

## MYTHS AS INVISIBLE FORCES IN HUMAN LIFE AS IN PERUMAL MURUGAN'S *ONE PART WOMAN*

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### **Abstract:**

*Each and every land in this world has a story and a tradition to transmit. Uniqueness of lands come from this and is visible through traditional practices and rituals that are visible manifestations of certain myths and legends endemic to the land or region. Therefore they are the invisible force which can influence and transform people and land across time and space. They play an inseparable part in the dissemination and transmission of tradition and culture from generation to generation. India, a cradle of civilization having religious, spatial and linguistic variations, has diverse spectrum of myths, rituals and across India. Indian culture and tradition is deeply rooted in these myths and legends. Indian writings deserve special mentions in this context as they reflect this aspect of our nations with great insightfulness. Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938), O.V. Vijayan's *The Legends of Khasak* (1994), Sarah Joseph's *Gift in green* (2011) are instances of writings based on Indian myths and legends. As myths are specific tools for transmitting certain ideologies like patriarchy racism, sexism etc. Many writers have started to question the importance we are giving to these virtual things in society. Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), Arun Joshi's *The Last Labyrinth* (1981), Geetha Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces Of Night* (1992), Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé'* (2001) are examples for this. This paper is an attempt to describe the role of tradition, myths and rituals in the lives of people as it depicted in the novel *One Part Woman* written by Perumal Murugan, one of the famous contemporary writer and Professor in Tamil. The novel tells the story of Kali and Ponna, a couple who are trying very desperately for a child. Even though they have a strong marriage bond of love and care, there is a feeling of incompleteness because of the sociocultural beliefs and norms which intrude into their lives and remind them of everything they might lose as members of a society that values fertility.*

**Key words-** Myth, Tradition, Ritual, Culture, Ideology.

### **Body**

*The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines Myth as:

Stories of unascertainable origin and authorship usually accompanying or helping to explain religious beliefs. Often (though not necessarily) their subject is the exploits of a God or hero, which may be of a fabulous or superhuman nature, and which may have instituted a change in the working of the universe or in the conditions of the social life. (p. 146).

The virtual power of these so called tradition and culture to transform people and the social as well as private lives can be traced in the works of the great contemporary writes in Tamil, Perumal Murugan. He is the author of ten novels, and five collections each of short stories and poems, as well as ten books and non-fiction relating to language and literature. His first novel, *Eru veyyil* ("Rising Heat") was published in 1991, and deals with the problem that a family faced when their land was required for the contribution of a leasing colony, engaging with the themes of family, greed and corruption. The second novel *Nizhal*

*Mutram* (1993) translated into English by B. Geetha as *Current Show* in 2004, drew from his personal experience of helping his father run a soda stall in a cinema stall. His third novel *Koolamadari* (*Seasons of the Palm*) dealt with themes of childhood autonomy and freedom. His novel *Madhuru Bhagan* (2010) translated by Aniruddhan Vasudevan as *One Part Woman* in 2013 deals with a childless couple struggling with in their marriage, drawing specifically from the community and culture of the Kongunadu region. This is a novel based on possible ancient cultural practice among people living around Tiruchengodu. Anirudhan Vardhaman is awarded Sahitya Academy Translation Award (2016) for the translation of the book.

The novel is set in Murugan's native town of Tiruchengode, and deals with the couple Kali and Ponna, who are the subject of social stigma and humiliation for their inability to have a child. Much of the narrative follows his consciousness, his psychic struggles, marital difficulties, and attempts to reconcile the two. Prior to their marriage, Kali spent most of the time with a band of similarly restless young men. But now the village knows him as a notoriously lazy, often idle, and frequently running off without word of his departure. Though much of Kali's narratives focus on his inability to conceive a child with Ponna, even after twelve years of marriage, Kali often retreats into reminiscences of the past. He usually finds peace in the well-kept barnyard and has close association with nature. Beginning of the novel itself indicates this characteristic of Kali, who planted a Portia tree in front of Ponna's home at Kizherippadi, as:

The Portia tree was dense with foliage. If you looked closely, you could see the yellow trumpet-like flowers with their flared mouths, and the drooping, fading red ones with their inviting smiles. Portia flowers always grew more beautiful as they fade. Kali leaped up and plucked one. He never could resist the desire to possess what attracted him. The leaves came ripped, but the flowers were intact. Settling down on the cot, he smelled the flower. It had a mild fragrance, that too when held close to the nose. He felt he should have left it on the tree. The sight of the flower the tree was more beautiful than its scent. (Murugan 10)

The novel portrays their eventual participation in a chariot festival to honor the God Ardhanariswara, during which for one night every year, the local community in the novel relaxed taboos and allowed free relations between man and woman. The novel throws light on how traditional concept like myths, rituals, the loss of inheritance and fertility, the cast factors, sexuality, gender roles, constitute complexities to simple human life and well beings.

