

**Infertility as a Social Disability: Stigmatization of Womanhood  
in Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman***

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Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* was published in the year 2013 in English which was originally published in the year 2010 in Tamil as *Mathorupagan*. Novel is set in a village which is steeped in old traditional beliefs and values. At the heart of the novel is Kali and Poona a young childless couple who are sexually attracted to each other. Their life's happiness is disrupted by the people of the village who are concerned about the couple's childlessness even after twelve years of marriage. The novel intricately examines Poona's emotional turmoil as she navigates her identity as a woman in a patriarchal society that deems her unfit and incomplete due to her inability to bear children. The main crux of the paper is to show that infertility is portrayed as a disability that isolates the female protagonist, Poona, highlighting the stigma and identity struggles women face due to traditional gender expectations. It examines the rigid expectations of womanhood that are central to Poona's experiences and how these expectations create psychological and social barriers for her.

In India the status of a woman depends on her motherhood and the condition of childless women is precarious. The institutional importance ascribed to motherhood is strong and determines the position of a woman in a family and the larger community. In this aspect all caste and creed are alike. Bearing a child is considered pivotal in building relation within a family. The wife's command over her family depends on her capacity to reproduce. Women, who are unable to bear a child, are often ridiculed and ostracized. According to Catherine Kohler, "Motherhood in a word, serves critical cultural functions in India's hierarchical society-stratified by gender, caste and class-that are masked by psychological and sentimental discourse... A married woman who is childless in India exists at the margins, in a liminal space" (112-115). Becoming a mother is very important in a patriarchal society to assert one's position. Involuntary childlessness can affect a woman in various ways and degrees. Meaning of her life is under question, particularly in the country like India. Women who face life without children will have severe impact on self and identity.

This stage leads to psychological distress. Women living in their midlife, married for more than a year are often viewed as non-normative people.

Poona, the female lead of the novel, often compares herself with trees and animals and feels inferior to that all. The tree in full bloom in her father's house which was planted twelve years ago, reminds her infertility.

Twelve years have gone by'. She sighed.

A shadow fell on her face. She must have been thinking about how the tree had grown so lush and abundant in twelve years while not even a single worm has crawled in her womb. Every wretched thing reminded her of that lack. After the wedding, she had fought with her father and had taken a cow from here. It delivered seven or eight calves, populating Kali's barn with its offspring. She'd tear up just looking at that cow. She had once cried out loud, 'I don't have the boon that even this mute creature has been blessed with (OPW 5).

The topic of second marriage for Kali comes up both secretly and openly. Some people indirectly ask Kali to change the cow which is unproductive, indirectly referring Poona. One of the relative of Kali says, "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 (OPW 7). Though Kali also becomes the butt of ridicule in the village, it is Poona who bears the burnt of childlessness more. She is considered unfit and disabled by everyone around her.

In the developed countries an infertile woman is sympathized but in developing nations these women experience condemnation, ridicule and punishment due to strict cultural, societal and socioeconomic roles. Kavitha Shah and Frances Batzer argue that the condition of women in developing countries is worse when compared to the childless women in developed nation. They say that feminists and Disability Rights proponents must articulate and promote the plight of the infertile women who are marginalized and rendered outcasts. The Disability Studies analyses two models of disability, the medical model and social model. The medical model of disability looks at the defect in an individual's body. The social model is based on the social and political factors that considers a disabled which does not perceive any biomedical condition. The pioneers of Disability Studies are more concerned with social model that directs attention away from the body to how society mistreats a disabled person. Feminist Disability Studies questions the assumptions and cultural

meanings attributed to a body that society considers disabled. The social model of disability excludes and stigmatizes human differences, it reveals discriminatory attitudes and practices directed at those bodies. This model exposes disability as a social category of analysis and argues that disability is an effect of power relations. Due to limited participation of the childless woman in society, infertility is often treated as disability. The infertility hinders women from fulfilling their societal roles as mothers and these women face medical, social, political and psychological negative ramifications. These women are devalued in the society. In the case of Poona, she is considered disabled as she is different from other fertile women in the village.

