



Research Paper

One Part Woman by Perumal Muruganand Aniruddhan Vasudevan (Tr) in Comparison with the Mahabharath:A Critical Study

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ABSTRACT: *One Part Woman* is set in the Konku region around the town of Tiruchengode, a Taluq headquarters in Salem district of Tamil Nadu. And the backdrop of this novel knitted with the issue of the childlessness of a young couple, Kali and Ponna, who wait for almost 12 years to a child. Though they are very loving, caring of each other and mate with utmost desire and zest, they still fail in having a child of their own and thus their efforts come to futile. Ponna is advised by her mother and mother-in-law, who are uneducated and superstitious, to have sex with another man in the name of god on the occasion of the chariot festival celebrated in honour of Lord Siva, who is seen in the form of half female and half male - Ardhanarishwara. The 18th day of the chariot festival is regarded as so dear to Lord Shiva, and so pious for people to fulfill their unfulfilled desires and wishes, and that day all the existing social customs are relaxed in all aspects. Hence, anybody can sleep with anybody, because every macho man is a god on that day. So women, who suffer from childlessness and want to have a child of their own, can mate with any man unknown to her, because such a man is devotionally viewed and believed to be a god on that particular day. Thus it was the belief of people who lived in that particular region about a hundred years ago. The novel ends with Ponna's visit to the chariot festival. Nobody knows what happened to Ponna thereafter. However, her visit to the festival creates disbelief and disloyalty about love and affection in her husband Kali, for whom his wife is everything. Here is the line that shows his love for her: "You are the apple of my eye-my pearl, my treasure. How can I ever leave you?" (p.13). His love and his concern and his affection for his wife is unfathomable. But, because of the societal issues, he decides not to see her in his life again, and she too prepares herself to indulge in an action, which is not dear to the heart of her loving husband. Not just for him, but for anybody such suggestion will be very painful; the idea of sharing one's wife with someone else for whatever reason is unimaginable, and is tantamount to death.

KEYWORDS: *superstitions, social taboos, restrictions, childlessness/barrenness, chastity of woman, contradiction and politics.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Banning books, films/movies at state, national and international level; approaching the court of law raising objections against certain portions in books, and dialogues or scenes in movies; issuing 'pattwas' (Orders) against writers, directors and threatening journalists, cartoonists and right to information act (RTI) activists is not so uncommon in India. And moreover the practice of banning books, and killing writers is not new. This kind of things arose in 1910 itself with the ban imposed on the short story of Subramania Bharathi: *Aari Oru Pangu*¹, the very first short story in the Tamil language. Thereafter, since 1910 up until now the book banning culture has been in vogue in India whenever there are protests from certain sections who do not like to be questioned in any form about issues such as religion, caste and information related to illegal activities. This cynical attitude of inflicting pain on writers, banning books, issuing pattwas, threatening social activists and killing journalists is not confined just to India; it is prevalent everywhere in the world.

Down the line, way back in 1988 Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* was banned thinking that it was blasphemous and hurt the religious sentiments of the Muslims. In 1995 the same writer's *The Moor's Last Sigh* was also banned labeling it as targeting Balasaheb Thackeray, founder of the right wing political outfit

Shiv Sena. It was also thought that one of the characters in the book was christened after India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. So was the case with Taslima Nasrin's *Dwikhandito* - translated into English as *Lajja* - in 2003. The work of Nasrin was viewed by the West Bengal Government as inciting communal discord in the state, since it mistook that it dealt with the communal issues between Hindus and Muslims during the liberation war of Bangladesh wherein India intervened on behalf of Bangladesh against Pakistan (1971). In 1997 a lawyer-Sabu Thomas - from Kerala filed a case against Arundhati Roy's Booker Prize winning novel *The God of Small Things*, alleging that Chapter 21 of the novel had obscene scenes and they were outrageous to the modesty of Indian women. The list of such novels however is not exhausted with these instances; it is very long. It is therefore not possible to delve into every account that took place previously in detail, because of certain limitations and spacial constraints.

