



Puppet Play of a Woman: A Character Study of Ponna from *One Part Woman*

S. Anjali, Assistant Professor, Department of English, MES Kalladi College, Mannarkkad, Kerala.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2675-7602>

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.5203123

Abstract

Culture, Tradition and family are exceptional words to every ordinary uneducated Indian. Every person lives according to the systems and rules created by these systems have their special provisions to man and woman separately. A typical Indian woman is made up of the culture and the circumstances in which she lives. She has to follow all the unwritten rules of religion, family, society culture, etc. and what she really is and what she wants to be is an unquestionable fact. Ponna like other women of the time born and brought up in a patriarchal system to married off to Kali. As a typical Indian woman, she acts according to the instructions of others. What she really is and wants to be are unaware to Ponna herself. She has to face all the troubles and curses of other people for their childlessness than Kali, because of her incapable womb. A childless mother is a curse, whereas for a father it can be solved with a second marriage. Ponna used to act according to society even in her personal matters, that's why she has to face all the burdens of rituals. Kali is not bothered about all the insults casts on them due to their childlessness. Everybody accused her of incapacity to bear a child. As a typical orthodox woman, she can't think about life beyond all the customs. When the big mouths of the society come out with the solution for her childlessness she is ready to do all such things despite her likes and desires. Even the completion of the chariot festival cannot help Ponna to declare her true self.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Childlessness, Womanhood, Culture and Society.

Society is an ample term comprising all the systems, religion, caste, spirituality, ritual, gender and others which determine the role of an individual. The so called inhabitants of the system intentionally or unintentionally follow the rules and regulations to act upon. The tradition, custom and religion of a society do not give the freedom to live as the individual like; the so called systems are made by a few to thrust upon a majority. This reading is an attempt to find how the society is trying to influence upon the lives of people, especially the case of women, even in their personal issues. The people are not liberated to think apart from the rigid conceptions of the culture therefore they are victimized within it. In this light the novel *One Part Woman* by Perumal Murugan is taken and examined to investigate the plight of citizens in a culturally oriented, genderly defined, superstitious, and caste biased society, especially the women characters to show how they are marginalized to be act like a dumb. It



also focuses on how the characters like Ponna and Kali are made to be the victims by following all the rules and regulations of the social order.

Perumal Murugan, the Tamil novelist, writer and activist critically comments on how the immoral, superstitious and caste biased community is negatively foreshadowing upon the ordinary lives and make them to play like puppets, in his renowned novel *One Part woman*. Perumal Murugan is a luminary of contemporary Tamil literature, having garnered both critical acclaim and commercial success for his work. An award winning writer, poet and scholar, he has written several books, novels, short story collections, poetry anthologies and works of nonfiction. Some of his novels have been translated into English to immense acclaim like *Seasons of the Palm* which was shortlisted for the Kiriyaama Prize in 2005.

The novel, *One Part Woman*, pictures precisely the plight of the two central characters Kali and Ponna. They are living in a small farming community in the Kongu region in south India. Even after twelve years exquisite relationship they are unable to conceive a child, and it becomes a source of constant taunts from family members and fellow villagers, who variously attribute it to family curses, god's wrath, or their ancestor's ill behavior. The community plays a major role in life of every individual. They expect certain features from each character. These external pressures include religious, cultural and social values which promote feelings of guilt and failure among the two characters.

The present study is an attempt to find out why Ponna is turned to be puppet like plaything of the society? Why women are too much protected as a possession? Can't a woman take her own ways to live her life? Why a woman becomes another woman's enemy? Despite of protecting each other why they themselves become the tools of patriarchy? All these questions can be answered by analyzing the character of Ponna and her female counterparts. Women are always treated as inferior to man and the same attitude is also seen in the novel. What is unfortunate is that even women don't know the consequence of freedom; they like to live under the protection of males, whom they have considered as their 'gods'. As suggested by Elizabeth Jackson:

...it is the female body's capacity for birth that makes women crucial to the preservation of a particular community's integrity and purity. In addition, women's responsibility for the organization of the home and the socialisation of children makes them crucial in cultural – as well as biological – reproduction. For this reason, cultural control over women is fundamental to the continuity of tradition and community identity. However 'tradition', and women's place in it, is constantly being contested, reinvented and reinterpreted, and a number of scholars have analysed processes of 're-describing women' in redefining national and other community identities. (16)

Ponna is always described either as the wife of Kali or as the sister of Muthu. She likes to be submissive to Kali and a world beyond the hands of Kali is unimaginable to her. Like the words of Virginia Woolf "a woman must have money and a room of her own" (4) not to write fiction but to prove herself. Ponna lacks a personal space and money to create a world of her own to be independent and courageous. As Ponna's mother remarks about Ponna's gratitude to Kali as: "As if you have some wonder of a husband that no one else has!



