

The Interplay of Humanitarianism and Social Stratum in Perumal Murugan’s Duology Sequels: *Trial by Silence* and *A Lonely Harvest*

Ganesanpillai Ramakrishnan¹   Gerri Harikrishna²   Dr R. Meena³  

Abstract

Perumal Murugan wrote a duology Sequels, “Trial by Silence” and “A Lonely Harvest”. These novels are different from “One Part Woman”. Unlike “One Part Woman”, they do not follow a single narrative. Instead, they explore deeper themes. They show how caste, gender, and social rules affect people’s choices. They also look at how these forces impact relationships. The story of this duology is set in modern Tamil society. This article argues that these novels critically examine the intricate relationship between individual humanism and the deep-rooted social stratum.

This research first delves into “A Lonely Harvest”, exploring the tragic consequences of betrayal and societal pressure on Kali, juxtaposed with Ponna’s journey through grief and unexpected new life. Subsequently, it examines “Trial by Silence”, focusing on the arduous process of attempted reconciliation between Kali and Ponna as they navigate their enduring social environment. Through close readings of both narratives, the study illuminates how Murugan’s distinctive narrative style, marked by realism and sympathetic portrayal of marginalized lives, offers a poignant commentary on social stratification’s influence on

Submitted: 2.02.2026 Revised: 23.03.2026 Accepted: 29.03.2026 Published 31.03.2026

¹Ganesanpillai Ramakrishnan, Research Scholar-VHNSNC, Assistant Professor, Department of H&S, Audisankara Deemed-to-be University, Gudur, Tirupathi - 524101, Andhra Pradesh, India.

²Gerri Harikrishna, Associate Professor in English, Department of H&S, Audisankara Deemed-to-be University, Gudur, Tirupathi - 524101, Andhra Pradesh, India.

³Dr R. Meena, Research Supervisor, VHNSN College, Virudhunagar - 626001, Affiliated to Madurai Kamaraj University, Tamil Nadu, India.

©2026. Ganesanpillai Ramakrishnan & Gerri Harikrishna & Dr R. Meena. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction, provided the original author and source are credited.

individual human experiences and relationships. The duology ultimately suggests the possibility of empathy and understanding, even within a system marked by profound inequality, offering a powerful commentary on the continuous impact of social structures on individual lives.

Keywords: perumal murugan, duology, *trial by silence*, humanism, *a lonely harvest*, social division

Introduction

Regional literatures serve as invaluable channels for cultural understanding and the preservation of diverse heritage. By reflecting the unique cultural, linguistic, and social identities of specific areas, they significantly develop the global literary landscape. Such works offer diverse perspectives, challenging stereotypes, and nurturing intercultural understanding as they are translated and circulated to a broader range of audiences. And thus, they act as crucial bridges between local and global experiences. Scholars like Ranajit Guha, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Chatterjee, Mahasweta Devi and particularly Spivak have emphasized how regional and subaltern narratives are crucial for decolonizing literary studies, asserting that they “resituate the global literary map” (Spivak 15).

In this vital global exchange, Perumal Murugan’s extensive body of work holds a major place. Despite common misconceptions, sub-regional fiction remains highly relevant, particularly in its capacity to illuminate caste relations within specific communities. Sub-regional fiction helps to show everyday caste discrimination. This kind of discrimination is very common. Sub-regional fiction can also encourage a wider political response. Such a response is much needed. Right now, this kind of political action is missing. One reason is that dominant castes often use their caste identity to gain social advantage.

Renowned for his nuanced portrayal of the specific cultural and social contexts of Kongunadu, a region in Tamil Nadu, Murugan’s novels particularly those engaging with caste, gender, and social inequality have resonated internationally. His unique ability to blend deeply rooted regional specificity with universal human themes has established him as a significant voice in contemporary world literature. The cultural capital plays a major role in reproducing social structures. Individuals with higher levels of cultural capital tend to reproduce their social positions by passing on their cultural knowledge and resources to their children. Pierre Bourdieu’s idea of cultural capital refers to the non-economic resources that can be used to enhance social mobility and success. These resources include knowledge, skills, education, and other cultural assets that are valued within a particular society. Cultural capital is not at all distributed evenly, with higher socio-economic groups.

