

The Sociocultural Politics of Infertility in Perumal Murugan's

Narratives

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Abstract

The research paper analyses the sociocultural politics of infertility as portrayed in the novel *One Part Woman* (2013) by Perumal Murugan, translated by Aniruddhan Vasudevan. Murugan's depiction of the cultural background, religious rituals and social practices in association with infertility of the Kongu region, Tamil Nadu, is keenly focused. As portrayed in the novel, the study also investigates cultural victimisation and social stigmas. Furthermore, the article highlights social bullying with reference to infertility such as blame, judgement, intrusive questioning, social pressures, expectations, insensitive comments, and unsolicited advice by the patriarchs. Considering the protagonist couple Kali and Ponna, as the primary case, the paper substantiates the politics of infertility and the underlying victimisation. Nevertheless, the prime objective of the study is to reveal the psychological complexities of infertile couples in the contemporary world due to sociocultural factors. To endorse the key idea, secondary references and real-life cases are included.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Infertility, Stigma, Victim, Impotent

Infertility is prevalent in Indian geography as a sensitive topic that promotes social stigma and questions against parenthood. In turn, the government of India introduced the Assisted Reproductive Technology Act, 2021, to regulate fertility clinics to conduct IVF and IUI treatments. Nevertheless,

access to these treatments is limited to the middle and upper classes because of its medical fee. This issue in reproductive health victimises both genders equally and results in marital breakdowns. The current study employs a literary perspective to examine infertility and social victimisation through the primary text *One Part Woman* that advocates social stigmas in the roots of the Kongu region of Tamil Nadu. The narration focuses deeply on the stigmatised condition of the region and the cultural victimisation through an infertile couple named Kali and Ponna. In addition, this article highlights the element of procreation, which is considered the fundamental obligation in specific cultures. To substantiate that, the paper investigates cultural stigmas and victimisation of the couple through the lens of Murugan by stressing the culture and ritual of a particular southern village. The study also focuses on the cultural norms that perpetuate discrimination and impose psychological burdens on infertile individuals.

In contemporary society, irrespective of genders, the infertility stigma depends on various social and psychological factors. For women, societal expectations pertaining to motherhood victimise them, causing anxiety, shame and emotional isolation. The extremity of these conditions triggers the victims to exhibit depressive symptoms in the long run as portrayed through the couple in *One Part Woman*. These tensions are also symptomatic in the individuals who engage in infertility treatments. Similar evidence is found in a study published in the journal *European Psychology* titled "Depression and suicidality amongst infertile women: a hidden pandemic?" The investigation conducted Mini International Neuropsychiatric Interview and assessed hundred infertile women. "According to the results obtained by assessment of MINI scale, the prevalence of major depressive disorder (50 %) followed by Dysthymia (25%) was documented among infertile group while suicidality at 15% were significantly higher than other disorder" (Dastidar 183,184).

The aforementioned psychosocial triggers have the potential to worsen depressive symptoms and drive certain individuals even to suicide. A recent report published in *Deccan Herald* highlights a real-life case from Uttar Pradesh mentioning the demise of a woman who committed suicide due to

infertility. It is reported and alleged that she was depressed and subjected to torture by her husband and his parents. In response to the cause, the court charged Moni, her husband, “who was accused of instigating his wife to die by suicide, was charged under section 306 of the IPC (abetment of suicide) which provided for a punishment up to 10 years and also fine (Deccan Herald, par. 3). Such clinical and statistical evidence reveals the need for a support system.

These growing concerns expose an elevating mental health burden among the infertile. Such issues are the root cause for many partners to face chaos between them and their circle. Since the literary interpretation of Kali and Ponna is an effective portrayal of this dilemma, the narrative does not refer any scientific intervention of medical care. In Murugan’s narrative, the couple is subjected to patriarchal and superstitious structures. The use of characters such as Chellapa Gounder, Bommididi Mani and random community elders critically examine the results of the patriarchal pressure confronted by the couple. Patriarchal frameworks define women based on their reproductive capacity. Ponna experiences the same when Chellapa Gounder places blame on her fertility, as in his perspective she is unproductive and cursed for her sterility. Chellapa’s conversation with Kali carries a metaphor of comparing Ponna to a barren cow, “that is just how some cows are. No matter what you do, they never get pregnant. Just quietly change the cow. If you say yes, I can fetch you one right away.” (Murugan 14). This tag on Ponna stigmatises her as infertile. The Foucauldian view in *The History of Sexuality* details this unproductive view of the humans by declaring that, “sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover” (Foucault 105). This standpoint denies the perception that infertility is personal for Kali and Ponna and claims they are under surveillance by the institutions of power, namely family, tradition and caste.

