



THE HUMAN AND THE NON-HUMAN IN PERUMAL MURUGAN'S *ONE PART WOMAN*

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ABSTRACT

Perumal Murugan is a Tamil writer whose novels have won acclaim across the world. Though they have been marginalised for some time as *vattara illakkiam* (regional literature), the kind of issues they deal with have an irrefutable universality. The earthy idioms and typical provincial expressions, rather than putting the reader off, have surprised him by their novelty. The reader can easily relate to the fictional world he creates and the characters who inhabit it as they are driven by passions common to humanity. Being born into a farming community of Gounders, Murugan is able to recreate the deep-seated alliance and bond between his characters and the land which spawns them. This paper probes into this rootedness, trying to fathom how much the non-human world has a bearing on the humans, how it subverts as well as constructs their lives and livelihoods.

Key word: Caste factor, closure, Gounders, myth-making, exploitation, Ardhanareeswara

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INTRODUCTION

The writings from the Indian languages, to which the English-speaking, city-centred readers are gradually awakening to, have charted a course of their own. For want of a better phrase, I have called them 'grass roots narratives' to describe the emerging literatures of the States. With the availability of subtle, sophisticated translators, these narratives are carving out a niche of their own. Perumal Murugan's *Maadhorubagan*, translated as *One Part Woman* and published by Penguin India, is one such ground-breaking novel, quite slim indeed (240 pages) for the kind of controversy and book-burning it has generated. The protests from the Hindutva and communal groups led to the author declaring himself dead in his *Facebook* page. *Nizhal*

Mutram (Current Show) and *Koolamadari (Season of the Palms)* are two of his other novels which have won critical acclaim. Considered for a long time writings from the margins, these literatures are announcing their presence to the Indian English fiction with a great deal of clarity.

As these writings are about people who haven't had their voices heard, they come saturated with practices that have been with the people for centuries and narrated in a pithy, earthy idiom that will appear at once strange and fascinating. This research article proposes to itself the study of the non-human world and its impact on the human, and how inextricably these two are linked in order to produce the particular closure that *One Part Woman* reaches. The land, the animals, the crops, the gods

configure the non-human world; the rituals, the laws of inheritance, the caste factors, the gender roles and sexuality make up the human.

The Land

The land in and around Tiruchengode, which is the location of the novel, was once a rocky, difficult terrain covered with rugged forests. The Gounders are the dominant caste who, through sheer hard work, cleared the land and made it arable. Paddy, millet, corn and coconut grow there only after a great deal of efforts has gone into the cultivation of them. If the land owners are Gounders, the castes which subsist on them are the Chakkilis and Sanars, the latter doing the job of toddy and palm-tapping. This type of land breeds paradoxical qualities of dependence on the one hand and exploitation on the other. The lowest and the most marginalised among them are the tribals who are now forced to live in remote parts of the hills and whose rare incursions into the so-called civilized world are met with violence and rape as it happens in the case of a young girl who is raped and murdered by four Gounder youths. This incident acquires myth-making proportions to such an extent that all the Gounders who came through the lineage of these four youths get cursed with infertility, a curse that couldn't have been more catastrophic than any other. As Kalyanaraman says,

As a farming community, the Gounders tend to be unsettled by childlessness, by the lack of male heirs for the family property. In the Gounders' worldview, the hard work put in by a Gounder male in his adult life is meaningless if there is no son to inherit the fruit of his labours. As a result, childlessness is brutally stigmatised in the Gounder community.

The strange contours of the land and rocks of the region have given birth to a number of beliefs and important among them is the worship of the '*varadikkal*' or the stone of the barren. The infertile woman is supposed to go round it thrice and it is fraught with danger because the walkway or the ledge is just one-foot wide and a misstep will land her headlong onto the rocks below. With much trepidation, Ponna, the heroine, completes this circumambulation and in spite of her conviction that

she would conceive that month, nothing comes of it. From the narrative point of view, it is a very significant act because the human, the hill and the divine coalesce into it, one wedded to the other.

Muthu, brother-in-law and close friend of Kali, the hero, is in the habit of seeking out hideouts where he stores almost everything for a small party: chillies, salt, matchsticks, bottles of arrack, quails and partridges provide him with a quick and tasty repast. These subterranean sinkholes – inside a well or in the cleft of a rock – show that only when the human enters into a matrimony with the non-human he comes closest to finding the primordial bliss that he must have enjoyed before his world became dichotomous and splintered.

The gods

These land-owning Gounders depend on succession for the perpetuation of their property and childlessness, a curse that Kali and Ponna have inherited, could be disastrous for them. The tribal goddess 'Pavatha' will have to be appeased and propitiated if the curse had to be blunted but in Kali's case it was not to be.

