Womb, Widow, and Womanhood: A Feminist Reading of Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* and its Alternate Sequels

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Shalini Moorthi
Ph.D., Scholar, Department of English
Pondicherry University, Puducherry, India

Lakhimai Mili
Professor, Department of English
Pondicherry University, Puducherry, India

Abstract

Perumal Murugan, a distinctive figure in the regional literature of India known for his counternarratives, easily comes alongside Rushdie, Nasrin and other fearless writers who see literature as a hammer that shapes rather than a mirror that reflects. Focusing on themes like honour killing, caste-based violence, forced exile, and patriarchal oppression led him to literary suicide and self-exile. Murugan was saved by poetic justice, marking him a one-man countertrend. From this perspective, the paper explores the subversive representation of women in Murugan's One Part Woman (2010) and its alternate sequels, A Lonely Harvest (2018) and Trail by Silence (2018). By probing into gender-based discrimination that is prevalent in rural India, the study seeks to highlight how infertility and widowhood face troubles and turmoil in the feminine mystique society. With sections such as gender threads in Murugan's writing, fertility and its absence, widowhood as an anomaly, and shattering stigmas, the paper examines the social and cultural milieu which oppresses, depresses and represses women. In doing so, the paper shows how nuanced feminism and more profound dialogues are needed to eradicate gender discrimination in the country's rural regions.

Keywords: Womb, Woman, Wife, Widow, Womanhood.

Introduction

The cultural and social tapestry of a small Tamil Nadu town – with its earthy scents of palm fronds, betel leaves, portia trees, and solid rocks – is skillfully portrayed to a worldwide audience by Perumal Murugan, a distinguished writer of Indian regional literature. He confronts and reflects on rural practices that rapture communal living, such as caste hatred, honour killing, ethnic violence, and infanticide. In many senses, Murugan is a one-man countertrend who fearlessly explains the deeply rooted gender bias in the country. His oeuvre tells the story of womanhood within the patriarchal context in its multifaceted forms, ranging from being a prenatal foetus through the wife to the widow and extending his representation to goddesses and animals.

For instance, international Booker nominee *Pyre* (2016) witnesses how the character Saroja was burnt at the stake in the name of caste; *Poonachi* (2018) explores a she-goat and her odd life endeavour; and *Resolve* (2021) addresses half a dozen female foeticide, and the catalogue goes. Likewise, the selected texts for this study – *One Part Woman* (here after *One*) and its sequels, *A Lonely Harvest* (hereafter *Lonely*) and *Trial by Silence* (hereafter *Trial*) – are unrivalled in many senses.

Featuring a childless agrarian couple, Ponna and Kali, this saga – stretched into three books – intertwines a woman's life in all its forms. With metaphors of wife, womb, woman, widow and womanhood, this agrarian saga tattletales the life of the central character, Ponna and her inability to conceive a child. Published in 2010, *One Part Woman* has garnered critical attention, accolades, and controversies. In 2019, Meena Kandaswamy read *One Part Woman* from a feminist perspective and commented on how Kali's love for the Ponna cannot be qualified as love. 2020 article "Feminine Quest for Freedom: A Re-reading of Ponna - Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman*" highlights themes such as gender discrimination and patriarchal hypocrisy by tracing the protagonist, Ponna, as a disparaged figure. Published in 2023, "Female Body as the 'Other': Rituals and Biotechnical Approach using Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman and Matrubhoomi: A Nation Without Women* focuses on the objectification of women and the performances of fatal rituals connecting to infertility and customs.

Having said that, the paper aims to explore womanhood and women's suffering in all its forms concerning *One Part Woman* and its sequels, *A Lonely Harvest* and *Trial by Silence*. The paper will be qualitative in nature, and the scholarship provided by feminist, eco-feminist and gender studies experts will be employed to establish a theoretical framework. The paper is divided into six interconnected sections, commencing with an introduction to the selected texts. The following sections unveil the threads of gender discrimination in the works of Murugan, explore fertility and its absence, and examine how widowhood is perceived as an anomaly, respectively. The paper culminates in discussing how Ponna was shattered by stigma and saved by womanhood, which sees matriarchy as a transformative force against patriarchy.

