

Contouring Culture against a Controversial Backdrop - An Insight into Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman*

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Abstract

Culture always refers to the ideas, customs, and social behaviour of a particular people or society. It represents the different ways of life of a particular group. There are many factors affecting culture. Culture has always been a mixture of the values and the attitudes that determines the life and life styles of either an individual or a group. Every individual is assessed or evaluated in the society based on these values and ideas. The groups of individuals communicate and interpret these values depending on the socio-behavioural factors. They transmit it to the next generation and when practiced by every generation, the culture gets accepted by the society and turns out to be an established culture. Many authors have delineated such culture in works – both subjective and objective. The present paper focuses on one such book by Perumal Murugan. The paper highlights the culture of a particular community, which has nurtured controversies against the backdrops of modesty and refinement.

KEYWORDS:Culture, Perumal Murugan, Maadhorubaagan, One Part Woman

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The values, beliefs, customs and rituals constitute the dynamism of the cultures of groups. There are many factors which affect the cultures of a society. As per the sources from the web, these cultures, “change with the change of time, development and progress of knowledge, influence of other cultural discoveries, globalisation etc. but still each society has its culture.” (<http://www.yourarticlelibrary.com/consumer-behaviour/indian-consumer-markets/culture-definition-influence-and-factors-affecting-culture/64174>)

Literature has always been a replication of reality. It has mirrored the situations of men of flesh and blood. Though fiction remains imaginary, the situations and the emotions displayed are intertwined in lives of people, in one way or the other. Many authors have delineated such culture in works – both subjective and objective. A source from the web advocates, “The customs, traditions, rites and rituals of the tribes find expression in different novels of India written by writers, some of whom belong to these communities.” (<http://www.tezu.ernet.in/casms/pro2.php>). On analyzing such novels, it is

evident that the primary focus of the authors is on issues of ethnicity and gender. The present paper focuses on one such novel by Perumal Murugan.

Murugan, a contemporary Tamil writer and poet, is a Professor of Tamil. Having authored six novels, four collections of short stories and four anthologies of poetry, his writings are profound with an appeal to the scents and flavours of the locales of the plots. His writings are highly impregnated with the culture of the state. His three books are translated into English. The translated works are *Seasons of the Palm*, *The Goat Thief* and *One Part Woman*. His *One Part Woman*, published in Tamil in 2010 as *Maadhorubaagan*, was translated into English by Aniruddhan Vsudevan and published in 2013.

The novel speaks about a childless couple of a particular community in Tamil Nadu. Kali and his wife Ponna perform every pooja and offer so many offerings to God. Though the couple is deeply in love with each other, they are in the hunt of a radical solution for their childlessness. Taunted by the jibes of their family and friends, they try every herb and every God. The story converges on the night of the chariot festival in the temple of Maadhorubaagan. The night of the chariot festival is a ray of hope for married women who are childless as all conventions are relaxed and the woman can choose a man for consensual union. If the woman gets conceived, the child is said to be a gift from God and hence called Sami Pillai, which means the child of God. The children so born are named so because there is a belief that on the night of the chariot festival in Karattur, all men who wander around the hills when the deities are taken back to the temple are incarnations of God.

The situation of childlessness to inherit the ancestral property is stigmatized in the highlighted community. The sensitive approach of the author toward gender and sexuality reflects the established norms of the society and how people view things. Sharanya Manivannan states, “The novel is also acutely sensitive in its approach toward gender and sexuality and humane in its treatment of longing.”(<https://sharanyamanivannan.wordpress.com/2014/02/07/review-of-one-part-woman-by-perumal-murugan/>). The narrowed vision of the people is reflected through the venomous words of the villagers, when they taunt Ponnayi for menstruating every month and Kali for his sexual impotence. Culture is put under test when the elders of the family feel no remorse to send Ponna to the eighteenth day of the festival – the night for the childless women to choose the man of her choice. Kali feels offended at the thought of his wife being surmounted by another man whom others believe to be the incarnation of God, because his love for her is so deep. He loves her more than anyone on earth. Murugan writes,

His mother might have given birth to him and raised him, but her control over him was limited. Nothing compared to the power his wife wielded over him. It was for Ponna that he left his circle of friends and relatives and confined himself to the barnyard. She said, ‘I will go if you want me to.’ That didn’t mean, ‘I will go.’ It meant, ‘I will do anything for you.’ Giving up everything was the only price he had to pay to have her rest in the palm of his hand, to nestle in the hold of his fist. (238)

The contouring of a controversy in portraying the culture begins when the question arises on the sexuality of the female gender. The society has defined conduct codes for both the men and the women. A man can satisfy his needs, either physical or intellectual or spiritual, at the cost of his own interests. Nevertheless, a woman has to abide by the rules and get confined to the narrow frame that the society has framed for her. Ponna and the similar barren women are allowed to choose a man of their choice to be blessed with a child, as the society has practised it for years and has accepted it to be the established culture of the soil. However, if it had been a woman's personal choice or her like to sleep with a man of her choice, the society would condemn the custom. This gives a clear picture that when practised in large numbers and when the consequence is cherished by a larger group of people, culture of a soil is widely accepted and enthralling.

Though a work of translation, the book brews up with ample attributes of rural life in interior Tamil Nadu. The title too has a great significance in depicting the culture that has been followed, though for some days, in real life and forever in mythology. The title of the novel is *Maadhorubaagan*, which when split is "Maadhu oru baagan". "Maadhu" is the Tamil term for a woman, "oru" refers to one and "baagan" is side. Myths have played a perennial role in the lives of human beings. Every myth, though far from the dark reality, shows that every couple has an equal role to play. A belief goes high in the religious circle that Lord Shiva has offered his left side of the body to his wife Shakthi, in an attempt of emphasizing that a man and a woman are equal. The title of the novel too refers to the incarnation of Shiva and Shakthi, called the Ardhanareeswara, which again means *One Part Woman*. The Caravan Magazine utters that, "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." ([http:// www.caravanmagazine.in/vantage/why-perumal-murugans-one-part-woman-significant-debate-freedom-expression-india](http://www.caravanmagazine.in/vantage/why-perumal-murugans-one-part-woman-significant-debate-freedom-expression-india))The irony pops into the story line when Kali wants his wife to be with him and play the equal role of a counterpart, whereas culture and the belief of the society drives her to go uphill on the day of the chariot festival, to choose the divine incarnation of her choice, which culminates in a controversy.

The culture of the soil is found impregnated in the entire novel. It encompasses the scenes and the scents of the soil, too. Murugan has not failed to render justice to the nuances that fill up the canvass of the Karattur soil. The names of the characters, the locales, the description of smaller aspects like the planting of the Portia tree, the description of the farms, the fields, the barnyards, the regional belief that a son-in-law should not be staying for long in the father-in-law's house, the superstitious conviction that a woman in white should not sow so as to get a good yield, the couple being to every astrologer with an expectation of a good prophecy of progeny, the description of the Maladikkal, which literally means the barren rock, the notion that the barrenness of Ponna is a part of the curse received generations before from an offended girl, the sacred poojas, the offerings of pongal and roosters to the deities of protection as a part of appeasing them to receive their blessings, the way people treat childless women, during ceremonies and celebrations, the description of the festivities during the temple celebrations, every herbal extract that Ponna tries, in spite of her dislike, to bear a child,

the description of the groves, the extraction of toddy and arrack, the different food that finds place in the novel etc. reflect every ray that falls on the backdrop of culture and customs of the soil.

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