

## Transgression and Discretion: Exploring the Madhorubagan Controversy

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### Abstract

The publication of the English translation of Perumal Murugan's novel titled *Madhorubagan* led to a scandal that pushed the writer into a self-imposed exile. This controversy created a lot of uproar and is regarded as one of the most famous literary scandals that occurred recently in India. It reveals how the current political atmosphere in India has influenced caste and religious sensibilities. The *Madhorubagan* event unveils how book related controversies are perceived by people and tackled by the state. The theory of Social Drama as conceived by Victor Turner divides a scandalous event into four phases. These phases signal the chronological progression of a scandal. He argues that the norms and rules of a particular society are most visible during a crisis, a social drama. The *Madhorubagan* event unfolds in the juncture of caste and sexuality and defines what is speakable and unspeakable about women and caste in caste communities. This event has a similar developmental pattern to the one that Turner describes. Thus my attempt here is to explore this event as a social drama. This paper aims to shed light into the extra judicial ways in which censorship has seeped into a democratic state like India.

**Keywords:** Social drama, *Madhorubagan* controversy, caste, sexuality, norms unspeakable.

Towards the end of 2014, in the little town of Tiruchengode, an issue around a novel named *One Part Woman* started. Perumal Murugan, the writer of this novel is from this town of the Tamil Nadu state of Southern India. While many label him as a regional writer of the Kongu Nadu (Western region) of Tamil Nadu, his books are translated into many Indian and other languages. One thing that pushed his journey to fame, something that made him a national writer of International acclaim was a scandal that occurred around the publication of the English translation of his novel *Madhorubagan*.

In this paper, I will be using Victor Turner's concept of social drama to understand the *Madhorubagan* controversy. Turner, a cultural anthropologist was of the opinion that performative processes like arts, sports, ritual and play could be linked to social structure. Performances do not just imitate the social system, they critique and evaluate the ways in which society perceives history. He argues that disturbances in normal and harmonic situations can give greater insight into the structure of a society. He says that "social dramas are aharmonic or disharmonic processes arising in conflict situations" (1974 37).

In his book *The Anthropology of Performance*, Turner proposes that the performative social dramas are structured into four phases before any story about it has been narrated. The language used in these progressive phases is similar everywhere. Although successive, these phases could possibly overlap. They are

**Breach** - This is the first phase of a social drama, where a norm that binds a group of people together has been crossed or breached by one person or a group. There is a transgression of some principle that is crucial to the identity and existence of the community. The breach

shocks people and causes a rift in the community. This leads to a conflict and passes on to the second stage of a social drama, which is

**Crisis** - There is a clear bifurcation of the group, and people start taking sides in this stage. People are "induced, seduced, cajoled, nudged or threatened to take sides"(1986 34). It often gets aggressive and there is a persistent threat of violence, even if it doesn't necessarily evolve into violent disputes. During this time, old rivalries, dislikes and vendettas surface and multiple clashes occur. This period usually has some *liminal* characteristics, some in-between and threshold features, as the crisis phase is held between phases that are relatively more stable and harmonic. The rift that the breach has caused widens in this phase. In the liminal space, the earlier structure is disbanded, and a new set of norms, rules and structure takes over.

**Redressive action**- The phase of redressal often overlaps with the earlier phases. During this phase, there will be attempts by certain parties to resolve the issues. Remedies, remunerations and compromise are key features of this phase. The resolution could be initiated by a formal and legal body like the judiciary or it could be an informal mediation by private parties. It could range from personal advice or the involvement of legal machinery to a formal ritual that aims at conflict resolution. He argues that the reflexivity at this stage, especially within the legal structure is a reflection on the social drama, but is also a reflection on its own past judicial activity. If the attempt to redress fails, it results in a "regression to crisis"(1974 41). After redressive action, the social drama evolves to the fourth and final phase of Turner's quadripartite model,

**Reintegration** - During the reintegration phase, two things can happen to the bifurcated groups. Either the conflict resolution is successful and the contending parties are brought back into the fold, or the permanent schism is accepted as the only possible outcome and the two parties go their separate ways. Turner acknowledges later in the book that resolution being successful is only true to a limited extent where the redressive body is able to bring the conflicting groups back together, but the one who breached the norm is permanently under the scrutiny of the other group that waits for another breach. This means that the reintegration happens with a lot of reservation. Therefore the preferable word for the fourth phase is *outcome*, one that Turner uses once later in the book than *reintegration*, because often the process of reintegration is not successful.