One Part Woman and its Alternate Sequels: Texts and Context

One Part Woman, initially published in Tamil as *Madhorubagan* in 2010, was later translated into English by Aniruddhan Vasudevan in 2013. Hailed by *The Guardian* as "the Tamil Irvine Welsh," Perumal Murugan is one of his generation's greatest and most accomplished regional writers. With the mild fragrance of the earth, the canopy of portia leaves, toddy stored in a guard bottle, the palmyra cattle-shed, and Egdon heath-like rocks, Murugan writes nothing but the anatomy of an ordinary rural landscape. Starting to pen verses from an early age, Murugan obtained a doctorate in Tamil literature and currently works as a professor in the same field. Including noteworthy literary pieces such as *Rising Heart* (1991), *Current Show* (2004), *Seasons of the Palm* (2004), *Resolve* (2008), *Poonachi: The Story of a Black Goat* (2017), *Pyre* (2013), *Estuary* (2020) and *Fire Bird* (2023), Murugan wrote eleven novels, five short story collections, and poetry anthologies. He stands out as the first Tamil writer nominated for the International Booker Prize in 2023, and his Fire Bird has won India's prestigious literary accolade, the JCB. His literary suicide note: "Perumal Murugan the writer is dead. As he is no God, he is not going to resurrect himself. He also has no faith in rebirth. An ordinary teacher, he will live as P. Murugan. Leave him alone", and his self-exile after the controversy that followed his literary piece *One Part Woman* is a significant incident on par with Salman Rushdie's *Shame* and his fatwa. However, the law resurrected the writer from his exodus with the verdict: "Let the author be resurrected to what he is best at. Write" (as qtd. in Sekaran 2).

Featuring head-to-toe loving couple Kali and Ponna, the agrarian saga is set in a 1940s small town in Tamil Nadu. All was well except for the fact that the couple was childless in a society where being infertile is almost considered a curse and thus considered as personas non grata. For the want of a child, the couple performed thousands of fatal rituals, offered appeasement, sorted dozens of astrologers, lit earthen lamps, and smeared oils on the village deity, but all in vain. Insults and insinuation such as "childless woman" (112), "the impotent one" (*One* 83), "impotent fellow" (78), "second marriage" (26), and "barren woman" (Lonely *66*) plague their daily lives. Despite all this, the love between Kali and Ponna remained the same as that of Rathi and Manmatha, goddess and God of love, lust and desire. All was well until the last day of the chariot festival of the titular deity *Madhorubaagan*, the half-female god, arrived that year. The carnival – akin to Bakhtin's *Carnivalesque* – relaxed norms, allowing any men and women to engage in consensual sex where all the men were considered gods to the infertile woman and the child born out of the carnival was considered that of a "god-given child" (*Trial* 29). Framing that Kali has approved, the families of both sides send Ponna to the carnival. Upon discovering the truth, Kali is shattered by Ponna's betrayal and yells, "You Whore! You have cheated me! 'You will not be happy. You have cheated me, you whore…" (*One* 240). The denouement features three images - Kali, a rope, and tree branches leaving for open interpretation.

> Many readers of *One Part Woman* (Madhorubagan) wondered what would happen to Kali at the end of the novel. Eager to see if I could respond to their queries, I wrote two sequels. In A Lonely Harvest (Aalavaayan), I removed Kali from this world. I wanted to imagine how Ponna's world might expand or shrink as a consequence of this. (Lonely ix)

Readers continued corresponding with the author for more, resulting in alternate sequels, A *Lonely Harvest (Aalavaayan)* and *Trial by Silence (Ardhanaari)*. In A Lonely Harvest, unable to bear the betrayal and the thought of "his alone" Ponna with another man, Kali hangs himself from the portia tree. Widowed Ponna becomes pregnant. With her mother Vallayi, mother-in-law Seerayi, sister-in-law Poovayi, and other women, Murugan weaves a beautiful web of womanhood around Ponna. By eliminating Kali, Murugan effectively eliminated the patriarchy and mushroomed matriarchy where womenfolk support and protect one another.

