



SOCIAL EXILE AND LITERARY CENSORSHIP: AN ANALYSIS OF PERUMAL MURUGAN AND "ONE PART WOMAN"

Baris Biswas*¹, Dr. Miazhi Hazam²

1Research scholar, 2Research supervisor
Rajiv Gandhi University, Arunachal Pradesh

*E-Mail: roddur06@gmail.com

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Abstract

This paper delves into a broader understanding of exile from a postmodern standpoint, looking beyond the paradigms of physical exile and examines the realms of social exile in modern day India where a writer named Perumal Murugan was outcasted from his society and had to rely on the judicial system of India to preserve his freedom of speech. Murugan in his novel 'One Part Woman' wrote about certain practices of pre-independence Tamil society which are considered social taboos in today's generation. This provoked angst amongst several sects of the Tamil society and they called for the withdrawal of the novel as well as threatened the author of homicide. The court dismissed the cases filed against them however Murugan had to face the backlash of the Tamil society which compromised his physical safety and had a long-lasting effect on his psyche. This paper investigates the aspects of social exile which the author faced, observed from different theoretical standpoints in order to develop a broader understanding of exile in the postmodern world and how it shapes the community.

Keywords: Murugan, One Part Woman, social exile, cultural capital.

1.1 Introduction

In his book, "Reflections on Exile and Other Essays," Edward Said defines exile as the unchangeable division of an individual from their country, their homeland. Said directs his attention to the idea of the concept of the intellectuals and writers who are expatriates of the society of their origin because of their ideas or political stand. Self-banishment or a form of socio-exile is an essential theme about writers'

and intellectuals' positions and status in light of elements of their societies or communities, politics, cultures, or simply for the sensitive topics they take towards the production of works. It is for this reason that this form of alienation can greatly influence the manner in which they develop their creativity.

The most recent instance of fallout was with Perumal Murugan, a Tamil author, who came under fire for his novel 'One Part Woman',

which was published in 2010. The novel is based on a childless couple, Kali and Ponna, living in the pre-Independence period in a Tamil Nadu district and their association with an inflammatory temple festival to conceive a child. The representation of this festival and the social practices related to it provoked protests from several castes, which demanded to withdraw the book and threatened to kill the author. It focuses on the controversy as an aspect of social ostracism on the author of the novel and the experiences expounded on revealing the struggle between tradition and modernisation in condemnatory India.

1.2 Background and Context

Perumal Murugan was born in 1966 in Tamil Nadu and Some of Murugan's novels are notably serious dramas illustrative of rural life and social realities all inclusive. "One Part Woman" is a novel about a couple Kali and Ponna unable to have a child and thus facing the societal pressure. In particular the novel describes a typical temple festival in which women who cannot bear a child can sleep with any man of their choice but not their husbands with a view of getting pregnant. This was formerly a tradition in some societies. The plot is based on the countryside of Tamil Nadu and paints a picture of religious practices, customs and traditions and the society of the region. The purpose in which this novel explores is not merely a narrative strategy but also contributes to understanding cultural traditions that were earlier active in some part of Tamil Nadu. In her work, Murugan gets to the core of the psychological and the emotional traumatic journey undergone by the main characters and the strong social critique on pressure on couples who are childless. This rich cultural and emotional landscape makes the novel a significant piece of literature, shedding light on traditions that are often hidden from mainstream discourse that are usually concealed from the society.

1.3 The Novel – Plot and Themes

In a novel titled "One Part Woman," which was authored by Perumal Murugan, social relations and individual dilemmas experienced in a conservative Indian society are being described. Based on the life of Kali and Ponna, a childless couple living in a village of Tamil Nadu. The story zooms in on issues to do with barrenness, social ostracism, and self-effort in the quest for acceptance and happiness. The couple Kali and Ponna has been married for more than fifteen years; however, they do not have children, and in their culture, it is considered shameful. The women experience high social pressure on the matters of child-bearing. When their relatives and neighbours run out of suggestions as to which gesture, prayer or rite could aid conception, the couple decides to consult the doctor.

