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### **Feminine Quest for Freedom: A Re-reading of Ponna- Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman***

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#### **Abstract**

Regionalism has now become a vital aspect in writing, reading and analysis of literary texts and other cultural practices. At present, writings from the Tamil literature take the audience into the core of unsophisticated rural areas and also to the scenes which are unfamiliar to the audience so far. Perumal Murugan is one among the controversial contemporary authors and as a professor he has greatly contributed to the academic field of Tamil Literature. This particular research paper tries to conduct a study over the work *One Part Woman*. It was a translation of *Madhorubhagan* (2010), Murugan's fifth novel. The novel offers us a sensitive portrayal of the disappointment and gender discretion experienced by a woman named Ponna. In this novel Ponna throws out the fetters showered upon her by the patriarchal forces in the society and experiences the taste of freedom. Ponna speaks for those who suffers silently a lot and also for those who always become a disparaged figure

**Keywords:** Regionalism, Plethora, Patriarchy, Disparaged

Regionalism has now become a vital aspect in writing, reading and analysis of literary texts and other cultural practices. Contemporary Indian English literature has nestled a plethora of writings, especially those which have sprouted in from the culture with a long history. At present, writings from the Tamil literature take the audience into the core of unsophisticated rural areas and also to the scenes which are unfamiliar to the audience so far. The story, culture,

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tradition, custom and life styles of the unknown figures for all time create an enigma as well as amusement in the mind of readers. Readers often show their curiosity in reading the novel associated with unfamiliar themes.

Modern Tamil literary scene is relatively so young and the last decade has witnessed the publication of influential novels that often depicts the story of people who live on the margins of the Tamil society, especially at the hands of socially conscious group of writers like Perumal Murugan. He is one among the controversial contemporary authors and as a professor he has greatly contributed to the academic field of Tamil Literature. His important works include *Season of the Palm*, *Current Show*, *One Part Woman*, *Nizhal Mutrattu Ninaivugal* etc.

This particular research paper tries to conduct a study over the work *One Part Woman*. It was a translation of *Madhorubhagan* (2010), Murugan's fifth novel. Translation was done by Aniruddhan Vasudevan and the English translation brought great attention among the readers. All of a sudden, the novel drew the rage of the self declared protectors of Hindu culture. The novel was burnt and he was subjected to continuous persecution.

Hindu mythology which for all time prefers gender equality presents Lord Shiva as an epitome of gender equality that he has given equal importance to his counterpart. His vision of oneness created out of the binaries is conceptualized in the image of the Ardhanareeswar. It signifies the man who has given the left part of his body to his consort, Parvathy. In the Thiruchengodu hill, lord Shiva sacralised in this mythical form and it is said that it is the only place where one can see the idol of lord Shiva in this form. Perumal Murugam portrays the story of the people around this hill.

*One Part Woman* is a novel that depicts the story of a childless peasant couple named Kali and Ponna living in a small village Tiruchengode, a town near Namakkal close to Erode. It is based on an ancient cultural practice called Niyoga which exists among people living around Tiruchengode. Here the author also explores how the tyranny of caste and pathologies of a community play a significant role in destroying a marital relation between Kali and Ponna.

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In this work, Murugan presents before us a real world without any exaggerations and it is evident in his selection of names of places and community. It focuses on the life struggles of Kali and Ponna. The novel offers us a sensitive portrayal of the disappointment and gender discretion experienced by a woman named Ponna. It is a well known fact that woman is the most subjugated one in a patriarchal society. Not only in society but also in home they are under the clutches of male figures. In this novel Ponna throws out the fretters showered upon her by the patriarchal forces in the society and experiences the taste of freedom.

In India, marriage has a prominent role in the life of woman. As it says a true relation finds meaning only if it is ended in a wedlock. In our male dominated society a woman has to pass through a series of question from the exact time of her birth to till her death. The discrimination starts when a woman delivers a child. The first question is whether it is a girl child or boy. If it is a girl most of them frowns at the family members. With that disgusted feel, the girl child reaches puberty. From that time onwards she is forced to entangle herself in a relation/marriage. After a month, they will ask for pregnant related matters. If she does not show the symptoms of pregnancy, she has to go through a series of harangues from elder ones in the family. If she gives birth to a male child everyone is happy otherwise cycle of tragedy repeats as mentioned above.

Here, in this novel, the central characters are from the farming community belonging to the caste of Gounders. 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. In other words childlessness is brutally stigmatized in the Gounder community. The family of Kali and Ponna experience the stigma of being childless for the past twelve years.

Ponna is the female protagonist and the wife of Kali, the male protagonist. They are madly in love with each other and living in perfect harmony. The only thing that makes their life tragic is that they bore no child. So naturally all their hopes and dreams together culminated in their intense wish to have a child. They take great efforts to appease all familiar and non-familiar

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gods to grant their dearest wish. But unfortunately all their prayers and offerings have turned out to be a futile matter and they continue to be childless.

Kali and Ponna have done much kind of repentant acts except Niyoga which is popular in a region called Tiruchengodu. But each of them looks at this with great anxiety and fear. In Tiruchengodu hill, there situates many idols of deities who are capable of giving specific boons. Among them the most popular one is lord Ardhanareeswar. During the annual chariot festival in this temple, there occurred a specific ritual named Niyoga in which childless women would come alone to the area and had sexual union with a male stranger. Everyone in the family would support this performance and if the women gave birth to a child he would be treated as an incarnation of god. The child would be called by the name Ardhanari (Half Woman) or Sami Pillai.

