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One Part Woman: Perumal Murugan's Novel

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The English translation of writer Perumal Murugan's novel *Mathorubhagan (One Part Woman)* has won the Sahitya Akademi's award for translation in English. The translation was done by Aniruddhan Vasudevan and the book was published by Penguin.

Erumal Murugan has been a professor of Tamil for the past 17 years, during which time he has developed considerable expertise in three different areas: building a lexicon of words, idioms and phrases special to Kongunadu; researching Kongu folklore, especially the ballads on Annamar Sami, a pair of folk deities; and publishing authoritative editions of classical Tamil texts. Murugan's output in these areas over the past decade has been substantial. It was his continuing interest in Kongu folklore that prompted him to apply for and obtain a grant from the India Foundation of the Arts, Bangalore, to undertake research on folklore surrounding the temple town of Thiruchengodu, a town he knew very well from his childhood but, in another sense, did not know at all.

There are many idols on the Thiruchengodu hill, each one capable of giving a specific boon. One of them is the Ardhanareeswarar, an idol of Shiva who has given the left part of his body to his consort, Parvathi. It is said that this is the only place where Shiva is sacralised in this mythical form. Murugan was intrigued on encountering several men in the region past the age of 50 who were called Ardhanari (Half-woman) or Sami Pillai (God-given child). On digging further he found out that till as recently as 50 years ago, on a particular evening of the annual chariot festival in the temple of Ardhanareeswara, childless women would come alone to the area alive with festival revelries. Each woman was free to couple with a male stranger of her choice, who was considered an incarnation of god. If the woman got pregnant, the child was considered a gift from god and accepted as such by the family, including her husband.

As a farming community, the Gounders tend to be unsettled by childlessness, by the lack of male heirs for the family property. In the Gounders' worldview, 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 labours. As a result, childlessness is brutally stigmatized in the Gounder community.

In Murugan's *One Part Woman*, Kali and Ponna, a couple madly in love with each other, remain childless for more than 12 years after marriage. During those 12 years, in the period immediately preceding the country's independence, they have run the gamut of prayers to various deities, vows and penances, but to no avail. Kali's mother tells him that his family is cursed by Pavatha, a ferocious female deity in the jungle, for a past crime against a young girl, and that the males in his family are doomed to remain childless; if a child is born to them, it will be short-lived. Kali and Ponna offer votive sacrifice at the altar of Pavatha and climb the varadikkal, barren woman's rock, on the hill of Thiruchengodu, but these efforts do not bear fruit. Meanwhile, both of them endure, in their own way, an endless stream of taunts and

insinuations from everyone around them, including strangers hitching a ride with them to the temple. In this scenario, Ponna's family—her mother and brother—as well as Kali's old mother, conspire to send Ponna alone to the festival to receive the blessing of a child from an anonymous Sami. Mathorupagan is the harrowing account of how a community's pathological obsession tears a loving couple apart and destroys their marriage.

One Part Woman is a rooted and passionate novel that, as the blurb says,

“...lays bare with unsparing clarity a relationship caught between the dictates of social convention and the tug of personal anxieties.”

The tradition of seeking impregnation by an anonymous male in the name of god seems to have died out decades ago. Kali and Ponna must have been among its last victims.

It is a curious paradox that even as progressive Indians would like to abolish the caste system, they have little or no understanding of the lived reality of specific caste groups in their traditional homelands. Even as these communities are stalked and often dispossessed by the forces of modernization, they remain hostage to the ways of the past that have sustained them for centuries. Perumal Murugan has at least shown us a glimpse of what our collective struggle may be about.

Distance allows us to be dismissive of the lives of other people, to filter their narratives down to a few essential keynotes and tragedies. In *One Part Woman*, Perumal Murugan turns an intimate, crystalline gaze on a married couple in interior Tamil Nadu. It is a gaze that lays bare the intricacies of their story, culminating in a heart-wrenching denouement that allows no room for apathy.

Kali and Ponna, land-owning farmers in Thiruchengode, enjoy a completely happy marriage on all counts but one. Theirs is a sexually-charged and mutually fulfilling relationship; it is neither for lack of effort nor of intent that they are unable to conceive. The couple perform countless acts of penance, entreating various deities – among them the half-male, half-female god on the hill attended by a Brahmin priest and the tribal goddess Pavatha of the same hill, to whom blood sacrifices are made. Ponna weeps at the onset of every menstrual period. Neither love nor their thriving land is enough to keep at bay the despair of being without offspring in their community. They are constantly on the receiving end of disparagement from the people around them: Kali's sexual potency is the subject of sly and open taunts, while every slip or argument Ponna has with another is turned on her using her childlessness as an indication of her character or capabilities.

The disparagement arrives in wounded, less unkind guises too – particularly from their mothers, who tell stories of hereditary curses that could explain their misfortune and sing dirges lamenting the couple's barrenness. Eventually, the two women decide that there may be only one way. Every year, on the fourteenth day of the chariot festival to the androgynous deity on the hill, the rules of all marital contracts are relaxed. Any man is allowed to lie with any woman – a tradition acknowledged as being a socially and divinely sanctioned method of conceiving should a husband be sterile. Ponna's mother and mother-in-law, in the hope that it is Kali who is the cause of their infertility, suggest the solution of sending her to participate. The resulting anxieties and attendant manipulations challenge the marriage, and alter its course.