As a last resort, Ponna's mother-in-law suggests a controversial solution: an annual temple festival during which barren women can liaise with other men in what could be termed as normal (no force) extra-marital affairs with a view of becoming pregnant. Such practice has implications to the moral and emotional development of the couple. Kali first rejects the concept, twisting at the stomach at the thought of a man, and most specially not her husband, laying his hands on her. However, he is also plagued by the fact that she is barren and that such a status is anathema to the society. Ponna finds herself in a dilemma: she wants to satisfy her husband and her family, at the same time, the expectation as well as the inhibitions regarding the festival.

The novella presents a rather painful and hard look at the emotional and psychological impacts that come with this decision for Kali and Ponna as it captures the flavour of being subjected to these social vices of the society as much as it displays the individuals' struggles in the desperate search for acceptance and happiness.

This novel shows that one of the important aspects of the culture of the people depicted there is the great pressure on those who are formally married to have children. Barrenness is looked upon as a misfortune and the couple as well as their parents feel embarrassed about it. This pressure is articulated very well through conversations and interaction of the various characters.

For instance, Ponna's mother-in-law considerably demands her come along with her in many occasions and seek for blessings from one God or another. For instance, in one scene, she says, "What is the point of all your beauty if you can't give us a grandchild? Go to the temple, pray harder." (Murugan, p. 34). This shows how women are constantly reminded and made to endure the pressure of behaving as mothers as per the society's standards.

A significant and a subject of debate is the presentation of the temple festival in which women who have no children may have permissible illicit relationships with other men in an attempt to bear a child. Being a practice that derives from rather archaic and dark age principles, it is enacted by Murugan in a way that highlights the ethical ambiguity of such practices and the guidelines of the society that sustains it. This too comes to a climax when Kali influences Ponna to go for the festival. Murugan writes, "She could feel her heart pounding in her chest. This was a chance, a forbidden chance, to change everything." (Murugan, p. 156). This moment encapsulates the desperation and inner conflict faced by Ponna, reflecting the extreme measures people are driven to by societal expectations and can lead a person to such step stress.

Nevertheless, it is highly important to state that there are some instances of the struggle against the oppressive norms and the expression of individual voice in the novel. In Kali for example, the figure is portrayed as a very loving and caring husband to Ponna and in the beginning he is quite against her

participation in the festival. His longing is depicted thus, "He could not bear the thought of another man touching her, but he could not bear their barren life either. What kind of a man was he?" (Murugan, p. 145). This dialogue highlights the complex emotions and the sense of helplessness that pervade the characters' lives, showcasing the conflict between personal desires and societal expectations. On this account, this dialogue exposes the tensions of pain and despair that envelope the characters; with the struggle between one's heart and duties.

Describing "One Part Woman" as a novel that walks through the life experiences of Kali and sets a perfect picture of how societal norms affect the lives of people and their relationships. While the controversy erupts, Perumal Murugan unfurls the dark side of the practices and the internal struggles provoked in the outsiders of societies and the plight and the strength of the character in the midst of the suffering.

2.1 The Controversy

In 2014 people from the Gounder community in Tamil Nadu issued threats to the Murugan inferring that he insulted their community. This culminated in demonstrations with flames, boycotts, and even with calls for more intimidation and assassination. Because of the pressure, in January 2015, Murugan announced the demise of the 'Perumal Murugan the writer' on his Facebook account, where he said, "Perumal Murugan the writer is dead. He is no God. Hence, he will not resurrect. Leave him alone." The Gounder community complained that the novelist has hurt the honour and tradition of the dominant caste group of the region. They claimed that the portrayal of the temple festival was crass and obscene, and this had provoked demonstrations and threats of violence. Rival groups also attacked not only Murugan but also his family members, which ensured intimidation among them. This reaction underlines the sensitive

issue of any commentary or attempt at re-reading the traditional practices in India, proving the fragile interaction between the literature and the diverse values.

