



SINGLE ISSUE, MULTITUDE SUFFERING-TRAUMA AND PAIN - REFERENCE TO PERUMAL MURUGAN'S ONE PART WOMAN

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the suffering of a childless couple from multiple perspectives. The text chosen for analysis is one part woman by Perumal Murugan. This novel, an original Tamil rendition titled Madhorubaagan has been translated with mere perfection by Aniruddhan Vasudevan. The protagonists Kali and Ponna are two lives caught in agony and suffering because of their childless stature even after twelve years of marriage. The novel traces the lives of this couple knotted in passionate love but eventually torn apart by the societal accusations and obligations. The author beautifully weaves the emotional drama that draws its sustenance from typical striking flaws of a society. A striking story of two lives fallen apart because of no fault of theirs.

Key words: *Trauma, Religion and Ritual, Male Ego and Hypocrisy, Social stigmatisation.*

INTRODUCTION

What is Trauma?

The word “trauma” is used to describe experiences or situations that are emotionally painful and distressing, and that overwhelm people’s ability to cope, leaving them powerless. Trauma can also be explained as circumstances that are outside the realm of normal human experience. Unfortunately, this definition doesn’t always hold true. For some groups of people, trauma can occur frequently and become part of the common human experience.



Emotional and psychological trauma are painful encounters that occur as the result of extraordinarily stressful events which shatter one's sense of security, making them feel helpless in a dangerous world. Traumatic experiences often involve a threat to life or safety, but any situation that leaves one feeling overwhelmed and isolated, even if it doesn't involve physical harm. It's not the objective facts that determine whether an event is traumatic, but subjective emotional experience of the event that decides the intensity of suffering. (Much) of our so-called mental life is about the lives we are not living, the lives we are missing, the lives we could be leading but for some reason are not. What we fantasize about, what we long for, are the experiences, the things and the people that are absent. (Phillips 2012, pg.xi)

Children are never simply themselves, co-extensive with their own bodies, becoming alive to us when they turn in the womb, or with their first unaided breath. Their lives start long before birth, long before conception, and if they are aborted or miscarried or simply fail to materialize at all, they become ghosts within our lives. (Mantell 2003, p.228)

The above quotes spell out clearly the sense of suffering and isolation experienced by individuals who fail to accept life as it is and instead subject themselves to extensive trauma and guilt for what has failed to be theirs in life.

One Part Woman:

Any piece of writing in its course of storytelling highlights certain follies and stereotypes that exist in certain regions, religions, and communities. As a reader, we become better equipped to understand the psyche of the practises if the familiarity with that region is greater. This is typically what the Tamil writer Perumal Murugan has set out to do in his novel one part woman.

The novel taken for study brings to the fore a common theme of societal isolation and ridicule because of a couple's inability to bear a child. A survey on the mindset of many childless couples was summed up thus, 'It was a sense that what they described as their 'childlessness'—and their grief response to it—was misunderstood, criticized or unacknowledged. At times, they felt harshly judged by others in their social worlds, and they often spoke of a distressing and lonely sense of inauthenticity in their lives; a jarring disjuncture between the 'mask' they were required to wear socially and the hidden face of their painful feelings about not having had a child. Many invoked the popular metaphor of a 'biological clock running out', talked about their 'window of opportunity' for having a baby closing in terms of their natural fertility, and expressed a sense of anxious urgency about having a child while it was still possible for them biologically to do so. Almost all talked about how difficult it was to speak about this experience to others around them.'"



About the Novel

Perumal Murugan is a Tamil author, poet and Professor and the author of six books. The book in question *Mathorubhagan*, whose English translation is called *One Part Woman*, narrates the story of a childless couple and the impact of childlessness on Ponna and Kali, landless agricultural labourers. The book raises several issues about gender, patriarchy and masculinity - all of which converge in a worldview mandated by narrow social conventions, that describe a childless marriage as incomplete.

One Part Woman is a novel based on a possible ancient cultural practice among people living around Thiruchengode, a town in Erode district, Tamilnadu. According to historian Romila Thapar, it is the story of a childless couple with a strong desire of having a child, "depicted with admirable sensitivity, anguish and gentleness".

The novel is also acutely sensitive in its approach toward gender and sexuality and humane in its treatment of longing. While fundamentally an emotional work, driven by personal desires and losses, it also unsettles the reader with what it frankly reveals about simplistic ideas on progressiveness. The society in which the book is set in is permissive in ways that the urban middle-class in the same state at large is not, even though known markers of suppression, such as caste laws, hold sway. But, here as elsewhere, the true hindrances to happiness and progress come in much more personal forms.