In the Preface of the other sequel, Trial by Silence, under the title "Let Him Live", Murugan writes, Several readers of One Part Woman (Madhorubagan) wondered what would happen to Kali at the end of the novel. Eager to see if I could respond to their queries, I wrote two sequels. Releasing everyone from the uncertainty of whether Kali survives or not, I let him live in Aradhanari. (Murugan, Trail xii)

Once again, Murugan presents Kali's anagnorisis of Ponna's presence at the chariot festival. Determining to inflict lasting suffering on Ponna, he deems the "perfect punishment for her" (2) is his suicide. With that, Kali pulls the noose on the portia tree; in contrast to the other sequel, his mother, Seerayi, arrives to save him. From that point onwards, Kali becomes a mere shadow of the man he was once and is full of "judgement, rejection, and eloquent silence" (Trial xi).

Thread of Gender Discrimination

> I would take Tamil literature to class so I would have more of a chance to speak about these topics and for (discussions) to happen naturally. I would converse with my students on caste and gender discrimination through short stories and poems. There would be good responses from students. They accept caste discrimination. However, but (often) male students won't accept gender discrimination. A lot more discussion and communication is needed for that. (Raghu)

Perumal Murugan, when he was interviewed about teaching topics like caste and gender as a professor of Tamil literature, said how students readily engage in debates and discussions on

caste discrimination, but tackling gender issues requires even more dialogue. He stressed that "gender and caste politics" are deeply rooted in the family and society; thus, decolonising the mind is a continuous process. For him, along with teaching, writing is also a form of protest, but a meaningful protest, distinguishing it from "holding flags, slogans and clashes" (Raghu). In this sense, his narratives on gender discrimination can be viewed as his method of making meaningful protests, reaching a broader audience beyond his classroom. Gender inequality, infanticide, honour killing, caste-based gender violence and other such issues framed the basis of his literary output incidentally and evidentially. *Resolve* was published in 2007, yet the subject matter formed a score years before for Murugan. The immediate setting for the novel was the issue of female infanticide that was in vogue during the 1980s in Tamil Nadu. When the poor killed their female infant due to the later-emerging dowry issue, Murugan asserts that the wealthy similarly engaged in such practices out of fear that their dowry would go to their possible son-in-law. He adds that the then landlords of Tamil Nadu welcomed the Family Planning Programme by wanting the first child to be a son; if a daughter was born first, they crossed their fingers for the second child to be a son. Nevertheless, the trouble begins if the second was also indeed a girl. Either with fatal erukku shrubs, grains of paddy, or suffocation, the female infants will find a little corner in the grave.

With this as the context, Murugan offers a critique on selective sex-infanticide and the skewed ratio of females through his protagonist, Marimuthu, and his quest for a potential bride.

Like *Resolve*, *Pyre* is also grounded in societal realities, focusing on the issues of honour killing. After the international Booker Prize nomination, Murugan told the press how big the honour-killing problem is in India. Murugan dedicates the Tamil version of *Pyre*, titled *Pukkuli*, to a youth belonging to the lower caste community, E. Ilavarasan, suspected victim of honour killing for his elopement with an upper-class girl in a district of Tamil Nadu, Dharmapuri. The mob rampaged the entire locality of Ilavarasan; the settlement was ablaze; people of his community became homeless, and there were incidents of reported looting. Years later, he was found dead on a railway track, and the cause of his death was documented as suicide.

