

**Perumal Murugan's one part woman-
A powerful rendering of an entire milieu**

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Abstract

One Part Woman is a powerful rendering of an entire milieu which is certainly still in existence, which it engages with insightfully. The author handles myriad complexities with sophistication, creating an evocative, even haunting, work. The novel is also acutely sensitive in its approach toward gender and sexuality and humane in its treatment of longing. While fundamentally an emotional work, driven by personal desires and losses, it also unsettles the reader with what it frankly reveals about simplistic ideas about progressiveness. The society in which the book is set in is permissive in ways that the urban middle-class in the same state at large is not, even though known markers of suppression, such as caste laws, hold sway. But, here as elsewhere, the true hindrances to happiness and progress come in much more personal forms.

Key Words : Perumal Murugan, Indian Literary Writing.

Introduction

Perumal Murugan is an Indian author, scholar and literary chronicler who writes in Tamil. Murugan was born into a family of marginal farmers with a small land-holding in a village near Thiruchengodu, a temple town in northern Kongunadu. His native region is at a higher altitude than the southern districts of Coimbatore and Erode, and has a rough terrain and a rain-fed, cattle-based agriculture, mainly millet cultivation. He has written six novels, four collections of short stories and four Anthologies of poetry to his credit. Three of his novels have been translated into English: *Seasons of the Palm*, which was shortlisted for the [Kiryama Prize](#) in 2005, *One Part Woman* and *Current Show*. He has received awards from the Tamil Nadu Government as well as from Katha Books. He is presently a Tamil Professor working at the Government Arts College in [Namakkal](#).

His six novels, numerous short stories and other writings, classified as regional fiction, evoke the senses and sounds of peasant life in Kongu Nadu (western Tamil Nadu). It must also be mentioned that the subject of Perumal Murugan's Doctoral thesis was the novels of R. Shanmugasundaram, the Kongu author of *Nagammal*. Murugan wrote and published more than a dozen short stories in Ma

KaKa's *Manavosai* journal between 1988 and 1991. His stories were well received and established him as an important new voice in the Tamil literary milieu. A selection of these stories was published in his 1994 collection, *Thiruchengodu*.

Murugan has contributed a lot to the region, language and his own community," says D Ravikumar, writer and a former MLA for an interview to a news channel. The works of Murugan, the accomplished Tamil writer, indicates a future in which new generations of writers from the rural hinterland will continue to tell their own stories. Rather than remain hostage to an urban-centred discourse trafficking in secular abstractions about caste, writers like Murugan set their own political agendas.

Mathorubhagan translated as *One Part Woman* is a sensitive portrait of the disappointment of a childless peasant couple set in Thiruchengode, a town near Namakkal and close to Erode — the home of the ideologue of Dravidian movement Periyar E V Ramasamy, who spoke and wrote against caste and social dogmas. *One Part Woman* is a novel based on an ancient and supposed cultural practice among Tamil Hindus, called "Niyoga".

Madhorubhagan, first published in 2010, is set a century ago. It's a gripping fictional account of a poor, childless couple, and how the wife, who wants to conceive, takes part in an ancient Hindu chariot festival where, on one night, consensual sex between any man and woman is allowed. Murugan explores the tyranny of caste and pathologies of a community in tearing the couple apart and destroying their marriage.

It is the story of a childless couple with a strong desire of having a child, depicted with sensitivity, anguish and gentleness. However in this work of fiction, Murugan used actual names of places and communities, thereby casting aspersions on the parentage of many generations of the community. This invited a backlash from the community and from other organizations in support. Set in the early years of the 20th century, the novel discusses how the wife is cajoled and convinced by her family to attend a temple ritual that allows a woman to beget a child by entering into sexual union with a stranger. The child born of this union is called samipillai or God's child, since the stranger is perceived as a representative of God.

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. Murugan was intrigued on encountering several men in the region past the age of 50 who were called Ardhnari (Half-woman) or Sami Pillai (God-given child). On digging further he found out that till as recently as 50 years ago, on a particular evening of the annual chariot festival in the temple of Ardhnareeswara, childless women would come alone to the area alive with festival revelries. Each woman was free to couple with a male stranger of her choice, who was considered an incarnation of god. If the woman got pregnant, the child was considered a gift from god and accepted as such by the family, including her husband.

