

“Why Society Needs the Margin?---Perumal Murugan’s *One Part Woman* in Perspective”

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Abstract

This present study portrays the social margin’s present in Perumal Murugan’s *One Part Woman in Perspective*. It brings us to a harsh truth that the autonomy over one’s body is not possible in the tight-knit Indian village community. Every bit of one’s being from one’s body to his family becomes subject to scrutiny. It is like a fine sieve that tries to extricate and sort every misfortune that a person might happen to suffer and penalize him or her for it. Murugan explains the centrality of the body in an agrarian community. This lack in their life is constantly probed and scrutinized by the villagers time and again. Each person offers them a new theory. Some suggest worship and rituals while a few others suggest a second marriage for Kali. As is expected a second marriage for Ponna is beyond question. The way in which their private lives are inspected and intruded upon by others shows the readers the pincer grip that Indian society exerts upon individuals. The author in an interview has explained the way in which marriage is a social institution in India.

KEYWORDS: Barrenness, Culture, Marginalized Other, Marriage,Society, Tamil Literature

The irony that emerged when protests raged against PerumalMurugan’s social realist novel *One Part Woman* was that the author was marginalized by the society for having portrayed a marginalized couple in his novel. The question that haunts intellectuals time and again is that why society needs to create this segment of the marginalized other? The answer lies in Foucault’s notion of power dynamics. In his book *The History of Sexuality*(1976) Foucault clinically examines how concepts like sexuality are discourses shaped by the power centers within any given social framework. It is these same power centers that choose to castigate a few due to the peculiarity of their bodies or sexual preferences. In the First Volume of his *The History of Sexuality*Foucault has considered how the eighteenth century European Government policy took up ‘policing’ of the individual subject’s sexual preferences. He has observed:

In the eighteenth century, sex became a ‘police’ matter.... A policing of sex: that is, not the rigor of a taboo, but the necessity of regulating sex through useful and public discourses....Things went from ritual lamenting over the unfruitful debauchery of the rich, bachelors, and libertines to a discourse in which the sexual conduct of the population was taken both as an object of analysis and as a target of intervention...(Foucault, 1652-1653)

This particular context brings into mind the humiliation and censorship that D. H. Lawrence faced for his novel, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. The book was declined publication in the author's native country England for its sexually explicit language. It was first published privately in 1928 in Italy and was not published in England until 1960. This refusal to accept both Lawrence and Murugan was because these authors dared to portray the sexual choices of women in their fiction. The early 20th century England and the present 21st century India being primarily patriarchal societies this castigation was obvious.

For a patriarchal society to retain its essential character a strict vigil has to be maintained against any freedom of choice offered to women (even in the fictional world). The protagonists of *One Part Woman*, Kali and Ponna are devoted lovers. Their world is almost idyllic as they lack nothing. But the society imposes a want on them: That of a child. They are marginalized within their village for being childless. They are made to suffer mutely as one or the other of the villagers' heap accusations on them for any of their own misfortunes. Their village needs them just as a house needs a dustbin to keep itself clean.

The Madras High Court declared in 2016 that *One Part Woman* was a work of art and so not a matter of societal interference. Murugan had given up his vocation after the controversy raged against his book. After the court directive Murugan has returned to writing encouraged by the progressive attitude of the country's judiciary. In an interview given to "First Post" he enunciates his views on writing about controversial topics like caste:

If there is caste violence, and Dalits are involved, we must call out the oppressor. We must not be patronising and fall into that trap. That's what I keep in mind. We need to transcend from the fixed mindset of poor so and so. We run away from the caste system and don't try to understand it fully. We must reconsider our perceptions, our gaze. (Murugan, par. 19)

The words of the author cited above are about the caste system of India. But these words may be considered equally true regarding his portrayal of the marginalized childless couple in *One Part Woman*. His novel is an earnest plea on behalf of all childless couples whose private lives are ruthlessly made subject to rampant criticism of the society at large. The taboo is so great that these couples are literally forced to stay within the bounds of their home and not participate in any of the social events round the village. They are treated as 'untouchables'. The plea is to alter this hateful gaze towards the couple who are actually suffering from a medical condition and are otherwise harmless individuals.

Kali and Ponna are often embarrassed in the middle of social gatherings for being childless. The novel enumerates various such incidents which turn Kali pale and draw out malicious words from the mouth of Ponna. Kali wonders what makes people take such interest in his life. He actually detects the nihilistic pleasure that this kind of people derive without even having a faint idea of the term nihilism. His life experiences have taught him to detect this negativity in people:

It annoyed Kali that though they might have a million things wrong with their own lives, people found a great pleasure in poking and prodding other people's miseries....What kind of pride comes from knowing that the other person does not have what one has? Does everyone have everything? Isn't there always something lacking? (Murugan, 19)

Kali himself does not admit the lack of anything in his life. He believes that his wife, mother and his barnyard complete him. But his social life is over. His closest friend and brother-in-law, Muthu observes that Kali has become a completely different person from the one he had been before. He was popular among his friends in his younger days and was quite a leader among them. For Muthu it is hard to believe that it is the same man who is now undergoing a self-imposed exile. It is the fear of being ridiculed as impotent for his lack of children that has made Kali like this. The narrator informs us:

According to them, only the man who induced morning sickness in his wife in the very second month marriage was a real man....And the entire bunch of Kali's friends had insinuated this several times. (Murugan, 82)

