

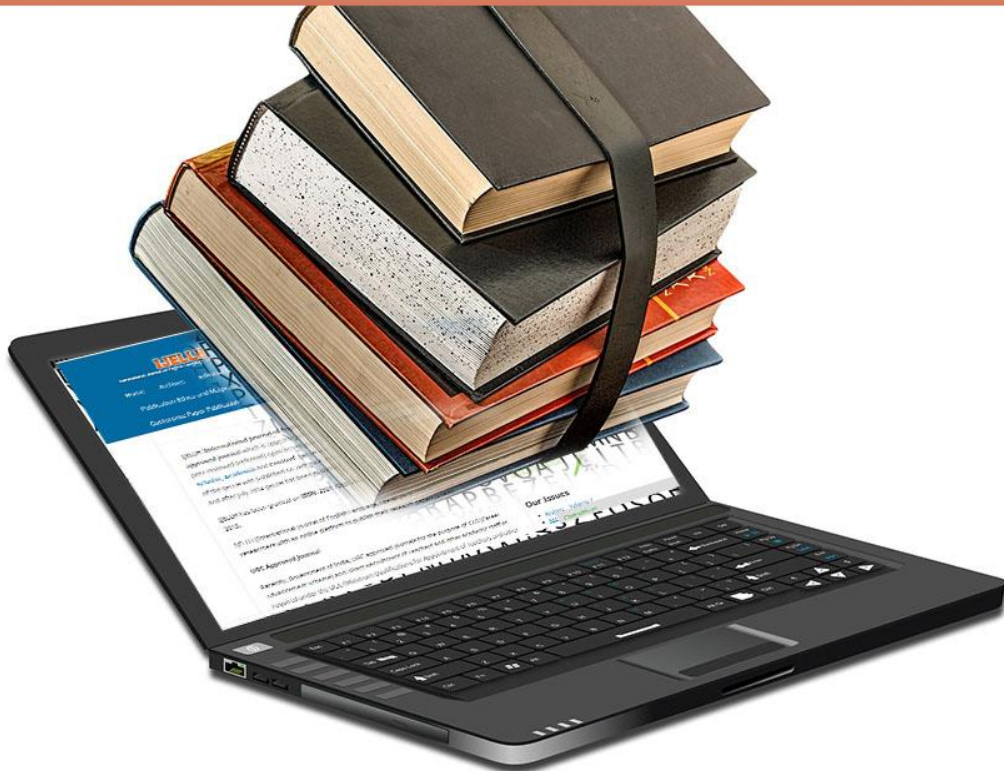
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Mirroring the Images; Representation of Ponna in a Patriarchal World in Perumal Murugan's
'One Part Woman'

Abstract

Feminism as a critical theory has emerged to question the dominant male supremacy and marginalization of women's position in the society. In its present stage it is an ideology (theory) as well as a political movement (Praxis). The construction of gender and socialization in India is hierarchical and men are placed above women in the social order. Gender roles are part of the cultural setup and are strictly followed leading to patriarchal subjugation of women. The essential way of seeing women, the essential use to which their images are put, are not changed. Women are depicted in a quite different way from men, not because the feminine is different from the masculine, but because the 'ideal' spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him. Religion is one of the most influential tools that have been used by the patriarchy to wreak violence on individuals who do not conform to the 'rules'.

Perumal Murugan is a well known Tamil writer and poet. Within the ambit of his much discussed 'One Part Woman' he presents the plight faced by female protagonist Ponna and her husband Kali who were became mere victims in the hands of patriarchal society for being

childless. The paper attempts to investigate how the patriarchal social setup and religious practices place crucial role in the destruction of the marriage bond between Ponna and Kali and how Ponna is presented in the novel on the backdrop of the patriarchal rural social milieu.

Key words: Patriarchy, religion, ethics, marriage.

Perumal Murugan is one of the finest modern writers in Tamil language. His novels are rooted in the western region of Tamil Nadu where he was born. Naturally, his works are soaked with the thoughts and ideas drawn from the rich cultural heritage of Tamil Nadu. He has upheld the ancient religious culture and the struggles of the marginalized Hindu peasants in his novels. His *One Part Woman* is a novel based on ancient and supposed cultural practices among Tamil Hindus. It is a story of a childless couple with a strong desire of having a child, depicted with sensitivity, anguish and gentleness. In this work of fiction Murugan has used actual names of places and communities. In the backdrop of the ancient rural culture of an interior south-Indian village Murugan sets the story of his novel *One Part Woman*. The plight of an Indian woman without a child is worse than a dog. Ponna after twelve years of marriage is not able to conceive, is a serious question for all her near and dear ones. A woman after marriage lives a life of tension and dilemma until a baby comes their way. The love between the Kali and Ponna is intense and they have a sexually satisfied life. The surrounding intruded their happy life. External forces and socially constructed norms are the reasons that created conflict between the couple. A want of a child to make a complete family life is a genuine desire for any normal couple. But things become an issue if that is the only reason left for a good life. A constant reminder to a woman that she cannot give birth to a baby can at times be quite exasperating. They have done all the pujas and penance to fulfill their only wish

to have a child. They have left no stone unturned to make their dream come true. The plight of Ponna is the plight of so many other women in India and across the world.

