

Fertility or Barrenness: The Unending Control of Women's Reproductive Bodies in Murugan's *One Part Woman* and Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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Abstract

This paper analyses how women's reproductive bodies are treated as a site of control, arguing that women, whether fertile or infertile, become subjects of control for the state and society. The narrative of fertility and barrenness is explored through Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. Atwood's text, although a dystopia, is, according to Atwood, shaped by real-life incidents of regulating women's reproductive bodies, allowing it to be read alongside Murugan's *One Part Woman*. In *One Part Woman*, Ponna and Kali have been married for twelve years, yet they have no children. Ponna's inability to produce a child is seen as a disability, and it also strips her of the privilege that her caste has to offer. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, women are literally treated as two-legged wombs; they are constantly and systematically raped, and barren women are exiled to the colonies. The paper will examine how both texts present women's bodies as public and as something to be regulated. In *One Part Woman*, barrenness leads to social exclusion and public humiliation; in *The Handmaid's Tale*, fertility results in total surveillance and coercion. Hence, both fertility and barrenness become conditions through which patriarchal powers are exercised. The paper will also look at the intersection of caste, class, and gender in both novels. In *One Part Woman*, Ponna's infertility is seen as a threat to her purity, lineage, and social status. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred is positioned as a Handmaid because she lacks an elite status. In both cases, the women do not benefit from whichever class or caste they belonged to. In both cases, women are reduced to their biological functions. With the help of Foucault's idea of Biopower, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's work on cultural disability, Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, and Silvia Federici's analysis of the commodification of women's bodies, the paper will show how women are always rendered helpless and succumb to the demands of culture, caste, patriarchy, and the social order.

Keywords: Barrenness and Fertility, Body Politics, Commodification of the Female Body, Intersectionality, Reproductive Control

Introduction

Women's bodies have always been controlled. This is not unique to any one society or any one period in history; the basic idea remains the same across all of them: a woman's body does not fully belong to her. This paper specifically focuses upon women who are in their reproductive ages and argues that women are regulated and watched over whether they can bear

children or not. Fertility and barrenness both become reasons for society to intervene in a woman's life, and neither condition offers her any real freedom or protection.

The two texts this paper examines are Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. Murugan's novel follows Ponna and Kali, a couple in pre-Independence rural Tamil Nadu who have been married for twelve years but yet they are without a child. Ponna's inability to conceive easily ceased being a private matter. Her family, her neighbours, and her entire community make it their concern, and her body becomes something that everyone feels they have the right to manage. Atwood's novel is set in Gilead, a fictional totalitarian state where fertile women are forced to bear children for the ruling class. Atwood says "I made a rule for myself: I would not include anything that human beings had not already done in some other place or time, or for which the technology did not already exist". Hence, *The Handmaid's Tale* might be a dystopia but it is not far from the reality. The two novels are very different in setting and in tone, but the control over women's bodies becomes the common ground between these novels allowing one to read them side by side.

The central argument of the paper is that fertility and barrenness are not two binaries when it comes to how power works on women. Both are used as reasons to control them. Ponna's barrenness strips her of social value and turns her body into a community project. Offred's fertility does not protect her at all but makes her a target. Her body is watched and used precisely because it can reproduce. The paper also looks at how caste and class shape the specific forms this control takes. Ponna's infertility becomes a threat to caste purity and family lineage, which means her body carries anxieties that go far beyond her own personal situation. Offred becomes a Handmaid partly because she lacks the class status that would have shielded her, which shows that Gilead uses existing social hierarchies to decide whose body is available for the taking. In both texts, caste and class do not protect women. They only determine the form in which control is imposed on them.

To make this argument, the paper draws on four theoretical frameworks. Michel Foucault's concept of biopower explains how states and societies manage populations by controlling individual bodies. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's work on cultural disability shows that infertility is not simply a biological concern but is constructed as a social failure. Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality framework shows how gender, caste, and class combine to produce specific vulnerabilities for women. Silvia Federici's argument in *Caliban and the Witch* shows how women's reproductive labour is extracted without recognition or compensation. Together, these frameworks show that the control of women's reproductive bodies is not incidental to the social orders in these novels. It is one of the primary ways those social orders sustain themselves.

