

Infertility and cultural stigma in Perumal Murugan's Novel *One Part Woman*

Mr. K. Karthickraja

Reg No: 241131502074, Research Scholar (Full Time),

S.T. Hindu College, Department of English, Nagercoil- 629 002.

(Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli – 627 012, Tamil Nadu, India.)

Email Id: rajakarthick2911@gmail.com

Dr. S. Geetha

Assistant Professor, Department of English,

Sri K. G. S. Arts College, Srivaikuntam.

(Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli – 627 012, Tamil Nadu, India.)

Email Id: geethasankar0911@gmail.com.

ABSTRACT

The concept of infertility in medical terminology during the modern generation is complex and rigid. There are several causes and effects associated with infertility, making it a common issue for both men and women. In India, this topic remains controversial due to traditional narratives that are often unquestioned. A false, preconceived patriarchal notion has been widely propagated, making it difficult to challenge societal norms. The discourse on gender and social structure varies significantly within society. The theme of gender inequality and gender consciousness is explored in the novel *One Part Woman*. The novel highlights the psychological trauma faced by women due to both physical stress, which they internalize, and mental stress, which is imposed upon them by society. Perumal Murugan employs different themes

and ideological principles, interwoven with the characterization of his novels. Key themes in his works include the patriarchal setup in traditional society, family bonding, the search for true identity, infidelity, and the struggle for existence. His novels emphasize the power of women, who challenge societal restrictions and fight for independence and freedom. Many theorists and writers, including Betty Friedan—an American feminist, activist, and author of *The Feminine Mystique*—have examined these issues. Friedan's work challenges traditional gender roles and advocates women's equality and empowerment. Perumal Murugan's works reflect the tension between traditional gender roles and modern aspirations, aligning with Friedan's concepts. This research paper focuses on the psychological trauma experienced by women and the complexities of their struggles within society.

Keywords: Social Conflict, Psychological trauma, Isolation, Masculinity and Infertility.

Perumal Murugan is a contemporary Indian Tamil writer known for his novels, short stories, poetry, and commitment to teaching. He has written twelve novels, six collections of short stories, six poetry anthologies, and several non-fiction works. Most of his books were originally written in Tamil, and ten of his novels have been translated into English by different scholars. Some of these translated works are *Seasons of the Palm*, *Current Show*, *Pyre*, *One Part Woman*, *A Lonely Harvest*, *Trial by Silence*, *Poonachi: Or the Story of a Goat*, *Resolve*, *Estuary*, and *Rising Heat*. His literary works focus on social and cultural issues, especially the status of Dalits and Gounder communities in the Kongu region of Tamil Nadu.

Murugan's novel *One Part Woman* explores an ancient cultural practice in communities near Tiruchengode. The story centers on a childless couple who deeply long for a child. It captures their emotions with care, pain, and tenderness. The novel was first published in Tamil as *Madhorubagan* and later translated into English by Aniruddhan Vasudevan. The narratives of the place are set in Murugan's hometown of Thiruchengode. The tale follows Kali and Ponna, a couple who face social stigma and shame

because they cannot conceive. The narrative highlights their involvement in a chariot festival that honors the deity Ardhanareeshwara. During this festival, on the eighteenth day, social rules are relaxed, allowing men and women to interact freely. While initial protests against the novel faded at the state level, local groups continue to push back against it.

The present research paper aims to investigate the psychological and emotional turmoil of the couple who cannot conceive in a patriarchal society. The researcher also underlines the representation of South Indian cultural traditions by examining evolving social issues, particularly how Ponna, the protagonist, experiences isolation and emotional detachment from her husband due to societal pressures and blind faith in Hindu superstition. The researcher finally analyzes the concept of Betty Friedan's feminist theory, particularly her concept of the problem that has no name, as reflected in *One Part Woman*, highlighting how societal expectations reduce Ponna's identity to motherhood, leading to emotional distress, social isolation, and internalized oppression. This study aims to explore the parallels between Friedan's critique of patriarchal conditioning and the novel's depiction of rigid cultural norms that confine women within traditional gender roles.

