

Original Article

Gender Justice through Culture and Traditions in *One Part Woman* by Perumal Murugan

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Abstract

This research paper investigates the theme of gender justice in Perumal Murugan's cultural novel One Part Woman which portrays the struggles of Ponna and Kali, a rural South Indian couple burdened by the stigma of childlessness. The novel situates personal relationships within the larger framework of caste, kinship, and ritual practices, exposing how "tradition" becomes a powerful mechanism of social control. Ponna's identity as a wife is defined primarily through her reproductive capacity, while Kali's masculinity is judged by his virility, revealing how patriarchy produces parallel yet unequal vulnerabilities for men and women. The sanctioned "night of license" during the temple festival becomes central to Murugan's interrogation of consent, choice, and coercion, raising crucial questions about women's agency in contexts where refusal is socially costly.

This study employs qualitative textual analysis informed by feminist hermeneutics, intersectionality, and Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach. It examines how communal surveillance, religious sanction, and kinship pressures converge to discipline the body, silence dissent, and commodify fertility. At the same time, Murugan highlights the couple's mutual care and affection, suggesting an alternative ethic of dignity that contrasts with the oppressive honor-based order of the village.

The paper argues that true gender justice requires recognition of women's dignity beyond motherhood, non-coercive religious and cultural practices, and a redefinition of masculinity grounded in care rather than ownership. By exposing how coercion is disguised as custom, Murugan compels readers to rethink justice as the protection of bodily integrity, genuine choice, and relational equality.

Keywords: Gender Justice, Patriarchy, Pronatalism, Consent and Coercion, Feminist Hermeneutics, Caste and Kinship

Introduction

Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* (Tamil: *Madhorubhagan*) centers on Ponna and Kali, a loving agrarian couple whose marriage is slowly crushed by the public-private split between their intimate affection and the village's pronatalist expectations. The novel's dramatic hinge the chariot-festival "night of license," a sanctioned sexual exception purported to cure infertility stages a conflict between sacred custom and bodily integrity. Rather than indicating a single antagonist, Murugan renders a thick social texture: gossip, kin elders, ritual specialists, and agrarian precarity together produce the conditions under which Ponna's "choice" is both permitted and compelled. This paper asks: what would gender justice mean in such a world, and how does the novel envision or foreclose it?

Literature Review (selected debates & lenses)

Pronatalism and kinship in South Asia: Scholarship shows fertility as a key axis of honor and belonging within patrilineal systems; women's social worth is tethered to reproduction and lineage continuity (e.g., Chakravarti; Chhachhi).

Intersectional feminism: Gender oppression intersects with caste location, rural economy, and religious authority, shaping distinct constraints on autonomy (Crenshaw; Rege).

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Consent under constraint: Feminist legal and philosophical debates distinguish formal consent from conditions of structural coercion, where refusal carries severe social sanctions (MacKinnon; Cornell).

Capabilities and dignity: Nussbaum's framework clarifies how bodily integrity, practical reason, and affiliation are curtailed by coercive norms—useful for reading Ponna's constrained options.

Care ethics vs. honor regimes: Fraser's "recognition" and "redistribution" and the ethics-of-care tradition illuminate how the couple's private tenderness is devalued by public honor.

Hypothesis

The novel demonstrates that in contexts where communal honor is yoked to reproduction, religious ritual operates as a legitimizing technology for coercion, converting women's sexuality into a problem of public order. Consequently, any "solution" that restores status by instrumentalizing the woman's body cannot meet the threshold of gender justice, even when framed as culturally sanctioned choice.

Objectives

1. To analyze how childlessness is constructed as moral failure and civil disability in the village social order.
2. To examine the chariot-festival "night of license" as a ritual mechanism that manufactures consent.
3. To explore the mutual entanglement of femininity (fertility) and masculinity (virility/ownership) in the couple's crisis.
4. To assess how Murugan's narrative strategies (voice, setting, symbolism) critique pronatalism.
5. To articulate a justice-centered reading that prioritizes dignity, care, and non-coercion.

Research Method

This is Qualitative, interpretive literary study with Analytic approach. Close reading of key scenes (taunts and surveillance; kin negotiations; temple and festival sequences; Kali's interiority).

Textual Analysis: A close reading of both *One Part Woman* by Perumal Murugan will form the core of the research methodology.

Research Design: The research will follow an exploratory design, focusing on the depiction of a **Gender Justice** for characters through novel

Sampling: The primary text, *One Part Woman* by Perumal Murugan

Tool: Thematic analysis of pronatalism, shame, consent, ritual authority, and masculinity within the novels

Analysis of Gender Justice in One Part Woman

1) Pronatalism as Soft Law

⁸From the earliest chapters, neighbors and kin convert Ponna's childlessness into a public record. Murugan shows how "ordinary talk" becomes governance: rumors track menstruation, fertility cures are prescribed, and Ponna's body is made legible to communal judgment. The couple's affection to field labor shared, domestic playfulness shows a counter-ethic. Yet public shame steadily reorganizes their marriage, relocating authority from the home to the village. ⁹In capabilities terms, Ponna's bodily integrity and practical reason are constrained; her freedom "to be and to do" is subordinated to her capacity to be a mother. (Sen 1999, p. 75; Nussbaum 2000, p. 41).