The Barren Body as Disabled Body

One of the crucial things both texts show is that a woman who cannot reproduce is not seen as unfortunate but is treated as a problem. Her body becomes something that needs to be fixed, corrected, or removed from society altogether. This section looks at how barrenness is constructed as a kind of disability in both novels, not in the medical lens but through the eyes of society. The barren body does not fit the norms of its social environment, and because of this, it is pushed to the margins.

In *One Part Woman*, Ponna's inability to have a child after twelve years of marriage makes her a target for her entire community. Her inability to conceive is not treated as a private sorrow but as a public failure, and the people around her feel entirely comfortable making it their business. One of the clearest examples of this is the way she is mocked at a neighbour's wedding. Her friend Sarasa says in front of everyone, "Despite my telling you to come early, you are arriving only now. Did you get delayed in getting your daughters ready?" (Murugan 65). The remark is meant to remind Ponna, and everyone present, that she has no daughters, no children at all. It is a casual and deliberate humiliation, and the women around them laugh. Ponna is not just being teased. She is being reminded of her place, which is below every woman who has managed to do what she could not.

The community's treatment of Ponna goes beyond mockery. Her barren body is treated as something dangerous and polluting. When a neighbour's crop fails one season, the village decides that it is Ponna's fault. Someone says, "That barren woman ran up and down carrying seeds. How do you expect them to grow once she has touched them?" (Murugan 115). No one questions this logic. Everyone seems to accept that a barren woman's touch can contaminate a field and ruin a harvest. Ponna's body is not just seen as unproductive but as actively harmful. This is exactly what Garland-Thomson means when she talks about the body that does not fit its social environment being treated as a misfit. When Ponna fails to fit the norm, she is treated as a liability to her family and the community.

The pressure on Ponna also comes from within her own home. Her mother-in-law sends the couple to temple after temple, desperate for a solution for Ponna's barrenness. When Ponna drinks a ritual preparation meant to help her conceive, her mother-in-law says, "She is drinking this so that my lineage will endure. Please let it grow" (Murugan 45). The prayer is not for Ponna's well-being or happiness. It is for the family's lineage. Ponna's body is being used as a vehicle for someone else's wish, and her own feelings about the matter are not part of the conversation. This is what Foucault's idea of biopower looks like at the level of the family. The body is disciplined and directed not for the woman's own sake but for the sake of the larger social group she belongs to.

Kali too feels the weight of Ponna's barrenness, though he carries it differently. At a public gathering, an indirect remark is made about their childlessness and "everyone turned to look at Kali. No one laughed, but he shrank with shame" (Murugan 82). The fact that Kali feels shame in public over Ponna's body shows how thoroughly her reproductive failure has become his social problem as well. Her body is not just her own burden. It is a burden that belongs to the whole household and, by extension, to the community.

Furthermore, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the treatment of barren women is far more brutal; however, it follows the same logic. Women who fail to produce children after being assigned to a Commander are declared Unwomen and sent to the Colonies, where they are forced to do dangerous labour until they die. Fertility is the only thing that protects a Handmaid from this fate. After a successful birth, Offred observes that the new mother "will never be sent to the Colonies, she'll never be declared Unwoman. That is her reward" (Atwood 127). Surviving is presented as a prize. The barren woman in Gilead is not just a social failure. She is disposable, and the state makes no effort to hide this.

The Red Centre, where Handmaids are trained, uses the image of the Unwoman as a constant warning. Aunt Lydia shows the women documentaries about Unwomen, framing their past lives as wasteful and their current fate as deserved. This is biopower working through spectacle. The barren or disobedient body is put on display as an example of what happens when a woman fails to be useful. Moira tells another woman plainly, “They won’t mess around with trying to cure you... you go too far away, and they just take you up to the Chemistry Lab and shoot you” (Atwood 216). In Gilead, the barren body is not just disabled. It is eliminated.

What both texts show, when read together, is that the social logic applied to barren women is the same, even if the consequences are different in scale. Ponna is mocked, excluded, and made to feel like a contaminating presence. Gilead’s barren Handmaids are exiled and killed. In both cases, the woman who cannot reproduce is treated as someone who has failed in her most basic social duty, and society feels justified in punishing her for it.

