

The Impact Of Childlessness On Marital Identity In Perumal Murugan's One Part Woman.

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Abstract

Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* presents a powerful exploration of the social, cultural, and psychological consequences of childlessness in a traditional rural society. The novel focuses on the married life of Kali and Ponna, a couple who share deep affection and companionship but experience severe social pressure because they remain childless after twelve years of marriage. In the society portrayed by Murugan, parenthood is considered an essential aspect of marital fulfilment, and the inability to produce a child affects not only individual identity but also the stability of the marital relationship. This paper examines how childlessness transforms the marital identity of Kali and Ponna by exposing the influence of patriarchy, caste traditions, religious beliefs, and social expectations. The study argues that Murugan presents childlessness not as a biological failure but as a socially constructed stigma that determines the value of individuals within the community. Through the experiences of the protagonists, the novel questions the assumption that marriage gains meaning only through reproduction.

Keywords: Childlessness, Marital Identity, Patriarchy, Gender, Social Stigma, Perumal Murugan, *One Part Woman*.

Introduction

Marriage in many traditional societies is often associated with family continuation, inheritance, and reproduction. Within such social structures, couples who fail to have children frequently encounter humiliation and exclusion. Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* examines this reality through the story of Kali and Ponna, whose loving relationship is gradually affected by the expectations of their community. Set in rural Tamil Nadu, the novel portrays a society where motherhood becomes a defining feature of female identity and where a couple's social status is measured by their ability to produce an heir.

Kali and Ponna are presented as an ideal couple whose relationship is based on love, emotional understanding, and mutual respect. Unlike many marriages arranged solely for social purposes, theirs begins with genuine affection. However, their inability to conceive becomes a major source of suffering. The community refuses to recognize the emotional strength of their marriage and instead views them through the single lens of childlessness. Thus, Murugan reveals how social attitudes can transform a personal issue into a collective crisis.

In *One Part Woman*, childlessness directly influences the way Kali and Ponna understand themselves and their marriage. Initially, their relationship exists independently of parenthood. They enjoy each other's companionship and share a close emotional bond. However, repeated criticism from relatives and villagers gradually changes their perception of marital happiness.

This childless woman smells a child's ass and squirms at the sight of a child's shit. How does she expect to be blessed with a child? Ponna broke into sobs. "Kali did not know what to do.... Had she handled a child before, she would have done better. She did not know. That does not mean you call her barren". (Murugan 158-159 C-XXIII).

The absence of a child causes their marriage to be viewed as incomplete. Society considers a family without children unsuccessful because children are believed to continue the family lineage and inherit property. This cultural belief places enormous pressure on the couple. Their personal happiness becomes secondary to the community's demand for reproduction.

Ponna experiences the greatest burden because the society associates womanhood with motherhood. Although infertility is a problem concerning both husband and wife, women are usually blamed and labelled as incapable or incomplete. Ponna's identity is reduced to her inability to become a mother. The novel exposes the injustice of judging a woman's entire existence based on her reproductive ability.

Kali also experiences social humiliation. As a man, he is expected to prove his masculinity through fatherhood. The absence of a child affects his position among other men in the village. Therefore, Murugan shows that patriarchal expectations harm both genders, although women experience greater emotional and social consequences.

The novel presents childlessness as a tool through which patriarchal society controls women's lives. Ponna is repeatedly reminded that her primary duty is to give birth to a child. Her value within the family and community depends on her ability to fulfil this expectation. Foucault suggests: "Religion thus can be interpreted as a patriarchy-infested, disciplinary organization that functions on the underneath around the law. It reinforces and multiplies the asymmetry of power and undermines the limits that are traced around the law" (222-23).

The pressure placed upon Ponna reflects the traditional belief that a woman achieves completeness only through motherhood. Her personal desires, emotions, and individuality are ignored because society views her primarily as a potential mother. Murugan challenges this narrow understanding of female identity by portraying Ponna as a complex individual who experiences love, pain, conflict, and emotional struggle. "Patriarchy could not survive without motherhood." Page 43 (1995 Norton paperback)

The social pressure also affects the relationship between Kali and Ponna. Although they love each other, the constant interference of society creates insecurity and emotional distance between them. The couple becomes trapped between their commitment to each other and their desire to satisfy social expectations. Their marital identity is no longer defined by affection but by the absence of a child. "I simply cannot touch her after that. I cannot even lift and hold the child. Why do I need all that? I am happy lying around here. I don't want a child so desperately. Moreover all of you will call me impotent and laugh at me. So let it go" (Rich 140 C-XXI).

Murugan also examines the role of religious beliefs and cultural practices in shaping attitudes toward childlessness. The Tiruchengode festival becomes significant because it represents the traditional belief that divine intervention can overcome infertility. The rituals associated with fertility demonstrate how deeply religious practices influence personal decisions.

For Ponna, the festival represents hope and the possibility of achieving motherhood. However, Murugan does not present these traditions as simple solutions. Instead, he reveals how cultural practices can create complex emotional and ethical conflicts. The ritual places Ponna in a situation where her body becomes controlled by social and religious expectations.

The novel questions whether traditions that claim to provide solutions actually liberate individuals or reinforce existing patriarchal structures.

The emotional consequences of childlessness are central to the novel. Both Kali and Ponna experience feelings of shame, anxiety, and helplessness. Their inability to have children creates a psychological burden that affects their self-confidence and relationship.

Ponna suffers from constant criticism and isolation. She feels that society refuses to accept her as a complete woman. Kali, meanwhile, struggles with feelings of failure and humiliation. Their experiences reveal that social stigma can be more painful than the condition itself. This is a novel of many layers; of richly textured relationships; of raw and resonant dialogues and characters . . . Perumal Murugan's voice is distinct; it is the voice of writing in the Indian languages rich in characters, dialogues and locales that are unerringly drawn and intensely evocative. - Indian Express

Murugan's portrayal suggests that the real tragedy is not childlessness but the social attitudes surrounding it. The couple's suffering emerges from a society that refuses to accept different forms of family and identity. Finally , Ponna went to the chariot festival. She had a sexual union with a complete stranger. It is only in the morning that Kali came to know about it. Adrienne Rich explanations:

The power of a Mom has two features: The organic potential or capacity to bear and nourish human life, and the magical power devoted in women by men, if in the form of Goddess-worship of the fear of being skillful and overcome by women. (13)

Rich says that a woman is seen a goddess till the time she stays with the norms laid out by the patriarchal culture and more specifically, within the norms laid out by the man in her hour, her house, her father, brother, husband and son. If she fails to do so, she automatically becomes the shame for the family and is given names like a witch or a whore.

Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* presents childlessness as a significant social issue that affects marital identity, gender roles, and personal dignity. Through the experiences of Kali and Ponna, the novel demonstrates how patriarchal traditions transform infertility into a source of shame and suffering. Childlessness becomes not merely an absence of children but a condition that influences how individuals are perceived by society.

The novel challenges the belief that marriage is meaningful only through reproduction. Murugan emphasizes the importance of emotional connection, individual identity, and human dignity beyond social expectations. By portraying the struggles of Kali and Ponna, *One Part Woman* invites readers to question cultural practices that reduce human worth to biological functions.

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