2.2 Legal and Social Ramifications

The legal wrangle over “One Part Woman” colours the picture further. In early 2016, two written petitions were filed before the Madras High Court which sought to restrain circulation of the novel; the division bench dismissed the petitions merely observing that Murugan had every right to free speech. The judgment got the concerns of the prevention of literary works from unnecessary censorship while supporting the judiciary in the defines for art freedoms. Although Murugan got victory in the legal arena, they lost in social aspect as they have to face a number of consequences in terms of social life, mindset and physical security.

It was a great judgment in the realm of literature freedom in India and the rule of law that the creative work should not be controlled in arbitrary manner. Racial incrimination was spatially deconstructed in the judgment as a dogmatic assertion of artistic freedom was given in the assertion that while art should be allowed to offend the public it should not be allowed to lead to violence or hatred. However, the case also pointed to inadequacy of legal solutions in dealing with the cultural and social aspects on matters that lead to such controversies.

2.3 Broader Implications

Murugan’s case is what is seen repeated so many times in different countries. This goes hand in hand with other forms of writing suppression and social marginalization in India; so often target authors, artists and intellectuals are threatened for being uncompliant with the mainstream view. A lot of issues can be raised regarding the controversy over “One Part Woman” and freedom of issue versus sensitiveness and the urge to protect the society from establish norms of decency. It also brings to light the requirement of more tolerance from

society and better legislation when it comes to creative initiatives.

In Murugan’s case there are definitely historical precedents and contemporary parallels for censorship and subsequent excommunication from society. One could start with Salman Rushdie’s “The Satanic Verses” and go all the way down to Taslima Nasreen’s “Lajja” to name but a few examples of writers who have been severely penalized. These are the examples showing that the right of the free speech is an eternal struggle with the pressure of society and censorship.

3. Analysis of Social Exile

Exile in society means the exclusion of a particular individual from the larger society due to the wrong things he or she did or the ideas he or she holds. With regard to Murugan, the tradition holds him dear but the modern social values do not; hence he is an outcast. This tool of social control by means of such a kind of banishment has been very effective and has been previously used to restore order by eliminating spirited opposition. The public reactions and the fact that Murugan stopped writing for so long already prove how limited is the freedom of creativity in a society where literature may become a field of culture clashes.

The decision of Murugan's exile was not a personal retreat but an artistic remark on the possibilities of free artistic expression in India. His statement on the social page was too, a very touching message about the suffering that an artist goes through when under attack. Murugan's rejection by the villagers gives centre stage to a culture of discipline which penalizes any kind of transgression.

It might be argued that Émile Durkheim's theory of social integration and regulation seems to suggest that societies act as a collective, so as to establish conformity and create some form of order. For Durkheim, therefore, as we shall see, collective conscience is very essential for coordinated societies, and any variation that

is considered to be outside this is seen to be a menace to the society. Those deviations can lead to sanctions from the society that is used to punish people or a group of persons to bring about discipline in society.

In the case of Perumal Murugan, his literary work, "One Part Woman" was seen as deviance from the culture and values that were accepted in the Gounder community. The acting of the temple festival is that included controversial practices that deviated from the traditional beliefs of the community. The very harsh backlash, from protests and burning of books to threats of violence, might be a posture by the community in trying to restate its collective values and restore social equilibrium. This reaction underlines Durkheim's view that societies react strongly to perceived threats to their moral fabric and use social ostracism to sustain group cohesion and order.

The theory of Michel Foucault pertaining to power and discourse comes into relevance when considering the aspect of social exile. According to Foucault, power is exercised through discourses that define the limits of the acceptable or unacceptable in society. It defines knowledge, norms, and behaviour's; powerful people use discourses to sustain their control and quash dissent.

In such a context, Murugan's novel was filled with a contesting discourse against the traditional concept of caste and tradition in Tamil Nadu. By shedding light on a controversial cultural practice, the novel questioned and subverted accepted narratives of powerful social groups. In Murugan's work, this socially ostracizing move can be compared to demands for a ban as an attempt to silence such a subversive narrative. It is thus through the mechanism of social exile that Murugan is maintained as a means to retain holding power structures, making sure that dissenting voices are put at the periphery and the dominant discourse remains unchallenged.