The focus of this paper would be on the crisis phase of the social drama. This phase allows us to look at the controversial bits of the novel in the way it was circulated among the crowd that called for a ban of the book. But before we get into that, I'll introduce you to Perumal Murugan and his controversial novel, *Madhorubagan*.

Perumal Murugan writes in the Kongu dialect of Tamil language. He is from the western part of Tamil Nadu. The western districts of Tamil Nadu like Salem, Erode, Namakkal, Coimbatore and others constitute the Kongu Nadu of Tamil Nadu. Murugan's hometown Tiruchengode figures in many of his novels and short stories. Murugan's famous dictionary of Kongu language focuses on this particular dialect. It is necessary to establish that despite the controversy and the clash with the locals, Murugan's contribution to this region and its language is significant. In various accounts, Perumal Murugan has said that his works make an effort to bring out the distinctive nature of his town and its people (Clarification 2014).

The Tamil edition of *Madhorubagan* was first published in December 2010 by Kalachuvadu publications. It was released a month later in January 2011 at Chennai book fair. The novel's English translation named *One Part Woman* was published in November 2013 by Penguin books. The book takes its title after the name of the presiding deity of the

Ardhanareeshwarar temple of Tiruchengode town. The novel focuses on the problem of infertility and how that affects the life of a young couple belonging to the Kongu Vellalar Gounder caste of Western Tamil Nadu. Perumal Murugan who comes from the same community has written many novels focusing on this community as well. The Kongu Vellalars are a powerful intermediate Gounder caste community from the Kongu region. Vellalars are agricultural communities mainly living in Tamil Nadu, but also in some parts of Kerala and Sri Lanka. There are claims that the name Vellalar takes its origin from the word Vellanmai, *vellam* meaning water and *mai* meaning management (Pondeepankar 2011). Gounders are land owning communities and the name is used by Vanniars, Vettuvans, Kongu Vellalars etc. The major occupants of the Namakkal district where the controversy transpired are the Kongu Vellalar community.

### **Madhorubagan-The Novel**

The main characters of the book are Kali and Ponna, a childless couple who live in the pre-independence era in Tiruchengode, Tamil Nadu. The novel initially presents the playful nature of their relationship. There are several scenes in the book that describe their emotional and sensual involvement with each other at length. But soon we realise that their seemingly untroubled life has certain complications. They had been married for 12 years and were childless. The novel shows various instances where the couple visits local gods and fertility goddesses to pray for a child. They try every remedy they know of that would solve the issue of infertility. But all their attempts are in vain. Even though they were very much in love, the lack of a child causes both of them a lot of mental distress. As V. Geeta notes, even though Ponna is not a “victim-wife who is taunted by society at large on account of her childlessness”, she is disturbed by the passing comments (Geeta 3). She wonders why she cannot have a child when she can turn any land into a fertile and fecund field. Ponna’s family and her mother-in-law, as a last resort, decide that she should go to the car festival at Tiruchengode temple. Desperate to have a child, Ponna finally agrees to take part in a fertility ritual at the temple festival. According to the novel, on the 14th day of the vaikasi visakam chariot festival, consenting adults can engage in sexual activity and the women won’t be chastised for having sex with men who are not their husbands. This ritual helped married women who were childless a chance to get pregnant. The novel thus presents how communities bend their norms to accommodate deviations when it has to deal with an issue like childlessness. The child born out of this union is believed to be semi-divine and is called ‘sami kodutha pillai’ or god-given child. It is this part of the novel that has caused the controversy. Ponna reluctantly broaches the topic of the festival and the couple discusses whether Ponna should go for it. Kali is heartbroken and displeased that Ponna could even think about another man. But the following year, Ponna's brother Muthu and the mothers of the couple conspired and sent Ponna to the festival while Muthu distracted Kali. Ponna engages in sexual activity with a boy who came to the festival. Kali upon realising the infidelity of his wife feels dejected and decides to end his life. The novel ends where Kali hangs on the Portia tree that he planted in front of his house. The novel thus, at least for many readers, discusses the life of a couple who is forced to navigate their life through a social stigma like childlessness and how this situation damages their relationship gradually. We see this damage initially whenever the topic of a second wife is brought up. There are instances where we find Kali pondering over the thought of marrying again. Even when he mentions this idea to Ponna only to annoy her, we witness Ponna being distressed. She lives in the constant fear that she would be substituted. It is that which drives her to do something she never thought she would do. Ponna was doing the unthinkable, at the risk of damaging her marriage forever. That is the state to which the social stigma of childlessness has driven her