One Part Woman is a powerful rendering of an entire milieu which is certainly still in existence, which it engages with insightfully. The author handles myriad complexities with an enviable sophistication, creating an evocative, even haunting, work.

The novel is also acutely sensitive in its approach toward gender and sexuality and humane in its treatment of longing. While fundamentally an emotional work, driven by personal desires and losses, it also unsettles the reader with what it frankly reveals about simplistic ideas about progressiveness. The society in which the book is set in is permissive in ways that the urban middle-class in the same state at large is not, even though known markers of suppression, such as caste laws, hold sway. But, here as elsewhere, the true hindrances to happiness and progress come in much more personal forms.

Murugan's writing is taut and suspenseful, particularly as the book progresses towards its climax. Though Kali had resumed normal conversation with Ponna, he was constantly haunted by her words. He was now convinced that women were terrible creatures. Mother tells the son, 'Send your wife to another man.' The other mother is ready to take her own daughter to it. And Ponna says, 'I will, if you are fine with it.' No one seemed to have even an iota of hesitation anywhere. He, on the other hand, was still hesitant to talk about those long-gone days when he had been to the fourteenth day of the festival. While a man felt so shy about these matters, look at these women! What they dared to do! If someone told them that the only way to have a child was to drop a rock on his head while he slept, would Ponna be ready to do that too?

These thoughts drained his trust in her. A falseness entered in his sweet words to her. His embrace was no longer wholehearted. There was no softness when he made love to her, not the usual generosity that let him include her in its sway. He came to be possessed by a fury for revenge, a desire to pound her violently and tear her apart. It was hot in the barnyard those days, even at night. He would wake up suddenly and go home. Ponna kept the earthen wick lamp burning softly through the night. He would peep through the gaps in the wooden planks on the door to see if she was asleep. Sometimes he even went back to the barnyard without waking her up. Whenever he saw that the light inside was put out, that there was nothing but darkness, he panicked. On such days, he listened carefully for any sound that came from inside the house. Sometimes, his tapping on the door woke his mother. When she asked, 'Who is it?' he replied shyly, 'It's just me. Go back to sleep.'

A sense of urgency and carelessness started pervading all his actions. However much she tried to hold him tight and take him inside her, all he wanted was to hold back adamantly and ejaculate as soon as he could. Whenever he decided to drink loads of arrack, which he knew would knock him out till morning, he asked her to come and stay in the barn. He would force her to drink. Earlier, on the nights he drank, his body lost its harshness and spread on her like a fluid. He would chatter happily for a long time. On such nights, he wore only the loincloth. She'd playfully pull it open. But he would feel no shame. She would say in mock anger, 'You have no shame. Look at you! Sitting with nothing on.' And he'd reply, 'Why should I feel any shame in front of you? Why don't you be naked too?' But there was none of that intimacy now.

Now he downed the arrack like water in quick gulps and passed out right away. At whatever time he came to at night, he jumped on her and took control of her. It took him several mornings to regain a sense of balance. 'The drinking is getting out of control, maama. Please drink less,' she said lovingly. He responded with a slight smile. His face never blossomed again in a full smile.

Whenever he crushed her underneath him, she begged, 'Maama, please don't show your anger on me this way. It is unbearable. Just hit me. Get a club and beat me to pulp if you want. But please don't torture me like this.' His heart went out to her. His embrace and kisses then said to her, 'It was my mistake, dear.'

When she menstruated every month, she came to sit and cry in the barn. It was consoling to bury her face in his lap. He'd ruffle her hair and say, 'Let it go. We should be used to it by now.' But she kept hoping things would change. Sometimes, her crying made him cry too. So they cried together, lamenting their fate. Ironically, it made him happy on the inside whenever she got her periods on time and came crying to him. The way his mind worked, she was trustworthy as long as she was menstruating regularly.

Subsequently, he reasoned: 'Poor thing. How can I be so suspicious because of just that one thing she said? She only said it in the urge to do something to have a child of her own. Does that mean I can conclude she would go with any man? Didn't she come to me complaining about Karuppannan's advances? She said what she said because of me - she said it for me. She said, "I will go if you ask me to." And I didn't ask her to. Then why would she go?' This made him treat her with affection, and it looked as though the Kali she knew was back.

But it lasted only a week. He then got back to being irritable, and she was at a loss for words to placate him. But since she was annoyed too, it was easy for her to raise her voice. It put him in place a little if she shouted at him. He never raised his voice. Even when he had to call out to her from the field, he didn't yell. He'd move closer and call her in a voice that sounded like he had a raven hidden deep inside his throat. She felt bad that she needed to shout and fight with him. This went on for a year. She had no other way but to observe him closely and choose her responses accordingly.

