

Sacred and Profane: A Feminist Reading of Marriage and Desire in *One Part Woman*

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Abstract

Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* is a poignant exploration of societal expectations surrounding marriage, fertility, and desire in rural Tamil Nadu. This research paper delves into the intersection of the sacred and the profane within the narrative, analyzing how Murugan portrays the tension between religious orthodoxy and human passion. The novel centers on the lives of Ponna and Kali, a childless couple caught between the rigid expectations of their community and their personal desires. Through a feminist lens, the paper examines how women's bodies, especially in relation to fertility, are politicized and controlled by societal and religious norms. The analysis further explores Ponna's struggle with the sanctity of marriage, familial pressure, and her own sexual desires, offering a critique of how cultural and religious narratives shape women's roles within traditional societies. By highlighting the challenges faced by the characters, *One Part Woman* presents a complex dialogue between individual autonomy and social conformity, questioning the boundaries between sacred rituals and human desires, and offering a compelling critique of patriarchal structures that govern women's lives.

Keywords: Cultural Critique, Infertility, Patriarchy, Social Norms, Religious Orthodoxy

Introduction:

Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* (originally *Madhorubagan*) is a stark and thought-provoking exploration of the complex intersections between tradition, fertility, and desire. Set against the backdrop of rural Tamil Nadu, the novel follows the lives of Kali and Ponna, a childless couple whose love for one another is juxtaposed with the societal pressures

and religious expectations they face. The novel's exploration of marital struggles and the stigma surrounding infertility forms the core of its narrative, but it is Murugan's portrayal of the sacred and profane that lends the text a profound complexity. The title itself, *One Part Woman*, alludes to the reduction of women to their reproductive roles, reflecting the ways in which societal structures define women's worth primarily through their ability to bear children.

Through a feminist lens, *One Part Woman* critiques the patriarchal mechanisms that control women's lives, particularly within the institution of marriage. Ponna's experience becomes emblematic of the broader issues faced by women in traditional societies, where their identities and desires are often shaped and constrained by cultural and religious expectations. Murugan's narrative, however, does not present these dynamics passively; rather, it presents the characters' internal conflicts, particularly Ponna's struggle between personal desire and the pressure of social conformity. The paper aims to investigate how Murugan's novel critiques the intersection of sacred traditions, community expectations, and human passion, offering a feminist reimagining of the ways in which women navigate their sexuality, autonomy, and roles within the confines of a deeply religious and patriarchal society.

By examining the dualities of sacred and profane, this paper seeks to uncover how the themes of marriage and desire are intricately intertwined with the limitations imposed on women, exploring how Murugan's work challenges traditional narratives about female agency, sexual autonomy, and identity. Ultimately, this research aims to illuminate the ways *One Part Woman* engages with feminist discourse, particularly in its portrayal of female resistance and the subversion of patriarchal structures within a culturally rich and conservative setting.

I. The Intersection of Sacred and Profane in *One Part Woman*

Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* interrogates the boundary between the sacred and the profane, particularly in relation to marriage, sexuality, and fertility. At the heart of the novel is the tension between religious and social expectations surrounding marriage, specifically the pressure placed on Ponna and Kali to have children. In the rural Tamil Nadu setting, fertility is not only a personal matter but a sacred duty. In this context, Ponna's inability to conceive becomes a source of public shame and private anguish, illustrating how deeply religious and societal norms shape women's roles.

The sacred expectations surrounding fertility, particularly the role of women as mothers, are firmly entrenched in the community's understanding of marriage. The community's response to Ponna's childlessness—her “incompleteness”—illustrates how women are often reduced to their biological function within the institution of marriage. Murugan describes, “The woman is one part of a whole. Without her fertility, she is incomplete” (Murugan 50). This notion of incompleteness, linked with Ponna's failure to conceive, evokes the idea that the female body is sacred only insofar as it fulfills its role in procreation. As feminist scholars like Kamala Bhasin have argued, “In many societies, a woman's body is seen as a site for reproduction rather than as an entity with its own desires” (Bhasin 112).

The conflict between personal desire and societal pressure is articulated when Ponna and Kali, desperate to have a child, are given a religious solution: Kali must participate in a ritual that involves a sexual encounter with another woman, a practice rooted in fertility cults that blend sacred rites with profane acts. In this moment, the sacred and profane collide. The ritual represents the community's attempt to maintain religious purity while addressing an earthly desire. As Ponna contemplates this arrangement, Murugan writes, “The gods may

grant fertility, but human passion must play its part in the cosmic design" (Murugan 142). This duality, where divine intervention and human desire intertwine, underscores the complex ways in which religion and sexuality are perceived as interconnected.