Humiliation is a recurring element for the couple in the novel. Since Ponna shelters in a male dominated circle, her experiences are unpleasant domestically. Chellapa’s role in the social circle is handled by random community members. One instance is an insult made with the cultural importance

of heirs by an old woman. In the mode of retaliation for a rage, the old woman questions Ponna's sterility:

To shut her up, the woman had just one thing in her arsenal, and she used it: 'Why do you worry so much about an heirless property?'

Ponna was shocked. But she collected herself and responded, 'So what?

Have you come as the child to eat off my property?'

She was quite hurt by what the old woman had said. (192,193)

The study by Taebi et al. in their article "Infertility Stigma: A Qualitative Study on Feelings and Experiences of Infertile Women" identify that, "one of the distressful behaviours mentioned by all the participants was verbal stigma in the form of sarcasm, humiliation, and use of offensive terms for infertility by acquaintances" (Taebi et al. 191). These behaviours are explicitly presented by Murugan through the inner turmoil of the character Ponna. Her vulnerability becomes the product of othering made by the outside world. She slips into depressive thoughts and exhibits it personally to Kali. The narrator captures it, "during moments of intimacy, Ponna would ask, Maama, are you planning to abandon me and marry another woman? Tell me" (17). Though everyone curses her, Kali eases her with his loyalty as he does not exhibit the patriarchal lineage. He conveys, "you are the apple of my eye—my pearl, my treasure. How can I ever leave you?" (17).

Apart from these upsets of stigmatisation and patriarchy, the novel reveals the superstitious belief system of the state. References to divination and astrology are highly prevalent throughout the narrative as rural Tamil Nadu is rich with several belief systems. Certain beliefs are followed by Ponna with her urge to get impregnated by following astrology and divination. Her instinct to seek predictions is recorded, "whenever she went to the market, Ponna would go to have her card read by a parrot. She had been to every astrologer in the area who picked cards using a parrot. . . You will get it late, but you will get it for sure" (18). Here, the promise sustains her hope and reassures her about conceiving a child. However, some critics claim that astrology rejects rationalism and science and is viewed as an

instrument of social oppression and superstition. In the book *Collected Works of Periyar E.V.R.* (2005), the social reformer E. V. R. Periyar opines his view on astrology, “a rationalist who carefully scrutinizes astrology will notice that it is largely connected with religion. This is because astrology is based as much on superstition as religion itself. The stars and planets or good days taken into account in astrology have all legends attached to them similar to the ones in the Hindu Mythologies (Puranas)” (Naicker and Veeramani 275). The story also adds the ritual sacrifice of a rooster by Ponna to the tribal goddess Pavatha to gain fertility. Although the attempt is a failure, it delineates the extent of superstitious efforts to lift the curse of infertility:

Ponna, too, was full of hope after praying to Pavatha. Her expectations were heightened in the months that followed. After every twenty days, she prayed, ‘God, please fill my womb at least this month.’ Even if there was a day’s delay in her menstrual cycle, she was filled with excitement: ‘This is it!’ But if her cycle began the next day, the house looked as though someone had died in it. She didn’t eat properly and just lay around. Kali had to go to his mother for food. Even after cutting open a rooster and satiating Pavatha’s thirst for revenge, nothing changed. (36)

The most critical superstitious practice and the turning point of the novel is the Ardhanareeswara festival in Tiruchengode: a fifteen day festival with a ritual on the fourteenth day. The ritual is commenced to address infertility and conceive through socially and divinely approved extramarital relations. Ponna’s decision to attend the festival paves the way to secure her familial lineage and revoke the approval of her womanhood. Initially she disagreed with her mother-in-law when she was informed about the ritual. “Ponna, please go to the fourteenth day of the festival this year, said her mother-in-law to her happily” (105). This proposal aligns her parents-in-law’s alignment with the cultural policy that prioritises bringing an heir, despite the fact that it is of extramarital relations. The victim’s condition is critical as she confronts with the conventional patriarchal norms and beliefs. She struggles with the reproductive pressure and falls into the trap of cultural expectations. The

anthropologist Marcia C Inhorn in her book, *Infertility and Patriarchy: The Cultural Politics of Gender and Family Life in Egypt* (1996) critically evaluates the case of the infertile women in patriarchy. Even though the book focuses on victims in Egypt, it generally covers the restraints on women of all places, who are subjected to emotional vulnerability and psychological turmoil. Inhorn says that, “she is thus reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one. Such an attribute is a stigma, especially when its discrediting effect is very extensive” (Inhorn 1). Ponna’s sterility lines up with Inhorn’s notion of stigmatised female since she is limited to a reduced and restrained individual due to the lack of reproductive capacity.

