

Culture and Woman in Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman*.

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Abstract

Perumal Murugan is a writer and lecturer in Tamil literature working in Government Arts and Science College in Namakkal district. Murugan is strictly against the caste orders and casteist origination. He is a contemporary Tamil writer, but he strictly believes even now people are following class division and caste based difference between them. For instance the current religious issues indicate that people get more insane about their caste and religious believes. Murugan gives more awareness to caste through his novel. The loveable couple, Ponna and Kali break their nuptials promises and choose their own way of life. Murugan through these novels, *One Part Woman* puts forth a message that the unwanted believes and rituals can distract everyone's life. Ponna, and Kali, are the victims of redundant cultural practices. The couples start their life with hopes and dreams but later their hopes and dreams are shattered by the social orders.

Key Words: Caste, Cultural Studies, Religion, and Religious Fundamentalism.

Culture refers to a set of practices. Culture plays an important role in understanding human life. It partially and basically involves some cultural practices, discrimination, and intolerance. In an interview with UN News Centre, Paulo Coelho, the Brazilian novelist states "Culture makes people understand each other better. And if they understand each other better in their soul, it is easier to

overcome the economic and political barriers. But first they have to understand that their neighbour is, in the end, just like them, with the same problems, with the same questions” (Coelho).

Cultural Criticism comes under the field of Cultural Studies. Cultural Studies begins in England in the late 1950s and 1960s. The renowned Cultural Critics, Richard Hoggart’s book *Uses of Literacy* and Raymond Williams’ book *Culture and Society* reveals the importance of Cultural Studies to the world. Stuart Hall, the well known Cultural theorist and sociologist, along with Richard and Raymond Williams begins the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham, which became the evidence source for the Cultural Studies.

Raymond Williams, the cultural critic, expresses that Cultural Studies cannot be characterized because the term culture is tough to classify. Hence Cultural Studies does not follow one form or does not terminate a strict sense of expression but rather it pursues a set of practices. Cultural Studies involves and analyses both scientific and artistic disciplinary as it can be called an interdisciplinary approach. In the text *A Handbook of Critical Approach to Literature*, Guerin and four other critics list four objectives of Cultural Studies. Cultural Studies goes beyond the limits of certain discipline such as history and literary criticism and it attempts to discuss many of the issues within the present scenario. Cultural Studies looks beyond its restriction and limitation. A cultural critic does not analyze a single content and the historical problems but they should concentrate on things apart from the text.

Perumal Murugan analyzes social conditions such as gender discrimination, caste discrimination and cultural practices through his novels. Murugan tries to convey social and cultural injustice among the society. Murugan does not focus only on the contemporary social issues but also focuses on the consequences of social injustice in the society. His characters are suffering from various social discriminations and are affected by internal struggles. His novel *One Part Woman* reveals the rich culture and greatness of Tamil Nadu at one hand, and the dark side of superstitions and unrightfully rituals at the other hand. This becomes the prominent reason for the misery of the couple. It portrays the pain and suffering, the couple witness in the novels.

Cultural Studies is partially engaged with politics. Cultural Studies aims to analyze the socio-political problems in society. Cultural Critics consider themselves as a resistance. They inquire

struggles of the contemporary society with their own experience. The critics know the atrocities and exploitation prevalent in the society. They are offensive about the unequal treatment within the society and argue with colonial power about the class divisions followed by the society.

Murugan portrays the contemporary issues such as caste injustice, intolerable religious practices, and religious violence in his novel. Both novels, *One Part Woman* portrays the story of a couple who become the victims of superstitious beliefs and customs and suffer for their very existence. This shows that even today the atrocities of caste takes an evil role in this society. Murugan's *One Part Woman* condemns the unrightfully ritual practices and superstitious belief and which take place in the society.

Religion and rituals take an important role in India. India has many religions and subdivisions. All religions believe God as the superior source. People forget brotherhood and humanity and follow evil practices in the name of God and adhere to a different religious format. Murugan highlights the fact that most of the religious' superiors are dishonestly corrupted because of the money they receive from the ordinary people and the wealth that they attain from them.