Now it is the time of Perumal Murugan's *Madhorubhagan*, translated into English by Aniruddhan Vasudevan as *One Part Woman*. Murugan (1966--), author, scholar, controversial writer; of course he is not a writer controversial to be brought into moot, but is made to be controversial by the so called guardians of the Hindu religious beliefs, writes novels in Tamil his mother tongue.

Murugan has six novels, four collections of short stories and four anthologies of poetry to his credit. Of the six novels, three have been translated into English: i) *Seasons of the Palm*, ii) *Current Show* and iii) *One Part Woman*. They went on to win for him the coveted Sahitya Akademi Translation Award (2016). The novel *One Part Woman* raised no issues when it was published in 2010, but became controversial when it was rendered into English in 2013 and especially when the right wing political forces gained power at the central level in 2014.

In addition to high imaginary power and creativity as evidenced by the unprecedented success of the novel *One Part Woman*, Aniruddhan Vasudevan (Tr), who graduated in anthropology from the University of Texas, Austin, is a fine scholar, performer, writer, translator and social activist is equally significant in crafting this book so as to merit with a prestigious award – Sahitya Akademi Translation Award.

The quality of writing and the quality of translation of this novel are complimentary to each other and they worked like hands in glove and made the novel popular among the literary circles; the book readers; and the elite sections of the world, those who relish and enjoy the treasure of the world literature.

In fact the element of sex between man and woman outside marriage portrayed in the novel is not the whole story; it is just one piece of information believed to have happened long back in 1930, and nobody knew whether or not it was real or factious. The writer Murugan has brought it on to stage as a stock to be added for his out of box thinking. He never thought that the matter would become controversial. It was however turned into an issue by a political outfit that wanted to reap political mileage just on the pretext of Indian woman's chastity, modesty and dignity. As a writer and individual one should enjoy the right to live harmoniously and enjoy freedom of expression, without hurting the feelings of fellow citizens. It is a constitutional right given to every citizen. The writer merely used his constitutional right, but it is mistaken by some so called Hinduthva groups for serving their vested interests. Nothing, in fact, is seriously viewed from the point of view of Indian woman and her fidelity, as it is thought by such groups who have forced the writer to declare on his Facebook wall a post which reads like a suicide note. "It is by P Murugan on behalf of Perumal Murugan, He is no God. Hence, he will not resurrect. Hereafter, only P Murugan, a teacher, will live ..., Perumal Murugan the author is dead and will not publish anymore."²

In addition to this aspect, the writer has also delineated many other social elements such as superstitions, middle class woes; common man's understanding ability, social customs that once prevailed, farming culture and how a farmer shows his love towards farming, people's nagging at barren woman, and even a rebellious kind of human nature. For instance, Nallayan in the novel is so famous as a rebellious man who does everything as he wishes disregarding social bonds. He starts living with a woman who is not his wife and who she is:

... I bring a dried up woman home, should not she just shut up and sit around? She started saying she wanted a taali around her neck and a child by me! I got her earrings and this and that and kept her like a queen. But apparently all that was not good enough for her. She wanted a taali. At first I thought the desire would go away soon. But she would not let me touch her without tying a taali round her neck. That's why I hit her, gave her the sari she came in and chased her away (p.88).

And however the novel is also viewed by Indian Express as:

An evocative novel about a childless couple reminds us of the excellence of writing in Indian languages...this is a novel of many layers; of richly textured relationships: of raw and resonant dialogues and characters...Perumal Murugan's voice is distinct; it is the voice of writing in the Indian languages rich in characters, dialogues and locales that are unerringly drawn and intensely evocative. As the novel moves towards its inevitable climax, tragic yet redemptive, the reader shares in the anguish of the characters caught in a fate

beyond their control. It is because a super writer has drawn us adroitly into the lives of those far removed from our acquaintance.³

Believers of Hinduthva should also keep in mind their pious books the Ramayana, the Mahabharath and the Bhagvat Geeta, while creating uproar against the writings of creative people, thinking that the writings of some writers degenerate the modesty and chastity of Indian woman. Writing is one of the arts, and no art should be suppressed in any form. If there is no art, there is no pleasure and entertainment in life. Art and imagination are two important factors through which entertainment; pleasure, creativity and knowledge are derived. Art is not for art's sake; it is for people's entertainment and enlightenment.