In *Pyre*, Murugan sketches a similar narrative, but the girl is from the lower caste, and Kumaresan is from the upper caste. After their elopement and marriage, Saroja's life becomes a nightmare in her upper-caste husband's village. Insults and slurs from her mother-in-law and villagers are a daily occurrence to Saroja:

> At dusk, any good woman would be expected to take the goats in and tether them. She would light the fire to heat water so her husband can have a wash, and stoke the fire in the kitchen to start cooking. That is what a farmer's wife does. But look at her! She had secked herself up in all her finery. Only prostitutes stand like this on the streets of Kunnoor town! And my son has brought one of them home! Has she bewitched him by mixing something in his food? How can I release him from her magic? Which doctor would I take him to? How much will I have to spend? Will I ever get my son back, or have I lost him forever to this wretched woman? (Murugan, Pyre 62)

From her skin tone to the way she stands, her entire natural being was criticised and scrutinised under the casteist eye. One fine day, the entire village, along with Kumaresan's mother, came together to burn Saroja alive when she came for open defecation inside a bush with dried "karuvela thorns" (192), leaves, and twigs. On a gendered lens, Saroja is a victim of both gender and caste discrimination. Saroja has been harassed by her husband's cousin time and again. Even before blazing her, one of the mob's states, "Our Vellapayyan can finish everything in two minutes. All we need to do is to find her", to which he replies, "There's a crowd now. If I had found her earlier, I'd thought I would enjoy the fair-skinned girl that has bewitched Nondi. Now it is too late" (Murugan, *Pyre* 187). By depicting the ills of the caste system, Murugan also sheds light on womenfolk who

are doubly suffering. In his other works, such as Poonachi: *The Story of a Black Goat*, non-fiction like *Amma* and other short stories, Murugan continues to represent complex female characters and the complexities female characters encounter. Similar to black feminism, which depicts how women are doubly oppressed based on both colour and gender, Murugan illustrates how women in India face dual oppression rooted in both gender and caste.

Fertility and its Absence

Murugan draws inspiration from everyday issues unfolding in the neighbouring households of Tamil Nadu. In the societal context where Murugan's novels are set, infertility is perceived as a disability, sin and curse. The study titled "Childlessness and its Association with Fertility in India: A Spatio-Temporal Analysis" differentiates childlessness and infertility; the former is "the failure of a couple to have a live birth", and the latter "is the failure to conceive" (Banerjee and Singh). According to the abovementioned study, the percentage of childless women is highest in Tamil Nadu. Despite various factors contributing to infertility and childlessness, females are often blamed and burdened, disregarding the equal importance of both male and female factors in the birth of a child. Notably, in the given narrative, the burden on Ponna is more pronounced than on the male counterpart, Kali. As the narrative hints, women were dictated to conceive in their first month of the marriage. Failing, the society remains patient for six months with innuendoes before bombarding with direct questions. That said, Ponna's womb henceforth becomes the symbolic focal point. Kali was advised for the second marriage, but Ponna's struggle was real. Panopticonic surveillance of Ponna and her menstrual cycle commenced in the pursuit of a child. Bitter concoctions, including bitter shoot juices and crushed neem leaves, were administered, causing tongue numbness. In contrast, Kali was advised to seek a second wife. The narrative also vividly portrays how every menstrual cycle of Ponna was grieved as that of a funeral in their household. Even in the days of Valmiki's *Ramayana*, as documented in "Endocrinology in the Ramayana", the queens of King Dashrath – Kaushalya, Sumitra, and Kaikeyi – was given the blessed porridge to eat despite the possibility that Deshrath might have been the sub-cause of infertility, the male factor. The research also observed a parallel between Sagar, the King of Ayodhya, and his wives. The paper also debated that these are some of the early reported instances of infertility and the forerunner of "female-centric" treatments.