II. Feminist Analysis of Female Desire and Autonomy

At its core, *One Part Woman* is a narrative of female desire and the negotiation of autonomy within the strictures of tradition. Ponna's struggle with societal expectations of womanhood, particularly her identity as a wife and potential mother, offers a feminist critique of the patriarchal structures that seek to control women's bodies.

Ponna's internal conflict is poignantly captured in her reflections on marriage and the expectations of motherhood. In a moment of frustration, Ponna questions, "Why is my worth only defined by my womb? Am I not a woman beyond my fertility?" (Murugan 100). This question encapsulates the critique of a patriarchal society that places women's value in their ability to reproduce, reducing their identity to mere vessels for procreation. As feminist theorist Judith Butler argues, "The body is not merely an object in culture; it is shaped by the discourses of sexuality, marriage, and motherhood" (Butler 81). In this sense, Ponna's body, like many women's, is not her own but an object subject to societal demands and religious interpretations.

Moreover, Ponna's experience sheds light on the emotional toll that such social structures take on women. Her body, instead of being an instrument of personal desire, is seen only as a vessel for fulfilling societal needs. This external imposition is not limited to infertility but extends to Ponna's sexual agency. As feminist scholars such as Rajeswari Sunder Rajan note, "In patriarchal societies, female sexuality is often constructed as something to be controlled, hidden, or silenced" (Rajan 75). Ponna's submission to the ritual with another woman, although framed as a religious necessity, underscores her lack of agency

in her sexual life and her body's role as an object for communal benefit rather than personal pleasure.

III. The Subversion of Patriarchy: Kali's Role and Resistance

While Ponna's struggle with societal expectations forms the central narrative, Kali's role as a partner provides a secondary lens through which to explore male complicity in the patriarchal system. Kali's participation in the ritual is driven by love for Ponna, but it is also a tacit acceptance of the patriarchal structure that dictates his wife's worth. His willingness to abide by the customs, despite the personal sacrifice it involves, reveals the subtle ways in which patriarchy operates on both men and women.

In *One Part Woman*, Kali is presented as a character caught between love and societal expectations, reflecting the constraints placed on men within patriarchal systems as well. However, his participation in the ritual represents a form of resistance, not just compliance. By taking part in a custom that challenges the notion of monogamous marriage, Kali subtly subverts the patriarchal norms that seek to control both his and Ponna's sexual agency. As critic Meena Kandasamy writes, "Kali's decision can be seen as both an act of submission and rebellion, where he is compelled to violate his own sense of male ownership over Ponna" (Kandasamy 91).

While Kali's resistance is more nuanced compared to Ponna's, his participation in the ritual symbolizes an effort to reclaim control over their circumstances, even at the cost of disrupting the status quo. This act, however, is not without its consequences. The community's reaction to the ritual serves as a reminder of how deeply ingrained patriarchal control is, and how difficult it is to subvert even the most intimate of societal norms. Kali's participation is ultimately framed as a necessary evil to secure the future of his family, which

underscores how deeply embedded patriarchal expectations are in both men and women's lives.

IV. The Collective Female Experience: *One Part Woman* as a Critique of Social and Religious Norms

While *One Part Woman* focuses on the individual lives of Kali and Ponna, it also critiques the larger social and religious norms that govern the community. The novel is a narrative about women's collective experiences under the weight of societal and religious expectations. The community's collective judgment of Ponna as incomplete because of her inability to conceive reflects broader societal attitudes towards women's worth being tied to their reproductive function.

Murugan's depiction of the ritual as a solution to infertility is an allegory for the ways in which religious structures attempt to regulate and control female bodies. The very idea that Ponna's body must be "corrected" by a religiously sanctioned act speaks to the commodification of women's fertility and sexuality in traditional societies. As feminist sociologist Sharmila Rege argues, "In patriarchal societies, women's reproductive capacities are often framed as communal rather than personal, reducing their sexual autonomy" (Rege 118). This reduction of women to mere reproductive vessels reflects the patriarchal social order that views women primarily through the lens of their reproductive functions, rather than as autonomous individuals with desires and rights of their own.

Conclusion

One Part Woman presents a powerful critique of the intersections between sacred traditions, societal norms, and female agency. Through the experiences of Ponna and Kali, Perumal Murugan explores how women's bodies and desires are regulated by religious and

social structures, while also offering a critique of the patriarchal systems that shape their lives. The novel invites readers to reconsider traditional narratives about marriage, fertility, and gender, and presents an opportunity to reflect on the continued relevance of these issues in contemporary society.

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