Perumal Murugan’s Life and Works

Perumal Murugan is a well-known Tamil writer, born in 1966 in a small village

called Konganapuram near Thiruchencode, a temple town in Namakkal district, Tamil Nadu. He grew up close to agricultural farming and rural life, which deeply shaped his writing. As a young man, he was drawn to literature and later became a professor of Tamil literature. Murugan's novels often focus on the lives of ordinary people in villages, especially farmers, herders, and traders.

While Murugan's earlier works, such as *EruVeyyil* (1991) and *Koolamadari* (2000), which was translated as *Seasons of the Palm* (2004), established his thematic concerns with family dynamics, social injustice, and marginalized lives. His novel, *Madhurobhagan* (2010) which was translated as *One Part Woman*, (2013), that brought him unprecedented global attention, alongside the forceful controversy. He was acclaimed for his writings. For example, Ellen Barry praised as "Murugan's fictional villages are places full of quiet menace, where caste boundaries are protected with violence and social exclusion" (New York Times).

Murugan started his writing career by publishing short stories in *Manavosai*, a Tamil journal during 1980s and 1990s, later collected in *Thiruchengodu* (1994). Geetha.V translated his second novel *Nizhal Mutram* (1993), as *Current Show* (2004), which was derived from his personal experience (Murugan, *Nizhal Mutrattu* 2013). N. Kalyanraman described *Koolamadari* as a "tour de force" (Raman 78). This pivotal novel (*One Part Woman*), depicting a childless couple's desperate decision to participate in a traditional fertility ritual. It sparked widespread debate and social upheaval. In the aftermath of this contentious publication, Murugan penned a distinctive duology, *A Lonely Harvest* (2018) and *Trial by Silence* (2018) which serves not merely as sequels but as profound explorations of the complex repercussions stemming from the events of *One Part Woman*.

Perumal Murugan reveals the rural village life through his novels. He uses a strong and evocative language. Mostly he tries to reveal the complex social issues exists in the surrounding rural area of his living arena. Particularly the social issues surrounded among the marginalized people is portrayed in his writings. Demonstrating his versatility as a writer, he has written not only novels but also poetry, essays, and literary criticism.

This article argues that Murugan's duology sequels, *Trial by Silence* and *A Lonely Harvest*, critically examine the complex relationship between individual humanism and entrenched social stratum in contemporary Tamil society. By diverging from the singular narrative path of *One Part Woman* to present two distinct and powerful interpretations of its aftermath, the novels vividly expose how caste, gender norms, and societal expectations profoundly impact individual agency, relationships, and the very potential for human empathy and reconciliation.

Review of Literature

Regional literatures, often marginalized in global literary discourse, are increasingly recognized as vital for decolonizing literary studies and fostering intercultural understanding. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues, these narratives "resituate the global literary map," providing unique insights into cultural, linguistic,

and social identities (Spivak 15). Perumal Murugan's extensive body of work, particularly his nuanced portrayals of Kongunadu in Tamil Nadu, stands as a testament to the significance of sub-regional fiction. His novels, engaging deeply with themes of caste, gender, and social inequality, have garnered international acclaim, bridging local specificities with universal human experiences.

A central concept for understanding the dynamics within Murugan's work is Pierre Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital. He states that non-economic resources like knowledge, skills, and education contribute significantly to social mobility and success. The uneven distribution of cultural capital, often concentrated within higher socioeconomic strata, plays a crucial role in reproducing existing social structures, as cultural knowledge and resources are passed down through generations. This theoretical lens is particularly relevant to Murugan's exploration of pervasive everyday casteism, which sub-regional fiction like his uniquely exposes, potentially catalyzing broader political responses.

