



Postcolonial Feminist Reading of Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* with its Resistance in the Context of Myth and Culture

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Abstract

With time and newer waves in feminism various new questions came in which not only added to the existing beliefs but also interrogated such conceptions as in their broader view of liberation, they almost limited the notions by excluding a certain community. The novel *One Part Woman* starts a conversation with its layered narrative and explores various factors which get involved in structuring a mass opinion towards a situation in the society. The ways in which myths keep on being summoned in the daily life of the inhabitants of the region and gradually take a part in shaping the decisions both private and public is also quite interesting. Hence, this paper will look into these notions in a multidimensional way as in the story the concepts of patriarchy, folktales, masculinity and most importantly childlessness along with resistances will be read with a critical note which aims for a more inclusive approach.

Keywords – postcolonial feminism, myth, caste, childlessness, resistance.

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Postcolonial feminism or 'Third World feminism' being a field exploring the women's lives belonging to previously colonized countries in context of oppression and marginalisation in multi-dimensional notions including socio-economic, socio-political, class differences, gender, sexualities, etc. presents the inferior treatment of these women in a way much broader and critical than that of the mainstream western feminist theories. In its intervention it provides a view regarding the gradual movements in the fields of both postcolonial and feminist studies bringing forth something more than homogenized and universalized view as Sara Mills says:

"Feminist post-colonial theorists are not a unified group. However, they can be said to be those of feminist who have reacted against the lack of address to gender issues in mainstream post-colonial theory and also against the universalizing tendencies within Western feminist thought." (Mills 24)

Thus, in a way it counters the one-dimensional representation of Third World women to be docile, submissive, mum pawns unable to represent due to years of patriarchal conditioning thus without any recognition and the assumptions of similar situation for every woman which could again clearly be presented in the words of Chandra Talpade Mohanty, when talking about the Western feminist writing about the Third World women that:

"discursively colonizes the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world, thereby producing/re-presenting a composite, singular "third world woman"[,] an image which appears arbitrarily constructed, but nevertheless carries with it the authorizing signature of Western humanist discourse."(Mohanty 19)

Hence, this paper intends to study the depiction of the women in a very culture bound caste ridden society in South India during the period of colonial rule exploring their desires, their



dealings with the societal norms and orthodox rules, also studying the various layers of patriarchy. *One Part Woman* is one of the finest examples examining the notion of patriarchy also presenting a wholesome view of the society including almost all its realities, like women actively being a part of patriarchy through oppression and exploitation, hence questioning the idealist thought of solidarity amongst all women in the society. And like this is for once in South Asian storytelling, childlessness is presented more than just a women's plight but again Murugan handles this progressive masculinity with a welcome departure. This paper also focuses on analysing the several forms of resistance developed in the novel through the characters along with the incorporations of the religiosity, the mythical fervour and the impact of folklore in the ethnic grounds throughout the narrative.

One Part Woman (2013), the famous novel that stirred up controversy and had led its author to declare- author Perumal Murugan has died- is actually the translated work of Aniruddhan Vasudevan from the original book in Tamil named '*Madhorubagan*' (2010). Allegations were raised against the author from then Hindu right-wingers and the Kongu Vellala community for depicting certain religious practises and the rituals around the Ardhanareeshwar temple festival in bad light. But keeping aside all the controversies the core story is actually a phenomenon which effectively reaches the heart of every reader. The novel is set in the colonial times around 1940s in the Tiruchengode town (the author's home town) in Tamil Nadu. The novel narrates the story of a couple belonging to the 'Gounder' caste (a lower caste group in South India) and revolves around the difficulties Kali and Ponna have to face for not being able to conceive even after twelve years of marriage. The novel fascinatingly brings forth the various social stigmas for which the couple gets humiliated and are almost pushed to the fringes of the society. The social, physical and psychological toils are very well depicted in the story. The author weaves the narrative around various aspects like the caste issues, societal expectations and intolerance, gender roles, familial relations, patriarchy, complexities of the 'simple' rural life and many more but mainly focuses on the relationship between society and cultural practices as well as rituals. The story is based upon the local chariot festival that gains its pace when the situations lead Ponna to opt the path of consensual sex, practised as a part of the rituals for childless women on the fourteenth day of the festival, when the Gods return to the hills, and the laws of marriage get relaxed.

