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UNASSAILABLE WOMEN IN THE CULTURAL CLUTCHES AS PORTRAYED IN *ONE PART WOMAN* BY PERUMAL MURUGAN

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Culture is the identity of a group of people living in specific place. It was set by the group of people who lived during the early ages for the individuality and betterment of the people of their community, out of which few superstitious beliefs were also set due to the ignorance and innocence of man. However they were abolished in the later period with the increase in rate of literacy. The fact about culture is that the younger first learn the culture from their elders and when these young become elders they transfer it to the next generation. There is always confusion if people belong to culture or culture belongs to people.

Though people live by culture even at present, it was religiously followed by the ones who lived earlier and whoever denied to live by those socially mandated rules either accidentally or intentionally had to suffer the humiliations and punishments by the society. People, especially women were confined to the culture they belonged to. Unlike the current status of women, those of the earlier period were bound within their family and community. In spite of their controlled status in the society, women were strong in their own way.

South Indian culture with its visible differences forms an important part of the Indian culture. The South Indian Culture is essentially the celebration of the eternal universe through the celebration of the beauty of the body and motherhood. It is exemplified through its dance, clothing, and sculptures. In South Indian literature and philosophy, women are considered very powerful. A married woman is regarded as auspicious, her shakti or mother-feminine power, protects and empowers her husband and their children. Religiously they were considered to be superior but in reality their place was next to that of men.

Literature plays a major role in spreading the aspects and importance of each culture. Through the writings of many writers, the culture of south India especially Tamilnadu, is made known to people around the world. Translated works take up the pride in delivering the culture and tradition to the readers from every part of the world. One such beautiful work that exhibits the culture of Tamilnadu is *Madhorubagan* written by Perumal Murugan, and translated by Aniruddan Vasudevan as *One Part Woman*. Perumal murugan is the star of contemporary Tamil literature having both critical acclaim and commercial success for his work. He is an Indian author, scholar and literary chronicler who writes novels in Tamil. He has written six novels, four collections of short stories and four anthologies of poetry to his credit. His novel *One Part Woman* has won the Sahitya Akademi's award for translation. This novel questions the place and role of women in Indian society. It brings out the fact that Indian women are not valued for who they are but for their ability to attain motherhood and their commitment to the family unit.

The culture of Kongunadu is naturally depicted by Perumal Murugan through the characters, incidents and colloquial words used in Thiruchengode. It projects the beautiful life of the intimate couple kali and Ponna and how there comes a void between them due to the practices of the society in the name of culture. Ponna is being continuously humiliated by the people for being childless but she proves to be a strong woman

throughout the novel. There is also another woman, Ponna's mother – in – law Marayi who is an example of women being strong in spite of the suppression in the society.

When a child is born, a mother is born and from that moment onwards she sacrifices everything for her child. The life of motherhood on begetting a child is a gift from God but Ponna did not have the chance to own that gift. She was married by Kali out of pure love on her. Their love for each other had grown so much in their twelve years of marriage life in spite of not having a child. The state of being childless bothered them once in a while; still it was their care for one another that served to be the medicine to cure the pain. But it was not that easy for them in a society that considered a childless marriage as incomplete. They had to face humiliations from people every time on their inquiry about this couple not having a child and it was Ponna most of the time. Even Ponna's parents and her mother-in-law were ready to arrange a second marriage for Kali for the sake of producing a heir, which shows that the fault was on Ponna. But her love for her husband was abundant that she did not want to give up her husband to any other lady.

There are several characters in the novel that represent the society. For instance, Chinnappa Gounder to whom Kali decided to sell one of his cows since it did not yield a calf in spite of mating it several times with other bull. Gounder who had come to fetch the cow, with his eyes fixed on Ponna says, "That is just how some cows are. No matter what you do, they never get pregnant. Just quietly change the cow. If you say yes, I can fetch you on right away." (14). On realizing the hidden meaning behind these words, Ponna takes a stick and beats a cow in anger. With an eye on Gounder, as if shouting at the cow she says, "It has no sense of time and place. Shouldn't it know I was picking up the dung? It keeps stepping on my foot. It's just come to incur my wrath. Are you trying to get smart with me? I will cut off your tail you wretched creature!" (14). She was not hurt by what Gounder said but she was able to give an instant reaction in the same way as Gounder's. He did not have guts to turn up to Kali's house after this incident.

Kadhirvel, the son of Kali's second uncle stayed in their home at times. Someone always had to keep an eye on him because of his hyper activeness. He always played with the kids around and they named him water gourd. It so happened that once while playing he got an injury at head which was continuously bleeding. On hearing this, his mother became furious. It is mentioned that "As soon as she heard the news, his mother came rushing like a she-devil" (51). Without minding the crowd that was gathered, out of love for her son, she screams at Ponna saying, "She would know only if she had a child of her own! She has taken such good care that my boy's head is broken. Would any mother allow that to happen?" (51). The next second Ponna doesn't hesitate to say "Well, if you know the blessing of having a child, why don't you keep him to yourself? Why send him here?" (52). Even here Ponna is bold enough to give an immediate reply instead of feeling inferior.