The Fertile Body as Surveilled Body

The fertile body is also not free. It is a watched body, a used body, and a body that belongs to everyone except the woman it belongs to. This section looks at how fertility in both novels leads not to safety but to a more intense and more systematic form of control.

In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Offred’s fertility is the reason she exists in Gilead’s system at all. Her body is valuable to the state precisely because it can produce children, and this value does not give her power; rather, it takes power away from her. The most striking example of this is the Ceremony, including the monthly ritual in which the Commander has sex with Offred while his Wife sits behind her, holding her hands. Offred describes it in a way that makes the violence of the situation very clear: “My red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher. Below it, the Commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love, because this is not what he is doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved” (Atwood 94). The language Offred uses is precise and deliberate. She does not call it rape, but she makes it clear that she is not present in any meaningful sense. Only her body is there, and only the lower half of it.

The Wife’s role in the Ceremony is also significant. Serena Joy sits behind Offred and holds her hands, and Offred notes that “what it really means is that she is in control, of the process and thus of the product” (Atwood 94). The Wife is not a passive figure. She is an active participant in the regulation of the Handmaid’s body, because the child that Offred might produce belongs to her household. This shows that the surveillance of the fertile body is not just something the state does. It is something that every layer of the social hierarchy participates in, including other women.

The surveillance also becomes internal. Offred describes how she has come to monitor her own body on behalf of the system: “Each month I watch for blood, fearfully, for when it comes it means failure. I have failed once again to fulfill the expectations of others, which have become my own” (Atwood 73). This is one of the most important lines in the novel because it shows how thoroughly the state’s demands have been absorbed into Offred’s own thinking. She does not just feel watched by others. She watches herself. She has taken over her own

surveillance, which is exactly how Foucault describes the most efficient form of control: when the person being regulated begins to regulate herself.

The way Offred understands her own body has also changed completely since coming to Gilead. She says, “I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will... Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I’m a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear” (Atwood 73). Her body used to be hers, something she used to move through the world and experience pleasure. Now it has been reorganized entirely around its reproductive function. The pear shape she describes is the shape of a womb. Her entire sense of her own body has been replaced by the state’s sense of what her body is for.

In *One Part Woman*, the surveillance of Ponna’s potentially fertile body works differently but follows the same logic. Ponna and Kali have not been able to conceive, but the community’s response to this is not to leave them alone. It is to intensify its involvement in their reproductive life. The mother-in-law tracks Ponna’s visits to temples, monitors her rituals, and manages her diet and behavior in the hope of producing a child. The community watches and comments. Every failed attempt is noted. Every new remedy is suggested. Ponna’s body is a collective project, and she has very little say in how it is managed.

The festival at Karattur is perhaps the most complex example of this in the novel. On the eighteenth night of the festival, the rules of society are relaxed and “any consenting man and woman could have sex” (Murugan 98). For women who have not been able to conceive, this night is understood as an opportunity to receive a child as a blessing from God. But even this apparent moment of freedom is tightly controlled. It is available only to women of a certain age, only within certain caste boundaries, and only during the festival’s specific time frame. The woman’s body is not being freed. It is being redirected into a different but equally regulated channel. The goal is still the same: to produce a child for the family and the caste. Ponna’s own feelings about the festival, her fear, her confusion, and the fact that Kali withholds information from her about what the night involves, are treated as secondary to the outcome everyone else wants.

What both texts make clear is that the fertile or potentially fertile body is never left alone. It is watched, managed, ritualized, and used. In Gilead, this is done through state machinery, through the Ceremony, through the color-coded system that marks every Handmaid’s body as the property of the republic. In Murugan’s village, it is done through gossip, ritual, family pressure, and community expectation. The methods are different, but the result is the same. The woman’s body is not her own. It belongs to the system that needs it to produce.

Intersectionality: Caste, Class, and Gender

Gender alone does not explain the kind of control that Ponna and Offred face. The specific form that control takes in each of their lives is also shaped by where they stand in their society’s hierarchy. Caste and class determine Ponna’s and Offred’s experience in ways that go far beyond their gender. This section looks at how gender, caste, and class work together in both texts to produce very specific kinds of vulnerability for women.

