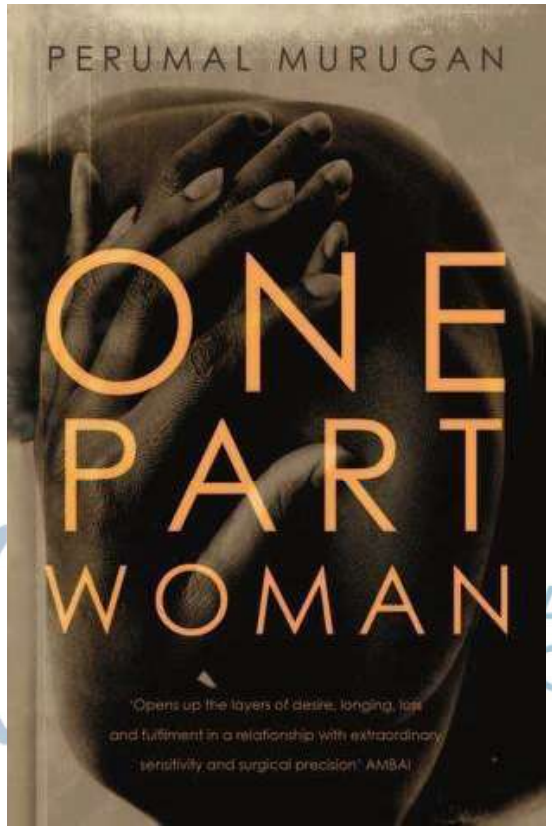
Book Review

One Part Woman

Author: Perumal Murugan



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Language: English

Pages: 240

Reviewed by: Samyuktha B

Introduction

"One Part Woman", originally "Maadhorubaagan", is a translated work of fiction by Perumal Murugan, a renowned author of critical acclaim. The translator Aniruddhan Vasudevan, a scholar in the subject of Anthropology, does a decent job of conveying the essence of the text. The original name of the book comes from a deity who is depicted as the androgynous form of Lord Shiva. The plot revolves around the lives of a young couple, Kaliyannan and Ponnayi, who bear the brunt of society for being unable to conceive and how their childlessness affects their marital life. Set against the backdrop of conservative and casteist villages of Tamil Nadu, this book traces the journey of the protagonists - Kali and Ponna- as insults are hurled at them for their inability to become parents. Both men and women shun them from attending auspicious festivals or including them in anything valued as necessary. The hardships they go through do not deter them from being in love. Despite twelve years of marriage, the man's lust for his wife is depicted in various instances. The crux of the story lies in the social essentialisation of women as mere child-bearing animals and the patriarchy entrenched in our society that treats a childless woman as the "non-norm" Also, the decisions in the life of a woman as a social agent are affected by the "rules" of the community. The couple's happy marriage is in shambles due to the wrath of such baseless superstitions and norms. (Murugan, 2010).

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About the Author

Perumal Murugan, who hails from Tamilnadu, is a prolific writer who is known for his dramatic storyline and the ability to communicate the emotions of the protagonist to the readers in a simple yet effective way. His literary career began with the publication of short stories, and his first novel was published in the year 1991. Most of his works revolve around the Kongunadu region of Tamilnadu because of his association with the place. He rose to critical acclaim with the publication of "Maadhorubaagan" in 2010, but in 2014 he was subjected to controversies, and litigations were filed against him for dishonouring the local deity of a temple which had allusions to the title, which the Madras High Court later cleared. As a professor of the Tamil Language, he has been a faculty and currently heads the Tamil Language Department of a government college in Attur. Some of his translated works include A Lonely Harvest and Trial by Silence (2018), both of which are the sequels of One Part Woman, Poonachi-The Story of a Black Goat (2017), and Estuary (2020). The commercial success of the books in both

Tamil and English is notable because of the sensitivity of the issues which he addresses. He delves into storytelling with the sole aim of capturing the readers' attention to the vices in the society that he wants to acknowledge.

Background

The story is set in the 1940s in the villages of Thiruchengode, which is home to numerous temples of historical importance. The temples of significance in the textual context are the Devatha or Maadhorubaagan and Karattaiyar Temples, which occupy either side of a hill. The tale of Devatha or Maadhorubaagan is instrumental to the plot. Devatha and Maadhorubaagan are often treated as adaptations of one another. The statue of Maadhorubaagan as a half-woman and half-man symbolises oneness, meaning a man needs to accommodate his woman within him, and it also depicts that a man can be feminine. The legend goes that the deity Devatha was a child of the local tribal community who strayed into the forest during which she was raped and murdered by a group of higher caste men from the village, and a few days post the incident, a flowery odour started emanating from under the tree where she was brutally murdered, and the villagers erected a statue in her honour. There was also a tale of the curse associated with the lineage of the men who had abused her that no man in their family would beget a female child, and if ever a male child was born, it would not live to see adulthood. This assumes significance because of the rituals associated with God, which is that to appease the anger of God, she is celebrated every year for eighteen days. This is substantial to the plot because of the event that takes place on the eighteenth day when extramarital sex, which is prohibited in a normative society, is permitted to give any childless couple a chance to have a child. The woman who is involved can choose any man to "impregnate" her whom she is to consider as a "God". (Murugan, 2010)

Kali and Ponna are a married couple who belong to one of the prominent higher castes in the village. They are a childless couple often taunted by the society for being so. Kali is mocked by men for his apparent impotence and Ponna for being infertile, which becomes the topic of discussion in any event they attend. Their attempts at trying medicinal herbs and to appease the gods with the hope of getting a child all end in vain. Despite these failures and insults, the passion that exists between them does not fade, and they learn to explore each other's sexuality through the years. However, the "elders" in the family are worried about the couple's future because, according to them, only a child can "complete" a family. Seerayi, Kali's mother,

discusses the eighteenth-day ritual with Ponna's mother, who agrees to it. Seerayi then takes up the conversation with Kali, who shudders at the thought of his wife mating with another man and refuses to assent to the "vulgarity". He even stops Ponna from going home for the festival for two consecutive years. But, both their families decide to take matters into their hands. Muthu, her brother, takes Ponna to the eighteenth-day ritual giving her the false premise of Kali's acceptance, who is ignorant of the occurrence. She, thus, goes through the ritual, and Kali, who had trusted his wife not to go to the festival, has his heart broken. (Murugan, 2010).