Murugan's literary trajectory illustrates a progressive engagement with societal complexities. His early works, such as *Eru Veyyil* (1991) and *Koolamadari* (2000), translated as *Seasons of the Palm*, (2004), established his thematic concerns with family dynamics, social injustice, and marginalized lives. However, it was *Madhurobhagan* (2010), translated as *One Part Woman* (2013), that catapulted Murugan to global prominence and exploded intense controversy. This critical novel, depicting a childless couple's desperate decision to participate in their locality's traditional fertility ritual, was lauded by Romila Thapar for its "admirable sensitivity, anguish and gentleness" but also sparked widespread debate and social disruption and upheaval (Thapar 45). Murugan's insights about relationships spread throughout his work like flashes of lightning.

In the aftermath of this contentious publication, Murugan penned the distinctive duology- *A Lonely Harvest* (2018) and *Trial by Silence* (2018). These works are not merely sequels but profound explorations of the complex repercussions stemming from the events of *One Part Woman*. The initial premise of *One Part Woman*, revolving around Kali and Ponna's struggle with childlessness and their participation in a fertility festival, sets the stage for the divergent narratives of the duology. *A Lonely Harvest* explores Kali's suicide due to perceived betrayal and Ponna's subsequent journey through grief and unexpected pregnancy, highlighting the tragic consequences of societal pressure. Conversely, *Trial by Silence* presents an alternative outcome where Kali survives his suicide attempt, focusing on the arduous process of attempted reconciliation between the couple and their navigation of enduring social complexities.

Scholarly articles on Perumal Murugan's works often highlights his unique narrative style, characterized by a blend of realism and symbolism, deeply rooted in the landscapes and social structures of rural Tamil Nadu. Critics note his close observation of daily life, focus on marginalized communities, and avoidance of simplistic representations of good and evil, instead presenting characters with

complex traits (Suganthi & Deivasigamani 653-658). His use of a third-person perspective, often close to the protagonist's consciousness, offers intimate portrayals while maintaining objectivity. This distinctive approach allows Murugan to critically examine how social stratum, particularly caste and gender, shapes individual experiences, relationships, and dictates the course of lives. Works like *Pyre* (2016) further exemplify this consistent thematic concern, showcasing how characters are often defined by their social, caste, and gender moorings, with their actions largely shaped by the limitations and opportunities presented by these structures. The duology, therefore, extends this inquiry, shifting focus from collective societal pressure to the individual struggles and emotional turmoil of Kali and Ponna, ultimately exploring their attempts to navigate and challenge restrictive social norms, and the potential for empathy and understanding even within a deeply unequal system.

Many other writers have also analysed his works. The researchers such as: Arya Krishnan, Evangeline Jemi and Manjupriya analysed Murugan's novels in view of humanism takes place from restlessness to reassuring. (2024). The evaluation of the lives and thoughts in the novels of Perumal Murugan have also been analysed by few of the regional researchers such as Suresh, Poomari, Jeyaraman and Sowmia Kumar in his works.

This research article will first delve into *A Lonely Harvest* to explore the tragic consequences of betrayal and societal pressure on Kali, juxtaposed with Ponna's journey through grief and unexpected new life. Subsequently, the paper will examine *Trial by Silence*, focusing on the arduous process of attempted reconciliation between Kali and Ponna, and their efforts to navigate the enduring complexities of their social environment. Through a close reading of both narratives, this study will illuminate how Murugan's distinctive narrative style, marked by its realism and sympathetic portrayal of marginalized lives, offers a distressing commentary on the enduring influence of social stratification on individual human experiences and relationships.

Analysis and Discussion

Humanitarianism and Social Stratum

Humanitarianism, when viewed through a socio-cultural lens, reveals itself as a concept deeply embedded in specific historical, political, and cultural contexts, rather than a universally applicable set of principles. Understanding humanitarian action requires analysing the interplay of various actors, the power dynamics shaping their interactions, and the cultural norms influencing how these interactions unfold.

