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Traditions, Rights, and Individual Freedom: Human Rights Violations in Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman*

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Abstract: Perumal Murugan's novel '*One Part Woman*' explores deeply rooted socio-cultural constructs that expose human rights issues, particularly caste rigidities, traditions and rituals, the victimisation of women, reproductive rights, and personal freedom. The narrative of the husband-wife relationship during India's pre-independence era unfolds into a tragedy due to the impact of traditions and customs, ultimately disrupting individual and social relationships. This paper examines the novel's thematic aspects through the lens of the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The infringement of universal human rights at social, moral, and cultural levels is at the core of this novel. The repression of the individual 'self', especially of the woman protagonist, is juxtaposed with the community's socio-religious customs. This paper also aims to explore the impact of traditions and customs on individual lives. Literary, qualitative, and analytical methods were used in analysing the representation of the violation of personal and social human rights in *One Part Woman*. It helped in unveiling the interwoven themes in the novel.

Keywords: Human Rights; Gender; Community; Rituals; Violation of Rights

Introduction

"Literature is central to human rights work because it makes suffering visible and demands an empathetic, ethical response." (Dawes) James Dawes rightly notes the intimate connection between literature and human activities in his book *That the World May Know: Bearing Witness to Atrocity*. He emphasises the importance of literature as an effective tool in making human suffering visible in the context of the human rights

movement. However, literary narratives often encompass broken, deprived, and dehumanised humans. There has been a long-standing awareness and recognition of human social structures related to natural human dignity, as reflected in literary discourses. Lindsey Bridgestone, the interdisciplinary professor of Humanities and Human Rights, suggests that there is no possibility of human rights without literature. "I don't think we'd have modern human rights without literature." (Stonebridge) The study of human rights, whether modern or ancient, in the socio-cultural, political, moral, and civil rights, is reflected in literary works. Studying human values and rights reflected in literature, therefore, helps in recognising and exploring a wide range of themes.

The modern concept of human rights is deeply rooted in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations in 1948. The declaration aims at "recognition of the inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world..." (United Nations) The declaration consists of approximately 30 articles that encompass fundamental rights and freedoms, which are profoundly described through various literary texts. Literary narratives often draw the attention of readers due to the infringement and violation of fundamental human rights.

The present paper examines the human rights issues reflected in the Tamil poet and novelist Perumal Murugan's novel, *'One Part Woman'*, through the lens of the United Nations' *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Perumal Murugan's novels present a social milieu through intersectional and multi-dimensional aspects of class, gender, community, and religion. His novels delve into the issues of human rights during the pre-independence era, particularly caste oppression, gender inequality, social ostracism, and religious and communal rituals, which were posed against individual freedom rights. Murugan's other novels, such as *Pyre* (2017) and *Seasons of Palm* (2013), including *One Part Woman*, cover these issues broadly. *One Part Woman* examines a similar confrontation of individuals against caste-based ostracism. Murugan thoroughly depicts the customs, traditions, and rituals of an upper-middle-class community in a South Indian village. The narrative encompasses the major human rights concerns that are related to caste oppression, gender inequalities, violation of individual freedom, and social disrespect. This paper also attempts to unveil the themes explored by the novelist through an intersectional study of human rights and literature.

The following questions were considered while studying issues of human rights in the novel:

- Does the novel *One Part Woman* highlight the intersection of gender and social exclusion in the context of various articles of the Declaration of Universal Human Rights?
- Does Perumal Murugan intend to highlight the societal pressure in the novel as a violation of individual rights of privacy and freedom of choice?
- What role do community rituals and religion play in the justification or contestation of human rights issues in *One Part Woman*?