Even if he moves his finger a little bit, you ran and stand in front of him. That's right. My husband is a wonder for me. . . Even if I give birth to ten children, he will always be my first child" (Murugan 46). She is born and brought up in a culturally tuned society. A female has to live under the burden of fixed female identity and her failure to beget a baby results in the oppression and repression of her individual self. She shows her predicament by comparing herself to the mute creature cow that is more proficient in bringing small calves into the barn of Kali. In a similar way, Ponna expresses her predicament to one of the ladies: "The plant I planted is flowering now, the tree I planted is bearing fruit, the calf I brought has grown and given birth to many of its own, and the egg that I helped to incubate has hatched a beautiful chick" (101). This stigma of barrenness turns down even the soul of Ponna. The whole novel centers on the question of unproductiveness and how it affects Ponna.

When the society takes charge of the existence of people issues like childlessness is converted into a dilemma of women, and for a man it can be solved with a second marriage. Chellappan, who dealt with cattle, comes to the barnyard as one of Kali's cows had failed to yield a calf despite two or three meeting attempts and he wanted to get rid of the cow by selling it to Chellappan. He says: "It is fate, mapillai 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 one right away" (14). He is making an indirect reference to Ponna and hinting at a second marriage to Kali comparing her to an infertile cow. This was a defining characteristic of the couple which made them ridicule in their community. The taboo attached to infertility is also seen in the practices and customs that the community follows. Marriage becomes the association of two bodies for producing children. When Kali meets his friend Bommidi Mani after a long time during the festival the first thing that Mani asked is: "Do you have children?... Mani smacked himself on the head to express his sympathy with Kali's fate and said, 'Get married again'" (24).

Traditional or folk medicines and treatments try out through women along with blame, abandonment, social isolation and impoverishment. Ponna's mother-in-law kept a watch on Ponna's menstrual cycle in every month. As soon as it came to pass, she told Ponna to drink the juice of shoots in the morning of the third day. She said "don't eat anything else even by mistake. The juice will be better. You will have to close your eyes and swallow it" (43). After that Ponna got used to such methods. She is ready to face every hardship to give an heir to Kali.

Even if her male partner is an iconoclast women are unidentified. Nallayan is a rebellious man who does everything as he wishes disregarding the social bonds. He starts living with a woman who is not his wife and she started saying she wishes a taali around her neck and a child by him. He got her earrings and this and that and kept her like a queen. But apparently all that was not good enough for her. She wants only a taali, a promise from a man or a more protection. He thought the desire would go away soon. But she would not let him touch her without tying a taali round her neck. He is not willing to take responsibility over her. He only needs physical relation with her. She lost her individual identity before society. There is no value for her desires and opinions. When she approaches to attain her wants, he



hits her and gave her the sari she came in and chased her away. Women is always subjugated in culture even if her man against all the social stigmas. Nallayan never follows any customs but he cannot glimpse a woman as his equivalent.

The culture wants woman to be obedient and weak but Murugan is succeeded in creating character like Kali's mother as a thrash on the so called femininity. Kali's mother is portrayed as a widow in white dress to suit the preset scenario of the society but she plays as a counterpart to Ponna, the only woman pictured as different from other women, a bold, independent, successful and courageous woman. One year she could not find anyone to sow the seed and without considering the so called status of a widow she has cultivated her own land without seeking help from anyone. Everybody said that "Nothing would grow when sown by a woman in white" (10), undoubtedly referring to her widow's attire. Nothing untoward happened; her yield was as good as anyone else's. She made sure no one had the chance to say that a child raised by a widow would amount to nothing. The day Kali grew strong enough to carry the basket, she handed it to him. She was there to help him until he learnt the skill of sowing evenly, but after that it became his responsibility. When men are matured enough, they are responsible for all family, property, community and all other work associated things.

Women are always treated as a thing to be protected. Society often considered women's body and beauty more important than their identity. Kali is tensed about what will happen to Ponna's body if she delivered a baby and she became looking exhausted and unwell, especially from fatigue worry or suffering. A woman's body is her own issue but here Kali is more worried about it than Ponna, may be the changes will create a lack of attraction, causing limits to his physical pleasures. Ponna used to dress well as the way Kali likes. So the question of who is the actual possessor of the body arises with the behaviors of Kali and Ponna. The property rights of a woman's body is not the case of Kali alone the entire male are alike. Ponna's father is very dominating and he gives many instructions to Ponna and her mother before they leave to the marketplace on the Chariot Festival. He asks his wife to cover her breast properly, upsetting the contact of others. He keeps repeating to them that they should be very careful when they went into the crowd. He thinks that women cannot manage themselves when they are in the crowd. Society tends to teach women that they are physically and mentally weak.