From an ecocritical perspective, one could find the parallel between Ponna's and that of the natural world - trees, cows, goats, hens. The narration delves into a portia tree planted by Kali during their marriage, when he did not like the 'sight of the bare front yard' (*One* 1). Though his in-laws reasoned planting a tree would hinder sun-drying their yields, such as corn and nuts, Kali brought a stalk from his barn. Considered as son-in-law's dowry, Ponna's family took care of the tree dearly. Over twelve years, the tree had grown with dense canopies and filled compost pits with leaves, juxtaposing Ponna's barrenness. Comparison with the cow Sridevi, goats and their litters, and chickens in the coop further amplifies the theme of fertility and societal pressure on females. Ponna replied,

> "Only if women give birth would you still keep in the family. Only if sheep and cows give birth would you still keep them in the shed. Otherwise, you'd sell them for meat. That's why God has created it all this way. If women didn't stop being able to give birth after a certain age, wouldn't you men torment us?" (Lonely 68)

Ponna brought the cow Sridevi from her house to her husband's during their nuptial days. From the day Sridevi entered Kali's barnyard, it consistently populated the space by birthing calf after calf all year. On seeing Sridevi, Ponna used to reflect on her lacking the boon that the cow is blessed with. In the later narrative, Sridevi is depicted as being of an advanced age. As a sign of

gratitude for Sridevi's service to the family, Kali took more care of the cow and prevented it from mating further. One of these days, Kali wondered how animals, unlike humans, continue birthing until their old age. Ponna provocatively answered that if not, society would get rid of livestock, just like they do away with infertile women.

From children playing to chickens clucking, the surroundings reminded Ponna of her barrenness. Besides, society also exacerbated her struggles by branding her an outcast and deeming her a jinx factor. It is evident when a harvest was a failure, Ponna was blamed - "That barren woman ran up and down carrying seeds. How do you expect them to grow once she has touched them?" (*One* 115). At a puberty function, Ponna carried one of eight plates, which later found that it was given to her grudgingly, highlighting the stereotypical prejudices society holds against women without a child. Furthermore, she was forcibly removed from performing a ritual, stating that it might affect the girl for whom the function is arranged. From societal sniggers to exclusion from communal events, the humiliation weighs heavily on her.

> But look at me, I am draped in white now. From now on, they will say it is unlucky to start a day looking at my face. They will turn away if they see me coming down the street. They will say I should not take part in auspicious functions. Do you think they will include me in anything from now on? No. Earlier, they pushed me away because I was childless. Now even though I have a child on the way, they will shun me because I am a widow. Look what my life has become. (*Lonely* 160)

After the chariot festival, Ponna became pregnant, marking the end of the metaphor of barrenness. However, the norms that had once accused and ostracisedPonna for her bareness now turned their judgement toward the stigma of her widowhood. Besides, she was compelled by custom to stand in front of the entire village and swear that the late Kali is the father of her unborn child while the council members calculate the foetus and the days since her husband's demise. On May 11, 2014, an article titled "HC Delivers Justice to 'Childless' Woman" was published in *The Times of India*, covering a case in the Madras High Court. The case involved a man seeking his wife's consent for his second marriage for the want of a progeny. He offered her a portion of his property on the condition that she could enjoy the property until her "lifetime". However, she should return it if she could not bear a child. Dispute arose after the husband's death when the wife decided to sell her property. The second wife appealed to the court, calling the sale illegal and emphasising the "limited rights" granted to the first wife by the husband. The court, favouring the first wife, criticised such inhumane acts carried against women under the institution of marriage. The Justice lamented, "Though women alone are not the cause for this issue, yet, the problem of infertility has broken many homes, separated many couples and caused disharmony among couples" (Subramani 8). The court's verdict also warned that such kind of "limited rights" and other similar injustices against women would turn the "society from e-age to stone-age" (Subramani 7).

Incidents against women are common occurrences in India and its neighbouring South Asian countries. Women often find themselves entangled in the rhizomatic web of dowry, denial of higher education, domestic violence, gender inequality, stigma and stereotypes against widows, not bearing a male child, patrimony and childlessness. As the report reads, women without children do face injustices and lead a fishbowl existence. In the narrative, the norm that excluded Ponna also pushed Kali to consider taking a second wife (Kandasamy 4). Discussions about a second marriage arise after seven or eight months, causing anxiety and turmoil in Ponna's life. Alongside the desire for the child, the prospect of Kali's second marriage weighs heavily on her emotions. Kali also considers the idea of a second marriage but dismisses it. One reason is his genuine love for Ponna; another is the fear of managing the two women besides farming. Moreover, if the second wife also fails to conceive, it would confirm his fears of being engraved "impotent", jeopardising his reputation.