Ponna has always been kind to everyone around her. At no point in the book she seems to be rude without a reason. Old people are the ones from whom love and affection is expected to be exhibited often. But here Pottupatti seems to be slightly different from this. Ponna goes with Pottupatti to the fair and even gets her some puffed rice with peanuts, since Pottupatti did not have money. In spite of this concern she tells Ponna,

You have bought so little. Do you have a child crying at home? Your husband and you are protecting an inheritance that God knows which wretched dogs will claim later. Why don't you eat what you like? Whom are you being so miserly for? A woman without husband and an inheritance without an heir are the same, they say (52).

These are the unexpected words for Ponna from the age old lady. She replies,

You and your husband had no control and you were producing babies even when you were forty five. You divided your land among them. Do any of your sons work the land now? Didn't it go as bad as not having heirs? You don't even have anyone to give you some money to go to the fair. You don't have money to buy yourself some puffed rice. What have you accomplished by bearing children?"(53).

She means that the old lady has gained nothing out of bearing children, but Ponna was happy even without a child, when compared to this old lady. Pottupatti's comparison of childless inheritance with a lady without husband shows how much stress is upon a lady without a child, even if it was natural.

It is really an embarrassing situation for Ponna in the gathered crowd when her neighbor Sarasa tells her, "Despite my telling you to come early, you are arriving only now. Did you get delayed in getting your

daughters ready?" (54). Another day when Ponna was about to perform a ritual for a girl in puberty function as an aunt, a lady drags her saying, " You stay away" (88), for the sake that she was a barren lady. When Thangavel's land did not give proper yield for the year, Ponna was blamed since she being a barren lady, has helped in sowing the seeds. Ponna proves all these thoughts to be superstitious through her words to Thangavel's wife,

You said you were in severe leg pain and begged me to go. That's why I carried the seeds. Do you think I am obliged to go and work in your field? I might be barren, but nothing I have touched has ever withered. The plant I panted 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... there is nothing I have touched that has not flourished. Anything sowed in a dry land will go waste, no matter who helps in carrying the seeds. If you – wife and husband - has taken better care of the land, maybe it would have all grown (90).

These words of Ponna's response is more than enough for any person who points out her as barren lady. She proves that she is in no way lesser than others except in not having a child. Her words prove that she is not unfortunate when compared to others.

Ponna does not consider, not having a child as a very great lag since she had a loving husband who would do anything for her. But from her part she boldly attempts all steps to bear a child. She does not hesitate to have the bitter medicines that her mother and mother-in-law gave her all the time. She along with Kali lit the lamp for sixty days in temple for all the sixty steps which would take one whole day. Ponna dared to walk around the 'Varadikkal' which was a rock, with the belief of walking around it would give them a baby even a slight slip of the step would push her to death for its height.

As proposed by Ponna's mother and mother-in-law, Kali brings up the idea of sending Ponna to the fourteenth day of chariot festival with the hope that she would not accept. The fourteenth day of chariot festival is when according to their culture, the childless women go to the festival and allowed to have open relationship with any man who visits the festival, and the baby formed out of that relationship would be considered as God given child. When Kali tells Ponna about this she says, "If you want me to go for the sake of this wretched child, I will" (86). This was a shocking and unexpected answer from Ponna for Kali. She says so because, she thinks that bearing a child at least in that way would get rid of her husband's name being impotent and would walk around with a raised head that he is also a father of a child. For this sake she boldly comes up with her decision.

Ponna's mother –in-law Marayi is another strong woman in this novel who has brought up her son Kali, as a sole lady after her husband's death. When a widow was considered to be unfortunate in the society, she was adamant that they be treated equally as others. She did all the work by herself saying, "We should not be dependent on anyone" (9). When people said that nothing would grow if a widow sows the seeds, she was bold enough to tell them that she would be content with whatever that grows and would never even mind if nothing grew. But her yield was as good as others. We see her as a lady bold enough to suggest her own son to send his wife to another man, meaning the chariot festival. Though this seems to be weird, she comes forward to talk to her son about this for the sake of goodness of his family.

The writer himself brings out the fact that women are equal to men through the words of the priest in this novel, where he says about Ardhanareeswara,

Many saints have sung his praise, calling him "Mother God", "One Part Woman", and so on. The male and the female together make the world. To show that to us, the Lord stands here combined with the goddess. In other temples, you would see separate shrines for Eeswaran and Ambal. But here they stand together as one. He has given her the left of his body. It is only when we give half of ourselves – both body and mind – to the woman that we can be good husbands. Even though we are born male, we also have feminine qualities within us. Considering all this, elders have called him one part woman. There is no female without the male, and no male without the female. The world goes on only when they come together. (27, 28)

This is an open ended novel where the readers are left to decide what would have happened but the writer makes it clear that space has occurred between the lovable couple only because of the practices in the society.

Though it does not speak about the existing practice, it clearly brings out the mentality of people in the name of culture that still prevails. This novel shows how women come up with bold decisions amidst the clutches of the culture.

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