The title, *One Part Woman*, instantly strikes the reader's mind with curiosity and very well serves its meaning as well as the story. As mentioned, it is literally the English translation of the Tamil title *Madhorubagan* meaning half-male and half- female God in the same body or



Ardhanareeshwar, but the English title hits well the lacking spot of the couple along with the desire of Ponna to become a mother and thus to become a complete woman. The story begins with Kali reminiscing the past memories of life at Ponna's father's house, filled with some sensuous moments between the couple but mostly with their struggle for begetting a child and absence of which led to all the bitter experiences. Even the dense Portia tree above, which was a symbol of their new life after marriage, had grown to produce so much that it pointed in his face making him remember his failure. Kali and Ponna, though not receiving any proper medical help, had tried everything possible from their side to produce a child. From trying bitter concoctions to praying to forest gods and temple gods in the locality, offering oil lamps lit from produce of the whole year, goats and roosters even *pongol* and trying out every traditional remedy and superstition advised, they left no stone unturned but nothing worked in their favour. Ponna even risked her life to walk around *Maladikkal* or the barren rock which was famous for blessing the woman with a child who performed the ritual but even after that too she bled that month nullifying all her hopes. Thus, they continued getting ridiculed by every person they passed by in the village. The societal pressure killed the wild spirit in Kali as he confined himself to his fieldwork, maintaining his barnyard and fetching the animals which partially satisfied him by providing him with a sense of accomplishment to face all the taunts he has to face for being, as the villagers called him, impotent. The growing taunts and gossips around filled them with guilt and pushed them aside from all social gatherings. Sometimes Uncle Nallayyan's words felt like fresh air and calmed down their tensions but the effect lasted only for a few moments, as the constant chatter and gossip about them overpowered Uncle's sensible and warm talks. After all this the main victim of the whole situation, Ponna feels restless as all her efforts proved to be fruitless and the constant fear of Kali's second marriage haunted her. A non-existent child almost ate up her identity and the only way for Ponna to hold her position both in her private as well as social life was to give birth to a child by any means possible. Thus, to stop all the mouths that spitted bad words for them and to make all the guilt and shame go away, Ponna gave into her mother-in-law's suggestion and her family's decision to send her to the fourteenth day of the chariot festival, which allows the willing women to have free sex with men who are considered 'gods' that night, to get laid down with an unknown man who would impregnate her and bless her with a son. She didn't restrain herself even after the constant objections from her husband and at last participated in the tradition which ultimately shattered Kali to pieces, as for him all the matters of loyalty and trust went away.

Indian women's status in the society gets majorly defined on the age-old traditional images abiding to the regional cultures influenced by the socio-political filters and differences on the





basis of class, caste, religions along with various expectations and rules for women that get moulded according to the orthodox social patterns fulfilling the patriarchal ideology. Analysing the influence of these beliefs on Ponna's life thereby criticizes the exclusivist perspectives propagated through some of the debates by the Western feminists for generalizing the experiences of different women from various regions and limiting them to a singular community. Such images present the kind of reality the women of these communities are forced to face and the control over them move them to a subaltern position and layered inferiority, in comparison to their male subordinates of the same community. The identity of an ideal Indian wife in the society gets constructed on the terms of her efficiency to fulfil the conditions her husband and the in-laws present, only being a beneficiary negating any kind of importance of her choice. Among one of these requirements is carrying on the family lineage or in other words child bearing efficiency. This novel points to several poignant issues and talks about them very subtly thus opening up the matter in certain layers. The novel curates a beautiful narrative that brings the double-faced society to forefront and shows how the careless and toxic gossip ruins a beautiful relationship. Every aspect which is talked about opens up another chapter to ponder upon, like the fake concerns of the Kali and Ponna's relatives and neighbours had the only purpose to find the chance to pounce upon the couple's property thus opening up the caste realities of the society. The set hierarchy places the Gounder caste to one of the lowest castes in Tamil society, and to keep the property within the family one has to have a male inheritor. Thus, for the property issues the relation between the close relatives and the couple gets strained. The dark humour in the story very well describes the cultural aspects of an Indian village life and presents the consequences and ridicule one has to face when one doesn't fit to the stereotypical standards of the society. The need to know each other's personal problems and the entertainment as well as the satisfaction found in that very well presents the sadistic face behind the mask as well as the frustrations which led to do so. The story talks about a society which is bound around traditional rituals and religious belief hence artfully capturing the cultural aspects and effects of the beliefs from all angles. A community which takes every step in the name of God and has fixed structural identity, to which every person almost needs to cater, gradually builds such an immense pressure on the protagonist couple that leads them to experience identity crisis and worthlessness. The story well captures the nuances of the blind beliefs and reveals the role of myth as both the cause and the answer to the problems in the couple's life. For instance the cause of the lack of offspring in the couple's life is said to be as the result of ancestral sins like – belonging to the lineage of the four Gounder men who brutally raped the tribal girl led to the wrath of the forest Goddess *Pavatha* or the case of stealing crops by Kali's grandfather or obtaining the land through deceitful ways – lead to the childlessness and thus to pacify the sins