Perumal Murugan's novel *One Part Woman* probes into the complexities of married couple in social hierarchy, revealing its dual oppressive nature. On one hand, it subjugates women within the same caste by placing immense social pressure on them to bear children, and on the other hand, it marginalizes individuals from different castes, reinforcing social divisions. The story vividly portrays the rigid constraints imposed by society, as the central characters, Kali and Ponna, are subjected to significant social exclusion. They are deliberately kept away from attending auspicious occasions and joyous gatherings in their community due to their inability to conceive, further isolating them from their social circle.

The novel starts with Kali and how he connects his family with nature. It gives immense pleasure in reading and thus the connection between nature and the writer is unique in all his works. The Portia tree is

symbol of the married couple. "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" (Murugan 10).

The novel intricately interlaces various aspects of cultural traditions, long-standing beliefs, mythological references, and daily customs, seamlessly incorporating them into its storytelling. The narrative is deeply intertwined with the cultural fabric of its setting, making it impossible to separate the unfolding story from the deeply embedded traditions that govern the lives of its characters. Just as in real life, where cultural norms shape personal experiences, the protagonists of the novel find themselves ensnared by the rigid social and religious structures of their land. Despite living in their ancestral homeland, they are unable to escape the overwhelming consequences of societal expectations and the unrelenting scrutiny of those around them. The deep-seated customs and historically significant traditions of the Kongu Nadu region are meticulously depicted throughout the novel, adding authenticity to its portrayal of social realities. The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms defines Myth as: "Stories of unascertainable origin and authorship usually accompanying or helping to explain religious beliefs. Often (though not necessarily) their subject is the exploits of a god or hero, which may be of a fabulous or superhuman nature, and which may have instituted a change in the working of the universe or in the conditions of the social life" (P.146).

Although some of the religious customs and cultural practices depicted in the novel sparked controversy and provoked debates, it is crucial to understand that *One Part Woman* is ultimately a work of fiction. The cultural myth and belief are socially constructed in society. Thus, the practices of system raise the question against the science of factual truth. The novel serves as a literary representation of historical cultural practices of superstitious belief rather than an assertion of factual events. Just as historians document past customs without being questioned for doing so, a writer should not be criticized for drawing upon history and imagination to create a compelling narrative. The Murugan's creative vision does not

necessarily align with historical accuracy, and the novel should be appreciated as an artistic reflection of cultural traditions rather than a literal account of historical events.

“The plant that I planted is flowering now, the tree I planted is bearing fruit, the calf I brought has grown and birthed many of its own, and the egg that I helped incubate has hatched a beautiful chick” (116). It highlights the psychological trauma inflicted by societal pressure and ostracization, showing how such cultural stigmatization can exacerbate the emotional and mental burden of infertility. The research paper also seeks to illuminate the complex interconnection between the cultural narratives and the medical understandings of infertility. By analyzing the Ponna and Kali story, it argues that infertility is not merely a biological condition but also a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by cultural, social and psychological factors.

Friedan’s concept of the problem that has no name refers to the dissatisfaction and psychological distress experienced by women who are expected to conform to societal roles, particularly as wives and mothers. In *One Part Woman*, Ponna experiences a similar crisis of action. In this novel, her identity is reduced to her ability to bear children. In medical terminology, it is termed as infertility. Thus, the condition seems to be complex for both men and women in the society. Compared to men, the dependency of societal pressure is heavily subjugated on women in the society. The relentless pressure from her family and society forces her into an internal conflict, where she feels inadequate and alienated despite being deeply loved by her husband, Kali.

Friedan discusses how women in mid-20th-century America were socially isolated due to restrictive gender roles. Similarly, Ponna and Kali are socially ostracized due to their childlessness, which isolates them from festivals and other community events. The novel highlights how cultural conditioning forces individuals to conform to oppressive traditions, reinforcing Friedan’s argument that societal norms imprison women in roles they do not necessarily choose.

Thus, the author, in *One Part Woman*, challenges oppressive traditions that dictate women's lives. *One Part Woman* not only exposes the emotional turmoil faced by women in traditional societies but also urges a critical reevaluation of customs that continue to reinforce gender inequality. By examining the intersection of Friedan's feminist theory and Murugan's literary narrative, it becomes evident that the struggle for female autonomy is a universal issue, transcending time and culture.

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