In *One Part Woman*, Ponna's infertility is not just a personal or even a gendered problem. It is a caste problem. The child that Ponna is expected to produce is not just any child. It is an heir who will carry the family's caste identity forward. This is why the anxiety around her barrenness is so intense and why it involves so many people beyond just her and Kali. When Kali is confronted with the possibility of sending Ponna to the festival so that she might conceive with another man, his first concern is not Ponna's well-being or even his own feelings about it. It is caste. He says, "If any one of them gets to be with Ponna, I simply cannot touch her after that. I cannot even lift and hold the child" (Murugan 140). The child would be unacceptable not because of anything to do with love or legitimacy in an abstract sense, but because it might carry the bloodline of someone from a lower caste or an untouchable caste. Ponna's womb is expected to produce a caste-pure heir, and this expectation is placed on her body whether she consented to it or not.

This also means that the caste privilege Ponna might otherwise have had does not protect her. She belongs to a landowning family, and in her society, that position carries social weightage. But her infertility cancels that out. Her caste status is only useful to her as long as her body performs its reproductive function. The moment it fails to do so, her position in the social hierarchy becomes unstable. She is mocked by women who might otherwise have treated her with respect, excluded from spaces she should have been welcomed in, and made to feel that she has betrayed not just her husband and his family but her entire caste.

Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality is useful here because it shows that Ponna is not just oppressed as a woman. She is oppressed as a woman whose body has failed to serve the caste system, and these two things together produce a form of exclusion that is more complete than either one would produce on its own. If she were a man, her caste would protect her. If she lived in a society without caste, her infertility might still carry social stigma, but not this particular kind of stigma. It is the combination of gender, reproductive failure, and caste expectation that puts her in the position she is in.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, class plays a similar role. The women of Gilead are divided into categories that are based largely on their class position and their relationship to the men in power. Wives are women who are married to Commanders and sit at the top of the female hierarchy. Marthas are domestic workers. Econowives are women married to lower-ranking men who must perform all roles at once. And Handmaids are fertile women who have been assigned to households to produce children.

The class system in Gilead does not liberate any of the women within it. Even the Wives, who sit at the top of the female hierarchy, are controlled and confined. Serena Joy was once a public figure with her own voice, and now she sits in her garden and knits, reduced to managing the domestic space she has been assigned. But the Wives are at least protected from the most brutal forms of control. They will not be sent to the Colonies. Their bodies will not be used in the Ceremony. Their class position gives them a degree of safety that the Handmaids and Econowives do not have. This shows that class in Gilead functions not to free women but to distribute the forms of oppression among them. The higher a woman's class, the less her body is directly at the disposal of the state.

Offred's class position before Gilead was middle-class and educated. She had a job, a husband, a daughter, and a life that was built on a degree of economic independence. All of this is taken from her when Gilead rises to power, and it is taken systemically. Women's bank accounts are frozen, their jobs are taken away, and their legal identities are erased. Offred becomes a Handmaid because the new system has stripped away every social protection she had and left only her fertility, which the state then claims for itself. Her class background does not save her. In fact, it almost makes things worse, because she remembers clearly what she has lost.

What both texts show is that caste and class do not ultimately protect women. They only shape the specific way in which control is exercised over them. Ponna's caste makes her infertility a community crisis rather than a private one. Offred's class position determines exactly how her body is used by the state. In both cases, the woman is at the bottom of every system she belongs to, and the intersection of her gender with caste or class only tightens the grip that society has on her body.

Conclusion

Both novels show that there is no version of a woman's body that is left alone. Ponna's barrenness makes her a community problem. Offred's fertility makes her state property. The two situations are different, but the logic behind them is the same: a woman's body exists to serve a purpose that is decided by others, and when it fails to serve that purpose, there are consequences. Caste and class do not offer any real protection. They only change the shape that control takes. Foucault, Garland-Thomson, Crenshaw, and Federici all help explain different parts of this, but together they point to one conclusion: the regulation of women's bodies is not an accident or an excess of power. It is how these social orders maintain themselves. *One Part Woman* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, separated by geography and genre, arrive at the same truth. Women's bodies have never simply belonged to the women who live in them.

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