of their forefathers and overcome the wrath of God, Kali and Ponna got bound in promising so many offerings and vow fulfilments that is reached the limit of torture and almost drained them of all other wills in life. Such oppressions in the community confined the women's self within boundaries and deprived them of individuality to such an extent that they remain as mere commodities, from being an object of desire to being a vessel for the continuity of a lineage. They are limited to various roles to support and fulfil the various norms of patriarchy. The kind of 'othering' the women have to face who lack in certain aspects is very much noticeable in the story, for instance the lack of help or assistance Kali's mother had to face, all the hard times she had to go through only for being a widow. Here again the progressive face of masculinity gets questioned as Kali's ideals present several fault points within them. In the beginning of the novel an Indian man being so sensitive and responsive towards his 'wife's' problem really felt like a fresh breeze but as the other aspects started getting unravelled his beliefs also starts to present certain gaps- he never wished for a second marriage not solely because he cared for Ponna but mainly for he feared that he might be the cause of the problem and even after a second marriage if he couldn't produce a child he certainly would be the one to blame and hence left Ponna to face the circumstances. Again, his possessiveness towards Ponna not only as partner but more as a commodity of his sole pleasure and hence later when Ponna decides to go against his will it hurt his male ego to an extent that he didn't wait even for Ponna's explanation hence opening up the realities of the male ego and a relationship with desire as he felt that every bit of her body was his and his alone. Thus, this progressive, softened version of masculinity is again nuanced.

Ponna when seen on these grounds is pushed way behind in the community where childlessness is unacceptable, she a woman from lower caste and then without a child is hence triply oppressed. Here the patriarchy plays an important role to put the blame of infertility towards women majorly. Thus, when Kali interrupts in this process of exploitation by negating the idea of a second marriage, the wrath turns to him too. Both Kali and Ponna are denied from participating in all sorts of agrarian rituals and communal ceremonies for the various social stigmas where even the touch of a barren woman is considered ominous. The power dynamics around gender roles in the society is also hinted at since the Tamil society though allows matrilineality, the power to be constricted in a woman's hands the presence of her children matter the most, thus the anxieties and mental pains of Ponna shown very well serves this purpose. The influence of patriarchy can be well noticed as it presents its gender biased views on the analysis of the rituals in the Tiruchengode festival, where the women who having the sole purpose of continuity of her husband's lineage participates in the rituals are tagged as prostitutes and the men who participate with sole purpose of fulfillment of sexual desires are labelled as



'gods'. Again, the violence inflicted by patriarchy upon the couple gets sanctioned in the name of religion and rituals. Murugan here presents an interesting interaction of thoughts between the devotee and the Almighty in the episode where Kali gets mesmerized with tribal androgynous God. He gets fascinated looking at the shrine and shares a philosophical view where he presents his jealousy in the state of the God, who can enjoy the pleasure of being unified all the time without the thoughts of progeny or reproduction. When Kali seems to be in the same state the reactions received are completely opposite. The author provides a wide view on the effects of the rituals to be an accumulation of a long process of preparation rather than a result of few frenzy moments. Ponna feels lack of mental clarity and undergoes a trance like state not only due to the atmosphere around her which gets enhanced with the rhythmic beating of the drums or the regular chants and the mesmerizing dance by the local men, but also due to the preparation from the last couple of months with constant chats of her family members. In this episode, the reference to female desire and sexual pleasure is quite interesting for it fiddles with the representation of the complex subjectivities of the oppressed. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak too notes the scarcity in the recognition of the impact of class and racial differences as she speaks on the objectification of "colonial benevolence" in viewing the Third World women by Western feminism. She comments in her essay "French Feminism in an International Frame" (1981, rep. 1987) regarding the perspectives of French feminism towards female sexual pleasure, though being controversial, might present an alternate reading of identities and notions of humanism. The occasional loosening of the strict cultural norms in the name of rituals is presented as an essential escapist mentality of a society rigidly controlled by tradition and proper behaviour. The writer also presents a beautiful flow and assimilation of ancient folk traditions into mainstream Hinduism presenting the strength of primal belief. For instance, Kali being more hopeful in praying to the tribal God than Madhorubangan, and the incorporation of a practice similar to something which is present in the epic Mahabharata with the name of *Niyoga* or levirate marriage. The story beautifully highlights the blind faith of people and the justification of everything in the name of God. The characters present a well-balanced view to the rituals and society. Ponna here represents the clan of members who readily get involved in the whole system in the name of tradition, Kali aptly captures the aspects of an Indian male psyche with certain hypocritical masculine views and has questioning outlook toward the rituals, the uncle here presents the rationalistic view and similarly every character curates an alluring novel that feels like fable based on the margins of the Tamil society but presenting an egalitarian outlook towards community. The methods or actions presented here as the forms of resistance emphasizes the importance of history and culture, emphasizing on the importance of regionality for a deeper view towards the problems of patriarchy. Starting with the image of a happy



