

**BONDS AND BURDENS OF MOTHERHOOD IN PERUMAL MURUGAN'S
ONE PART WOMAN AND AYOBAMI ADEBAYO'S STAY WITH ME:
A COMPARATIVE STUDY**

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Motherhood is traversed in literature with diverse magnitudes. It is one of the critical feminist issues echoed in literature. The picture of mother is painted with challenging womanhood and motherhood by outspoken authors. Anne Frank remarks:

In the book *Soldiers on the Home front*, I was greatly struck by the fact that in childbirth alone, women commonly suffer more pain, illness and misery than any war hero ever does. And what's her reward for enduring all that pain? She gets pushed aside when she's disfigured by birth, her children soon leave, her beauty is gone. Women, who struggle and suffer pain to ensure the continuation of the human race, make much tougher and more courageous soldiers than all those big-mouthed freedom-fighting heroes put together (235).

The issues in the parenthood are always attributed to the woman than man. Men are not blamed or not considered as the cause of infertility in many societies. This paved way for the women to struggle for their social rights and existence. Apparent examples are Maya in Anita Desai's *Cry the Peacock*, Monisha in Anita Desai's *Voices in the city*, Rupa in Manju Kapur's *Home*, Karuna in Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark holds no terror* and so on.

The cogent representations and Interpretations of Motherhood remain same in two contrasting cultures of Tamil and Nigerian. In both the cultures, motherhood is acknowledged with deep respect and valued the fruit of the labour of motherhood. At the same time, sterile woman becomes the subject of caricature in the family and society. This research paper is an attempt to explore the multi-faceted, complex and debating theme of childlessness and Image of mother in Perumal Murugan's "One Part Woman" and Ayobami Adebayo's "Stay with Me"

The pivotal pattern of these two novels is similar: the married female protagonists Ponna and Yejide lost their self-identity due to the vexation of Infertility. They endure emptiness in the family as well as in the society. These novels reveal their inner personality to the outer world with their hushed agitations.

To begin with, Perumal Murugan's controversial novel *Madhorubhagan* translated by Aniruddhan Vasudevan as "One Part Woman" deals with childless couple, Kali and Ponna who lived in Aanangur, near Tiruchengode in Tamil Nadu in the early part of the 20th century. As the title of the novel signifies the Tamil deity Madhorubhagan who is embodied with the female qualities on one half of the body and male on the other. This tale is based on the myth that worshipping this God would bless the childless couple with descendants. The novelist lists out numerous idols on the hills of the temple town of Tiruchengode, each one capable of providing a distinct boon. One among them is the Lord Ardhanareeswarar, an Idol of Shiva who has offered the left part of his body to his soul mate Goddess Parvathi. It is believed that the Lord Shiva is sacralised in this mythical form. Perumal Murugan portrays several men who were called as ardhanari, Half-women or Sami Pillai. (God given child)

Perumal Murugan highlighted the tradition of the huge annual chariot festival held in the evening in the temple of Ardhanareeswara where the barren woman would come alone to seek the offspring. The woman is unencumbered to unite with a male stranger in the chariot festival. She should consider the man as an incarnation of God. If the woman is blessed with the baby, it will be regarded as the gift from God. The convention of obtaining impregnation by unknown virile in the name of deity seems to vanish many

decades ago. But the childless couple Kali and Ponna trapped in the net of this brutal cultural practice as a last victim. This Niyoga (mentioned in Mahabharatha) ritual, ancient Hindu tradition crushes the social status of the barren female protagonist Ponna. On every occasion, she is reminded of her infertility which provokes a profound sense of grievance. This is evident in the following words of Murugan, "She must have been thinking about how the tree had grown so lush and abundant in twelve years while not even a worm had crawled in her womb. Every wretched thing reminded her of that lack"(8) Thus, Childlessness is viciously stigmatized and Ponna becomes the victim of this brutal ritual practice.

Ayobami Adebayo's "Stay with me" displays the plight of the childless couple Akin and Yejide. The female protagonist Yejide is rather subdued and leads a frustrated life. Being sensitive, she is compelled to immerse in the flood of depression and dejection by lukewarm relatives around her. As motherhood is the ultimate aim of Yejide, she even breastfeeds a goat. She climbed the "Mountain of Jaw Dropping Miracles" in southwest Nigeria to meet the prophet Josiah who recommended her to assume white goat as a newborn baby. This innocent educated female protagonist Yejide believed the goat as newborn and performed the ritual for the sake of getting baby.