This brings us to a harsh truth that the autonomy over one's body is not possible in the tight-knit Indian village community. Every bit of one's being from one's body to his family becomes subject to scrutiny. It is like a fine sieve that tries to extricate and sort every misfortune that a person might happen to suffer and penalize him or her for it. Murugan explains the centrality of the body in an agrarian community:

Bodies are seen two ways — to celebrate, or to destroy. We are people who celebrate bodies. For characters in my stories, their body is central to their occupation. They are labouring bodies. Their life depends on it. It's not one dimensional for my characters. (Murugan, par. 16)

Kali and Ponna's active lives are a reminder that the body is not unidimensional. This efficient farmer couple has a thriving income that is the result of their bodies yet the only thing that seems to matter is the incapability of those same bodies to produce children. The community insinuates them to perform every rite and ritual ever prescribed for barrenness. Kali and Ponna believe what they are made to believe and undergo those very customs. They lose significant portion of their income by spending on these rituals yet they cannot stop since stopping would be an end to all hope they ever had.

Like her husband Ponna too has become enchained to her home and hearth for fear of being reminded time and again before the entire community of her barrenness. There are more than three instances in the novel where Ponna is humiliated for her childlessness. Right in the beginning the narrator remarks, "The only way to save oneself was to conceive in the first month of marriage" (43). This is repeated again near the climax of the novel to describe the way in which Ponna's mother-in-law humiliates her for her inability to conceive:

When she had menstruated in the first month after the wedding, her mother-in-law sniggered in displeasure and turned her face away. Since then, the snigger had continued until that day. Nothing happened to change that. (Murugan, 150)

This does not remain a family matter for long. As is the case within every social segment in India so it is in an agrarian community; here too having male children is important. Without children the property of the farmer becomes subject to the claim of all and sundry. People from all walks of life keep reminding them how their hard work will all go to waste since there will be no one left to enjoy its fruits. Kali's uncle's son's children are sent to them quite often because they have assumed that these children will be blessed by the property of Kali since he himself has no heir. When one troublemaker among these children meets with an accident and hurts himself the mother viciously accuses Ponna. Similarly her neighbor Sarasa sends her children to Ponna's house daily. But at a social event Sarasa too rebukes Ponna's barrenness. Ponna retorts, "It is not enough to give birth to children---you should also know how to take care of them!" (65) Even the woman, Pottupaatti towards whom Ponnais kind does not fail to remind her brutally of her barrenness:

Your husband and you are protecting an inheritance that god knows which wretched dogs will claim later....A woman without her husband and an inheritance without an heir are the same, they say. (Murugan, 63)

Ponna does not mutely accept these words and is quick to respond that Pottupaatti herself is not too well off either in spite of having given birth to several sons. Ponna reminds her, "You don't have money even to buy yourself some puffed rice. What have you accomplished by bearing children?" (64)

This lack in their life is constantly probed and scrutinized by the villagers time and again. Each person offers them a new theory. Some suggest worship and rituals while a few others suggest a second marriage for Kali. As is expected a second marriage for Ponna is beyond question. The way in which their private lives are inspected and intruded upon by others shows the readers the pincer grip that Indian society exerts upon individuals. The author in an interview has explained the way in which marriage is a social institution in India:

Marriage is an institution for family, never love. It never appealed to me in a sense. There is property, caste and children intertwined. It hasn't changed, especially in villages. I am very interested in these problems and emotional complexities that are wrung together in the web of caste kin and property. (Murugan, par. 9)

Twelve years after their marriage when every ritual attempted fails to yield results their family decides to do the unthinkable. They choose to let their daughter participate in the eighteenth day of the chariot festival of Karattur. We are informed that at the peak of this festival, all rules are relaxed. Any consenting man and woman could have sex that night. The rules of matrimony would become defunct just for that night. The narrator informs us, "No one sent unmarried women to the festival. But women over thirty were to be seen everywhere. Young men roamed all over the place." (98) The societal imbalance regarding gender becomes apparent from this ritual once again. The right to have sexual intimacy as per one's desires is not a prerogative of women but the same is true of men. In fact these men are supposed to be 'gods' to those barren women who are impregnated by them.

Kali's hypocrisy in this regard is revealed when he refuses to send Ponna to the festival to which he himself had gone in his youth. He had exercised his free will to enjoy sex but he will not let his wife have that same freedom. Muthureminds him that since they themselves had gone there in their youth there was nothing wrong in sending his wife there. Kali rejects Muthu's argument saying:

When you and I went, were we gods? All we wanted was to find some decent-looking women to fuck, didn't we? Did you ever think of yourself as god? (Murugan, 138)

There is certainly no scope to deny the validity of Kali's arguments. Yes, it is yet another weapon in the hands of the patriarchal community to exploit women. But the fact remains that Kali is more selfish in refusing to send Ponna to the festival than it apparently seems. He is scared that Ponna may be impregnated by an untouchable. To him then Ponna too would become an untouchable. The notion of the male authority over the woman's body forbids him to accept her after she has mated with an untouchable. His other reason is even more selfish, "Moreover, all of you will call me impotent and laugh at me." (140)

Till the moment both remain barren there is scope for Kali to escape the allegations of being impotent since as a rule society is harsher towards women. When Ponna is unable to conceive within six months of their marriage her mother-in-law begins Ponna's herbal treatment but not that of her son. The villagers are cruder in their approach towards Ponna than towards Kali. At most Kali is suggested a second marriage. It is Ponna who is reproached time and again as undeserving of children. The society needs this inequality. It needs some of its members to stay at the margin so that their own lives may seem idyllic in comparison to those unfortunate 'others'.

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