marriage, even if constraints remain in their bond and which later intensifies with the interference of the outside forces in a such a private and personal bond, the idea in a whole pack's resistance in this place of humour and joy to face of society which never expects it in the first place. The challenges it presents when dealing with an aspect that is so sensitive and sacred to the people in general i.e., the religion, as the novel where the divine figure core to the story the figure and belief behind 'Ardhanareshwar' itself challenges the interpretations, scriptures and rules that people follow in name of faith and belief. Even the fact of speaking up regarding this ancient ritual is a force in its own. The actions functioning through the characters, mainly the female protagonist, really hold up the practices of everyday resistance. As Catherine Kohler Riessman vividly examines this area in her paper "Stigma and Everyday Resistance Practices: Childless Women in South India" as she explores women experiences and their ways to contest the stereotypical definition of a family, their habitual interactions, questioning their motives and if these actions can be theorised as a form of latent contestation in the lack of large-scale representation of the oppression in the name of norms and thus says:

"Western stereotypes and generalizations about Indian women are based on inadequate knowledge about class structure (India has a large middle class alongside a wealthy class and considerable poverty), regional context (women's status and opportunity for education vary markedly within India), and India's vibrant feminist organizations (working on health issues and violence against women, primarily). Although there continue to be severe constraints on women who remain unmarried or live in same-sex unions, power over women is certainly not absolute and hegemonic. Social change in postcolonial India has reconfigured family form for married women, and patterns are continuing to evolve with economic liberalization." (Riessman 112)

Set in a period when the several liberal ideals afore mentioned were a distanced dream in one hand shows the absence of any change regarding the stigmas attached to the gender role and the pressure that women face but on the other hand works as a signal for a kind of determination and persistence people need to move forward thus adding to the claim that "Women modify their reproductive lives as the need arises. Women grapple with their position as victims of a culturally constructed subordinate status at the same time as they search for creative ways to resist subordination" (Reissman 114). The several steps Ponna takes like acting up or speaking out though being a part of the everyday resistance practises here work to show the differences in the range of severity pointing to the significant cultural boundaries for not once she thinks Kali for having any problem. Hence, it highlighted the ignorance of the women of the communities for



understanding the politics and complexities regarding the orthodox norms and the years of social conditioning and serving the societal rules eventually contributed to the boundaries that limited them and further added to the stigmatization. Their actions in a dual role sustain and defy the cultural forms that try to bind them boundaries. Finally, Ponna's decision to go to the fourteenth day of the festival, a decision though taken through a misunderstanding and influence, is a choice of her own something through which she wants to act up to end the miseries as noted by Linda Gordon:

“We must be clear that concepts like agency and resistance do not mean victory; nor should they work to soften the ugly and painful history of victimization. Indeed, many forms of resistance are probably poor choices, although one might argue that the impulse to do something, however ineffective, [is] usually preferable to resignation.” (Gordon 142)

This beautiful tragic story is significantly powerful that points to several poignant issues and talks about them very subtly thus opening up the matter in certain layers. The rituals here help to frame the historiography of the place by analysing the behavioural attitudes of the people around. The myths and rituals which are often considered non-cognitive provoke intellectual input. The rituals here provide valuable resources that lead to the development of new modes of thinking and dealing with representational politics. This novel in part leads to various domains of discussion in the field of postcolonial feminist studies by presenting the limitations in several feminist analyst discourses and raising the significance of the radical differences in the global, economic, cultural, political, ethical, historical factors characterised more than the extremes of wealth and poverty and points to the importance of the recognition of regional differences that present a matrix of notions towards a struggle for identity and choice in the words of Audre Lorde:

“The future of our earth may depend on the ability of all women to identify and develop new definitions of power and new patterns of relating across difference...The old patterns, no matter how cleverly rearranged to imitate progress, still condemn us to cosmetically altered repetitions of the same old exchanges, the same old guilt, hatred, recrimination, lamentation and suspicion.” (Lorde 123)



Notes

“Ardhanareeshwar” is translated as the composite form of Hindu god and goddess “Shiva” and “Parvati” denoting the ultimate divine power where the deity is seen to be half male and half female. (All foreign words translated by the author.)

“Pongal” is translated as a rice dish which can be both sweet and savoury but traditionally made by mixing rice with milk and sugar in South Indian Community which is often used as offerings in religious festivities. (All foreign words translated by the author.)

“Maladikkal” is translated as the divine barren rock referred in the text which is famous in the community as a belief for granting the wishes of women by fulfilling their dream to be pregnant. (All foreign words translated by the author.)

“Pavatha” is translated as the ferocious tribal female deity in the jungle referred in the text. (All foreign words translated by the author.)

“Niyoga” is a practice in ancient Indian tradition in which a woman, whose husband is incapable of fatherhood or has died, gets involved in the consensual act of sex with a revered man with the sole intent of begetting a child. (All foreign words translated by the author.)

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