The only structure that fits all above the components on its frame is *patriarchy*. 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” (10) “That is just how some cows are. No matter what you do, they never get pregnant. Just quietly change the cow” (10) is what is suggested to Kali. From the ancient era the one who used to be in disadvantages is woman in different role as a mother, sister and daughter from the past decades. May be these all are the pre-assigned duties to a women to manage one of the big part of a society a home. Taking the advantages of our very own historical documents like *Manusmriti* written by sage Manu where he has described woman as slaves from beginning to the end of their life. (Sunitha Y. “*Fragrance of Feminism in Tara Patel’s Poems ‘Women’ and ‘Request’*”) Women have always been placed secondary to man, as a biotic machine of reproduction which is still continuing from the past itself. The claws of patriarchy are so gigantic and tough that the women are unable to realize their basic fundamental rights. In the name of religion, custom and tradition women are marginalized, subjugated and restricted from the other roles beside a homemaker or a mother, which is evident in Murugan’s depiction of Ponna.

In the *One Part Woman*, the protagonist made to believed that she is responsible for the childless marriage. The concept that it could be Kali who is responsible for not having the child is brush off by the family as well the society. The writer has a sly suggestion that Kali might be the reason behind the couple not having a child. The suggestion became obvious by letting Ponna go for the Temple Chariot festival where for that particular night women were allowed to conjugal with any men whom they see god like feeling in them. Thus, Ponna going to the temple festival was the only option left for them for since they live in the interior village

with no access to the modern world and advancement with medical science. They are not aware of IVF process to conceive, medical treatment was not expose to them. Temple festival can be equated with the process of buying a donor egg from someone else in medical term and it is not considered as betrayal like sleeping with another man as in the case of Ponna.

The opening and the closing lines of the novel has a special connection with Kali.

The Portia tree was dense with foliage. If you looked closely, you could see the yellow trumpet-like flowers with their flared mouths, and the drooping, fading red ones with their inviting smiles. Portia flowers always grow more beautiful as they fade. (1)

For, Kali there is a special connection with the huge Portia tree; it has been his constant companion. "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. He has seen the best days of his marriage as well his worse phases of his marriage. When the novel opens the tree has a sensuous relation with Kali, he finds everything so beautiful and lovely about the tree. But, when Ponna went to the temple festival and he felt that she had betrayed him, he was devastated and he could feel connected with the Portia tree.

The men dancing with sticks at the 'Tiruchengode' carnival who want to get physical with Ponna can never stick to her mind. She can go to any extremes to get her unfulfilled maternal instincts fulfilled. The unfulfilled desire haunts her and looks more significant and weightier than the desires that have already been fulfilled. It is the belief that on the 14th day of the festival in Tiruchengode celestial beings and even the three gods- Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva along with their consorts are considered to be staying on here (213).

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` (8). She has the firm belief in these superpowers and feels that it is a place of divine feats and her wish can only be achieved by mingling with the unknown faces in the crowd. Ponna gravitates towards Tiruchengode with her brother Muthu and her husband decides to come on the 14th day when the gods go back to the hills. They set on the journey with the religious fervour “They carried on as if the dust was nothing but holy ash smearing itself on them” (151). She has the conviction that she is heading towards spiritual kingdom. Where “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” (98). The place where Ponna has come is so crowded that it looks like an ocean of human faces. She is standing in midst of unfamiliar faces to get familiar with them. Ponna in her heart of hearts feels that men in the crowd are the incarnation of Brahma, Vishnu or Shiva- the three superpowers. She goes to the fair to put her loyalty, honour and chastity at stake. All of these traits of her personality are now going to become the relics of the past. She, in reality, falls prey to the conspiracy and irony of circumstances. In the crowd of gods, Ponna finds it very difficult to find the right god. She thinks that the man in the crowd who will start the act of pressing her right shoulder can be the right person for her. Ponna cannot decide whether to sacrifice her chastity to that stranger or not. She shows her disapproval as if she were little bit ready to be one with that person (219). The face of that person reminds her of the face the boy with whom she fell in love in her childhood. Ponna prays “Please appear with a new face, one I am not familiar with (221). She prays more fervently “Come to me with a form I like” (ibid). The religious realm that she enters, measures her devotional gestures through the lenses of patriarchy that pushes her individual self into the abyss of lust and mistrust. The crowded place provides Ponna with aesthetic pleasure. She is enchanted by theatrical performances and dancers who dance seductively and sensuously in rhythm to the drums (222). Oyilattam dancers

that are the group of twenty men attract her a lot for they dance vivaciously and show themselves to be the proven dancers. They dance with such magical acrobatics that Ponna feels like joining this band of dynamic dancers. "Looking at the dancers, she wondered if men were really such beautiful creatures." (ibid)