One Part Woman is a novel which portrays an ancient cultural practice exists among people living around the region called Tiruchengode. It tells the story of a childless couple's intense desire for a child and their participation in a temple festival where women without children could have sexual relations with a stranger, a practice believed to grant fertility. Kali, unaware of this tradition, feels deeply

betrayed by his wife, Ponna, leading him to contemplate suicide. This controversial premise sets the stage for the duology.

The sequels, while restricting from the same initial premise, diverge significantly from *One Part Woman's* narrative, offering two distinct trajectories for Kali and Ponna. In *A Lonely Harvest*, Kali, unable to cope with the perceived betrayal, commits suicide after the festival. The narrative then shifts to Ponna's experience, highlighting her grief, guilt, and eventual pregnancy (revealed three months after Kali's death). On the other hand, *Trial by Silence* presents an alternative outcome: Kali survives his suicide attempt, but his relationship with Ponna is severely damaged. This story explores the arduous aftermath of the festival and the couple's attempts to rebuild their relationship, facing the consequences of their choices and societal expectations.

These three works, *One Part Woman*, and its sequels *A Lonely Harvest*, and *Trial by Silence* showcases a unique narrative style and voice. These novels show both realistic and symbolic deeply rooted in the landscapes and social structures of rural Tamil Nadu. Murugan's writing style is characterized by a close observation of the in-depth daily life, a focus on the experiences of marginalized communities, and a blend of realism with elements of folklore and the supernatural. He frequently employs a third-person perspective that stays close to the protagonist's consciousness, offering an intimate portrayal of their experiences while maintaining a degree of objectivity. He presents characters with both positive and negative traits, reflecting the complexities of human nature and social situations. And at the same time, he avoids simplistic portrayals of good and evil.

The duology also examines the impact of caste and social norms on their relationship and individual agency. "Every festival, every gathering, every casual visit ended with the same question. A child had not come yet? The question clung to them like dust that refused to be shaken off" (Murugan, *One Part Woman* 43). These novels highlight the complexities of human experience within a rigid social structure. Though this duology has the base of the same initial premise, *One Part Woman* explores a couple's desperate desire for a child and their decision to participate in a local festival where sexual relations are permitted. This leads to potential consequences. Whereas, deviating from this point, the sequel novels present two distinct paths for Kali and Ponna. In Perumal Murugan's duology sequels, there are several poignant moments where elements of empathy and understanding emerge despite the rigid social structures and emotional turmoil experienced by the characters. These moments provide a window into how, even within a caste-based society that severely restricts individual agency, there is potential for connection, healing, and growth. Here are a few key scenes and character moments that illustrate this.

The novel *One Part Woman* focuses on Kali and Ponna's struggle to conceive and their participation in a traditional festival to potentially resolve their infertility. The story concludes in a moment of tension, leaving the reader to wonder

about the couple's future. In the sequel '*A Lonely Harvest*', Kali, unable to cope with the perceived betrayal, commits suicide after the festival. The narrative then shifts to Ponna's experience, highlighting her grief, guilt, and eventual pregnancy.

Ponna's grief and her unexpected pregnancy is explained in a scene that, After Kali's suicide, Ponna is left devastated, wracked with guilt and despair. The narrative shifts to her emotional and physical state, detailing her grief over her husband's death. To boot, three months after Kali's death, Ponna discovers that she is pregnant with his child. Actually here in this novel, Ponna's pregnancy is a symbol of both hope and sorrow. Even in her grief, there is an unspoken bond between her and Kali's memory. Her pregnancy is also a subtle recognition of life continuing, despite the ruptures caused by societal expectations and individual struggles. In this scene, Murugan shows Ponna's inner turmoil, but also the quiet resilience of a woman navigating loss, the societal pressures of childbearing, and her need for emotional closure.

Ponna's Silence and Kali's effort to understand her is excellently represented in *Trial by Silence*, as Kali and Ponna attempt to reconcile after the events of *One Part Woman*. While Kali struggles with the tension between his feelings of betrayal and his desire to repair their relationship, Ponna remains silent for much of the novel. "He could not decide whether to blame her, the village, or himself. The thought circled endlessly until it hollowed him from within" (Murugan, *A Lonely Harvest* 71).