Ponna and Kali followed every ritual very accurately and executed whatever they could to please the god for an heir. The hardships of the rituals and offerings turned to be easy in front of Ponna's determinism. The only thing Ponna need is a baby. "In the matter of offering prayers, Kali and Ponna left no stone unturned. They did not discriminate between small and big temples. They promised an offering to every god they encountered" (47).

Women used to perform according to predetermined roles and they themselves become the tools of patriarchy to use against other women. The newly married wife of Mandayan becomes notorious because of the envious actions of another woman. Apart from the bonding between women they accuse each other in order to strengthen the rules of patriarchy. Women are unconscious of all these inherent structures and they themselves



become the tools of men to shape other women. Kattahayi is a new young bride and living with her husband in Kali's village by making spring toddy. Pazhani is doing similar work in the adjacent plot of land. Pazhani's wife is a troublemaker, who believes that their business is not going to flourish as long as and Kattahayi and her husband Mandayan long around. So Pazhani's wife has started to making insinuations and hurling indirect abuse against Kattahayi. She spreads rumours linking Kattahayi with each of her customers. Some people like this and have no problem in leading vulgarisms and spread rumours about a woman. Women make themselves as their own enemy unknowingly, a kind of victimization.

Ponna is also made to be a victim of such womanly annoyance due to her barrenness. Superstitious believes add colour to such allegations. On an occasion when Ponna and Kali were called for the celebration of one of their niece's puberty attained celebration Ponna is kept away by the other women. The accomplishment of womanhood is celebrated, which means the girl is capable for bearing children and look after their family. Woman is seen in the angle of reproduction only, where Ponna is a cursed woman because she cannot conceive a child therefore others forbid her from performing rituals. Ponna and Kali take part in that function, where Ponna carries one of the nine plates in the possession, because it was the convention for the uncle's wives to do so. There was a custom meant to ward off the evil eye for that all the aunts are called. Fearing of the curses Ponna herself keeps away from that and she is called to perform that. "But when she tucked in her pallu and went forward, Chellama's brother's wife dragged her aside and said, 'You stay away.' If a childless woman did the ritual, would it make the girl barren? Was she that inauspicious?" (99). In such a culture the word woman becomes meaningful only if she can conceive a child, otherwise the barren woman is an outcast to the culture.

Sarasa's children used to come to Ponna's house and Ponna likes to eat them with what they need. It's for the chatter of their voice filled in those walls. But even her friend Sarasa has failed to understand the mind of Ponna, whom she accused as: "Despite me telling you to come early, you are arriving only now. Did you get delayed in getting your daughters ready? She was showing off that she had children while Ponna didn't" (65).

The people are mainly depends on farming and Ponna is made as an annoyance for her actions in farming also. In the months of Vaigasi or Aadi, depending on when the rains arrived, they would grow the groundnuts. They used to plough the land in the order of preference, based on the soil and its moisture content. Every woman assists their males by sprinkling water in the ploughed furrow and by lifting the seed baskets. On that year the climate was not fair and Ponna helped them by lifting the basket while they are working in Thangavel's field. Originally she was asked to sprinkle water but carry out this because Tangavel's wife came down with severe leg pain. Thangavel did not get a good yield like the previous times and the finger pointed towards Ponna herself as: "That barren woman ran up and down carrying seeds. How do you expect them to grow once she has touched them?" (109).

The novel points out to the superstitions of people in every action. They have even celebrated the momentary gifts which they got as part of a performance as a fortunate thing



for their further living. "Women who received a lemon in their laps were blessed with children. Ponna too received a lemon in her lap. She did that every time the Punnadayan story was sung in the village. But nothing happened" (186), the trust over things beyond reality is visualized everywhere in the novel.

Kali's grandmother narrated him the myth of Goddess Pavatha. It is clear that even the myth of women is not liberated from the cruelties of men. According to the myth Pavatha was a tribal girl whom four young men raped and killed. It was also believed that the tribal girl's curse haunted even those families that dared to associate with them: "Pavatha, our goddess who resides up in that hill, will seek justice from those who did this to her. No girl child has ever born to their families. Even the male children shall grow up to be impotent and die young. This curse of the tribal girl persisted till today. That was why no girl child had been born in this lineage. Even those that were born had died in a day or two. The men, too, had truncated lives. Kali's grandmother narrated all this and launched into a dirge" (26). The only female sound that is raised back to all humiliations is the curse of Pavatha. The generations of men can't learn their lessons even from the curse and still they try to assault women mentally and physically.

