundamentally public phenomenon," and threats are expected to be most troubling "in front of other men" (Vandello et al. 1337).

One of the original studies bears directly on this novel. Participants were asked to choose an image that captured the character of an adult who had learned he or she could not have children. They were far more likely to choose a picture of a child for the infertile man than for the infertile woman (Vandello et al. 1331). The authors concluded that "men who cannot produce children are no longer viewed as real men, whereas women who cannot produce children may be considered flawed but nonetheless real women" (1335). The theory, in other words, already names Kali's situation. What it does not say is what such a man can do about it.

The theory also has limits that a literary reading must respect. Its evidence comes largely from experiments with American undergraduates, a population the authors themselves describe as "young, predominantly White, middle-class, Westernized" (Vandello et al. 1336). It treats manhood as an individual's status, measured one man at a time. Murugan's village near Tiruchengode, by contrast, is organised around the Gounder household, its land, and its line of descent, and a man's standing there is inseparable from his caste and his lineage. The anthropological concept of lineal masculinity supplies what PMT lacks here. Diane King and Linda Stone describe a masculinity that "flows through time, through males to successive generations," so that "only sons pass it on"; each man "builds on, maintains, or diminishes" what he has received (323). In Hindu South Asia, they add, this inheritance turns on "purity of descent" as well as "continuity through progeny" (330). Writing on rural Kerala, Caroline and Filippo Osella likewise count "the importance of generating children" among the themes that cut across South Indian masculinities (1). Their fieldwork is not Murugan's Tamil setting, and I use it only as regional context. Taken together, these accounts explain why a man in Kali's position is judged less as an individual who has failed a test than

as a broken link in a line. The authors anticipate part of this difficulty when they suggest that where ordinary routes to status are "cut off," aggression may become "a particularly attractive option" (Vandello and Bosson 13). The novel presses further. It asks what happens when the route that is cut off is the only one that counts.

I therefore use PMT as an interpretive lens, not as a diagnostic instrument. The aim is not to measure Kali against laboratory findings but to see what the theory's terms (test, threat, audience, restoration) reveal about the way the novel builds his crisis, and where those terms stop working.

## III. FATHERHOOD AS THE TEST, THE VILLAGE AS EXAMINER

The novel is careful to show that Kali once had what PMT would call secure standing. Before his marriage "you could find Kali amidst any group of young men just hanging about town. He was also their leader in some ways" (Murugan 71). He is a skilled dancer, he roams the hills with Muthu, and as a youth could walk the narrow ledge around the barren rock at Tiruchengode "in two swift moves" (53). Murugan gives him, in short, every conventional credential of rural masculinity. The point of doing so becomes clear once the marriage fails to produce a child. None of these credentials' transfers. A single criterion overrides them all.

The village states that criterion openly. The "real man" is the one whose wife shows morning sickness in the second month (73), and the failure to conceive is read as a failure of the husband's "work." At a drinking session with Munia Nadar's arrack, a newly made father turns a remark about good liquor into a joke about the quality of the "water you send out," and "everyone glanced at Kali, even if it was for just a moment" (73). That glance is the novel's image of the examining audience. It is brief, collective, and decisive. Kali gradually stops joining his old friends (73-74). PMT's observation that manhood threats are sharpest before male peers (Vandello et al. 1337) is borne out almost scene for scene, and it matches Marcia Inhorn's description of masculinity in patrilineal Egypt as "a homosocial enactment performed before and evaluated by other men" (qtd. in King and Stone 332). The men who once followed him are the ones who now name him.

It is Kali's mother, though, who gives the most exact account of how the verdict works. "The wretched people around us do not see what a man has," she tells him. "They only see what he does not have. We have to hold our heads high in front of these people, my son" (83). The sentence could serve as a gloss on precarious manhood. Status is not built up from a man's possessions or abilities. It is judged by a single absence, and the judgement belongs to others. The same logic reaches into ritual life. Kali notes that "even for death ceremonies in the village, no one asked him to fetch water in the cremation ground" (99). A childless man is quietly removed from the roles through which men serve the community and are seen to serve it.

