

Fractured Identities and Cultural Dissonance in Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* and *Pyre*

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Abstract

*Perumal Murugan is a well-known, prominent contemporary Tamil writer. Most of his works are deeply rooted in the rural landscape and social life of Kongunadu. His novels portray the everyday world of farming communities and articulate their agricultural practices, livestock, occupations, customs, beliefs, food habits, and relationships. These details also serve as clear ethnographic records. Murugan utilises the ethnographic records to create a realistic social world and to give dignity and visibility to the people whose lives he portrays. He consistently conveys the knowledge, skills, traditions, and struggles of rural communities through his characters. Murugan not only represents Kongunadu culture but also its agriculture. Cattle, goats, poultry, and other animals play a vital role in rural life. They also contribute to the economic survival of farming families. His fictions vividly portray the relationship between people and the landscape, which includes rocky lands, cultivated fields, grazing areas, cattle sheds, and goat pens, and these details help establish a strong sense of place and demonstrate how closely human life is connected with the land. This paper focuses on cultural conflict and the search for Identity in his two acclaimed novels, *One Part Woman* and *Pyre*. It analyses how Perumal Murugan uses the rural Kongu landscape as not just a setting but as a cultural force that shapes and controls identity.*

Keywords: Cultural conflict, Caste, Gender, Tradition, Discrimination

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Introduction

Perumal Murugan was born in the year 1966. He is an Indian writer, scholar, and literary chronicler. He writes in Tamil. He has written nearly twelve novels and six short-story collections. He has also written six poetry anthologies and many non-fiction books. Ten of his novels have been translated into English. Aniruddhan Vasudevan translated the novel *One Part Woman*, originally known in Tamil as *Madhorubhagan*, into English and published it in 2013. Aniruddhan translated his novel *Pyre*, originally known in Tamil as *Pookkuzhiin*, and published it in 2016. His novel *One Part Woman* follows Kali and Ponna. They loved each other deeply and married. They have lived together for twelve years and have no children. Their inability to conceive a child exposes them to intense social humiliation and family pressure. The novel clearly portrays their desperate search for a cure through rituals and the climactic tension of the temple festival. Murugan's other novel, *Pyre*, deals with the young lovers Kumaresan and Saroja. They face brutal social hostility after a hasty inter-caste marriage. They move from a town to his rural village and suffer intense isolation and suspicion from neighbours and family, leading to a tragic end.

Murugan's fiction deeply analyses social issues such as caste, patriarchy, marriage, gender inequality, fertility, social honour, and cultural identity. *One Part Woman* and *Pyre* are extremely detailed in this regard. *One Part Woman* explores childlessness and its consequences, as well as the restrictions imposed by patriarchal customs. Whereas *Pyre* articulates the theme of an inter-caste marriage and the violence produced by caste prejudice. Readers can see that both novels show individuals caught between personal desires and community expectations. Thus, Murugan's fiction presents cultural identity not as something fixed and uncomplicated, but as a source of both belonging and conflict.

Perumal Murugan was born into a family of marginal farmers in a village near Tiruchengode in northern Kongunadu. His childhood and upbringing in this region significantly influenced his literary imagination. Kongunadu is characterised by a relatively dry climate, rocky terrain, rain-fed agriculture, and a strong dependence on cattle and millet cultivation. In this context, the Gounders are considered one of the major agrarian communities, and Murugan himself comes from this community. He has deep knowledge of rural life and portrays it clearly throughout his fiction. His novels do not present the village as an idealised or romantic space. Instead, they expose its complexities, including affection, jealousy, humour, fear, caste prejudice, gender discrimination, religious beliefs, and social surveillance. Most of his novels reflect the theme of individuals struggling to find spaces where they can escape the strong judgment of their communities. For them, the landscape plays a vital role in this search for security. They find refuge in forests, fields, rocky areas, and isolated places.

Murugan became interested in writing at an early age. His academic interest in regional literature and his exposure to Marxist ideas motivated him to write about the society and community he knew. Moreover, his doctoral research on the Kongu

writer R. Shanmugasundaram strengthened his engagement with regional literature. His fiction consistently returns to questions of community, caste, land, tradition, sexuality, gender, and individual freedom. This study examines the theme of cultural identity and identity crisis in *One Part Woman* and *Pyre*.

Cultural Identity in Perumal Murugan's Fictions

Culture in Murugan's novels is deeply rooted in everyday life. Farming methods, animal rearing, food preparation, local occupations, festivals, religious beliefs, village relationships, and oral traditions all shape his characters' cultural identity. His works vividly tell how traditional folkways, rigid caste boundaries, and community expectations govern and often crush the intimate lives of ordinary individuals. His vivid portrayal of rural practices helps readers understand how communities survive and how knowledge passes from one generation to the next.