The determination to attend the festival was challenging for Ponna, but pressures mounted on her draw her psychologically to get prepared to go and have a consensual relation. Inhorn’s view of patriarchal bargaining is visible in the pressured narrative of Ponna. At last, she compromises her chastity to secure the needs of the bargainer, that is the patriarchal group. In this context, the negotiation symbolizes a stigmatized condition which brings challenges and confusions to Ponna in latter part of the novel. Inhorn idealises that, “women under classic patriarchy engage in so-called “patriarchal bargaining,” or various strategies to maximize security and optimize life options within a set of concrete constraints” (19). And later, the narrator records her encounter with the strange man at the festival:

When she felt something touching her earlobes, she reached back and wiped herself. It felt as though someone was blowing gently on her nape. She turned around and saw a pair of eyes to her side. She knew it was the touch of these eyes that had bothered her. Those eyes pierced the glow of the burning torches, and touched and teased her. The folded dhoti and the towel that was around his neck and fell over his chest made him look like no one she knew. His hair had been combed carelessly, and it looked like he had not even started shaving. It occurred to her that this was her god. His eyes smiled. His lips too were parted in a permanent grin.

(186,187)

Similar to the condition of Ponna, Kali faces oppression privately. Here, in the novel, Murugan never reveals the infertile person among the couple. Through this tactic, he gifts a wide angle of the impediments of femininity and masculinity. Kali's masculinity is questioned on several occasions by his own family members and the social circle. Since decades, patriarchy has been shaping masculinity incorrectly by attributing biased notions. As examined through the tale of the couple, *One Part Woman* set in the rural setting projects the traditional conditioning of men. In contemporary discourses, men and masculinity becomes a researched topic. In Indian context, this conditioning starts from the rural settings as they are rooted more into patriarchal frameworks. According to the *Merriam Webster Dictionary*, the word masculinity is, "the quality or nature of the male sex: the quality, state, or degree of being masculine or manly" ("Masculinity"). This definition is disregarded and corrupt in the novel as it attacks Kali's masculinity with terms like impotent and slave.

The concealed nature of Kali's emotion at times is a silent narrative strategy Murugan employs to project the stigmatisation and contained mode of masculinity. "Even though Kali was trying to be funny, these conversations made him extremely sad. He lamented the fact that he had become the butt of ridicule in the village" (15). Agency is declined for him as he fails to showcase patriarchal qualities. As a result, he often receives suggestions from his social circle, and it attacks his choices and decisions. On an encounter with Chellapa Gounder, he receives a metaphorical comparison to Ponna from him, hinting to remarry, "just quietly change the cow" (14). Similar occurrence with his friend, Bommidi Mani, "get married again" (21).

Absence of agency and missing requirements play a crucial role in the progress of men like Kali living in patriarchal conditions. These constraints are analysed by theorist David Buchbinder of masculinity studies. In his work, *Studying Men and Masculinities* (2012), he asserts its impacts, "any such refusal will no doubt be judged as a repudiation in some degree of their own manhood and, hence, masculinity. The consequences, therefore, of an individual man's disengagement from the patriarchal dynamic is likely to be severe, and felt by that man, despite his courage in resisting the

pressure of the patriarchal order” (Buchbinder 108). The inability to produce an heir even after years of marriage prompts people to doubt Kali’s fertility. The surge in questions from his social circle ends up in his anxious thoughts, “they had nicknamed him ‘the impotent one’” (72). Thereupon, Kali becomes the victim of patriarchy through the role of a failed husband.

Therefore, *One Part Woman* effectively presents infertility in a social and patriarchal construct. Murugan strategically focuses more on the cultural and societal consequences of being infertile rather than on medical advancements. Through the identity of “impotent” in the narrative, the femininity and masculinity of the couple are stigmatised (151). Stigmatisation occurs here through social labelling of the couple indirectly as handicapped in society. Erving Goffman, the founder of stigma theory, in the book, *Stigma: Notes on Management and Spoiled Identity* (1963), defines this condition, “he is thus reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one. Such an attribute is a stigma, especially when its discrediting effect is very extensive; sometimes it is also called a failing, a shortcoming, a handicap” (Goffman 13). By analysing Murugan’s infertile representations like Kali, Ponna and the “cow”, victimised by the patriarchal structure obsessed with fertility and lineage, the paper concludes that whatever is infertile in the society is socially stigmatised, victimised and are made the targets of societal scorn (14).

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