to. She then goes to the car festival and engages in sexual activity with a stranger, hoping she would get pregnant. This part of the novel became controversial for discussing a sex/fertility ritual. Certain groups took offence at how Murugan presented the Gounder community and the Tiruchengode town. The novel showed that it is customary for married women over 30 to engage in sexual activities with younger men who come to the festival. This offended the community members and led to an event that changed the course of Perumal Murugan's literary life.

### **The Controversy**

The fact that the novel had a quiet readership for four years since it was first published in Tamil needs special mention. During this time, the novel received some awards and was read and discussed in the Tamil literary circles. But the translation of the book and the fame that the book received at that point started the controversy. Through translation, the book acquired a lot of attention, but a great deal of attention was also drawn to the small town of Tiruchengode and the Ardhanareeshwarar temple. I presume that this sudden rise to fame was something new for the natives of Tiruchengode. It is possible to deduce that their reaction thus stemmed from the fear that their town and the people who lived there would be marked by this novel and the ritual mentioned in it. But looking at the particular manner in which the events unfolded, the controversy seems more complex than a simple reaction. The complexity of it lies in the way this book was framed by the various groups that supported and opposed Murugan.

Towards the end of 2014, Murugan attended a literary festival in Singapore where he spoke about the book. This is said to have triggered some people back in his hometown, marking the beginning of the controversy. It is necessary to mark this moment as the *breach*. According to Turner, *breach* initiates the social drama. During the initial phase of breach, there is a noticeable transgression of the norm governed social relations"(1986 34). In the beginning of 2015, Murugan started receiving threats and the situation was worsening in Tiruchengode day by day. Here, we move to the crisis phase of this event. Turner argues that during the crisis phase, "the social field is divided into two camps or factions, one will proceed under the ostensible banner of rationality, while the other will manifest in its words and deeds the more romantic quality of willing and feeling "(1986 91). There were many organisations that opposed Murugan, and most of these are Gounder caste organisations. I presume that to the groups that object to the novel's content, the writer has deliberately included an imagined portion of the sex ritual to add a controversial element to an otherwise simple story. The allegation against the novel is that it creates the notion that there are certain festivals in Tamil Nadu where sex rituals are observed. They argue that this novel insinuates that the Gounder community functions outside the values of chastity and marital fidelity. This is used as a sellable point to expand the reach of the novel. They argue that Murugan has created such a rumour to create a kind of curiosity in the novel that would only bring defamation to Tiruchengode town and Gounder women.

Now, we will look closely at the controversial parts of the novel. Luckily, somebody has already arranged the contentious bits of the novel neatly into a booklet in the middle of the crisis phase.

### **Circulation of the Booklet**

Eight pages of the 120 page novel *Madhorubagan* were printed as booklets and distributed in Tiruchengode town, the author's native, especially among women and caste associations near the Ardhanareeshwarar temple. A pamphlet explaining the situation was also attached to the booklet. Neither the pamphlet nor the booklet had the names of any individual or organisation that would reveal which organisations or people are behind it. They only carried four phone