In the novel *One Part Woman*, the couple Kali and Ponna spend more money as offering to various temples and pray to various God for a child. Murugan critics this notion through his characters Kali and Ponna as, "In the matter of offering prayers, Kali and Ponna left no stone unturned. They did not discriminate between small and big temples. They promised an offering to every god they encountered. For the forest gods, it was a goat sacrifice.... For some gods, the promises even doubled" (*One Part Woman* 47).

The couple are ready to offer anything for God but no God answers their prayers. Kali and Ponna pray and promise offering in *Devatha Shrine*, *Dandeeswarar temple*, *Karattur Murugan temple* and *Maladikkal* or 'barren rock'. They make *pongal* in front of the temples and serve it to others. They even sacrifice blood to God and gives money to priests. Finally, the novel portrays Ponna offering her life to God in *Karattur temple*.

The *Gounder* community believes the land owners have a male child, cattle, and orchards for their own. Infertility is considered as a curse. The ancient people follow the *Karattur temple* rituals

were woman are allowed to sleep with any men and get children from them. For that they select the idol of *Ardhanareeswarar* or *Madhorubhaagan* which is male and female partially conjoined into one. It is the symbol of infertility or completeness but people pray to *Madhorubhaagan* for fertility. Society compels Ponna to attend the ritual and it creates a gap between the couple Kali and Ponna.

Caste system is considered as a part of religious fundamentalism. Caste is one of the most important sources in the culture. Caste system exists in various parts of the nations. The current caste system is a production of historical development. The caste system comes from Varnas but this concept has some resistance from people. Dwarakanath Gupta in his text *Socio Cultural History of an Indian- Caste*, remarks four theories about the origin of the caste. Based on these theories India has four castes- Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vysyas and Sudras.

Brahmins are considered as superior to other castes. On the other hand Sudras are considered as inferior to others. This system is commonly followed by people a century ago in India. Today there are more than multi thousand castes and sub-caste in India. Caste system includes being prominent and unimportant, being superior and inferior and touchable and untouchable. It is horrific instead of admirable, inconvenient instead of improvement and hopeless instead of hopeful in human race.

Members in the caste are decided by birth. Each caste has their customs and culture. Lower caste people are forbidden to touch on the things of upper caste. On the other hand, the upper caste persons should not touch the lower caste. If they touch they will become polluted. The society compels them to perform certain ritual to regain their normal status. Education and globalization marks some changes among the people. People start to believe that every person has some rights to choose their own life. Even today murders and humiliations are happening in the name of caste system.

One Part Woman clearly shows the current situation of society that is still seriously followed by the caste system. In India particularly in rural areas, everything begins and ends with the name of caste. Gupta has pointed out similar views in his text *Socio Cultural History of an Indian- Caste*. Gupta finds that the rural regions are more affected by caste institution. Gupta points out that the majority of Government institutions such as district councils, state cabinets and state administrations

are dominating the caste and social classes. On the view of foreigners', India is an independent nation and non-religious country, while the people follow and fight for caste discrimination among them.

In *One Part Woman* the couple is ready to do anything for a child. But they are not ready to adopt a child from other caste region. Kali remembers what Ponna once said to him, "If it came to adopting a child, she would prefer one from the same caste" (229). Kali does not allow Ponna to participate in the eighteenth day ritual at *Karattur*, because, he is afraid of her participation with an untouchable. Murugan expresses Kali's anxiety through this line "More than half young men roaming about town from the 'untouchables' castes. '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'" (140). Throughout the novel the couple is split between the desire for a child, unconditional love for each other and the hatred to the outcaste people. The novel finally portrays how even if they get a child, the child cannot be accepted as their own. The Goddess *Pavatha's* gift provides a pathetic end.

Murugan is also victimized by religious violence in his own place by the publication of the novel *One Part Woman*. The novel *One Part Woman* is first published in 2010. Later the three revised editions are published. In 2012, the novel is translated into English by Anirudhan Vasudevan. In 2014, the book faces several controversies by political and religious parties, claiming that it greatly humiliates their God *Madhorubaagan* and the females of the particular region. The temple has a unique ritual followed at the special occasion of the chariot festival.

During the chariot festival, the childless women of the community without any restriction are allowed to have relationship with any man for a night. The children born out of this particular ritual are considered as God's children. After his controversies Murugan has expressed his views in an interview. He does not criticize God but criticizes senseless rituals followed by people in the name of God. Murugan is an atheist, he believes religions and God help the people to forget their sorrows from their life.

