

UNDERSTANDING TAMIL GODS AND CONTEXTUALIZING RELIGIOUS CUSTOMS IN PERUMAL MURUGAN'S ONE PART WOMAN

Abstract

This paper foregrounds the Hindu mythological scenario in general and Tamil Gods and legends in particular. It attempts to make a detailed investigation of the presence of Gods and Goddesses on social and religious space and their impact on human lives from Indian perspective. Besides, it contextualizes Perumal Murugan's most controversial text One Part Woman in order to understand and evaluate the effect of religious belief over lower middle class and rural household. Both the lives of the author and the characters in the text have gone through the whirlwind of religious sentiments, moral policing of the society, and public censorship.

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Myths are part of stories and narratives belonging to a particular community. Therefore, public sentiments are attached to it and it is very risky and dangerous to handle such a sensitive issue in any form of art or literature per se. Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* (Maadhorubaagan, 2010) provides modern readers the rituals and cultures of Ardhanarishvara Temple and its eighteen days long Chariot Festival in Kongunadu district of Tamil Nadu, a state in South India. However, in doing so, he fictionalizes some rituals of the local festival which raised objections on the national level.

This paper attempts to make a detailed and faithful analysis of Tamil Gods and the mythological stories around them as well. Besides, it shall also contextualize the socio-cultural conditions which push the childless couple, Kali and Ponna on the verge of humiliation and destruction. They are forced to leave their happy conjugal life and have to accept what society wants them to do. A myth which was made to give relief to childless mothers translated into a state-wide agitation among people who crossed all the levels of hostility. A myth changed the childless couple's life forever too.

The country India is like an all-consuming pot containing several religions, their various cultures and customs, numerous belief and norms, etc. It is this beauty of the country that despite such variety of cultural communities, we kept our humanity and belief intact throughout ages. The South part region remained separate from the rest of the country by the mighty Nilgiri Hills. A separate Dravidian culture emerged there and continued to flourish uninhibitedly. They had their own social structure, mythological facts and belief- almost different from North Indian culture. The Dravidian culture is considered to be as old and pure as that of Sanskrit. It has been counted among the oldest world literatures and its richness is acclaimed by the greatest scholars of the world today. However, even in South India, there are cultural differences and it would not be justified if we count them under a general nomenclature i.e. Dravidian culture. Tamil Nadu has its own legacy and rich historical ancestry and cultural variety to exhibit. Sangam literature is part of the ancient Tamil literature spanning from 300 BCT to 300 CE. It was lost into oblivion until revived by Tamil scholars like Arumuka Navala, C.W. Thamocharampillai and U.V. Swaminatha Iyer (Sastry 105).

Moving towards Tamil mythology, it comprises of components from its own culture, its langue source- Dravidian culture and something from North Indian Hindu religion. Thus, alongside Vedas, Tamil and Sangam literature have become a reliable source for Hindus. It also contains a detailed description of Tamil Gods and Goddesses among whom Murugan, Nataraja and Meenakshi are important to remember and widely worshipped. In Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman*, we find several references of Lord Murugan and how people constantly worship him and perform his rituals to appease him. We also find the reference of Murugan in North Indian Hindu religious texts in the form of Kartikeya, the Hindu god of war and the commander-in-chief of Heaven's army. He is worshipped even outside India. Buddhist people of Jaffna, Sri Lanka and Malaysia are performing rituals for him through ages. He got His own temple there. Festivals are celebrated with delight and grandeur (Zvelebil). According to religious scriptures, He is born out of *Agni* (fire) and *Svaha* (ashes). In one of the versions, it is said that he is born to kill Mahishasura. Later Lord Shiva made him the army-chief of Devas. He eventually married Devsena, daughter of Indra, king of Devas. Thus he got the name Dev-Sena-Pati (husband of Devsena). Another powerful god who is a part of Tamil mythology is Lord Thirumal or Perumal. He is similar to lord Vishnu

of North India. Besides Lord Thirumal, Lord Ayyappan is widely worshipped by the devotees of Tamil Nadu. He is born out of the union of Lord Shiva and the enchantress Mohini (the female version of Lord Vishnu). Thus, He gets the name of *Hariharan Puthiran*. He possesses both the power of Lord Shiva and Vishnu, a rare union of two superpowers (Das). Nataraja, the ecstatic dancer whose dance is called *Tahdavam*, is a form of Lord Shiva. Nataraja is seen holding *Agni* (fire) in his left hand and *Damaru* in his backhand. The front two hands perform different mudras of dance. He stands only in one leg over a lotus pedestal, and there is a ring of fire around him (Encyclopaedia Britannica Online). Meenakshi temple is located on the bank of Vaigai river, in the holy city of Madurai. According to mythology, there was a childless king named Malayadhwaya Pandiyan who was depressed for his lack of heir for the kingdom. From the boon of Lord Shiva, a daughter was born. Actually, Devi Parvati took the form of a girl and took birth in the king's place. She was born with fish-like eyes. That's why she is called *Minachchi* (*Mina* means fish and *Aksi* stands for eyes). She was destined to marry Lord Shiva. In their marriage, Lord Shiva took the form of *Chidambaram* (Nataraja), the cosmic dancer and performed before the Gods (Klostermaier 153).

