

**Representation of Ancient South-Indian Culture: A Study of Perumal
Murugan's *One Part Woman***

Satyajit Pal

Bankura, West Bengal

M.A.(English), B.Ed.

We often use the word 'culture' without knowing its original meaning or usage. The word 'culture' is not a very easy term to define or it does not carry a simple interpretation. Rather, it has many references and significances. The word 'culture' has been derived from the Latin word 'cultura' which means growing or cultivation. Though in its origin the word 'culture' was related to cultivation and farming, later on it relates itself with the cultivation of literature, art, laws and customs. Culture is a way of life. The food you eat, the clothes you wear, the language you speak in and the God you worship all are aspects of culture. We can say that culture is the embodiment of the way we think and do things. To signify the word we should throw some light on the works of Mathew Arnold who has written a book on it. In his book *Culture and Anarchy* Arnold has explained the term 'Culture' as a special intellectual or artistic endeavours or products of any social group. He emphasizes that sense of culture which is more closely related to the aesthetics than to social science. Edward Tylor in his book *Primitive Culture* demonstrates that culture is "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society". Another interpretation of the culture is given by Matsumoto in his book *Culture and Psychology* where he has defined the term as '... the set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviours shared by a group of people, but different for each individual, communicated from one generation to the next." In its definition of the term Matsumoto has more similarities with the thought of Edward Tylor than other critics. In addition to its plethora of meaning and references the term 'culture' is associated with many other ideas and concepts like 'high culture',

‘popular culture’, ‘ideology’, and ‘hegemony’. Raymond Williams calls culture “one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language.”(p-87). Williams has suggested two or three usages of the word ‘culture’. Firstly, the word ‘culture’ indicates ‘a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development’. Secondly, it suggests ‘a particular way of life whether of a people or a period or a group’ (Ibid). Finally, Williams suggests that culture can be used to refer to ‘the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity.’(Ibid). Culture as a particular way of life includes various rituals and practices in a community such as celebration of Durga Puja, Christmas, Good Friday, Eid, Muharram, and any other carnival or fair.

The recent study of culture draws its sustenance from structuralism, post-structuralism, and post-modernism. And being influenced by the philosophy of these literary theories cultural studies has urged the cultural critics to deconstruct and erase the distinction between the high and low or elite and popular culture. Most of the cultural critics are of the view that after the World War II the distinctions among high, low and mass culture collapsed. The present research paper would highlight how Perumal Murugan has represented the ancient Tamil culture and at the same time, how he has uplifted the folk and marginalized cultures of ancient Tamil society in his one of the popular novels ‘*One Part Woman*.’

Perumal Murugan is one of the finest modern writers in Tamil language. His novels are rooted in the western region of Tamil Nadu where he was born. Naturally, his works are soaked with the thoughts and ideas drawn from the rich cultural heritage of Tamil Nadu. He has upheld the ancient religious culture and the struggles of the marginalized Hindu peasants in his novels. His *One Part Woman* is a novel based on ancient and supposed cultural practices among Tamil Hindus. It is a story of a childless couple with a strong desire of having a child, depicted with sensitivity, anguish and gentleness. In this work of fiction Murugan has used actual names of places and communities.

In the backdrop of the ancient rural culture of an interior south-Indian village Murugan sets the story of his novel *One Part Woman*. In this novel the author has given a pen-picture of the life style of a certain community. As the novelist himself belongs to the Gounder community,

he has uplifted here the social and religious culture of this community- their struggle for existence, their sorrows and sufferings, cultivation and food habit, and their religious customs and beliefs. In this novel the writer has projected the interior villages of the district Kangu Nadu where he was born and had seen the humdrum life of common peasants. What the author has seen and realized throughout his life, he has molded those experiences and realizations into a unified whole. He has not highlighted any popular culture of modern India rather, what he has exhibited here is the folk culture of ancient India's social life. Thus, in this novel the author has presented the long-preserved aura and glorious tradition of ancient India.

Cultivation and harvesting land is the part and parcel of one's culture. The economy and the food habit of a community depend on its harvest and cultivation. In this novel the readers can observe how Murugan, who comes of a peasant's family, has shown his deep knowledge and great experience in the cultivation of the land and the life style of the humble mass of peasants of Tamil Nadu. Kali, the protagonist of the novel *One Part Woman*, is a representative of these peasants who cultivate the land throughout the whole year and produce different crops like paddy, millet, ragi, and ground nuts. Kali has a beautiful barnyard where he spends most of the time during day and night with his pets and cattle:

“Fencing it around with dried, thorny twigs, Kali had kept his barnyard very well. The fence, which sagged now here, was strewn with creepers here and there...And then, of course, there was the portia tree. It had spread, arresting time in its branches. In its shade were tethered two bulls and a cow.” (p-122).