Agriculture plays an important role in Kongunadu. They clear the stones from fields. The cultivation of millet, the preparation of food over wood fires, and the maintenance of agricultural tools are portrayed as ordinary parts of their life. In contrast, livestock plays a vital role in economic and cultural life. Goats and cattle provide food, income, manure, and security for farming families. Murugan's expression of these activities clearly exposes that rural knowledge is complex and valuable. However, cultural identity in Murugan's fiction extends beyond customs and occupations. Caste, gender, religion, family honour, and community expectations also shape it. Every individual is repeatedly reminded of their position within the social hierarchy. Hence, culture plays both a source of identity and a mechanism of control. This tension is clearly evident in *One Part Woman* and *Pyre*. In both novels, the protagonists want to live according to their personal desires, but customs and rules restrict them to following social expectations. Their identity crises emerge from the conflict between individual freedom and collective expectations.

The novel, *The Pyre*, is set primarily in the fictional village of Kattuppatti. The novel describes the story of Kumaresan and Saroja. They belong to different castes. Kumaresan leaves his village to work in a town, where he finds employment in a soda factory and meets Saroja, a young woman living with her widowed father. They fall in love and marry in a temple before returning to Kumaresan's village. Kumaresan is very confident they can lead a peaceful life together. However, soon Saroja realises the villagers do not accept their marriage because of her caste. Instead of welcoming Kumaresan's wife, they make her a target of suspicion and hostility. They ask many questions about her caste. This simple question reveals how much caste shapes social relationships. The contrast between Saroja's appearance and the villagers' expectations also becomes significant. Initially, people admire her beauty; later, their admiration quickly turns into suspicion once they begin questioning her background. People no longer understand her identity in terms of her personality or relationship with Kumaresan; they reduce it to her caste. Caste is especially obvious when one of the village women gives Saroja flowers and irritates her by saying unusual things about her marriage. Later, the old woman warns Saroja

that Kumaresan's relatives will chase her away because of her caste. Murugan opines:

I don't know what caste you are from, be very careful with these people...But relatives on his mother's side are clustered around her like worms. Uncles and grand-uncles, several of them. They might strangle you to death, and then apply some blue dye on your body and claim that you were bitten by a poisonous snake. You cannot rely on Nondi. They might wait until he goes somewhere, and then try to chase you away in his absence. They could do anything. Be careful. (86)

It is very clearly shown that she is not safe in her family and society because of her caste. Murugan, therefore, uses the marriage to expose the artificial divisions caste creates. The couple's love is personal, but their community interprets it through the rigid framework of caste identity. Their individual identities are overwhelmed by the social identities others assign them.

But since they did very little to break up the workings of caste or to raise Dalits out of lives of poverty and oppression, and since they were, themselves, almost exclusively upper caste, the outcome of this thinking was not the actual eradication of caste, but instead the equating of modernity with a certain kind of bourgeois, rationalized upper-casteness and the relegating of the lower castes to a time outside modernity, and thus outside national history. As a result, the actual language of caste is used almost exclusively by the lower castes, and elites, like those who write novels in English, tend either to translate caste into the language of modernity (by equating it with class, for example) or simply fail to discuss it at all (Herrick 583).

Pyre paints a vivid picture of the difficulties inter-caste couples face in rural society. Kumaresan and Saroja marry because their love is genuine and pure, and they care for one another, but their relationship challenges the established social order. Their marriage is treated not as a private decision but as an offence against the community.

The caste system in India is based on occupational inheritance and a restricted social hierarchy in which the birth of a particular caste determines its position in society. In the modern era, individuals' identity is defined by their caste. Among the lowest castes, severe illiteracy and a lack of information about support services leave many people suffering in an increasingly complicated technological environment. They frequently feel disoriented and struggle to understand the intricacies of the contemporary technological world (Raman and Ratnamala 1).

Saroja suffers greatly because she enters a completely unknown place. She has constantly faced insults, humiliation, suspicion, and social exclusion because of her caste. It is clear that Kumaresan cannot protect her effectively. Though he loves Saroja genuinely, he is completely influenced by the community around him. He fails to understand the seriousness of her suffering. His inability to communicate openly with her before their marriage also contributes to her difficulties. Through Kumaresan and Saroja, Murugan presents identity as something negotiated

between the individual and society. They believe that marriage will allow them to create a new identity as husband and wife. However, the village refuses to recognise this identity independently of caste. Their social identities remain stronger than their personal choices.