Widowhood as Anomaly

The term for a widow in India is "*Vidhwa*", deriving from the Sanskrit word '*vidh*,' meaning "to be destitute'" Verma). According to the reports, there are 55 million widows in India. Researchers indicate that unlike in European counterparts, widows in South Asia are prone to high levels of harassment and mistreatment. Termed as 'unwanted insiders', widows bear a 'triple burden' - i) stigma, ii) limited resources access, and iii) sexual vulnerability, as reported in the UN Women's project. "Widows Without Rights: Challenging Marginalisation and Dispossession," writes about how a widow is seen as an *'anomalous social position'*, even after fulfilling societal expectations of marriage, birthing, nurturing, and educating her children and caring for her husband (Young). Young also emphasises how widows are perceived as a threat to societal stability once they are no longer contained within a marital relationship.

Murugan's narration extends beyond Ponna's infertility to portray widows' challenges in rural settings through Seerayi's perspective. In his preface to sequels, Murugan confesses that he did not anticipate the increased significance of Seerayi in the narration. Her dialogues, actions, and how she managed the matters were so relishing to Murugan as a spectator. Seerayi evolves into one of the central characters of matriarchy, supporting and protecting Ponna in the alternate sequels, thereby forging a strong bond of womanism.

> One year, she could not find anyone to sow seeds. They said, 'Nothing would grow when sown by a woman in white,' clearly referring to her widow's attire. She tried calling a few people, but to no avail. Then she said, 'Let whatever grows grow. Or maybe nothing will. Then that's fine too. I don't care.' And she sowed the seeds herself. Nothing untoward happened; her yield was as good as anyone else's. (One 5)

In *Trial by Silence*, Seerayi initiates her narrative with a moving passage: "When you narrate a widow's story, even a rock would melt, even a crow would cry. If you narrate this Seerayi's story, even this earth would dissolve, trees would weep" (*Trial* 107). Every action underwent scrutiny, and she bemoaned how not a day passed without shedding tears on her condition. She described how the fundamental aspects of human life, like going places and meeting people, were denied due to her widowhood. Through her, Murugan, the singular voice, exemplifies how widows endure marginalisation in rural villages. She laments how not even a day passed without her crying about her condition. She narrates how the fundamental point of human life, i.e. going to places and meeting people, is denied because of her widowhood. She challenges prevailing notions and breaks the stereotype that a child raised by a widow will amount to nothing or nothing will grow when a widow seeds.

Ponna's plight of infertility and that of widowed Seerayi is more or less the same. When a character mentions remarrying a widow, Seerayi encourages this decision, progressively emphasising the challenges widows face and stating, 'Don't you know how hard the life of a widow is? They must be lucky to get her married to someone like you. I will come to the wedding! (*Trial* 160). After Kali's death, the widowed Ponna faced numerous challenges. Some of their relatives spread gossip about Ponna's chastity, claiming she had an affair that led to Kali's shame and subsequent suicide. Others suggested that Ponna's brother killed Kali for the sake of property. At the sight of Ponna in a white sari, Seerayi sniffed and cried that her daughter-in-law's life had turned similar to hers. The depiction of widowhood was extended from Seerayi to Ponna as well. As one of the critics points out, rather than glorifying village life as idyllic, Murugan presents the dark side of it. Neelima, in "Widows of Vidarbha: Making of Shadows," advocates for a distinct feminism tailored for rural India, recognising its diversity and unique challenges by saying, "What we require, probably, is a separate kind of feminism for rural India. The country is so diverse and the problems are so different that the same measures don't apply" (Banerjee 7). That way, the selected saga can be seen as one way of calling for a nuanced feminism tailored to regional practices.