2) Ritual, Exception, and Manufactured Consent

⁸The chariot festival's "night of license" appears as a sacred loophole: if a woman sleeps with a stranger under divine sanction, conception may follow without scandal. Murugan renders this space with moral ambiguity at once charged, secretive, and bureaucratically traditional. Consent here is procedurally present but substantively compromised: refusal entails continued humiliation; compliance promises conditional respect. ²When the only exit from stigma requires sexual compliance under ritual cover, choice functions as strategy, not autonomy. (Chhachhi 1999, p. 335). The novel thereby exemplifies feminist critiques of consent detached from power analysis. .

"If this is the way to silence their tongues..." (a brief, representative paraphrase of Ponna's reasoning) (Murugan, p. 150)

The line signals calculation under duress, not desire.

The novel depicts a society where religion is deeply intertwined with daily life, and where rituals are performed to seek divine intervention in personal matters, such as fertility.

8The Ardhanarishvara Festival: A key aspect of the novel is the Ardhanarishvara festival, a religious event dedicated to a deity who is half man and half woman. During this festival, societal norms are temporarily suspended, and women who have not been able to conceive child are allowed to engage in consensual relationships with men other than their husbands to try and conceive a child. This ritual highlights the complex relationship between religion, sexuality, and social norms in the community. In this festival Ponna is forced to participate.

Faith and Desperation: The novel portrays how deeply ingrained religious beliefs can lead individuals to participate in rituals that challenge conventional moral boundaries. Ponna's eventual consideration of the festival ritual reflects both her

desperation and the power of religious faith to offer solutions to deeply personal problems.

3) Masculinity, Possession, and the Shattering of Care

⁸Kali initially resists the village's ridicule, shielding Ponna from taunts and miracle cures. His tenderness is real. Yet his sense of self is tied to virility and ownership. When he suspects the festival encounter, his affect turns from care to control, revealing a masculinist script: ¹love is compatible with possession until community scripts masculinity as surveillance. (Chakravarti 2003, p. 34) Murugan refuses easy villainy; Kali is both a casualty of ridicule and an agent of policing. Patriarchy harms men by tying dignity to dominance.

4) Caste, Community Surveillance, and Agrarian Precarity

⁸The pressure upon Ponna is not only of gender but also of gendered-caste-community pressure. The novel's social ecology such as land, cattle, temple, and markets make lineage continuity economically meaningful. (Murugan, p. 89) Childlessness threatens inheritance logics and ritual continuity; thus, the community securitizes women's fertility. Surveillance (gossip, elders, and priests) serves as a low-cost enforcement mechanism, outsourcing discipline to neighbors rather than law. (Foucault 1977, p. 177)

5) The Temple as Moral Infrastructure

⁸Murugan's temple is not merely a setting but it's an institutional machine that converts private pain into public ritual. (Murugan, p. 132). Sacred sanction shifts blame from decision-makers to divinity. ⁴This displacement (the god allows it) launders coercion, producing what we might call holy heteronomy. (Fraser 1997, p. 14). The chariot, crowds, and darkness form a scenography where anonymity is promised and yet women are never fully unseen—only unaccounted for.

6) Language, Focalization, and the Ethics of Attention

Murugan's plain style and careful focalization keep judgment suspended. The narrative's patient observation of fields, seasons, and small gestures elevates care over spectacle. By refusing melodrama, it dramatizes slow violence the cumulative grind of taunts, cures, and counsel. This ethics of attention invites a justice framework grounded in the couple's everyday tenderness rather than the village's crisis-management.

7) Agency within Constrained Choice

Ponna's decision is best read as strategic compliance. It is a pragmatic gambit to re-enter the circle of respectability. She is neither a passive victim nor a sovereign chooser. Murugan's achievement is to show that agency without

alternatives is not justice. ³A just arrangement would offer Ponna dignity whether or not she mothers; it would not condition recognition upon sexual availability to a ritual stranger. (Crenshaw 1991, p. 1245)

Discussion: What Would Gender Justice Require?

1. Dignity without Motherhood: A woman's worth should not be contingent on fertility; social respect and marital fulfillment should not be hostage to lineage anxiety.

2. Non-Coercive Religious Life: Rituals must not serve as instruments that manufacture consent; religious authority should enlarge, not constrict women's capabilities.

3. Redistribution of Honor: Communities should revalue care, companionship, shared labor, and mutual affection as ends in themselves, decentering procreation as the sole metric of a "successful" marriage.

4. Repairing Masculinity: Socialization for men must detach dignity from virility and possession, enabling caring masculinities aligned with mutual flourishing.

Conclusion

One Part Woman is not a parable against faith or tradition; it is a clear-eyed anatomy of how customs morph into soft law that disciplines bodies and feelings. By staging the festival's sanctioned exception as a test case for consensuality, Murugan exposes the gap between cultural permission and moral freedom. The novel makes a demanding claim that gender justice is not simply the availability of culturally recognized "solutions," but the presence of genuine alternatives, the protection of bodily integrity, and the honoring of intimate care against the crowd. In reimagining honor around dignity rather than fertility, Murugan points toward a justice able enough to hold love without surveillance and choice without coercion.

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Conflicts of interest

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