As a child less woman, Ponna is not allowed to participate in agrarian and domestic ceremonies that celebrate fecundity, and Kali's virility becomes the butt of several jokes in their village. Kali and Ponna leave before the time of artificial insemination, and therefore depend entirely on everything that religion, superstition and indigenous medicines have to offer. But they have no success. Since when they are about to give up, their mothers, convinced that it is Kali who has 'the problem', tell them about an ancient rituals that happens during a chariot festival in the temple dedicated to the part man, part-woman - Ardhanariswari. On the fourteenth day, any woman can have sex with any man in order to become pregnant, and bring a child into the family. Ponna and Kali learned that the ritual has evolved over time to help men eschew uncomfortable conversation about their virility.

The child from this pregnancy is considered as a child of god, not another man's and there for socially acceptable. The two mothers ask Ponna to Participate and while Ponna is tempted to take the chance mostly to end Kali's shame, Kali is unable to imagine another manmaking love to his wife and forbids her to go. This act of forbidding Ponna to the fourteenth day of chariot festival is the reflection of his masculine possessiveness and the fear of his to be revealed impotency. He seems ruled by the thought to possess Ponna's body for ever than her mind which always unconditionally longs for a child.

The stories of curse behind the impotency of Kali is an important element in the novel as it convey how myths and folklores get interlinked to the spectrum of social lives. First story is related to the life of

Kali's great grandfather Nachimuthu Gounder who once lied in front of the deity of Muruga, sculptured on a rock on the sixteenth step in the temple at Tiruchenkottai, to hide his misdeed in taking a bundle of castor seeds from Chettiyar. Villagers usually go there to find the truth when there is an unresolved issue. Eventhough there is a temple on the top of the hill to which one has to take sixty steps, the consecration of Muruga in the sixteenth step is their God to find out the truth.

The accused should light each lamp on each step with oil and swear to Muruga of his or her innocence after dousing every light. The Gounder doused every light as per the ritual and lied to Muruga for a single bundle of castor seeds and five rupees. After this incident he had gone mad and roamed outside the village. According to Kali's mother this is the curse behind their infertility. To get rid of this curse on the family of Kali, the couple starts to light those sixty lamps with castor oil for sixty days.

Another important story is the curse of Pavatha, the tribal goddess. According to them Pavatha was a tribal girl whom four young men raped and killed. Narrator describes,

But 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 been born to their families. Even the male children shall grow up to be impotent and die young." says Kali's grandmother. 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. (p. 26)

This incident of Pavatha acquires the status of a myth by which all the Gounders who come through the lineage of these four youths believe they have cursed with infertility, a curse which is more catastrophic than anything else. In the words of Kalayanaraman, "In the Gounders world view, 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 labors. As a result, childlessness is brutally stigmatized in the Gounder community".

They believe the tribal goddess Pavatha will have to be appeased and forgive them for lifting the curse but in the case of Kali it is not to be. He says, "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 revenging Ponna for that?" (37-38)

The racial prejudices of the Gounder community are well depicted through the words of Kali to Muthu, his brother-in-law, when they discuss about the fourteenth day of the chariot festival. He seems fearful of Ponna's engagement in that night with the 'untouchables'. As he says, "More than half of the young men roaming about the town are from the 'untouchables' 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). Here Kali becomes the representation of those who torn between desire, here for a child, and gender and racial biases.

The status of widows in the village is also stigmatized as depicted through the character of Kali's mother. Murugan has successfully questioned and unraveled the meaningless conceptualization of widowhood as 'otherness' in the novel as he describes Kali's mother as:

It was his mother who had raised him. And she made sure no one had the chance to say that a child raised by a widow would amount to nothing. She was adamant that they be treated equal to everyone else. She knew everything from ploughing the land to drawing water for the fields. "We should not depend on anyone"; she would say. One year she could not find anyone to sow seeds. They said, 'Nothing would grow when sown by a woman in white', clearly referring to her widow's attire. She tried calling a few people, but to no avail. Then she said, 'Let whatever grows grow. Or may be nothing will. Then that's fine too. I don't care'. And she sowed the seeds herself. Nothing happened; her yield was as good as anyone else's. (11)

The revolutionary figure in the story is Nallupayyan, uncle of Kali, who is the mouth piece of the

author. As considered as an outlaw by the villagers, he never blindly believes everything and is against the ways of the villagers who value traditional practices more than humanity and existence. He dares to question the meaningless prejudices of the village as he possesses a modern outlook towards life.

Murugan has successfully rendered a social milieu which is certainly still in existence. He has handled myriad complexities with an enviable sophistication, creating an evocative, even haunting work. The whole incidents in the works indicates how simple and innocent human life and existence got mixed with complex and vague beliefs through various myths and traditional practices by which different ideologies persist in this world.

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