Narrative Outline of *One Part Woman*

The novel, *One Part Woman*, narrates the story of a married couple from the Kongu Vellalar community, also known as the Gounder community, found in the remote part of the Kongu region of Tamil Nadu, South India. The protagonists, Kali and Ponna, are a husband and wife who struggle to leverage the socio-religious and cultural community traditions. Their childlessness entangles them in the complexities of individual choices and oppressive traditions of their community. The Gounder community follows patriarchal family traditions, and as a result, considers Ponna responsible for infertility and provokes her husband, Kali, to consider a second marriage to have a child. The community's belief that a man must have a son to inherit his name, race, and property is at the pivotal point of the novel. The issues of being childless are strongly disparaged at every possible event in the story. The beliefs and rituals concerning progeny become conflicts for the individual, the family, and the community at large. However, Kali is in a dilemma due to childlessness and does not want his inability to have a child to be known in the community. Still, his friends and people in the community keep humiliating him openly and frequently. Secondly, Kali loves his wife and wants neither to leave her nor to allow her to participate in the carnivalesque rituals of the chariot festival. Unfortunately, Ponna is deceived by her family under the community pressure and forced to attend the festival to have a consensual sexual encounter with a stranger from another village as a religious ritualistic tradition. Kali, after reaching home on the same night, learns that all the family members have turned up to the festival, which completely distorts him. He fears being deprived of communal sharing and the fear of social isolation due to the possibility of raising an untouchable's child.

Perspective on Human Rights Issues in *One Part Woman*

"To deny any person their human rights is to challenge their very humanity." (Mandella) These famous words by Nelson Mandela, from his first speech at the joint session of the US Congress, highlight the significance of human rights and the sense of humanity. Murugan's novel provides insights regarding the similar challenges faced by the characters depicted. The human rights perspective reflected in this novel enables an understanding of the multiple layers of socio-cultural themes by Murugan.

The family members, Marayi, Kali's mother; Muthu, Kali's friend and brother-in-law; Kali's mother-in-law; and father-in-law, constantly nag Kali and Ponna to deal with the curses of their forefathers and the furies of deities. This constant humiliation is a result of an urge to beget a child. Now and then, they are forced to run from pillar to post to worship every god with offerings, to take penances like climbing dangerous, barren rocks, and follow all sorts of traditional and communal rituals. They leave no stone unturned to get a child. Despite all the efforts taken to follow the religious rites, Ponna does not conceive a child. The excessive expectations from the family members overpower her right to have a child. The novel explores the exasperating experiences the couple undergoes due to not bearing a child, even after twelve years of their marriage. While Kali and Ponna look at the Portia tree blooming in front of the house, she feels the pain of her infertility. "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." (Murugan 13) Dr. Ali juxtaposes Ponna's inability to bear a child, despite the couple having successfully taken care of barnyard, cattle, plants, and crops. "Ponna alone remains an island of infertility in the middle of all the productivity. So, what would cause joy in the household of other farmers becomes a source of misery to them, because the humans taunt them endlessly." (Ali)

There is a life-threatening pressure from the community on all the individuals related to the issues of childlessness in the novel. Ponna finds herself inferior due to the social atrocities of the community and compares herself to a cow. She expresses her anger, envy, helplessness, and violent response towards the cow. "After the wedding, she had fought with her father and had taken a cow from her parents' household. It delivered seven or eight calves, populating Kali's barn with its offspring. She would tear up just looking at that cow. She had once cried out loud, 'Even this mute creature has been blessed with a gift that I can't seem to have.' Her tears filled Kali with rage against that cow and its calves. He felt like killing them all. However, when he looked at their faces, he would melt: 'Poor things. What can they do about our suffering?'" (Murugan 13) Even Kali's love for Ponna reflects anger and violence towards the cattle that are very close to his heart since childhood. The societal pressure on Kali and Ponna directly challenges the foundational principle of human equality. Their social marginalisation, for being childless, reduces their identity and self-worth to a biological function, thereby violating Article 1 of the UDHR, which asserts that "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." (United Nations) This treatment extends to a more insidious form of psychological abuse. Ponna, in particular, is subjected to a degrading stigma as if she were unnatural. Ponna's emotional and psychological torment projects cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment, indicating a direct infringement upon her protection under Article 5.