Culturally oriented society also injects the poison of untouchability in people. Two beautiful children of Maran, whom Ponna glimpses on her way to chariot festival, urge the motherly emotions in her but she can't even cosset them due to their lower caste. The one sitting on the father's lap must have been eight years old, wearing a small kandangi cloth torn from a sari around her waist. The other one, sitting naked on her mother's lap, must have only been three. Ponna felt like keeping the baby on her lap. But caste laws forbade her from touching the child. She refrained from even playing with caste children, since she feared some rebuke or comment. When Kali and Muthu have an intercourse with Mandayan, they come to know that Kathayi is pregnant with their third child, whom Kali is asked to adopt even without considering the caste: "Just give me the child that is going to be born. I will raise it" (199). Mandayan is promised it to Kali but Kathayi is not agreed to that. Here caste worked as the obstacle to donate child. "Kathayi rushed out of the hut in anger and said to her husband, 'will you eat shit when you are drunk?... Think before you speak! If they heard us, his relatives will come here to beat us to pulp. Let him find a child from among his relatives'" (199).

Women are asked to follow the systems unquestioning, whereas man can live according to their desires. The life of Nallayan perfectly illustrates this argument. But even Nallayan fails to protect the identity of women. Kali and Muthu used to roam around to find out some hidings. For Muthu "Man always needs such places" (40).

Kali's mother has suggested the chariot festival as a solution to their problem. "All men who set their foot in Thiruchengode on the fourteenth day are gods. It is god who is giving this. It is not a problem if we keep our mind on god" (92). Even if Kali himself has taken part in the festival years ago as a god, he cannot think sending Ponna there as a solution. "In the 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. . .



By the following year's festival, Kali had gained enough experience" (95). Man can undertake those festivals for enjoyment, but their women are not allowed such things even if they are performing as part of a ritual. Kali knows the Chariot festival 'very well' and Ponna is ready, without full heartedly, to give an heir to Kali. She says: "If you want me to go for the sake of this wretched child, I will. His hold around her relaxed. This was not the answer he had expected" (104).

Ponna's need to bear a child puts their loving marriage at stake as Kali doesn't want her to participate in the Chariot festival and have intercourse with other man, whom he fear might be an untouchable. If Ponna gets pregnant, it will question Kali's so called 'masculinity' and his impotency. On the other hand, Ponna's 'female essence' is often cross examined; she needs to get pregnant in order to prove her female essence and also to give an heir and thereby upholding their status and power.

Ponna takes part in the Chariot festival with the belief that Kali has given his full heart permission for that. Ponna always worried that "The plant that we plant grows; the seed that we sow blooms; is it only me who is the wasted land here?" (171), and all such encroaching feelings lead her to take part in the festival. It becomes a turning point to Ponna as if it liberates her from all the bounds.

She felt that, just like the wheel of the chariot, she had abandoned what she was accustomed to and was standing firmly in what was new. She had a sudden desire to run and jump amidst the crowd. She wanted to explode into laughter. There was nothing to stop her here. She could do anything she wanted to. She yearned to see the whole of Tiruchengode in one long run. She should control herself. She thought she could absorb nothing if she lost her balance. (206)

The only time Ponna takes her own decision is in choosing a god. Many have approached her, but in any of them she can't find her god. Actually she was searching for a face and body similar to Kali. Even in choosing a god she prefers the presence of Kali. She feels the presence of a man near her. "The folded dhoti and the towel that was around his neck and fell over his chest made him look like no one she knew... It occurred to her that this was her god" (207). The god takes her through the crowd and feeds hot puttu. She felt as if she is taken to another world. The new name, "Selvi" also converts her identity along with the name. The new experience transformed Ponna to a new woman, who is free from all the shackles of the society.

Kali and Ponna adore each other affectionately. Ponna live her life swearing the words of Kali and other big mouths of the society. But hairlessness made her to choose another man as part of the ritual. In an uneducated Indian society any women can't live a life of her own, if so she will be out casted. Society needs everyone, especially women to be submissive and obedient. Ponna obeys others, but more than a ritual or festival she could attain a self of her own, which will be a mistake in the eyes of Kali. Women should protect one other, that's why Ponna's mother takes her to the festival and the only thing that a woman could do in a patriarchal society is to build her own world within the limits. *One Part Woman*, the title itself proves the importance of equality of man and woman, they are the



inseparable entities. The novel critically points out the predesigned roles of women and with that they are asked to play their whole life as puppets.

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Author (s) Contribution Statement: Nil

Author (s) Acknowledgement: Nil

Author (s) Declaration: I declare that there is no competing interest in the content and authorship of this scholarly work.



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