Versatile, sensitive to history and conscious of his responsibilities as a writer, Murugan is the most accomplished of his generation of Tamil writers. Apart from his profound engagement with Kongunadu and its people, he is also a writer of great linguistic skill, being one of very few contemporary Tamil writers who have formally studied the language up to the post-graduate level.

Translated elegantly by Aniruddh Vasudevan, a professional Bharatanatyam dancer attending graduate school in the United States, *One Part Woman* is a rooted and passionate novel that, as the blurb says, "lays bare with unsparing clarity a relationship caught between the dictates of social convention and the tug of personal anxieties."

Religious parallel

The tradition of seeking impregnation by an anonymous male in the name of god seems to have died out decades ago. Kali and Ponna must have been among its last victim. The ancient practice was followed for centuries in not just India but also across many cultures. Due to lack of facilities like artificial insemination at those times, another man could impregnate a woman on strict conditions (like mandating that the act is not for pleasure and that he has to stop soon after impregnation, etc.,) . This was practiced in India too - but was only used in

rare cases where a child was mandatory to the wellbeing of the society (such as kings for instance) and he was impotent.

The practice was known as Niyoga... Here are the rules of Niyoga from Wikipedia...

1. The woman would agree to this only for the sake of rightfully having a child and not for pleasure.
2. The appointed man would do this for Dharma, considering it as his duty to help the woman bear a child and not for pleasure.
3. The child, thus born would be considered the child of the husband-wife and not that of the appointed man.
4. The appointed man would not seek any paternal relationship or attachment to this child in the future.
5. To avoid misuse, a man was allowed a maximum of three times in his lifetime to be appointed in such a way.
6. The act will be seen as that of Dharma and while doing so, the man and the wife will have only Dharma in their mind and not passion nor lust. The man will do it as a help to the woman in the name of God, whereas the woman will accept it only to bear the child for herself and her husband.

The ancient text of Mahabharata had a mention of Niyoga which is a tradition that was practised in the 18th century. No recent references to the same have been found anywhere.

The geographical positioning of the novel has as its key town the familiar villages around Erode District. There are many idols on the Thiruchengodu hill, each one capable of giving a specific boon. One of them is the Ardhanareeswarar, an idol of Shiva who has given the left part of his body to his consort, Parvathi. It is said that this is the only place where Shiva is sacralised in this mythical form. The author was intrigued on encountering several men in the region past the age of 50 who were called Ardhanari (Half-woman) or Sami Pillai (God-given child). On enquiring he found out that till as recently as 50 years ago, on an evening of the annual chariot festival in the temple of Ardhanareeswara,, childless women would come alone to the area alive with festival revelries. Each woman was free to couple with a male stranger of her choice, who was considered an incarnation of god. If the woman got pregnant, the child was considered a gift from god and accepted as such by the family, including her husband.

As a farming community, the Gounders(a major community in the region) tend to be unsettled by childlessness, by the lack of male heirs for the family property. In the Gounders' worldview, the hard work put in by a Gounder male in his adult life is meaningless if there is no son to inherit the fruit of his labour. Thus, childlessness is brutally stigmatised in the Gounder community.

In Murugan's *One Part Woman*, Kali and Ponna, a couple madly in love with each other, remain childless for more than 12 years after marriage. During those 12 years, in the period immediately preceding the country's independence, they have run the gamut of prayers to various deities, vows, and penances, but to no avail. Kali's mother tells him that his family is cursed by Devatha, a ferocious female deity in the jungle, for a past crime against a young girl, and that the males in his family are doomed to remain childless; if a child is born to them, it will be short-lived. Kali and Ponna offer votive sacrifice at the altar of Devatha and climb the *varadikkal*, barren woman's rock, on the hill of Thiruchengodu, but these efforts do not bear fruit. Meanwhile, both endure, in their own way, an endless stream of taunts and insinuations from everyone around them, including strangers hitching a ride with them to the temple. In this scenario, Ponna's family—her mother and brother—as well as Kali's old mother, conspire to send Ponna alone to the festival to receive the blessing of a child from an anonymous Sami. *Mathorubagan* is the harrowing account of how a community's pathological obsession tears a loving couple apart and destroys their marriage.

It is a curious paradox that even as progressive Indians would like to abolish the caste system, they have little or no understanding of the lived reality of specific caste groups in their traditional homelands. Even as these communities are stalked and often dispossessed by the forces of modernisation, they remain hostage to the ways of the past that have sustained them for centuries. Will they ever be able to enter a secular future? Perumal Murugan has at least shown us a glimpse of what our collective struggle may be about.