Ponna and a tribal girl are the two major characters who have experienced atrocities from male members and as an end result of their bitter experiences they transformed themselves into new beings with revenge as their motif. But both of them show their revenge and attain self realization in one way or another way. Kali's mother and Ponna's mother, the minor characters, are the curses among the feminine community who naturally pave way for their own submission. She has had faced bitter experiences from the women in their community. They act more ferocious and embittered and Ponna becomes a victim of scathing attacks from them. And Pavatha, the ferocious female deity, another female figure deserves special mention here. She, the goddess, is the one who teaches Ponna to take revenge. She here becomes a representative of a true feminine spirit. Both Pavatha and Ponna are the two sides of a same coin. Both of them take their revenge in different ways. Pavatha takes revenge and curses the lineage of Kali's family for sexually assaulting a girl which ultimately leads to her death. She comes back to them as a persisting curse. It reminds us of the punishment a man can receive whenever a woman suffers or experiences danger from man. Ponna is a replica of the tribal girl as well as the deity Pavatha.

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Women were treated with great respect and equal concern in the past time. But in the present scenario, exploitation of the female gender has been always a critical issue all over the world. The novel examines how patriarchal customs turn women into victims of gender essentialism. Women are often treated as marginalized ones and so they easily fall as victims to patriarchal attacks. Among the different kinds of atrocities, domestic violence is the major cruelty that a woman passes through.

Ponna has experienced a great amount of disparagement from family members and society. She is the victim of an endless stream of taunts and insinuation from everyone around them including their family, friends, and society and even from strangers also. Here Ponna cannot maintain her feminine identity as it is encroached by many around her because of her vulnerability of being childless. This eventually leads her to the suppression of her individuality.

For a married woman, Motherhood is always claimed to be the completion of womanhood. The absence of it penalizes the woman a lot and she will be forced to shrink their lives in the four walls of a home. The accusations always be showered upon the female counterpart. Here also Ponna receives the blames. It is natural that whenever a couple encounters the tragedy of being childless, man is advised to go for a second marriage. Here also family members compel Kali for a second marriage but he rejects it. It is evident in the below lines: 'For seven years now, there had been a talk of a second marriage-both openly and secretly' (10). Some elders suggested to Kali that 'That is just how some cows are. No matter what you do, they never get pregnant. Just quietly change the cow' (10).

Kali never expresses a desire for a second marriage because he has a fear that if the second wife does not conceive, people will mock at his infertility. Ponna really believes that his hesitation is because of his concern towards her. She is again nullified into a neutral character without any feelings. For getting pregnant, Ponna suffers a lot. She does each and every penance suggested by everyone without any hesitation. She received each and every advice without bothering whether it is well intentioned or with some sadistic purpose. She is made to drink bitter infusions made with neem leaves that are handed to her by an 'auspicious' widow. She also takes

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the adventurous walk on a dangerous rock near a temple to bribe the gods for getting the boon of pregnancy. As a convict, she is again and again shown the submissiveness of a woman.

When the penalization has gone beyond the control she bursts out of rage. She showed the courage to throw away the chain of control over her by the patriarchal society. She openly declares her decision to participate in the practice called Niyoga. The following line substantiates the point: 'if you want me to go for the sake of this wretched child. I will' (108). This completely shatters the mind of Kali. The patriarch in him gets irritated and starts to keep a distance from her. His dubious mind has haunted him every day but the news of her menstruation has made him happy as it is a proof of her chastity and trustworthiness.

In the moment of Ponna's sudden revelation, she courageously follows her desire to be a mother through the practice of Niyoga. At that moment she has become a liberated spirit. No woman will deliberately commit such a thing. Even if anyone commits such a crime, she will either be treated as a prostitute or as an outcast. But she gets the permission of her own elders for committing such a deed.

Her firm determination to prove her identity has compelled her to do such a deed. More than she considers it as revenge against Kali who have had multiple numbers of sexual unions with women. But the same Kali is too adamant in keeping his wife's chastity. It can be seen his statement that 'more than half the young men roaming about the town are from untouchable castes. If any of them gets to be with Ponna, I simply cannot touch her after that. I cannot even lift and hold that child' (140).

On the eighteenth day of chariot festival, Ponna with a strong will and also with the accompaniment of her mother reaches the destination. But at the moment of her boarding into the cart onwards she experiences the mental anguish. The naïve short tempered woman, who overreacted to comments and complaints, accepts the challenge. Gradually her mother disappears and she finds out her god who would set free the magic of maternity within her. She enjoys the moment with her 'like a rain soaked chicken, she huddled in his warmth'. (240)

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In a patriarchal society man is allowed to do any crimes. No one questions their actions. They can have relation with anyone they wish. A woman is not like a man and she is always a subordinated one. Patriarchal forces and their tyrannical rule create a rift among true relations and create binaries like domination and subordination, love and hatred and the like. Man strongly recommends for the purity of a woman whom he is going to marry. He can't tolerate her misbehavior with any other man even if is simply a talk with another man. In this novel also towards the end Kali calls Ponna a whore. The coming line substantiates this 'You whore! You cheated me! ... You will not be happy. You have cheated me whore...' (240).

Simon de Beavoir's statement on the subject of women is highly significant here. As she puts it in *The Second Sex* 'one is not born a woman; but becomes one' (267). It is the taxing and troublesome ambience that prompts a woman to fight against her opponents. Ponna comes out of the restraints created by the patriarchal society who always penalizes her in terms of subjugation.

Ponna is a person with an identity of her own. In the midst of anger and fear, she recognizes her moment of freedom and she captures it. Ponna speaks for those who suffers silently a lot and also for those who always become a disparaged figure. By presenting all these ideas, the novelist questions the place and role of women in the society. The novel *One Part Woman* throws a bright light into the hypocrisy both the man and society kept under their mask. Sometimes society deliberately looses the strict cultural norms in favour of the smooth existence of the society.

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