Ponna and Kali's self-determination to beget a child and helplessness due to the same are more intensified by the community's beliefs and rituals. The inability to conceive a child is not only connected to sacraments and customs, but the entire blame is cast upon the couple. The sanctity of the marriage between Kali and Ponna is progressively eroded by external pressures, a clear violation of Article 16 (1), which guarantees the right to marry and found a family without societal interference. This is another way of violating individual freedom by forcing Kali to marry another girl against his will. It results in conflicts between the husband and wife several times. Kali sometimes thinks of the second marriage, but he is very worried about social customs and the fear of his impotence. Their freedom to make personal choices and adhere to their own beliefs is severely constrained by oppressive cultural norms, thereby impinging on their rights under Article 18. This societal pressure and fear expressed by his mother are the threats to his being. Marai expressed the grim reality of their community while convincing Kali about the social pressure: "The wretched people around us do not see what a man has. They only see what he does not have. We have to hold our heads high in front of these people, my son." (Murugan 75)

Further, the relatives and other people in their community keep torturing Kali and Ponna for being impotent and childless. They are made to seclude themselves from participating in weddings and other functions. The community believed the presence of a childless person inauspicious. Couples who were having children were permitted to attend the rituals in community ceremonies. Ponna's experience of humiliation in incidents such as when her neighbour, Sarasa, makes her question the imbalances of socio-cultural rights. "It seemed that people who had children could do anything they wanted—that only they had such rights." (Murugan 55) The psychological threats of being insulted everywhere force Kali and Ponna into social exclusion from the family functions, farming activities, and social gatherings. Their persistent humiliation for being childless reveals the dark side of the social structure of the community. The community and its rituals are frequently highlighted throughout the novel as the representation of the violation of social and moral rights.

The family suggests an extreme remedy to beget a child. Ponna and Kali's families unite to conspire a plot to send Ponna to take part in the chariot festival night for consensual sex with a stranger. Muthu takes Kali to a distant place to drink toddy and eat. However, when Kali learns that the family has taken Ponna to the festival, he is shattered to the point of depression. The individual's right to make their own decisions about love and marriage is violated by the family under community and religious pressures. Sacrificing chastity for the sake of motherhood is tolerable not only to the family but to the community, surprisingly. The right to freedom of having a child is violated by venerating the carnivalesque rituals at the cost of chastity, individual will, and love relationships. Another aspect the novel touches on is that of gender discrimination, which is also a violation of human rights regarding pregnancy and having a child. Ponna, being a barren woman, suffers torture from the community. She is not free to assert her right of motherhood. It is the constant humiliation about her childlessness that makes her suffer more than her desire to be a mother. Ponna's decision to participate in the chariot festival came out of her husband's social and communal standing. Despite consistent force by his mother and in-laws, Kali opted out of the idea of a second marriage. Once or twice, he thought of the same, but his love for Ponna did not allow him to consider a second marriage. Ponna also wanted to avoid people for their constant broaching of the topic of childlessness, barrenness, heirless status, etc. She agreed to participate in the festival to end all social and psychological humiliations of her husband forever.

Societal Atrocities and Community Orthodoxy

The novel explores issues of human rights, covering gender equality, women's autonomy, and freedom to choose motherhood and love. It also touches the core aspects of human rights related to social ostracism and freedom of expression, juxtaposed against traditional notions of honour and purity. The implications of women's repression and distress due to patriarchal ties are a violation of their individual and family rights. Ponna is a representative of women in her community, where their sexuality is limited to being only for motherhood and the benefits of progeny. They are denied the freedom of married life and motherhood. This infers the representation of

double marginalisation of childless women in the Gounder community, firstly being a woman and secondly being childless, where either of which is not their fault. Rather, in the case of Ponna, women like her face individual rights issues at various levels, like gender, community, caste, class, and religion. E. V. Ramasamy rightly noted that the observation about the community in his book, *Why Were Women Enslaved?*, puts the condition of childless women as “A woman is respected only when she becomes a mother. Otherwise, she is merely a toy or an object of suspicion.” (Ramasamy) He highlights the issues of gender oppression and patriarchal control, and the constant denial of rights of equal opportunity and dignity to women.