The test is not only social. It is also inherited. The family's curse stories place Kali's failure in a longer line. In one, a great-grandfather perjured himself before the Murugan shrine on the sixtieth step over a sack of castor seeds (24-25). In another, ancestors raped and killed a tribal girl, whose dying curse was that "even the male children shall grow up to be impotent and die young" (29). Kali takes the second story to heart. Praying at Pavatha's shrine he says, "I am the one who is born in this useless lineage" (38). Here the novel adds something PMT does not account for, though the anthropology of patriliny does. In patrilineal systems, King and Stone argue, "collective memory is masculinized" and handed down as a record of male achievement (328). Kali's line hands down the reverse: a remembered crime and a curse on the potency of its men. Kali's manhood is precarious not only because the village watches him but because his family's remembered past has already passed sentence. The verdict reaches him before any test he could take.

## IV. FAILED RESTORATIONS

If PMT is right, a man so publicly diminished should try to win his standing back. Kali does try. The novel gives him most of the responses the theory lists, and it shows each one failing for a reason that lies in the nature of the test itself.

### 4.1 Confrontation

The first and most successful attempt is a confrontation. When the village's young men decide that Kali is "a useless sissy" and place bets on seducing Ponna, their ringleader Karuppannan starts calling at

the house and trailing her in the fields (89). Kali meets him in public and answers innuendo with harder innuendo, about Karuppannan's married sister and his idle reputation with his own wife. "Though Kali had mixed a good deal of lies with the truth, the conviction with which he spoke rattled Karuppannan and chased him away from the square" (90). As a display, this is almost a textbook case: public, before an audience of men, aimed at a rival's sexual honour, and effective.

The harassment stops but the victory settles the wrong question. Karuppannan has questioned Kali's ability to keep his wife. Kali can answer that. What he cannot answer is the original charge, and the novel shows how that charge disables future confrontations before they begin. When Mandayan and Katthayi, a toddy-tapping couple working the palms on Kali's land, are driven away by a rival toddy seller's slander, Kali wants to intervene but holds back, because he knows what would be said: "Look at this! The impotent one has come to fight!" (154). He has already heard what the rival says of him, "This impotent man has brought her from somewhere. When his own wife is a dry land, what is he going to do with this new one?" (154). In PMT the restorative act is valuable because it is hard to fake (Vandello et al. 1327). Here the act is discredited in advance. The label turns any display of force into more evidence for the label. Years later, meeting the couple again and watching Mandayan's two small children, Kali asks himself, "What was the use of being so well built and strong enough to knock four men down in one blow?" (154). The body that would ordinarily carry proof of manhood has lost its value as evidence.

4.2 Withdrawal

The second response is withdrawal, the avoidance strategy PMT describes (Vandello and Bosson 5). Kali makes his barnyard the centre of his life. "The barnyard occupied his mind wherever he was. It was only there that he felt safe" (64). His brother-in-law Muthu sees the change clearly: the old Kali went to plays ten villages away and to films in town, but "now he confined himself to the barnyard" (111). In the experiments, threatened men wanted to hide their results (Vandello et al. 1335). Kali hides himself. Yet withdrawal does not protect his status. It only removes him from the places where status is awarded, and Muthu reads it, accurately, as a sign that Kali has stopped being the man he was (111, 121).

4.3 Second Marriage and Adoption

The village offers Kali two conventional exits, and he rejects both on the village's own terms. A second wife might solve the problem, but "if the second woman too could not get pregnant, his reputation as an impotent man would be engraved in stone" (74). Adoption is no better. "Would that stop people from talking? They'd only say, 'He calls himself the father to someone else's child'.... He would still be the impotent one" (195). Kali understands the test better than those who press these solutions on him. What the village requires is proof of his seed, and no substitute counts as proof.

4.4 Displaced Aggression

The darkest response comes after Ponna, asked whether she would go to the festival, answers that she will "if you want me to go for the sake of this wretched child" (95). Kali hears consent where she meant devotion, and the marriage changes. "He came to be possessed by a fury for revenge, a desire to pound her violently and tear her apart" (103). He drinks hard, forces her to drink with him, and takes her roughly when he wakes (104). Ponna's plea marks what the marriage has become: "Maama, please don't show your anger on me this way.... Just hit me. Get a club and beat me to pulp if you want. But please don't torture me like this" (104).

