

Portrayal of Patriarchal Violence in Perumal Murugan's One Part Women

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Abstract

Family occupies a strong position involving women's subservience in the traditional set-up. Referred to as the vital site of the subordination of women, it depicts the patriarchal and psychic relations through which social relations are plotted into relations of subjectivity. The present paper deals with the subjugation a woman faces in the name of the major role, i.e., bearing and rearing of children, a woman is supposed to play.

Keywords: Gender, Patriarchy, Violence, Subjugation

A person is born into a culture that depicts a set of thoughts shared by a group of individuals; ideas that are emblematically expressed in his conduct and artifacts. Whatever role a woman plays in the society, we find a conspicuous synchronization in her domestic, social roles and the importance she assigns to a family. In a patriarchal set up, it is assumed that a woman's place is in the home where she has a very explicit set of responsibilities based on the biological imperatives. In the context of Indian society, on one hand, a woman bears the burden of being 'mother of the nation' as Bharat Mata, on the other hand, she is confined to the margins. Mulk Raj Anand in his essay, "The Position of Woman in India through the ages" throws light on the miserable condition of the Indian woman:

"Obviously, woman in India has sometimes been exalted as a goddess, but mostly pampered as a doll or kept down and oppressed". (Anand, 19)

Indian fiction in English is full of such archetypal images of women presenting their subaltern existence where the patriarchal gauntlet is so robust that it becomes difficult for them to pierce a hole in it. Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* depicts the violence on the psyche of a woman. It originates from the ancient religious belief which is further legalized by the patriarchal grammar of belief. Ponna, the main female protagonist, faces the sexual violence due to a religious practice at Tiruchengode carnival in Tamil Nadu, the Southern

State of India. Although Murugan pointed out in an interview with *The Hindu* that “there was no documentary evidence relating to the custom and that details about it were passed on orally” (Kolappan) yet as depicted in the story, this violence on Ponna’s gendered body is legitimized because of a socio-religious practice resulting in an endless cycle of vehemence on the female race.

An in-depth study of the novel reveals that the society puts a number of demands on a woman in the patriarchal set-up. Out of these, the most important one is that of role assigned to a woman to bear and bring-up children. After twelve years of her marriage, Ponna fails to bring happiness in the family as she has not been able to give birth to a child. The desire to be a mother is so strongly fostered in the mind of the female protagonist, Ponna, that she becomes a brand ambassador in the infliction of the violence against women in the name of solemnization of marriage with the sole purpose of begetting a child. The novel discusses in detail the fact that patriarchy along with religion legitimizes brutality against women. Even the tree Portia at her husband Kali’s house becomes a symbol of fertility as it provides shade to ten cots. Due to her infertile womb, she is envious of the cow that she had brought from the home of her father as “it delivered seven or eight calves, populating Kali’s barn with its offspring.” Expressing her quandary, Ponna says, “The plant I planted is flowering now, the tree I planted is bearing fruit, the calf I brought has grown and birthed many of its own, and the egg that I helped incubate has hatched a beautiful chick” (116). This dilemma compels her to inflict violence on her body, the roots of which are located at the Tiruchengode festival, celebrated every year in the Southern part of the Country.

In the Author’s Note, Perumal Murugan says, “In the villages around Tiruchengode, there are people who are referred to as ‘god-given child’ and ‘god’s child’” (244). This place becomes the epicenter of patriarchal happenings where raucous men disguised as godly figures on the fourteenth day of the festival do what they cannot do easily in general. These so-called gods inflict the violence on the gendered body of a number of barren women like Ponna harboring a ray of hope in them that their disordered reproductive systems will be in perfect orders helping them in the possibility of reproductive rejuvenation. Before reaching the last recourse, Ponna and Kali adopt many trials to pacify the local gods and goddesses. They pray the God Murugan and the Goddesses Pavatha. For sixty days, they lit sixty lamps and bow down at the feet of God Murugan. “The entire castor seed yield from that year became the oil in those lamps” (23). Even the act of gauging the rock with the accuracy of a rock lizard is again to appease the gods. According to Kali’s mother, he has done something that is rarely done by people, “You have even walked around the barren rock that one in a thousand people take on” (94).

Facing the biggest paradox of her life, Ponna faces a situation where the plan of conceiving by a god subdues all other plans. Her mother makes her aware of the heavenly powers by saying, “Her long desire of wanting a child that she could not conceive since her mother had said every man was a god that night.” The belief that on the fourteenth day, “the three gods- Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva along with their consorts are considering staying on here” (213), compelled Ponna to have firm belief in the superpowers. Ponna’s wish could be

accomplished only by intermingling with the unfamiliar faces. Standing in the midst of the crowd, Ponna believed with full conviction that these men are the embodiment of the three superpowers, Brahma, Vishnu or Shiva. Putting her chastity and honour at stake, she could not find the right god for her. She prays, "Please appear with a new face, one I am not familiar with ... Come to me with a form I like" (221). The place was enthralled with Oyilattam dancers dancing with thrilling acrobatics that Ponna even felt like joining the group of vibrant dancers. "Looking at the dancers, she wondered if men were really such beautiful creatures" (221). When a ruffled hair man wearing a dhoti appeared before Ponna, she thought for a while that it was her god but she could not think even in her wildest dreams to be moved by someone other than Kali. Addressing her as 'Selvi', he served her food which she galloped considering as a divine food. She feels "He has given me a new name so that no one around her gets suspicious" (225). Ponna's timidity could not last and she reciprocated his advances believing "He is my god. My job is to go where he takes me...Like a rain-soaked chicken, she huddled in his warmth" (225). The novel ends abruptly as Kali on his return back to home finds that Ponna has gone which leads him to breakdown and he curses Ponna for being unfaithful and deceitful. He yells, "You whore! You have cheated me! You will not be happy. You have cheated me, you whore..." (240).

The free-wheeling presentation of the destructive patriarchy is represented through Ponna at the Tiruchengode festival. The analysis of the text reveals the fact that women have been the victims of overt and subtle violence. It exposes how Indian subcontinent is still loaded by patriarchal normativity where the status of a woman is determined by the means of production. The pendulum of violence strikes with so called legitimized and legalized ways. According to Slavoj Zizek, "...the lesson of the intricate relationship between subjective and systemic violence is that violence is not a direct property of some acts, but is distributed between acts and their contexts, between activity and inactivity. The same act can count as violent or non-violent, depending on its context" (2009, 179-180). The story of Ponna depicts how women are being exploited which makes them vulnerable species and they are anchored as smaller creatures. The women are subjugated to a multidimensional violence and this violence assumes an elusive form where a force like religion is used as a whiplash.

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