In Murugan's writing, Ponna is forced by her mother and her mother-in-law to sleep with another man for the sake of having a child of her own, and the goal of her family is: "The goal was to beget a child, and she was ready to do anything to attain that goal"(p.43). She, in fact, is not happy about it; as she dearly loves her husband: "They could not even resist constantly looking at each other's face."(p.2). Even though they have been a married couple for over 12 years, they still spend all the time together, as if they were married today or yesterday. This is more than enough to understand how they love each other. But because of the circumstances, she is obliged to have sex with another man. As a woman doing so is so unavoidable because she is the one who continues her husband's lineage by bearing a male child. Or else society looks down upon and treats her as inauspicious. Sometimes she is also compared to an animal that fails to have her own calves.

The beginning of the Mahabharata, an epic story, is narrated with the king Shanthanu and his wife Ganga. The prince Gangeya is the son of Shanthanu and Ganga. Ganga marries Shanthanu on certain condition that she must not be prevented from doing anything she wishes. It is a story very familiar to every Indian. Ganga leaves Shanthanu after the birth of Gangeya, because Shanthanu fails in sticking to the promise he made to his wife. Thereafter, he marries Sathyavati, who gives birth to two sons -Vichitra Veera and Chithranga- who are killed in a war before they were blessed with children. Thus, the kingdom of Shanthanu falls in the dangerous situation of heirlessness. Here comes Vyaasa, the son of Sathyavathi and the Rishi Parashara. Gangeya could not marry in his life time, because he gave a word to his step-mother Sathyavathi that he would not marry and instead make her children the next kings of the kingdom after the retirement/death of his father - Shanthanu. To protect the clan of Bharata, with Bhishma's permission (Gangeya becomes Bhishma by taking the strong oath that he would not marry), Queen Sathyavati invites her son Vyasa and asks him to bless the wives of her deceased sons with children. Such initiative results in the birth of Drutharashtra, father of the Kauravas, Panduraja, father of the Pandavas, and Vidhura who is known for his extreme goodness and wisdom. So, the clan and the kingdom of Bharata is saved from falling into the status of heirlessness. Had it not happened so, the Mahabharata would not have there in the first place, and it would not have guided generations of Indians.

This is how the epic story the Mahabharata is popularly established as a valuable book to be read and emulated. It is ardently believed that such things came into practice in India right since the days of the Mahabharata. When it is thought that there is nothing wrong in the Mahabharata, how can the book of Murugan labeled as a book to be banned declaring that it has tarnished the character of the Indian woman.

The case in both the contexts is the same. There in the Mahabharata Sathyavathi used a chance, with her step-son's permission, to protect the dynasty of her husband and invited her son Vyasa, born to her from a pre-marital relationship with Rishi Parasara, to bless her two deceased sons' wives with children; here in the book of Murugan, Ponna is also asked and forced to have sex with somebody not known to her to get pregnant and have a son in order to save the family of her husband Kali. Ponna is prepared to do it with her husband's permission. She says to her husband Kali: "I will, if you are fine with it."(p.117). Here she does not think of her personality and character. However her intention is only to save her husband from humiliation and the nagging of others who find fault with her and her husband for not having children.

II. CONCLUSION

Whether it is either the time of the Mahabharata or the 21st century, the status of women remains the same. They are ready to relinquish their personality and fidelity to protect the clans, dynasties and heritage of their husbands. Thus, since then up until now there has been no change in the attitude of men toward women. Woman remains just like a puppet in the hands of patriarchal society in which male dominance is beyond human imagination.

Instead of appreciating women, who are ready to sacrifice their soul, heart, and body for the wellbeing of their husbands, society stigmatizes them as fallen creatures. So, the writing of Murugan has also dealt with the status of women in the 21st century, besides dealing with the custom that once prevailed in a particular region. Instead of looking at Murugan's One Part Woman from only one perspective, it should be viewed from the broad perspective of art, creativity and imagination. Otherwise, art in any form cannot survive and constitutionally provided rights will not be ensured.

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