Shattered by Stigma and Saved by Womanhood

With the death of Kali, the narrator witnesses the death of patriarchy and the emergence of matriarchy. Following this, the narration bears witness to the deep, profound and sturdy solidarity, friendship, and care among women. The women in the texts form an invisible web that repulses any accusations that are about to occur against Ponna and her innocence after her pregnancy. The patriarchal society fueled all sorts of grapevines - from Ponna's affair to her brother plotting for property. Even when the society linked Ponna and a particular landlord, the latter did not protest but "smiled meaningfully" as a sign of agreement (*Lonely* 8). Disillusioned, Ponna contemplates joining her dead husband, but the maternal embrace from the close rank of women, notably Seerayi, saves her. Seerayi is undeniably one of the robust feminist representations of Murugan, contrasting Marayi in Pyre, who castigated her daughter-in-law Saroja based on caste discrimination. Besides, she was a great comfort to Ponna, which is evident when she affectionately says, "My darling girl… Just somehow spend your life in that memory. I will make sure you lack for nothing' (*Lonely* 12). A strong sense of womanhood was exhibited during the agnipariksha-like village meeting. When Ponna is asked to confess that the foetus is her husband's, not a random man's, Seerayi rallied her community and gathered women in the house to attend the meeting where the custom was only for male attendees. With powerful statements such as "Only women understand other women's struggles" (134), "It will be good if all of us women stick together", "You don't worry, be brave. There are some five or six of us old women in the village. What are we good for? We will attend the meeting" (Lonely 140), Seerayi formed a women-led movement. Without the women's support, Ponna would have been another Hester Pyrnne shunned by societal norms.

One of the crucial transitions from patriarch to matriarch is represented by the control of farmland and barnyard. Overcoming grief and confusion, Ponna assumes responsibility for the field in both the sequels. What was once a male-dominated farm, now under Ponna's control, thrives with simplified tasks, construction of new storage spaces, and reasonable harvesting. Juxtaposing the days when Kali would never trust Ponna with his barn, she is now appreciated for her farm efficiency with an acknowledgement that even a man couldn't be as efficient as her. In short, this saga of womanhood and breaking the stereotypes can be seen as one of the dialogues that Murugan sees as a remedy against gender discrimination. Betty Friedan, in her concept of the feminine mystique, puts how the wife struggles alone with the question of "is this all" after making beds, shopping grocery, and "ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night". The *Feminine Mystique also explores* how the assumed role of a woman is that of a housewife and mother. The very act of Kali, not trusting Ponna with the farm while he was alive, seemed to enforce the notion that women are weaker. His headship over his farm runs as a symbol of his masculinity. However, Ponna did counter the feminine mystique that handicaps women by her sex.

Conclusion

One Part Woman, A Lonely Harvest and Trial by Silence are subversive works challenging the patriarchal norms. This unfearful representation promoted protests against Murugan akin to Salman Rushdie, Taslima Nasrin, and Sharmila Seyyid. Centred around the idea of infertility, gender inequality, and widowed life, the saga becomes a microcosmic representation of gender-based discrimination prevalent in rural parts of India and its neighbouring countries. With Kali's demise, Murugan sprouts a supportive network among women, which, as a collective force, saves Ponna from societal accusations and the council's judgement. Rather than being a damsel in distress, Ponna's resilience counters all the otherwise stated narratives that patriarchal society dictates. Ponna and her womenfolk challenge cliches such as women-run farms never thrive.

Rather than having a hackneyed idea of representing merry-go-round rustic life, Murugan sketches the other side of the milieu still in vogue. In short, Murugan's writings, in general, and the selected ones, are a much-needed discourse on feminism, which breaks the static stereotypes, shatters the preconstructed stigmas and advocates for a nuanced understanding of gender equality and women's rights in rural regions of India.

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