Both Kali and Ponna lose faith in the community and the people around them due to the community's atrocities. “Even when you have spent years with some people, their real faces are revealed only when the right time comes. God knows how many faces lie concealed forever, with no opportunity to reveal themselves.” (Murugan 55) Ponna and Kali belong to the upper middle class of the Gounder community in South India, where they were not allowed to adopt a child from a toddy-worker's low-caste untouchable family. The fear of untouchability overpowers Kali when he discusses his opposition to the chariot festival with Muthu. Kali tells Muthu that he will not be able to accept Ponna and the child if they are untouchable. He fears the possibility of untouchable young men participating in the chariot festival and says, “More than half the young men roaming about the town are from the ‘untouchable’ castes. If any of them gets to be with Ponna, I will be unable to touch her after that. I cannot even lift and hold that child.” (Murugan 140) The novel ends, suggesting bleakness of Kali's helplessness and possible suicide. The reason is not only adultery but the fear and anxiety of possible social judgments about raising an untouchable child.

The societal compulsion to attain motherhood forces Ponna to transcend her marital life. The Gounder community challenges her chastity for her womanly articulation of motherhood. The customs of the community are hypocritical. On one side, Ponna is restricted from participating in many community activities and functions for being an infertile lady; on the other side, she is allowed sexual adultery by releasing all the restrictions and allowing her to choose a stranger to beget a child under the garb of religious tradition. She is constantly oppressed for having a barren identity forced upon her. This displacement of the community's traditions and momentary transgression resulted in the violation of the socio-cultural, moral, and ethical rights of characters like Kali, Ponna, Marayi, and Uncle Nallayyan. The freedom regarding family relationships and the choice of motherhood or fatherhood is under threat due to fear of community judgment.

Kali expresses his anguish to the tribal goddess, Devatha, “Has your thirst been unquenched through the ages? It is not up to me to make you pull in your revenge-thirsty tongue. I am an ordinary man. For several births to come, I will do what I can. Please save me from being the talk of the town. 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 avenging Ponna for that? Saying this, he sat down in front of her. However, nothing quenched Devatha's anger.” (Murugan 35) This expression of despair

suggests that people suffer through ages and generations, but nothing changes their lives so far. Here, he expresses his helplessness and curses his family lineage. Even his mother's widowhood is not accepted by the community. Her rights to grow her crops and be a part of the community are snatched only because she is a widow. Despite supporting her to sow seeds, the community humiliates and discourages her. "They said, 'Nothing would grow when sown by a woman in white,' referring to her widow's attire." (Murugan 8) One of the characters from Bama's Tamil novel, *Karukku*, presents similar situations regarding pre-Independent social structures where equality and respect were denied to women: "But we too are human beings." (Bama 25) And "They treat us in whatever way they choose..." (Bama 36) Though Bama presents the plight of Dalit women in her novel, the condition of the upper-middle-class women in the pre-independence era was not much better, as reflected in *One Part Woman*. They were deprived of their fundamental human rights, and women like Ponna and Marayi represent the same humiliation.

The novel underscores a societal failure to prioritise rational understanding, which leads to harmful rituals and misinformed decisions. This pervasive reliance on traditional beliefs over education and critical thinking can be interpreted as a deprivation of the right to access informed knowledge. While not a direct violation of the legal right to knowledge, this thematic element highlights a societal condition that undermines the spirit of Article 26(1), which establishes the right to education and the development of the human personality.

Conclusion:

Murugan's *One Part Woman* intensifies the issues of infringements of universal human rights through the tragic story of Kali and Ponna. They suffer due to the violation of their human rights, encompassing rights related to their caste, gender, community, and reproduction, under socio-communal, cultural, and religious pressures. Religious beliefs and rituals have been overpowering the individual, interpersonal, family, and social human rights. The present study of the novel through the lens of universal human rights deeply reveals the infringement of Articles 1, 5, 16(1), 18, and 19 in the United Nations' Declaration of Universal Human Rights, specifically. They highlight the rights regarding inherent dignity and equality, marriage and family, freedom from cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment, freedom of expression, thought, conscience, and religion, among others. Meanwhile, the novel critiques the deeply rooted issues of ritualistic beliefs and traditions that cost individual freedom and personal rights, specifically, the rights of women against social atrocities. The story enables the readers to question the broader implications and the role of society in protecting universal human rights. *One Part Woman* demands reinforcement of recognising and addressing matters of human rights in a humanitarian and empathetic manner to build a sustainable social structure.

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