Ponna's silence is her form of protest, but it also reflects her profound emotional injury, and the weight of the societal expectations placed upon her. Kali, though initially frustrated, begins to understand that Ponna's silence is not just a personal rejection but also a reaction to the overwhelming social pressures they both face. His eventual realization that he must navigate these pressures with empathy rather than judgment marks a key shift in his character. Whereas in the novel *A Lonely Harvest*, the village community, particularly the women, have varying responses to Ponna's grief and her pregnancy. While some gossip about her situation, others show genuine compassion. There's a moment where an older woman takes Ponna aside and offers words of solace and practical advice, acknowledging the societal constraints but also emphasizing the importance of moving forward.

This moment highlights the communal support that exists alongside the oppressive social structures. The older woman's advice reflects a balance between understanding Ponna's personal tragedy and the societal realities she must face. It's a subtle acknowledgment that human relationships, even in the most restricted circumstances, are marked by care and compassion.

Like that, throughout the novel- *Trial by Silence*, Kali grapples with his sense of being trapped by caste and the social expectations that stem from it. In a particularly poignant moment, Kali reflects on the deeply entrenched caste-based hierarchy that shapes his actions and thoughts, especially in the context of his relationship with Ponna. The author's portrayal of Kali's internal struggles offers

readers an empathetic understanding of how caste operates not just externally but also internally, influencing one's self-worth and ability to empathize with others. Kali's awareness of this societal conditioning is an important moment of self-awareness, offering insight into the psychological toll caste-based social stratification has on individuals.

The humanism always exists, and it is portrayed throughout the sequel novel *Trial by Silence*. In the third chapter of this sequel, the character Seerayi, while addressing Kali by highlighting her remembrance about the behaviour and the humanism thrown towards her, says, 'Do you know how the men in this village behaved?' and she further went on and spoke.

As soon as night fell, they would knock on my door, throw stones at the house, shout out my name... No matter how much they persisted, I never opened the door. Our Nallayyan. You know him. Don't judge him too kindly. He said to me, "Sister-in-law, live with me. I will bequeath my property to your son. (Murugan, *Trial by Silence*, Ch.3)

Through this, she reveals how the society behaves towards the affected people and particularly the downtrodden people in support of the reflection of the social stratum of the marginalised community.

These three works: *A Lonely Harvest* and *Trial by Silence*, *One Part Woman*, showcase a unique narrative style and voice that is both realistic and symbolic too, rooted in the landscapes and social structures of rural Tamil Nadu. "A woman without a child had no place in conversation" (Murugan, *One Part Woman* 67). Say for example, the following lines from the first sequel to *One Part Woman* illustrate the difference between the natural world and the human society;

Flattening down the soil that had been raked and piled, he slowly filled up the brinjal bed. He stood over the roots and sank into them. Ponna could not even hear Muthu shouting to ask if the bed had been fully watered. (Murugan, *A Lonely Harvest*, 63)

His writing style is characterized by a close observation of the in-depth daily life, a focus on the experiences of marginalized communities, and a blend of realism with elements of folklore and the supernatural.

In the final sections of *Trial by Silence*, Kali and Ponna share a quiet, understated moment where both come to terms with their past. Ponna no longer seeks to explain her actions, and Kali no longer seeks to accuse her. There is a tacit understanding between them that transcends the painful events that have unfolded. This moment signifies emotional maturity and growth. Both characters have suffered, and in their shared silence, they come to realize that their pain is not something that needs to be articulated or justified. Their empathy for each other is not rooted in grand gestures or words, but in the quiet recognition of their shared humanity. Later, the same allows them to find a fragile form of reconciliation. Particularly Murugan frequently employs a third-person perspective that stays close to the protagonist's consciousness, offering an intimate portrayal of their

experiences while maintaining a degree of objectivity. Through his characters, he mostly reflects the complexities of human nature and social situations. Like in his novel *Pyre*, *One Part Woman* and its sequels explore how social stratum shapes individual experiences, relationships, and even dictates the course of lives, particularly for women. Through his characters and narratives, Murugan critically examines the oppressive structures of caste-based discrimination and patriarchal norms. His characters are often defined by their social, caste, and gender moorings, and their actions are largely shaped by the limitations and opportunities presented by these structures.