PMT names heavy drinking and sexual display as routes to restored status (Vandello et al. 1327), and it links threatened manhood to aggression. The novel gives us both, but relocates them. The drinking is solitary, the aggression private, and the audience absent. Nothing is restored, because nobody whose judgement matters can see it. What the theory treats as a public script for recovering status is here a private release that only damages the one relationship that sustained him.

The novel sets one figure against this pattern. Uncle Nallupayyan, unmarried and unconcerned with heirs, defeats the village's judgement by mocking it, as when he offers to grow back his pubic hair if the village's honour depends on it (94). Kali admires him and knows "he lacked his uncle's courage" (94). Nallupayyan shows that the test can be refused. He does not show that it can be passed, and even Kali comes to think that his uncle's freedom has its own poverty (201).

## V. LINEAGE AGAINST MANHOOD: THE FOURTEENTH DAY

The community's remedy arrives through Kali's mother. On the fourteenth day of the Tiruchengode chariot festival, when the deities return to the hill, "any consenting man and woman could have sex" (87), and childless women may conceive by a stranger who is understood, for that night, to be a god. "All men who set their foot in Tiruchengode on the fourteenth day are gods," she tells him. "Everything is in your hands now, my little god" (84). Kali's response is immediate and is phrased, tellingly, as a question about men in general: "Which man would say yes to such a thing?" (84). The night ends with his eyes bloodshot, "and they stayed so forever after that" (85).

The festival is the hinge of the paper's argument because it separates two things that the village usually treats as one. A child conceived on the fourteenth night would satisfy the lineage. The family would have an heir, the land an inheritor, and the curse stories an answer. But the child would not prove Kali's seed, which is precisely what the village's test demands. Muthu insists the remedy is a way to restore him: "We should be able to hold our heads high in front of others" (121). Kali sees the trap. If he refuses, he remains the impotent one. If he consents, he becomes the man who sent his wife. "Moreover, all of you will call me impotent and laugh at me. So, let it go" (122). The lineage can be repaired, but only by confirming the very charge it was meant to answer.

Murugan sharpens the irony through Kali's own past. The fourteenth night was where his sexual life began. In his first year he was too shy and hid under a bullock cart, and Muthu teased him about it on the way home. By the following year "Kali had gained enough experience" (88). The festival was, for him, an informal rite of passage of exactly the kind Vandello and Bosson associate with earning manhood (3). Now the same night is offered as the instrument of his unmaking. His retort to Muthu's talk of gods exposes the double standard: "When you and I went, were we gods? All we wanted was to find some decent-looking women" (121).

Kali's objection is also, explicitly, a caste objection. If Ponna conceives by a man from an "untouchable" caste, he says, "I simply cannot touch her after that. I cannot even lift and hold the child" (122). PMT has no vocabulary for this. The manhood at stake here is bound to Gounder purity and to control over a wife's body as caste property, and the novel does not let Kali's suffering obscure that fact. King and Stone's account of Hindu patriliny makes the connection explicit. A wife's sexuality is guarded in such systems because otherwise, in words they cite from Lynn Bennett's work on Nepal, "the offspring of other men, from other lineages and even other castes, may be mistakenly incorporated" (qtd. in King and Stone 332). His precarity is real, but it is the precarity of a dominant-caste man whose standing depends partly on the exclusion of others.

In the end the decision is taken out of his hands. Muthu misleads Ponna about Kali's consent and resolves to keep the couple apart "until the task was done," reasoning that "Kali could be handled" (122-123). On the night itself he takes Kali drinking at a distant coconut grove and is "relieved to see Kali gulp down more of the toddy" (171). The men around Kali do not restore his manhood. They manage it, and they manage him.

The final scene completes the pattern. Kali walks back in the night, longing for Ponna, and finds her parents' house locked and the cart gone. "She has cheated you; she has cheated you," he murmurs; his topknot comes undone, and he shouts "You whore!" into an empty yard (202). He downs a full bottle of arrack, walks home, and kicks the dog that runs to greet him (203). Every element of PMT's restorative script is present: the threat, the anger, the aggressive display. Only the audience is missing. The topknot is worth noticing too. Earlier the village treated Nallupayyan's cut hair as a threat to its honour (93-94). Kali's comes loose with no one there to see. The novel leaves him on the ground of his own barnyard, looking up at the portia branches spread across the sky (203), a man performing the recovery of a status that is no longer recoverable.