The novel begins with the male protagonist Kali saying

‘He never could resist the desire to possess what attracted him’(pg1) implying whether it was the flower in the Portia tree or his fondness for his best friend Muthu’s sister Ponna ,the female protagonist.

The entire novel is woven around the eighteen-day festival in Karattur and its significance in the lives of the main characters. At every juncture, she is reminded of her childlessness which evokes a deep sense of frustration.

‘‘She must have been thinking about how the tree had grown so lush and abundant in twelve years while not even a worm had crawled in her womb. Every wretched thing reminded her of that lack’’{pg8}

Kali's mother conveys to him the decision to send Ponna to the eighteenth day festival to beget a godchild. (pg96)



“all men are gods on this day of the festival.it is god who is giving this.it is not a problem if we keep our mind on god.”

“At the peak of the celebration all rules were relaxed, that night bore witness to that. Any consenting man and woman could have sex. Bodies would lie casually intertwined, darkness cast a mask on every face, It is in such revelry that primal being in man surfaces”(pg98)

Patriarchy

It is absurd that whenever a couple face the fire for being childless, the man is recommended for a second marriage, almost naturally throwing the blame on the woman. Here too there is constant pressure on Kali to find another woman to continue the progeny.

“For seven years now, there had been a talk of a second marriage-both openly and secretly”(pg10)

“That is just how some cows are. No matter what you do, they never get pregnant. Just quietly change the cow.”(pg10) is what is suggested to Kali.

Psychological patriarchy is the dynamic between those qualities deemed “masculine” and “feminine” in which half of our human traits are exalted while the other half is devalued. Both men and women participate in this tortured value system. Psychological patriarchy is a “dance of contempt,” a perverse form of connection that replaces true intimacy with complex, covert layers of dominance and submission, collusion and manipulation. It is the unacknowledged paradigm of relationships that has suffused Western civilization generation after generation, deforming both sexes, and destroying the passionate bond between them. By highlighting psychological patriarchy, we see that everyone is implicated and we are freed from the misperception that men are the enemy. To end patriarchy we must challenge both its psychological and its concrete manifestations in daily life. There are folks who are able to critique patriarchy but unable to act in an antipatriarchal manner. To end male pain, to respond effectively to male crisis, we have to name the problem. We have to both acknowledge that the problem is patriarchy and work to end patriarchy. Terrence Real offers this valuable insight: “The reclamation of wholeness is a process even more fraught for men than it has been for women, more difficult and more profoundly threatening to the culture at large.” If men are to reclaim the essential goodness of male being, if they are to regain the space of openheartedness and emotional expressiveness that is the foundation of well-being, we must envision alternatives to patriarchal masculinity. We must all change.(understanding Patriarchy by Bell Hook)

Whenever Ponna grieved her state, her husband was there to pep her up with consolation.

Maama, won't I ever get pregnant?

Why not dear? you are only twenty-eight now...women are giving birth right till they are forty and forty five. we are not that old(pg14)

Psychological trauma:

There are various psychological and psychosomatic effects, and especially women are affected. The most frequently mentioned effects of childlessness are distress, raised depression and anxiety levels, lowered self-esteem, feelings of blame and guilt, somatic complaints, and reduced sexual interest.

In her article on `Infertility and Human Sexuality` writer A. Pacheco Palha, MD, PhD Full Professor of Psychiatry (retired), Oporto Faculty of Medicine ,talks about the psychological condition of childless women. . In some African tribes, the emphasis on fertility was demonstrated by the strategies used by the couple: if the husband was impotent, the woman was encouraged to have sexual relationships with relatives and friends until she became pregnant; if the woman did not get pregnant, there was someone who had children in their name. In ancient Hebrew culture, the man was allowed to divorce if his wife was sterile and to swap her for another woman when the first one was older. In Mozambique, even today, infertile women of the Macua ethnic group suffer various consequences for their infertility, one of the most important being their exclusion from some traditional ceremonies and social activities. Most of them commit adultery with the hope of getting pregnant .

Ancient people believed that the fertility of the soil and of all species was a single phenomenon determined by divine will. Eternal fertility represented hope. The image of death symbolized infertility.

This is reflected when the author relies greatly on religious rituals to overcome physiological barrenness. The many temple visits, the extensive religious procedures that inflicts fear guilt and anxiety in the protagonists.

It is a belief that because a young tribal girl was molested and murdered by a group of four young cowherds roaming in the forest, the residing goddess Devatha seeks vengeance on the lineage of these four boys rendering them impotent or even if bestowed with a child, its life would be short-lived. To appease the anger of this Devatha, the yearning couple make offerings `of new clothes and pray to her`. `Gods cannot be angry with people for too long` is what the grandmother says.