The novel also exposes the most difficult situation of women within the caste system. Other villagers, particularly women, constantly target Saroja. They accuse her of having attracted Kumaresan and married him, disrupting the customs and social order. These accusations show how patriarchal values can be reproduced by women themselves. Saroja is not the only significant female character. Kumaresan's mother, Marayi, is a strong, complex figure in the novel. Being a widow, she is strong enough to raise her son and maintain her household despite difficult circumstances. Moreover, she is outspoken, emotional, and can express anger. On the other hand, Marayi becomes an agent of the so-called social system that causes suffering to her son and Saroja. She is unable to accept the inter-caste marriage because she thinks that it challenges the values she has been internalising. Her character is therefore neither entirely good nor entirely evil. Her love for her son is mixed with fear, anger, and social pressure tied closely to tradition. This complexity is one of Murugan's major strengths. His characters do not function merely as representatives of particular social arguments. They show contradictions, weaknesses, desires, and fears. Through such characters, Murugan shows how oppressive systems survive partly because ordinary people participate in and reproduce them.

'Silent blindness' is a new disease that has afflicted large parts of India. It is a rather strange type of disease. The silence relates to the lack of speaking and hearing, while the blindness relates to the lack of, or rather the end of, sight. In this new disease that has afflicted large parts of this country, silent blindness has not only afflicted the acts of speaking, hearing, and seeing. It has affected the very act of thinking itself. This essay is on the phenomenology of this disease that is playing havoc with our tongues, ears, eyes, and minds (Jal 221).

One Part Woman is an important novel by Murugan. It deals with cultural identity and social pressure. The novel is set in rural Tamil Nadu. It focuses on Kali and Ponna. They are a married couple who have been unable to give birth to a child for twelve years. Their inability to conceive becomes a source of humiliation and anxiety. Many people have concluded that Ponna and Kali will never have children. They also say that it is not their desire, but it will not happen. It is evident in this novel. Even Ponna's sister-in-law humiliated them for being childless. Murugan says, "What are you going to do by saving money? Eat well, wear good clothes and be happy" (59).

It was once Sarasa's brother-in-law's wedding. Sarasa had insisted Ponna to come early for the wedding. Since it was a long distance from her own place, she waited for the other women. Some ten or fifteen women went together. In front of everyone, Sarasa humiliated Ponna for being childless. Perumal Murugan says, "Despite my telling you to come early, you are arriving only now. Did you get

delayed in getting your daughters ready?" (65).

Although the problem is shared by the couple, society places the greater burden on Ponna. She is called a barren woman and becomes the subject of gossip and criticism. Kali, too, suffers because his masculinity is questioned by other men. The couple visits temples, performs rituals, makes offerings, and follows different forms of religious advice in the hope of having a child. Their attempts demonstrate how deeply religious belief and cultural tradition influence their understanding of fertility and marriage.

The novel's central cultural practice is tied to the annual chariot festival of Maadhorubaagan, a deity represented as half male and half female. According to the belief presented in the novel, the eighteenth night of the festival provides women seeking children with an opportunity to have sexual relations with men who are temporarily regarded as divine figures. The practice challenges ordinary marital rules and creates a conflict between individual desire, religious tradition, and social morality. The festival becomes especially significant because it exposes contradictions in the community's understanding of marriage and sexuality. Practices that might be condemned under ordinary circumstances can be temporarily accepted within a religious setting. Murugan uses this cultural practice to question the supposedly fixed boundaries between morality, tradition, sexuality, and religion.

The central identity crisis in *One Part Woman* develops from the pressure placed on Kali and Ponna to conform to social expectations. Ponna's identity becomes almost entirely associated with motherhood. Because she has not produced a child, the community considers her incomplete as a woman. Kali experiences a different form of pressure. His inability to father a child becomes a threat to his masculine identity. His friends make jokes and comments that appear humorous on the surface but reveal the seriousness of patriarchal expectations.

Thus, both husband and wife are caught by a cultural definition of marriage that depends heavily on reproduction. Their private relationship is gradually invaded by the opinions of relatives, neighbours, friends, and religious authorities.

Conclusion

Perumal Murugan clearly pictures the rural Tamil society. He has shown deep interest in writing about the land, language, occupations, customs, beliefs, and social relationships of Kongunadu. His writing is deeply rooted in cultural identity, identity crises, beliefs, and gender. Although Perumal Murugan belongs to the Gounder community, he vividly portrays the lives of poor people and their caste. At the same time, Murugan does not romanticise rural culture. His novels clearly articulate the darker side of social life, including caste discrimination, patriarchy, gender inequality, social exclusion, and the pressure to conform. *One Part Woman* and *Pyre* are very strong in portraying intimate human relationships at the centre of these larger social conflicts.

In both novels, Perumal Murugan shows how culture, when codified through caste patriarchy and community honour, stops being protective and becomes oppressive. “The proliferation of caste names as last names in the first two generations seems also to indicate the possibility that some persons and families sought to raise their social status by acquiring the last name of a higher caste” (Kumar 215). Thus, both novels, though different in plot his protagonists are not able to create an independent self because their identity is always defined, Judged and finally destroyed by the community.

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