Pierre Bourdieu's idea of cultural capital stresses how social hierarchies are maintained by the hegemony of control over cultural narratives. Cultural capital, in the form of knowledge, skill, and other cultural assets, is used by dominant groups to secure status and power. Those who hold and direct the flow of cultural capital hold the place for defining the norms and values for society.

Murugan held cultural capital through his literary works. In "One Part Woman," his representation of traditions threatened to turn upside down an established order based on norms sustained by dominant caste groups. This violence against him can be seen as an attempt by the groups to protect their hegemonic culture and not allow this redistribution of cultural capital, which may end up destabilizing them. The dominant groups, through such social exile of Murugan, reaffirmed their control over the cultural narrative and crushed any challenge.

Social exile involves stigmatization and labelling as deviant. According to symbolic interactionist theory, Howard Becker's labelling theory is built on the idea that society creates deviance through certain behaviours being identified and labelled as those that do not fit within the formulated norms in society. This whole process of labelling marginalizes these people, reinforces the boundaries between what is acceptable behaviours and discourse, and excludes them from the rest of the community. Murugan's description of the temple festival in "One Part Woman" was labelled deviant by his adversaries. The labelling process consisted of the framing of the novel as an attack on the honour and customs of the community, thereby legitimizing Murugan's social exclusion. This powerful social retaliation, involving threats and public condemnation, has already marginalized Murugan and is further striving toward rooting the boundaries within which discourse may be accepted in this community. By labelling Murugan's work as deviant, the community recommitted itself to its norms and

values and made sure that any breach of the same was effectively and seriously punished.

4. Conclusion

Perumal Murugan's "One Part Woman" is one of those novels that, upon publication, caused a lot of social ostracism. The novella was published in 2010 and evoked a storm of protests from interest groupings, mainly conservatives, over cultural and religious offenses. The novella is set in rural Tamil Nadu, and it pulls away the covers that are draped over the life of Kali and his wife, Ponna, a childless couple who resort to a controversial temple ritual in their desperate quest to conceive a child.

The controversy surrounding the novel therefore brings out the complex interplay between the poles of tradition and modernity that are very much part of Indian society. Traditionalists viewed with disgust the narrative of Murugan as an invasion of their culture, while the modernists and the connoisseurs of expression viewed this book as an imperative critique of some of the eons-old practices. This conflict therefore brings to fore the kind of challenges writers face as they navigate between such rich, nuanced dynamics, usually finding themselves in limbo without respect bequeathed to the culture yet trying to support change.

Murugan started receiving threats by way of boycotts and even calls for his arrest, all of which had him announce that he would stop writing and even declared, "Perumal Murugan the writer is dead." This already is quite an extreme response to the kind of pressure that societal and political challenges can put on the individuality of a writer. While legal interventions, such as the eventual adverse finding against any curbs on free expression by the Madras High Court on Murugan's right to free expression, may afford some protection, true creative freedom can only come with a change at the cultural level.

A large vocabulary of diverse opinion ensures that literature performs in a robustly free environment where the fear of backlash is minimal. This cultural change must attach value to different standpoints, and a provision must be made that will offer encouragement, allow, and practice arguing against the established tradition of thought through art and literature. This is how facilitating an environment for the exploration of different shades of the issues that don society will lead to a more emphatic and prolific cultural scene.

The case of Perumal Murugan shows mechanisms of social exile and what all it brings with it in terms of the freedom of expression and artistic creativity in contemporary societies at large. The present case of Murugan, seen from the theoretical vantage points provided by Durkheim, Foucault, and Bourdieu, shall reveal complex interlinkages involving social norms, power dynamics, and cultural capital that work in the labelling processes to achieve and enforce a state of exclusion for those who contest the dominant narratives. In order to preserve creative freedom, there needs to be a cultural space within which literature can be free to flourish without fear and where differences in viewpoint are not only acceptable but welcome

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