The socially ostracized women often feel insecure and resort all means to save their position and identity. She asks her husband, “are you planning to abandon me and marry another women?...was this about a marriage alliance”. her repeated question is “ Maama, won’t I ever get pregnant? His heart would melt and he would rush to comfort her” (OPW ). The couple try to turn every thing to bless them with a child. They make offerings to God, show their palms to read their fate and read the card picked by parrots. Poona becomes obsessed with the thoughts about children. “She managed to connect anything to the subject of children. It was not a worry she could keep hidden within herself. Even if she did, people would come to know anyway, she had no other thought besides trying to pre-empt other people’s questions about this” (OPW). They are forced to think that it is curse fallen on them due to the cruelty of their fore fathers and they try to redeem it with severe penance. The couple perform elaborate rituals to Pavatha, a female deity in the forest on Thiruchengode hill, to be reprieved of the curse, but to no avail. Appeasing God by going around the dangerous varadikkal, the barren women’s rock, risking her life; gulping down bitter concoctions to kill the unwanted germs in her stomach and undertaking severe vows at nearby temples becomes a part of life for Poona, to get the boon of a child. She is pushed to the level that she did not know what exactly needed to be done.

Except the child nothing was wrong in their life. Kali always loved her intensely as he had done during the early days of marriage. Kali refuses to remarry as he was in deep love with Poona. He never thinks of leaving her for begetting a child through another woman. They had good amount of land, cattle and money which many in the village lacked. Yet, they couldn’t live happy because they did not fulfill the expectations of the society. The happy marriage is broken by Ponna's mother and mother- in-law who decide that Ponna must take recourse to an age-old practice that

occurs on the fourteenth day of the annual festival at the temple. According to this practice, on the afternoon of the fourteenth day, a childless woman can sleep with any man she chooses from among the crowd there in order to conceive a child. The man so chosen is considered as God himself, and the child conceived of such a union is often named Sami Pillai or God's child. Both Kali and Ponna are horrified at the suggestion but the societal expectation and pressure, Ponna is brought to the temple on the appointed day and left alone in the festival crowd. Kali is deftly removed from the scene and does not find out about it until it is too late.

Kali's uncle Nallupaiyan, who decides remain single fighting against the societal expectations. He advises Kali as:

"You keep saying that we need an heir to what wealth we have, don't you? But what's the use of having a child? Even those parents who have four or five children have been left to take care of themselves. They all die alone. But I won't die that way.... The other day, I said, just for the sake of it, that since I didn't know who was going to take care of me, I was planning to write my property off to Sengottayan and Pavatha temples and then go die in a monastery somewhere. Since then, I am sent a big portion of whatever is cooked in my brothers' homes! Do people who have children get treated this way? Don't worry (OPW 237).

Defying the society which considers a childless woman disabled socially is not easy for a woman. Ponna unable to stand against the pressure succumbs to the traditional practice to sleep with a stranger to get a child. She considers having a child is more important than being loyal to Kali. The transformation of Ponna is the culmination of the pressure exerted on her by the people around her. She wants to become able and one among the crowd by choosing her own God from the crowd of men dancing.

When she felt something touching her earlobes, she reached back and wiped herself. It felt as though someone was blowing gently on her nape. She turned around and saw a pair of eyes to her side. She knew it was the touch of those eyes which had bothered her. Those eyes pierced the glow of the burning torches, and touched and teased her. The folded dhoti and the tower that was around his neck and fell over his chest made him look like no one she knew. His hair had been combed carelessly, and it looked like he had not even started shaving. It occurred to her that this was her god." (OPW 223)

In Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman*, the exploration of infertility illuminates profound issues related to womanhood, societal expectations, and the stigmatization of childlessness. Poona's journey navigates the intricate dynamics of her identity as a wife, as well as how her inability to conceive renders her socially disabled, culminating in a sense of profound isolation and desperation. In conclusion, *One Part Woman* serves as a powerful critique of the stigmatization of infertility as a form of social disability. The experiences of Poona shed light on the broader implications of societal norms that devalue women and their identities when they fail to conform to traditional roles. Through Poona's story, Murugan invites readers to reflect on the complexities of womanhood, the pressures exerted by deeply entrenched cultural practices, and the quest for self-worth in the face of societal condemnation. In a world still grappling with these issues, the novel poignantly underscores the need for empathy, understanding, and a broader re-evaluation of the structures that enable such discrimination against women.

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