'Has your thirst been unquenched through the ages? It is not up to me to make you pull in your revenge-thirst tongue. I am an ordinary man. For several births to come, I will do what I can. Please save me from being the talk of the town. I am unable to answer everyone's wretched questions. Ponna is wasting away. I am the one born in this useless lineage. Why are you avenging Ponna for that? Saying this he broke down in front of her.

But nothing quenched Pavatha's anger. (37-38)

The presiding deity of the novel is rather intriguing given the context of infertility/fulfilment in the novel. The deity is a special avatar of Lord Siva who is half male/half female in build. Kali thinks rather enviously of this god because the god is depicted in a state of perpetual coitus.

Ardhanareeswara is male and female fused into one. What a great pleasure it is to stay as one, body to body, forever! Only god gets to enjoy such great pleasure! (30)

The choice of this deity is not so very eccentric given the nature of this narrative. In a predominantly agrarian Gounder community the status of the land holder is directly in proportion to the male offspring he has, as well as the number of the cattle and the trees in the groves. Since infertility would be the greatest curse that could befall on a farmer, the ancient custom must have sought to provide some sort of redressal to this malady without at the same time coming into conflict with the existing ethical and moral norms. The fifteenth night when the deities return to their abodes is a bacchanalian night of revelry when consensual sex among adults is sanctioned and which Kali in his younger days had made ample use of.

In that first year, when his body was ready to get to know a woman's, he was overcome with shyness and he escaped from all the women and hid under a bullock cart. Lying there, he saw all the movements around him. He didn't dare to come out. On their way back home the next day, Muthu teased him. He gestured the number two to Kali, who was frustrated that he had let the opportunity slip by. He would now have to wait another year. But Muthu made sure Kali did not have to wait a whole year. By the following year's festival, Kali had gained enough experience. (98-99)

One reason why Ponna consents to go to the chariot festival is because of her anger on learning Kali's debauchery on this night in his younger days which she comes to know nearly a dozen years after their marital life. (111)

The Animals

The barnyard that Kali maintains is an object of envy to all for its cleanliness and orderliness. The barnyard has space enough for a calf to gambol and it is Kali's second home. With the innuendoes and insinuations increasing, calling into question his potency, the barnyard becomes his sole refuge. Though Kali and Ponna are childless, an issue around which the whole novel moves, the cattle and hens they rear and the crops and saplings they plant multiply and grow with a remarkable rapidity. The cow she takes from her home (8) yields seven

calves, the nanny-goat she nurses delivers a long line of kids and the hens have a brood of chicks going with them, giving them a sumptuous feast of chicken curry once in a while. Ponna alone remains an island of infertility in the middle of all this productivity. So what would cause joy in the household of other farmers becomes a source of misery to them, because the humans taunt them endlessly. The very beginning of the novel has a portia tree planted by Kali whose astounding growth becomes a matter of indifference to Ponna as she herself is not blessed with a child. So this want of fertility in farming communities like the Gounders is especially upsetting.

The Humans

The debate that Kali has with Muthu over the rationality of sending childless wives to strange men under the pretext of their being 'gods' on a given night says quite a lot about the love he bears for his wife whether she is infertile or not. Kali has been avoiding going to his in-laws' house for the past two years. After Muthu's insistent invitations, he reluctantly agrees to send Ponna there only after extracting an assurance that Ponna will not be sent to the temple festival. He is fearful of her participation in a kind of sexual orgy involving the 'untouchables.' As he says:

More than half the young men roaming about the town are from the 'untouchable' castes. If any of them gets to be with Ponna, I simply cannot touch her after that. I cannot even lift and hold that child. (140)

He is simply a man torn between his desire for a child and unmixed love for his wife. His agonised shout towards the end, 'You whore! You cheated me! ... 'You will not be happy. You have cheated me, you whore ...' (240) is the most emphatic expression of it. Along with this love there is also the fear of a caste contamination especially by the untouchables which, as a community, the Gounders feared. Whether Kali and Ponna's love for each other is strong enough to endure Ponna's loss of chastity, even if it is done under the sanction of religion, is anybody's guess.

Perumal Murugan has shown that the cultivation of the rugged land may make brutes of

the humans. In a moving description of the violation of the tribal girl, he observes:

Some adolescent anger had made her leave her haven and reach the edge of the forest. She was determined to stay there until her people came looking for her. At first the four men looked at her with sympathy. But it dawned on them that the girl was all alone, and they were soon overcome with the urge of youth. Even though she was a girl made strong by life in the forest, she could not fight the hard work-forged strength of the four young men. She could do nothing. Not only did they ravish her, they also strangled her to death and rolled her into a ditch in the forest.
(26)

She comes back to haunt them in the form of an ancient curse. The curse of the god can be mitigated only by the other gods but even the gods exact a price to nullify the curse. Kali may beget a child but he will not be able to call it his own. Pavatha's gift comes wrapped in irony.

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