Analysis

Patriarchy in the guise of love

The novel, though written from a male perspective, tries to subtly yet compellingly capture the essence of patriarchy. Kali as a husband, is devoted to his wife, and incidents of his loyalty are conveyed to the readers when he talks about his unwavering love towards her despite their long childless marriage. But he also expects his wife to be at his service, both sexually and emotionally, at any point in the day, which shows that his understanding of masculinity is rooted in hegemony over women. Murugan uses the phallocentric symbolism of a tree to characterise and compare Kali's fertility to that of the tree's flowering. When a discussion on remarriage is brought up, he tries to consider it, but when Ponna is given the choice of having another man to impregnate her, he deftly refuses. He also starts doubting her chastity and innocence because he thinks she would assent to exploring the option of involving herself with another man. A socially constructed institution like marriage is grounded on "private patriarchy", which is the subjugation of women in a household or any private occupancy, and "public patriarchy", where the women are not given the freedom of choice in the public sphere (Soman, 2009). An ontological perspective of patriarchy shows that the essentialisation of women as emotional beings is inherent when the author portrays Ponna as an individual with no temperance.

Superstitious beliefs in maternity

Childlessness is the core subject in discussion throughout the novel. The women in the novel- Ponna, Seerayi, her mother-in-law, Ponna's mother and her sister-in-law- form an integral part of the narration because the women ostracise Ponna in her own family for having

a "vacant" womb. Her duties as a wife are criticised as she did not bear a child within a year of marriage, which can be compared to the discourse by Derrida on the representation of women where she had questioned the necessity to choose between being a wife and a mother (Hird, 2003). Her infertility was compared to that of barren land, which can be seen as inhumane. The physical and emotional torture that she accustomed herself to for having a child is beyond the comprehension of an urban woman. When the radical libertarian feminist Shulamith Firestone talks about women who should opt for "artificial embryos" (Tong & Botts, 2017), she does not seem to include women like Ponna, who believe that their sole purpose of being born is to enrich the lineage of her husband. The eighteenth day of the festival is essential in this context because the family of the childless woman encourages them to have an extramarital affair with an unknown person. The support of the family for such an offensive procedure shows that a woman's value is solely associated with child-bearing.

Caste and Gender in Indian Villages

Crenshaw's intersectionality can be used to address the caste connotations and incidents mentioned in the novel. Evidence of rampant casteism in the villages of Tamilnadu can be seen when Ponna, despite her maternal instincts to embrace a child of a lower caste worker, abstains from doing so because of the social hierarchy in the caste structure. The intersectionality theory focuses on identifying the intersection between two or more issues that affect an individual, for example, the Dalit woman whose child Ponna wishes to play with prostrates before her, which is a symbolic representation of occupying the lower echelons of the social strata, and she, as a woman is further marginalised and stereotyped. Ponna though not a part of this intersection, fails to acknowledge the disadvantage of the Dalit woman showing that sisterhood was not present in that. Ponna, despite her yearning to mother a child, makes an effort not to "pollute" herself, but as the story unfolds, she goes on to mate with a man of unknown identity, which seems contradictory to the values that she holds as an upper caste woman. With his exemplary writing skills, the author urges us to understand the stark differences that exist even among women in the same community. As a casteist patriarch, Kali is at odds with his brother-in-law concerning the festival where Ponna is to be impregnated, as they would not know the caste of the person whose child he would have to father, and this is also testimony to the theory of purity and pollution.

The author's ability to traverse the childless couple's journey is effortless, and the plot continuity seems to hold its readers in place. A topic as sensitive as this requires extensive research, which the author has carried out, which is evident in his description of the rituals and the deities in discussion. His metaphorical allusion of a Portia tree to Kali and Ponna's relationship shows his literary prowess. His views on gender roles and prevalent stereotypes in Tamil society show his ability to address issues from a feminist perspective. The book also touches on the aspects of superstition and belief in the Indian villages, which translates to patriarchy in the households, and the essence of this phenomenon has been captured clearly. Childlessness as an issue among the couple is addressed from both Kali and Ponna's point of view, which is commendable because pregnancy is often associated with motherhood, and the role of a man in raising a child is ignored.

Conclusion

Perumal Murugan, in his "One Part Woman", attempted to analyse the dynamics in a heteronormative marriage and the community influence in maintaining the sanctity of the institution. The entire community's identity, which is rooted in superstition, is questioned when these beliefs are thrust on the couple. The power of the society over an individual which forbids freedom of choice is conveyed compellingly. The narrative technique of describing the age-old traditions that destroy the marriage of a childless couple is put simply with the absence of romanticism, which justifies the intensity of the matter in contention. The topics of caste and sex that are still considered forbidden discussions have been dealt with vigour and confidence, which was contested by various groups for its outrightness. The plot, set in the pre-independence era acts as a lens to the prevailing cultural norms and provides a historical overview to the reader (Jose, 2019). Culture is a set of beliefs and values that humans hold for the regulation of society, but when individuals are excluded from the community for their inability to comply, then the culture that is given importance to human life should be condemned, which Murugan vehemently does.

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