Feminism basically is a thought process where women as well as male counterpart of the society are determined the awareness among women and going against the prejudice set for them in the various aspect such as economy, society and politics. These preconceived notions debarred them from the equal participation as like their male counterpart in the society (Clare Chamber. "*Feminism, Liberalism and Marriage*") . The society which is highly categorized and based on the hierarchical concept for gender role it is quite challenging to bring equality. If we note the tune of contemporary women they are still jumbled to pick the priorities of their own lives. (Ghos Arpita. *Indian Feminism. indian Feminism. "A Debate on the incorporation of the 'alien' culture within the 'native' tradition"*). We are evidently nourished with images of Sitas, Savitris and Draupadis from the idyllic ages of our national epics, unquestionably written by men. These Sitas and Draupadis announces an unending custom of tolerant women whose real bravery is covered with the message of piety and service to their husbands, adoration of these potentials so that death is seen in some cases, as preferable. Their assets of showing sharp wit, intelligence, resourcefulness and affection have never been captive asleep for mimicry. Tradition has only emphasized women's self-immolation. This perverted concept of "pativrata" – the flawless one, is idealized through legends, myths, folklores, folksongs and reaffirmed through ceremonies of different kinds. Even educated, elite, urban women follow the practice devotedly. Here the notion of purity and virginity comes where we nurture the ideal womanism as a means of social construction. But the sexual ambiguity that is presented here in the form of Niyoga right at the center of the text is an ambivalent proclamation of the vaginal

freedom in the name of religion. It is in this context that the high culture patriarchal male dominant religious discourse had its disagreement with the local ideology existed once.

The man clad in dhoti with disheveled hair appears before Ponna. She feels that it is her “god”. He welcomes her in a ‘permanent grin’ but grin cannot guarantee her the permanent source of happiness for which she attends this carnival of religious significance. She knows that this fellow wants to build proximity with her. But she has never thought even in her wildest of dreams to be touched by somebody else other than Kali. It is something against her moral conscience. He takes her to the north chariot street to concretise and normalise libidinal liaisons with her. He also feeds her with local delicacies. He addresses her as ‘Selvi’ and serves her food with his own hands that she gallops as if it were the divine food to bestow her with divine energy. She feels “He has given me a new name so that no one around her gets suspicious” (225). Her diffidence cannot last more and she reciprocates his advances. She utters religiously “He is my god. My job is to go where he takes me...Like a rain-soaked chicken, she huddled in his warmth” (ibid). The law of attraction comes full circle for this coy mistress. She thinks that the god would provide her with perennial delight and readily agrees to follow the divine act of fulfilling her maternal instincts.

The dualism presented through the unknown man who treats Ponna as Selvi and Kali who treats her as a priceless possession are equally on the opposite sides of masculine identity and patriarchal imagination. The question of ability places the focal point of the discussion. Ponna affirms that the new man whom she met during the fest have the ability to gift her a child of her choice, which shackles the vaginal slavery imposed by Kali, since their marriage. Even though it was in the name of tradition Ponna got a chance to revitalize her sexual freedom to experience her own feminine self and there by seeking a child from the god at Tiruchengode. The maternal instinct that she preserved for the past twelve years places a crucial role in self exploration among the crowd for a suitable god. Kali who is unbeknownst to this strong feeling

was infested with sexual complex rather than paternal instinct. “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”. In other words we have to point out that Kali is always well aware of his impotency, which causes his retaliation from remarriage and other relations. 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 was the failure of this strong belief made him renounces Ponna as a “Pativrata” to a status of a slut. 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. (230)

The novel closes by suggesting a deep wound in the marriage bond between Kali and Ponna. But in Ponna’s perspective we have enough evidence to prove her loyalty and dignity towards the sacred knot, that kali tied around her neck a symbol of marriage bond. 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”. (203) To Terrence Real: “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) The destruction of the patriarchal notion of masculinity and vaginal slavery makes the novel brilliant with the

character of Ponna, who found her god in an Unknown who is capable of gifting her with a child despite her literally impotent husband who made her a sex slave for twelve years by cleverly waving emotional bond around their relationship. As Foucault suggests “Religion thus can be construed as a patriarchy-infested, disciplinary institution that operates on the underside of the law. It reinforces and multiplies the asymmetry of power and undermines the limits that are traced around the law.” (Discipline and Punish: 222-23) and cross reading his words with the context of the novel, it is far more clear that even the new found freedom of Ponna is even a mirage that had been created in the myth of Patriarchy in the name of religion thus a cleverly manipulated hoax.

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