Similarly, In Murugan's *One Part woman*, Kali and Ponna, an affectionate, loving couple remain childless for more than 12 years of marriage. They offer prayers to various Gods, vows and penances but in vain. The author pinpoints that the motherhood is the ultimate success of a married woman in the Indian society. The greatest accomplishment for a man is to produce male heir to inherit the property.

Murugan skillfully points out the blind faith of the villagers in this novel. Kali's mother reveals that their family is cursed by the violent Goddess Parvathi, for a crime committed against the young girl in the past and the male members are condemned to remain infertile; if they are favoured with the baby, it will be temporary. So, the protagonists offer votive offerings in the altar of the deity Pavatha and ascended the varadikkal, barren woman's rock on the hilltop of Thiruchengode. One can see the hope of Ponna when she prays to the God Pavatha as "God please fill my womb at least this month"(37) But these strenuous efforts were all for naught. In this context, One can remember the words of Radha Chakravarthy(2008): ".....valorization of motherhood has its own built-in-paradoxes: maternity is associated with a capacity for voluntary self-sacrifice which entitles the mother to her quasi-divine status"(84)

Meanwhile, the female protagonist Ponna endures predominantly. She leads an embittered life in an infinite tide of taunts and tribulations from everyone around her including strangers cruising a ride with her family to the temple. Murugan underlines the failures of Ponna to bear an offspring in many scenes. Ponna's mother, brother and Kali's mother started taunting her rigorously. They conspire to send Ponna alone to the chariot festival to get the blessing of a baby from an anonymous Sami.

The adverse effect of society on childless female protagonists Ponna and Yejide is strong. Both Ponna and Yejide are alienated from their relatives. Ponna's mother-in-law made her to drink bitter Herbal Juice to cleanse her stomach and compelled her to attend fourteenth day festival whereas Yejide tried strange teas to get a baby. Her mother-in-law forces Yejide to take a hike from her Son. Even the relatives in the family tried to deceive Yejide and showed a young woman Funmi as Akin's second wife. Moreover, they drag Akin towards polygamy. At the outset, Yejide acts as if she is in a family way to safeguard her marital bonding.

One can find constant familial pressures to the male protagonists, Kali and Akin to find other women to pursue the Progeny. This is evident in Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman*. "For Seven Years now, there had been a talk of a second marriage- both openly and secretly"(10). Correspondingly, In *Stay with me*, Akin's mother insisted to take a second wife Funmi. She bursts out to Yejide as "We are not asking you to stand up from your place in his life; we are just saying you should shift so that someone else can sit down"(29)

Both the Male protagonists Akin and Kali were supporting their partners during the personal and family crisis. They were bonded with the threads of love and marriage. They believed that their bonding

seems to be eternal bliss and curse at times. Uneducated, traditional Indian protagonists in Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* and Educated Nigerian Protagonists in *Stay with Me* are converged and diverged physically, socially, culturally and intellectually on many contexts.

These novels are an excruciating narrative of how society's alleviating obsession tatters affectionate couples apart and ruin their bond. Both the novels investigate the status and role of barren women in the two different societies. The authors have delineated how the childless female protagonists are shattered in terms of tradition and culture. For Ponna and Yejide motherhood is the burden than of Joy. Maternity leads them to live a shabby life. Both the authors portrayed the female characters as meek and morbid.

The powerful emotions of these emotionless barren women explores interface between the masculinity and femininity. Adrienne Rich (1976) opines : "It reinforces my sense that women of whatever class, nation or race share a common sensibility- a sensibility that is complex, subversive and heterodox"(xviii). A healthy society should value the equality of Man and woman in all walks of life. It is indeed disheartening that women are esteemed not for who they are but for their ability to attain motherhood and responsibility to save the family.

To sum up, these two different authors exceptionally highlighted in their novella that a childless life for a married couple is indeed a worthless living. They emphasized to the ancient traditional Tamil and Nigerian societies that the childless married couple should not be condemned, heckled or suspended from the society. It is not their fault. They should be given due respect as any other human beings.

Works Cited

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