

Patriarchy in Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman*

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Abstract

This paper tries to examine how patriarchy oppresses female sexuality by viewing its very purpose to be motherhood in Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman*. The novel set in Tiruchengode, a rural village in Tamil Nadu, is a poignant tale of Kali and Ponna, a childless couple. They try every possible way to get pregnant, putting their marriage at stake. Since they fail to perform the duties assigned by the society, they are constantly criticized and are deemed to be unfit. Their inability to 'perform' this predetermined roles, puts their entire life under risk.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Oppress, Gender Role, Perform.

Feminism is a sociocultural political movement that demands equality, justice of the sexes. A key argument that feminism postulates is that gender roles are predetermined and preconceived and women are forced to fit in to these roles. Women are often portrayed as docile weak, innocent, seductive or as mere pro-creating machines and have much less power and rights as compared with their male counterparts. Religion, family, education, are all social and cultural 'structures' that fortify these 'fixed' roles.

Perumal Murugan is a prolific writer, who hails from Tamilnadu, and has gained immense acclaim for his wide array of works, which include poems, short stories and novels.

He writes primarily in Tamil, and some his works are translated to English. Some of his notable works are *Seasons Of Palm*, *One Part Woman*, *Poonachi*, *Pyre*, *The Goat Thief*.

One Part Woman, initially written in Tamil, was translated by Aniruddhan Vasudevn, is set in the backdrop of rural village in Tamil Nadu and tells the touching tale of Kali and Ponna a married couple, who are unable to conceive a child in their ten year of marriage. Ponna is dutiful, wife who obeys everything unquestioningly and Kali is utmost affectionate towards her. Ponna is often excluded and mocked by the community because she is 'barren' and Kali is under the pressure to re-marry. They leaves no stones unturned, and visits every big and small temples, and offers prayers.

The novel explores how patriarchy and customs related to patriarchy turn particularly against women, making them victims of 'gender essentialism'. Gender essentialists believe that sex, gender, follow a set of specific attributes, and are very necessary for their identity construction and to function in a society. Various feminists and activists have revolted against the very idea viewing gender. Judith Butler, a well-acknowledged theoretician completely rejects this 'essentialist' notion; she argues that these identities are socially constructed. In *Gender Trouble* she argues that "periodic practices based on performative theory of gender acts that disrupts the categories of the body, sex, gender and sexuality and occasion their subversive resignification and proliferation beyond the binary fame"(xxxix). Butler views that gender is performed through various set of acts, gender identity is the product of various actions and behavioural patterns, and that is 'performance'. Judith Butler also asserts that speech patterns, customs, dress codes, taboos, representations, gestures, behaviours all functions together to produce the essentialists claim. In *Gender Trouble*, she gives a concise definition for gender,

"Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of

substance, a natural sort of being. A political genealogy of gender ontology's of it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set in the various forces that police the social appearance of gender"(45).

Butler also claims that "performance pre-exist the performer", she also states that,

"Gender proves to be performative- that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense gender is always doing, though not doing by a subject might be said to pre exist the deed....There is no gender identity behind the expression of gender; the identity is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be the results"(33).

Kali and Ponna, despite being in a loving and satisfying marriage, are the victims of haunts and backlashes from friends, family and relatives for their incapability to conceive a child. In a patriarchal society, the sole essence of a woman lies in motherhood, and Ponna is also entrapped in this idea and she is constantly being questioned and asked to prove her role. Kali is under constant pressure from friends and relatives, to remarry, indicating that fault lies with Ponna. There is an instance in the novel when Chinnapa Gounder, a fellow village mate, whom kali decides to sell a cow, since it cannot yield a calf, 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" (*One Part Woman*, 14),

implying that the 'cow' being Ponna and indirectly asks Kali to remarry.

On the other hand, Ponna is ostracized from the society and is tagged as 'barren' and is asked to 'stay way' from function as she brings bad luck. Ponna is constantly taunted by neighbours and relatives for her inability to conceive a child, when Kadhiravel's son, came to stay at Ponna's residence and injures himself, his mother screams at Ponna "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?"(15).

Ponna and Kali offers prayers and takes part in various rituals in order to get pregnant, Ponna even consumes bitter medicines, suggested by her mother in law for the sake of it. Kali and Ponna sacrifice a goat, lit lamp and walks around the rock, gambling her life. The constant pressure to get pregnant from her family and mother in law make Ponna to participate in the fourteen day chariot festival at Ardhanareeswara Temple, where the rules are 'broken' or 'relaxed' and consensual union between men and women are sanctioned. Kali completely distraught the idea, when he confronts Ponna and asks her opinion she says " if you want me to go for the sake of this wretched child, i will"(86). This reply astounds Kali, Ponna is pressured by the society to bear a child and is in the notion that Kali and Ponna will fail as a 'man' and 'woman' if they cannot pro create.

Their childlessness is also interlinked with their status, they belong to Gounder caste and their power is assessed by the number of sons. Ponna also goes through the pressure to bring an heir to inherit their property. There is an instance when Ponna and Pottupatti goes to fair and buys peanuts, 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 intensely explores the patriarchy deeply rooted in the system and how it is forced on individuals and how status, culture, religion, also helps to tighten these roles. Ponna's need to bear a child, puts their loving marriage at stake as Kali doesn't want her to participate in the Chariot festival and have intercourse with other man, whom he fears

might be an untouchable. If Ponna gets pregnant, it will question Kali's 'Masculinity' and his impotency. On the other hand, Ponna's 'Female essence' is often cross examined; she needs to get pregnant in order to prove her female essence and also to give an heir and thereby upholding their status and power. Gender identities are socially constructed and if not performed will be criticized severely. The novel question on how patriarchy oppresses female sexuality, by viewing its only purpose is to bear a child.

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