## VI. THE ASYMMETRY TESTED: PONNA

PMT's central claim is comparative. Womanhood, its authors argue, is seen as following from biology and, once reached, as secure. A woman who breaks gender norms "may be punished or viewed negatively, but her very status as a woman is less likely to be challenged" (Vandello and Bosson 13). The infertility study seemed to confirm this: the childless woman was

judged flawed; the childless man was judged no longer a man (Vandello et al. 1335). *One Part Woman* does not support that asymmetry.

Ponna's status is examined as relentlessly as Kali's, and in some respects more harshly. At a puberty ceremony for a relative's daughter, she steps forward to join the aunts in a ritual against the evil eye and is pulled aside with "You stay away" (99). Her own thought registers what is at stake: "Was she that inauspicious?" (99). When a neighbour's groundnut crop fails, someone says, "That barren woman ran up and down carrying seeds. How do you expect them to grow once she has touched them?" (100), and the couple are dropped from the village's shared sowing (100-101). An old woman silences her in a quarrel over grazing goats with one phrase: "Why do you worry so much about an heirless property?" (195). The language is agricultural throughout, and Kali hears it applied to her too: "his own wife is a dry land" (154). This is the seed-and-soil idiom that Leela Dube, as King and Stone report, finds "almost all-over patrilineal India" (qtd. in King and Stone 331). These are not judgements of a flawed woman. They are judgements that she is a source of barrenness, a danger to other women's daughters and other men's fields.

More striking still, Ponna is the character who performs PMT's restorative script most fully. To walk around the barren rock on the hilltop is to risk a fall to one's death, and the place is notorious for it (49-52). Ponna does it anyway, after praying, "God, my father, please make sure I do not gain the reputation for being barren" (53). The act is public in its meaning, physically dangerous, and impossible to fake. In Vandello and colleagues' terms it is close to an ideal demonstration (1327). It is undertaken by a woman, in order to secure a woman's standing, and it fails exactly as Kali's attempts fail, because no act can produce the proof required.

The novel therefore suggests that what is precarious in this world is not manhood as such but fertility, and through fertility the standing of both partners in a marriage. The difference lies in what each is offered. Ponna, at least, is given a remedy, however coercive: the fourteenth night may make her a mother. Kali is given none, since the same remedy that might restore her confirms his failure. If there is an asymmetry in the novel, it runs against the one the theory predicts. Womanhood here can be restored at a cost. Manhood cannot be restored at all.

## VII. CONCLUSION

Read through Precarious Manhood Theory, *One Part Woman* does three things. It confirms, with considerable precision, the theory's account of how manhood is conferred and withdrawn. Fatherhood is the test, the village is the examiner, and the verdict is delivered in glances, nicknames and quiet exclusions before an audience of men. It then disconfirms the theory's account of restoration. Kali's confrontation succeeds only against a lesser charge; his withdrawal confirms what it was meant to escape; second marriage and adoption are useless as proof; and his aggression, once it turns private, proves nothing to anyone.

Finally, the novel unsettles the theory's asymmetry between the sexes. In a world organised around lineage, Ponna's womanhood is as exposed as Kali's manhood, and she alone is offered a way back.

The broader implication concerns how PMT travels. The theory imagines a man who can act. Its threats are answerable in principle, and its interest lies in the costly and sometimes violent forms the answer takes. Murugan imagines a man for whom the field of action has been closed by the content of the test itself, and by a family memory that has decided the matter in advance. In such a setting precarity becomes something closer to permanent loss. The festival, which might look from outside like a communal solution, is better understood as the point where the community chooses its line of descent over the man who was meant to carry it.

The argument has limits. It rests on one novel, read in translation, and it uses an experimental psychological theory as a heuristic rather than as evidence about real men. The caste dimension of Kali's objection, which this paper has only marked, would repay fuller treatment through scholarship on Tamil caste masculinities.

So would the novel's own counter-image of masculinity, offered by the priest on the hill, who tells Kali, "It is only when we give half of ourselves . . . to the woman that we can be good husbands" (31). The god of the title is half woman. The village's idea of a man has no room for that half, and Kali, who loves his wife more than his standing, is the one who pays for the difference.

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