numbers. These booklets were also circulated in wedding auditoriums during that time. Weddings, interestingly, are places where a large number of people belonging to one caste assemble. This is because caste communities in India strictly practise endogamy. This kind of circulation would have helped in uniting the Gounder community against the writer. The booklet includes pages where the writer introduces the fertility ritual. It described how men and women meet at the 'temple hill mandapam' (gazebo) and after sunset, it is possible to see mating bodies lying everywhere in the 'naangu ratha veethi' (four chariot streets). The pages of the novel that were circulated along with a pamphlet reveal some important aspects of how this scandal was devised. The booklet starts with Page 84-85, which describes the car festival. Certain paragraphs are underlined, thus drawing attention to the contentious parts of the novel. Underlining also slightly displaces the context of these descriptions. The underlined paragraph opens with the description of certain rituals in Tiruchengode and how Kali's mother tells her son that they need to send Ponna to the fertility ritual at the chariot festival. But in this paragraph she also talks about how her family has carried the deities during the festival procession. "People in my father's house are entitled to carry the deities. And they have been doing so till date. I was born in that family. Will the gods fail to show me a way?" (84). This here is a caste marker. Such temple rituals are performed by certain families of a particular caste and cannot be done by people outside that caste. The aim of bringing focus to this paragraph is to show that the writer is talking about a particular caste in Tiruchengode. The second underlined paragraph establishes that the mating ritual happens on the 14th day and all men who set foot in Tiruchengode that day are regarded as gods. Page 86-87, which is the second page of the booklet, discusses the 14th day of the festival. The paragraph that is underlined in this page talks about how marital norms are relaxed on this particular day. It reads, "At the peak of the celebration, all rules were relaxed. The night bore witness to that. Any consenting man and woman could have sex. In the narrow lanes, on the fields around the village, in the rest stops on the hill, and on the open surfaces of the rocks, bodies lay casually intertwined. Darkness cast a mask on every face. It is such revelry that the primal being in man surfaces" (Murugan 97). The third page is where Ponna's mother-in-law advises her to attend the festival. She tells Ponna that there is nothing wrong with conceiving a child on the 14th day, that in fact it is a tradition. Page 118 reveals some concerns of Kali about the caste of the man that might sleep with Ponna. He says that if she sleeps with an untouchable man, he won't be able to touch her again. The last page of the booklet shows a dialogue between a clown and announcer regarding the presiding deity of the Ardhanareeshwar temple. The booklet reveals parts that claim that it is not unusual for women to be impregnated by men other than their husbands. It also talks about an old practice where young boys used to marry older girls and the fathers in law would fornicate with these girls until their husbands are of age. The booklet therefore succeeds in establishing the notion that

1. This is a historical account
2. The account is of Tiruchengode town
3. It talks about the Vaikasi Vishakham car festival
4. It talks about a promiscuous sex ritual that happens on the 14th day on the temple premises
5. A particular and recognisable caste takes part in the festival
6. That this festival is a tradition
7. Dalit men roaming around the temple ground impregnate the upper caste women who visit the temple.'
8. The novel also makes various other lewd comments about the community.



This booklet really supplemented the apprehension that the story of Madhorubagan circles around the notion that Dalit men frequently impregnate Gounder women. They feared this story would question the virility of Gounder men and the purity of their caste. The way in which the booklet progresses, creates a new narrative from these 8 pages. This is how the novel was introduced to the natives of Tiruchengode who had not previously read the novel. I infer that the distributors of the booklet mainly aim to achieve two strategic outcomes by taking these 8 pages out of context. One, by directly going into these sections without any introduction to the novel, the narrative of the booklet fails to mention that the story happens in the 1940s. Two, it takes the story out of the genre of fiction and makes it appear like an account or a description of the festival. The people who read these 8 pages without any context would be of the belief that Perumal Murugan had deliberately tried to tarnish the reputation of Tiruchengode town. The goal was to create civil unrest and public opposition against the author but also to bring the people of Tiruchengode town together to mark their opposition to the novel. The strategy of circulating these 8 pages was successful in that it mobilised the community and forced the district administration to take notice of the issue. At this point, the novel is not only placed in a completely different context, but also accessed by an entirely new readership. Even though it is just parts of the novel that was circulated among this new category, it is still their idea of what the novel *Madhorubagan* is about. The novel in its usual reading circles and in literary festivals was read as a nuanced piece of literature that discusses caste and gender relations within a caste community. But at this important juncture where selected pages are curated in a different manner, the narrative is framed in a different way. This framing leans towards creating the notion that *Madhorubagan* is a scandalous representation of Gounder community and its women- it treads this dangerous line between fact and fiction, not for literary-aesthetic purpose or for the necessities of form, but for confusing and discrediting a community. The booklet really reminds you of this Jain parable that is mentioned in *Censorship: A world Encyclopaedia* by Derek Jones. The story is of six blind men trying to identify an animal by touching it. Each of them touches a different part of the animal and guesses it to be a rope, a snake, and a tree trunk. None of them could guess that the creature they touched is an elephant. This is exactly what the booklet did. It gave part of the novel to a group of people who were unequipped to understand a novel, or the tradition of novel writing which resulted in them misinterpreting it.

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