As a farming community, the Gounders tend to be unsettled by childlessness, by the lack of male heirs for the family property. In the Gounders' worldview, the hard work put in by a Gounder male in his adult life is meaningless if there is no son to inherit the fruit of his labours. As a result, childlessness is brutally stigmatised in the Gounder community. In Murugan's *One Part Woman*, Kali and Ponna, land-owning farmers in Thiruchengode, enjoy a completely happy marriage on all counts but one. Despite over a dozen years together, they are yet to have children. Theirs is a sexually-charged and mutually fulfilling relationship; it is neither for lack of effort nor of intent that they are unable to conceive. The couple perform countless acts of penance, entreating various deities – among them the half-male, half-female god on the hill attended by a Brahmin priest. Kali's mother tells him that his family is cursed by Pavatha, a ferocious female deity in the jungle, for a past crime against a young girl, and that the males in his family are doomed to remain childless; if a child is born to them, it will be short-lived. Kali and Ponna offer votive sacrifice at the altar of Pavatha and climb the *varadikkal*, barren woman's rock, and even blood sacrifices are made on the hill of Thiruchengodu, but these efforts do not bear fruit. Meanwhile, both of them endure, in their own way, an endless stream of taunts and insinuations from everyone around them. Ponna weeps at the onset of every menstrual period. Neither love nor their thriving land is enough to keep at bay the despair of being without offspring in their community. They are constantly on the receiving end of disparagement from the people around them: Kali's sexual potency is the subject of sly and open taunts, while every slip or argument Ponna has with another is turned on her using her childlessness as an indication of her character or capabilities.

The disparagement arrives in wounded, less unkind guises too – particularly from their mothers,

who tell stories of hereditary curses that could explain their misfortune and sing dirges lamenting the couple's barrenness. Eventually, the two women decide that there may be only one way. Every year, on the fourteenth day of the chariot festival to the androgynous deity on the hill, the rules of all marital contracts are relaxed. Any man is allowed to lie with any woman – a tradition acknowledged as being a socially and divinely sanctioned method of conceiving should a husband be sterile. Ponna's mother and mother-in-law, in the hope that it is Kali who is the cause of their infertility, suggest the solution of sending her to participate. The resulting anxieties and attendant manipulations challenge the marriage, and alter its course. *One Part Woman* is the harrowing account of how a community's pathological obsession tears a loving couple apart and destroys their marriage.

Distance allows us to be dismissive of the lives of other people, to filter their narratives down to a few essential keynotes and tragedies. In *One Part Woman*, Murugan turns an intimate, crystalline gaze on a married couple in interior Tamil Nadu. It is a gaze that lays bare the intricacies of their story, culminating in a heart-wrenching denouement that allows no room for apathy.

The novel lays bare with unsparing clarity a relationship caught between the dictates of social conventions and the tug of personal anxieties. Fellow writers lauded Murugan's stark and shocking imagery and his "sensitive portrait" of the couple. "Childless couples, especially the women in these marriages, suffer untold humiliation even today. If anything deserves to be banned, it is this control over women's sexuality," says Murugan's translator Aniruddhan Vasudevan. One newspaper sharply reminded that the ["spirit of orthodoxy and heterodoxy have co-existed"](#) in the Indian intellectual traditions from ancient times.

Murugan's fiction has many features that are special to his chosen setting. The cultivator's life, with its range of tasks, implements and infrastructure, is described in fascinating detail. Murugan uses the details imaginatively to bring the terrain and people alive, giving them dignity and legitimacy. Through close descriptions of the wealth of knowledge and skills in a farming community, the reader also becomes intimately familiar with the community's inner life and the challenges that confront it continually.

Murugan's writing is taut and suspenseful, particularly as the book progresses towards its climax. At a slim 230 pages, the novel moves quickly, but with such a finely-wrought intensity that tension remains high right up to the final paragraph. Aniruddhan Vasudevan's translation deserves mention – the language is crisp, retaining local flavour without jarring, and often lyrical. *One Part Woman* is a rooted and passionate novel that, as the blurb says, "lays bare with unsparing clarity a relationship caught between the dictates of social convention and the tug of personal anxieties." The tradition of seeking impregnation by an anonymous male in the name of God seems to have died out decades ago. Kali and Ponna must have been among its last victims.

Versatile, sensitive to history and conscious of his responsibilities as a writer, Murugan is considered to be the most accomplished of his generation of Tamil writers. Apart from his profound engagement with Kongunadu and its people, he is also a writer of great linguistic skill, being one of very few contemporary Tamil writers who have formally studied the language up to the post-graduate level.

Murugan is one of the finest writers of his generation in the Tamil language. His novels are rooted in the western region of Tamil Nadu where he was born. His stories are peopled by characters caught up in the whirligig of maddening change, struggling peasants, a child bonded to work in an upper caste home to repay the loan taken by his father. He has been outspoken about the evil practice of caste discrimination. A vivid memoir recounts the experience of his farmer father running a soda stall in a cinema to keep the home fires burning. He's "versatile, sensitive to history and conscious of his responsibilities as a writer", says author and translator N.Kalyan Raman in a glowing appraisal of Murugan's work.

One Part Woman is a powerful rendering of an entire milieu which is certainly still in existence, which it engages with insightfully. The author handles myriad complexities with an enviable sophistication, creating an evocative, even haunting, work. The novel is also acutely sensitive in its approach toward gender, sexuality and humane in its treatment for longing. While fundamentally an emotional work, driven by personal desires and losses, it also unsettles the reader with what it frankly reveals about simplistic ideas about progressiveness. The society in which the book is set in is permissive in ways that the urban middle-class in the same state at large is not, even though known markers of suppression, such as caste laws, hold sway. But, here as elsewhere, the true hindrances

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