India is a country which gives freedom of speech, freedom to express one's feeling through writing. But the above incident proves there is still some restriction to express one's feeling truly because of the political and religious party's interaction within the society. The novel *One Part*

Woman speaks about the great God *Madhorubaagan*, who is half man and half woman. The God is incomplete without the female part.

In Indian tradition, women are represented in three images as maker, guardian and destroyer. The Goddess 'Shivani' is represented as a 'creator', the Goddess 'Bhavani' is considered as a 'protector' and the Goddess 'Kali' is considered as a 'destroyer'. The Indian tradition describes the woman either as "Devi" or "Dasi" and as a human being the woman is nothing. The society gives respect and honour to women by worshipping them as a Goddess. This raises a question about the contemporary women's situation in India.

At one extreme level, women are treated and worshiped as a goddess, mother and nature. On the other hand, they are considered as slaves and weaker sex. Murugan shows the pathetic situation of women in the contemporary era. Society speaks about science, discovery, development, education and globalization but can never see improvement in the matter of respect to women. In *One Part Woman*, the writer shows a male dominating society which considers women as an object.

Murugan firmly writes about the Devadasi system which is happening among the people. People follow *Devadasi* system as a culture and compel women to attend the ritual in the name of God and Religious sacraments. Kali's uncle Nallayyan often visits *Devadasi* Street for his pleasure. He finds a woman for his companion from there and brings her to his home. Some weeks later he chases her from his home, because she asks a *thali* and a child from him. Nallayyan considers Ponna as a sister and encourages his mother to live for herself, but he behaves awfully to *Devadasi* woman. Murugan shows the cultural failure through Nallayyan's character in the novel *One Part Woman*.

Women are considered as a secondary class and treated as an object. Violence against woman is considered one of the brutal and wild spread evil of our time. According to such researchers, forty percent of women around the world have experienced physical and sexual violence by men. Murugan illustrates the attitude of the male towards the female through his novels. In Kali's absence Ponna feels threatened. She knows some brutal men are watching her with the ravenous eyes. The people openly state that Kali is a useless fellow and start to sympathize towards Ponna. They feel that if they do so Ponna will come with them.

Moreover, the men have some bet with each other. Karuppannan, an owner of a palm grove, is often disturbing Ponna. One day Ponna bursts out her emotion and starts lamenting. “Isn’t it because I have no children that people look at I like this way? She cried. ‘If I had the blessing, would I have to suffer this disgrace? Every dog thinks I am just a stone standing at the street corner that it can rub itself against me’” (101).

Superstitions are considered as a part of our culture. It is like a contagious social problem. In India particularly in rural areas regardless of the educated or uneducated people follow these kinds of beliefs. Certain superstitious beliefs as Sati and human sacrifice are strictly followed by the ancient society. Sati practice is considered as prestigious and believes to raise family status. This leads them to the wrong path. Even now people are ready to do anything for their betterment. This imprudent thing is questioned in Murugan’s novels.

The childless couple Ponna and Kali finally decides to search the reason for their infertility. Kali's mother urges them to visit *Kaliyur* astrologer. She believes that the astrologer might give them a solution. But it is the beginning of their misery. On meeting the astrologer says “There is some curse that you have inherited. Everything will be all right if we find out what that is and make offering for appeasement” (20). This compels them to analyze their ancestor’s history, and they understand the three curses from Kali’s family. Ponna believes it as one of the reasons for their infertility. “When she heard what his grandmother had to share, she lamented her fate at having to marry into a family with so many curses weighing it down” (28).

Kali's mother has a superstitious belief that “To receive something from a woman in white is like receiving something from a woman in white is like receiving something from the goddess herself” (45). Ponna does not conceive after six months of her marriage, which arise a doubt of her pregnancy to Kali's mother. So her mother-in-law decides to give her treatment to bear a child. Her mother-in-law uses many bitter shoots and neem leaves to prepare the medicine.

Cultural Studies follows not only the specific cultural work that is produced but also the means of production. Similarly, Murugan’s novels show some stubborn social practices and describe its further consequences. His novels discover the harmful events of religious fundamentalist that play an aggressive role in frightening its victims. Urgency arises to protest against the usual traditional

structure of religion which utters the existence of the innocent people through its irrational and unconcealed discourse.

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