This barnyard is the most private place of Kali where he loves to refuge and feels ecstasy in his leisure time. His feelings for his barnyard have been expressed beautifully in the following lines of the text: “The barnyard occupied his mind wherever he was. It was only there he felt safe. It was enough just to be there and talk to the cattle.” (p-70). In this heavenly abode he bares his heart to his beloved wife Ponna, or deep-hearted friend Muthu or uncle Nallupayyan. The people of Gounder community such as Kali, Muthu or Uncle Nallupayyan represent the common South-Indian village folk whose economy is based on the farming and cultivation.

Food habit of a community is another important aspect of the culture which has an inherent relationship with cultivation. In this novel the readers of other cultures may discover a number of food items of South-Indian Cuisine. Murugan, the new voice of Tamil literature, has chosen very consciously those food items which are actually eaten by the village folk of Tamil Nadu which goes appropriately parallel with the portrayal of common peasant life in this novel. We see the reflection of rural social culture in the food habit of the ancient Tamil people. The peasants of the rural Tamil Nadu usually take those food items which have a connection with their long tradition. Normally, in the southern states people eat mostly rice or different items made from rice. In this novel we discern different food items made from rice like *Pongal*, *Puttu*, *Kacchayam* and various drinks like arrack, toddy (a type of palm wine) etc. which are usually drunk by the Tamil peasants.

Murugan has told the untold stories of a particular community and has exposed its history. He has explored the mystery of oral myth that has been traditionally carrying some history about a community which shapes the consciousness of the characters of his novel. 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 stigmatized in the Gounder community. In Murugan's *One Part Woman*, Kali and Ponna, a couple madly in love with each other, remain childless for more than twelve years after marriage. During those twelve years, in the period immediately preceding the country's independence, they have done a complete range of prayers to various deities, vows and penances, but all the prayers remain fruitless. 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 therefore 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, on the hill of Thiruchengode, 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, including strangers hitching a ride with them to the

temple. In this scenario, Ponna's family—her mother and brother—as well as Kali's old mother, conspire to send Ponna alone to the chariot festival to receive the blessing of a child from an anonymous Sami. It is told by Kali's mother that on the fourteenth day of the festival at the peak of the celebration all rules are relaxed and consensual union by any man and woman is sanctioned. It is the belief of a community that “all men who set their foot in Tiruchengode on the fourteenth day are gods. It is god who is giving this.”(p-96). Thus the writer unfolds the humanitarian aspects of a religious culture that has an everlasting impact in the society. At the same time, he also shows the harsh reality of that impact as it tears apart the lovely bondage and understanding between the couple Kali and Ponna and creates an invisible gulf between them which can't be erased so easily.

Murugan draws our attention to the description of the division and discrimination of the people in the society according to their caste which is still an important part of the rural social culture in India. The Gounders of Kongunadu were justly famed for their ability to transform rough, wooded terrain into arable lands with their hard work and expertise. In this effort, they were aided by the landless Chakkilis (of the Telugu-speaking Arundhatiyar caste) whom they have always treated, and still do, as low-caste untouchables. Murugan describes the various dimensions of this relationship in great detail in all his novels. In this novel also the author has pointed out this discrimination among the different castes. There is a description when Ponna and her parents stopped their cart at some water pandal on their way to chariot festival. Ponna noticed that “The Chakkiliyars, in difference to the upper castes removed themselves to the other side of the pandals and drank water out of palm-fruit shells” (p-152). Again when Maran, a Chakkiliyan, with his wife and children entered into the cart of Ponna's father, his wife was aware that she did not touch any one of Ponna's family. This bias of the caste system and the marginalization of people according to their castes and creed is an age-old aspect of the Indian culture that has been nourished and fostered since the pre-historic age in Indian society.

The novel has given a vivid picture of ancient religious culture of Tiruchengode, a city of temples, and its surrounding locality in Tamil Nadu. The very title of the novel *One Part Woman* suggests that the story of the novel has some kind of affinity with the mythical form of

Ardhanareeswara (translated as 'One Part Woman'), an idol of Lord Shiva who has given the left part of his body to his consort, Parvati. When we go through the novel we understand that a great deal of light is thrown on the religious faith of people regarding the temple of Ardhanareeswara which is situated in Tiruchengode. This temple has a great influence and somehow comes to acquire importance in all matters of life of the villagers. Here Murugan, the veteran novelist, has brought out the significance of ancient religious culture which had a great impact to the social culture of Tamil Nadu. Unlike his contemporary Indian writers who are inclined to expose the western popular cultures in their writings, Murugan emphasizes on his own native culture which makes him an exceptional Indian writer. Thus he decolonizes the Indian writing and gives it a new dimension. The glimpse of the chariot festival occurred in the text is seen in all other religious festival in India. The congregation of the pilgrims to worship the idol of Ardhanareeswar, the interest of the crowd in observing the religious plays based on the Ramayana or Mahabharata, and the craze of the people to see a dance event are the representation of a typical religious festival happened in any region of India.

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