Thus, the novel *Trial by Silence* takes a different turn. Kali survives his attempt to end his life, but his relationship with Ponna is severely damaged. The story explores the aftermath of the festival and the couple's attempts to rebuild their relationship, facing the consequences of their choices and societal expectations. and the novel, *One Part Woman* sets the stage, while the sequels offer two different interpretations of what happens next, exploring themes of love, betrayal, grief, and the complications of human relationships against the backdrop of social and cultural traditions. "They lived together, but words between them were few and careful" (Murugan, *Trial by Silence* 112).

The duology shifts the focus from the collective societal pressure experienced in *One Part Woman* to the individual struggles and emotional turmoil of Kali and Ponna. Both sequels explore the characters' attempts to navigate and challenge the restrictive social norms that dictate their lives, particularly those related to caste and gender. While Kali initially feels betrayed and seeks to punish Ponna, the sequels gradually introduce elements of empathy and understanding, suggesting a potential for reconciliation and healing.

Conclusion

The novels continue to highlight the pervasive influence of caste in shaping social relations, particularly in the context of marriage, honour, and social acceptance. The duology demonstrates how caste-based expectations and prejudices can lead to conflict, social ostracization, and personal tragedy. The novels expose the power imbalances inherent in a caste-based society, where individuals from lower castes face systemic discrimination and oppression. The characters' choices and actions are often constrained by the rigid social hierarchy, limiting their agency and freedom.

The duology sequels of Perumal Murugan offer a nuanced exploration of humanism within the context of a deeply stratified society. These novels highlight the conflict between social norms and personal autonomy through Kali and Ponna's experiences. And at the same time, they also imply that empathy and understanding are possible even in an unequal system. Thus, the sequels provide a powerful commentary on the everlasting impact of social stratification on the lives of individual and relationships. Through which Ponna in these sequels forced to find solution for the quest for her life.

Works Cited

- Ambedkar, B. R. *Annihilation of Caste*. Verso Books, 2019.
- Barry, Ellen. "Review: 'Pyre,' by Perumal Murugan." *The New York Times*, 2017.
- Devy, G. N. *After Amnesia: Tradition and Change in Indian Literary Criticism*. Orient Blackswan, 1992.
- Jeevagan, Kirankumar. "A Socio-Literary Inquiry on Perumal Murugan's Novel *Seasons of the Palm*." 2023.
- Murugan, Perumal. *A Lonely Harvest*. Translated by Aniruddhan Vasudevan, Penguin Random House India, 2018.
- . *One Part Woman*. Translated by Aniruddhan Vasudevan, Penguin India, 2019.
- . *Trial by Silence*. Translated by Aniruddhan Vasudevan, Penguin Random House India, 2018.
- Rajagopal, A. "Caste, Gender, and Narrative Form in Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman*." *South Asian Review*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2018, pp. 157-172.
- Raman, N. Kalyan. "Koolamadari: A Tour De Force." *Indian Literature*, vol. 78, 2006, pp. 78-81.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, Routledge, 1994, pp. 66-111.
- Srinivasan, R. "The Controversial Literary Terrain of Perumal Murugan: A Study of *One Part Woman*." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol. 53, no. 1, 2018, pp. 104-118.
- Suganthi, S. B., and T. Deivasigamani. "The Status of Childless Women in Socio-Cultural Society: A Study of Perumal Murugan's *One-Part Woman*." *Revista Electronica De Veterinaria*, vol. 25, no. 1S, 2024, pp. 653-658.
- Thapar, Romila. "One Part Woman." *The Hindu*, 2013.
- Tomkins, Silvan S. *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness*. Vol. 2, Springer, 1963.