`Kali visited the shrine whenever he was on the hillside...He felt the curse of the tribal girl would have been lifted after his diligent efforts at appeasing her

anger..Ponna too was full of hope after praying to Devatha. `God please fill my womb at least this month` (37)

-What is there to think about? This is God's work. You are going to be with whoever appears as god for you.... Ponna, this is a tradition that has been going on for ages. Don't worry about anything, just think of God (pg 136)

The mother in law convinces her to venture forth into the festival and be appeased by her god.

Social stigma

The novel also paints a vivid picture of the life in an Indian village, social hierarchy set by the caste system, and the beliefs/customs of the people in the course of the novel. The novel questions the place and role of women in Indian society. For a society, that purports to value the equality of man and woman - worshipping a deity such as Madhorubagan who is one half woman, it is indeed surprising that Indian women are valued, not for who they are, but for their ability to attain motherhood, and their commitment to the family unit. Madhorubagan, shines a bright light into this hypocrisy, with unassuming, simple prose.

Madhorubagan, documents the rigid caste based stratification in Indian society that is most visible in Indian villages. Tamil literary scene is relatively young. Barring a few exceptions, first generation of Tamil novelists mostly wrote about the life of an educated, middle class, and mostly Brahmin life. In the last decade, we are witnessing powerful novels that portray the lives of those who live on the margins of the Tamil society - Kallars, Barathavas, and Dalits. This is a welcome change, particularly because these writers write not as representatives of their caste or community; but raise questions the values of the community at large based on an egalitarian outlook. Madhorubagan is a worthy addition to this tradition.

Kali and Ponnayi are a childless couple living in a society where the taunts, insults and innuendos are free flowing. Help and advice comes in many forms to them, some well-intentioned, some plain sadistic. Ponna is made to drink bitter infusions made with neem leaves that are handed to her by an 'auspicious' widow. She has men making not-so-subtle suggestions offering their services. She does a Fear Factor level walk on a dangerous rock near a temple to bribe the gods. She is deemed unfit for motherhood because she found the stink of a baby's faeces repulsive. Surprisingly, she isn't the only one to be 'blamed' here. Though Kali is constantly under the pressure to take a second wife, he is also equally taunted for his 'impotence'. He has everyone from cousins to random neighbours hoping to dip their fingers into his heirless property after his death. More than his love for Ponna, it is the fear of confirming this impotence that doesn't allow him to marry again. After all, it is his ancestors

who raped a tribal girl and incurred her curse. It is a difficult life being childless in such a society in that era.

It annoyed kali that though they might have a million things wrong with their own lives, people found great pleasure in poking and prodding other people's miseries(pg19)

In the 6th month after marriage Ponna's mother-in-law `She kept a watch on Ponna's menstrual cycle that month.as soon as it came to pass, she told Ponna to drink the juice of some shoots on the morning of the third day. she said forcefully, ``don't eat anything else even by mistake. the juice will be bitter'.`goal was to beget a child and she was ready to do anything to attain this goal(pg43)

Maladikkal-the risk of walking around the barren rock (pg 47)--the extent to which the couple are pushed because of the social stigma further reiterates the impact and influence of the community on the individual.

Dispute, Distrust, and Disappointment

`Will you listen to your mother and mine and go on the day when the gods retreat?

She murmured, 'If you want me to go for the sake of this wretched child. I will'. This was not the answer he had expected.

The patriarch in him could never believe that his wife would respond in this manner. It was a matter of honour that he was about to give up. From this moment, he was subjected to diverse disturbing thoughts that distanced him from his wife.

'He was now convinced that women were terrible creatures. No one even had an iota of hesitation anywhere. He on the other hand was hesitant to talk about the long gone days when he had been to the festival.'

Ironically, it made him happy on the inside whenever she got her periods on time and came crying to him. This way he was reassured that she was trustworthy as long as she was menstruating regularly.

It is heart wrenching to see the couple go through this suffering and each trying to console the other.She genuinely thought it was a way out of being insulted and ridiculed by everyone .Didn't he remember the humiliation they suffered at the puberty ceremony of Chellama's daughter?If a child is so important to establish oneself as a human being in this world, why shouldn't she dare to do what it takes to accomplish that?

The humiliation she had to suffer because of this one problem was endless. She could not even go to their own fields during the sowing season for fear that others would broach the topic.

Conclusion

The concluding chapters beautifully envisage the dilemma and the challenge faced by Ponna. From the moment, she boards the cart to the moment she alights it, the state of mind and the inner struggle is contrasted with the liberated spirit with which she walks the corridors of festivity eyeing every man to identify her god.

On the eighteenth day of the chariot festival when Ponna is taken to partake in the festivity, initially her mother accompanies her, buys her flowers glass bangles and other Knick knacks. At one point, when Ponna is engrossed admiring the colourfully bedecked chariot, her mother disappears in the background.

“In that one unknown moment, when her eyes were lost in the spectacle of things, everything known to her must have taken leave of her”. (pg201)

The realistic manner in which she drops layers after layers of her old self, letting bare her true inner deeply hidden desires and longings.

‘She was overcome with a huge sense of relief...once her fear abated, she saw everything with fresh eyes’. (pg202)

Thus far entangled in the milieu of social stigma and shame, Ponna now emerges as a liberated woman with no inhibition or uncertainty” without jumping to a decision immediately she savoured the happiness of simply having options`. (pg203) There is always a wonder in the reader as we follow Ponna in her pursuits. The naïve short tempered woman who overreacted to comments and complaints, was here now at the festival, very receptive to the challenge, open to this new revolutionary concept of `seeking her god `who would unleash the magic of maternity within her. She was firm in her head and believed that `she had done enough walking towards the known and the familiar. At least on this one night, she wanted to make full use of the opportunity to walk towards the new and the unknown’. Is it a sense of deep desperation or utter frustration? That this woman, this chaste and committed wife of kali after twelve years of humiliation ridicule and disillusionment finally surrendered to this divine derivative of the `god `who would liberate her and empower her life status. ‘come to me with a form I like` she kept praying...she was thirsty. Was it her mind’s thirst that was peeping out through her tongue.



Is Ponna's search for her god devotion, innocence, stupidity, or sheer desperation? Does she manage to look beyond the face of her husband, look beyond her fears, look beyond society's taunts.

The juncture where she feels an instant connect with the man who gestures to her has her overcome with shyness. 'This is how I expected you to be, god' she thought. Almost in a state of trance, 'He is my god, my job is to go where he takes me' was all she could think. 'Like a rain soaked chicken, she huddled in his warmth'.

The novel very strategically doesn't say beyond this about Ponna's pursuits probably because the inevitable is far too obvious to be spelt out. The novel ends with Kali getting home to find Ponna and her parents missing, only to realise the enormity of the situation. 'she has cheated you, she has cheated you'. He banged his head against the door. 'You whore, have you really gone. Despite my saying no?' 'You whore, you have cheated me, you will not be happy. You have cheated me you whore. At this point irrespective of the gender of the reader, our heart reaches out to kali and his state of being let down.

This novel is one that awakens multitudes of our thought process, making us wonder at the consequences and pursuits of a couple who have been driven to insanity and desperation, all because of societal condescension and collective ridicule. A painful journey walked through the 200odd pages of this novel. Ponna is the most well crafted female character by a male author. She isn't just a role in the book, she is a complete person. In the midst of fear, she recognises her moment of freedom and she seizes it. Ponna speaks for those who are permanently aggravated by what is presented as the female mind, yet are too worn down to react to every insinuation.

It is ironical how the writer who had projected the sufferings of his protagonists eventually was subjected to similar or worse sufferings because of the connivance of a few politically and religiously twisted brains. His book which was published in 2010, and translated a year later initially received rave reviews and sold many thousand copies. But unfortunately, a few years later, the book seemed to have fallen at the hands of a few who took offence by its contents, raised a hue and cry, had his books and effigy burnt, eventually compelling him to tender a public apology and a promise to withdraw his book from the market. His frustration and disappointment were so high that he took to the social media to announce the death of the writer Perumal Murugan and that only the teacher will live on thereafter.

As a critic points out, "when the court stood up for the rights of the writer as an individual entitled to his expertise as a creative person, it relied upon three arguments: first, that the book has won many prizes, and has gained critical acclaim; second, that Indian culture had always celebrated sexuality until the Victorian British suppressed it; and third, that read as a



whole, the book is not intended to titillate or eroticise, but instead, to make a broader point about how social pressures can impact individual lives.”

Literature, as a part of culture, revises and rewrites values in consonance with the changing times of society. Unfortunately, despite all the benefits of constitutional rights in our country and scientific and ideological advancement at global and national levels, writers still, in large number, occupy peripheral space in the socio cultural and political arena. The problem lies in the fixed mind set fuelled by the desire to hold on to age old beliefs and biases tearing the social fabric of our culture. Fiction, which is the most read and popular of all genres and Indian Fiction in English specifically for the growing love and usage of English, by shattering the stereotypes around writers lend a great service in providing space for the real writer to grow and utilize their full potentiality.

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