In Tamil, the term *Siddhar* means people of wisdom. A person can achieve siddhi through utmost suffering, hard discipline and above all worship of God with full concentration. They had knowledge on every subject and equal efficiency for every aspect under the sun whether it is literature, science, technology, fine arts or astronomy. In one hand they wrote beautiful songs and poetry, on the other hand, they were in professions like medicine or science. They used to write on palm leaves and these are still being preserved by the respective families, museums or libraries. Their methods of treatment were scientific and according to many people, they were the inventors of pulse reading and identifying diseases through pulse (Rao). A total of nine Siddhars is listed in Abithana Chintamani. They are-

- Sathyanathar
- Sathoganathar
- Aadhinathar
- Anadhinathar
- Vegulinathar
- Madhanganathar
- Machaendranathar
- Gadaendranathar or Gajendranathar
- Korakkanathar

There is another list of eighteen Siddhars in Tamil tradition. They are-

- Nandeeswarar
- Tirumular
- Agathiyar
- Kalangi Nathar
- Pathanjali
- Korakkar
- Pulipaani
- Konganar
- Sattamuni

- Theraiyar
- Ramadevar
- Siva vaakiyar
- Edaikkadar
- Machamuni
- Karuvoorar Thevar
- Bogar
- Pambatti
- Kuthambai

They have their unique powers too which include-

- Anima (shrinking)
- Mahima (illimitability)
- Laghima (lightness)
- Garima (weight)
- Prapti (fulfillment of desires)
- Prakasym (irresistible will)
- Ishtavam (supremacy)
- Vashitavam (dominion over the elements)

Coming back to the concept of Ardhanarishvara, it can be traced in both North Indian Indus valley culture and Sangam literature. It comprises of three words- *Ardha*, *Nari* and *Ishwara* which means half, woman and Lord or God respectively. Speaking critically, the God is Lord Shiva and the Goddess is Devi Parvati, his better half. The idol comprises of Shiva on the right half and Devi Parvati on his left half (Encyclopaedia Britannica Online). It represents both the power of destruction and creation at the same time- the slayer and the preserver. The philosophy behind it is that you cannot separate the male and female entity completely. Both the elements of male and female are present in the human mind and body. In other words, the universe is made up of both the powers. Lord Shiva stands for Purush and Devi Parvati for Prakriti, together they form this universe. We can also see both the ideas as two separate ways of life- the spiritual way and the materialistic one. Samkhya Philosophy also talks about Purush (the male energy) and Prakriti (the female energy) which make cosmic energy. One of his temples is located in Thiruchengode district of Tamil Nadu. Murugan's *One Part Woman* exclusively talks about Ardhanarishvara, the annual temple festival surrounding it, and how it controls common people's destiny.

One cannot deny the authority and leverage, if not influence, of religious faith over literature throughout the world. Tamil literature is no exception to that. A historical study of Classical Tamil literature would reveal the dominance of religious orientation. For instance, early texts like Iraiyanar's *Akapporul* or Aiyanar Itanar's *Purapporul Venpa Malai* set an example in this regard, which was continued by their successors. Therefore, Modern Tamil literature taps some of their conventional structures in recent texts too. Kamil Zvelebil, in his research-length book *The Smile of Murugan* (1973), attempts to theorize this religious influence over literature in general and how Tamil literature is taking unique shape due to religious faith in particular. Taking cue from our present discussion, let us contextualize Perumal Murugan, a worthy representative of Modern Tamil literature, and scrutinize his controversial *One Part Woman*.

Born in 1966, to an upper-class agrarian family and single largest caste group of Kongunadu- Gounders, Perumal Murugan got high privilege for education. Although a farmer, his father supported the family by running a soda shop outside a cinema theater, which again became the setting of one of his novel, *Current Show* (2004). He completed his undergraduate study from Erode and postgraduate from Coimbatore. In 1988, at the age of 22, he went to Madras University to pursue his M.Phil degree in Tamil literature followed by scholastic research on the Kongu author R. Shanmugasundaram. Here he came under the influence of the Communist Party of India, called Makkal Kalachara Kazhayan or Ma Ka Ka. It was this spectacle which compelled him to write about the religion and community of his origin. As a professor of Tamil Literature, as he is now posted at a government college of Attur, Tamil Nadu, he studied heavily the lexicon of words, idioms and phrases common in the locale of Kongunadu (Raman).

Murugan published *Maadhorubaagan* in 2010, which was later translated into English as *One Part Woman* (2014). The novel is all about a childless couple and their plights in a hostile society. The novel is deeply saturated in the myths and belief of Tamil people. The setting is kongunadu region of Tamil Nadu somewhere between the 1950s and '60s. Kali and Ponna is a happy couple in the beginning when the novel opens twelve years after their marriage. Even after twelve successive years, they fail to produce any child. Here lies the problem. This is the epicenter of all the troubles. In Indian social construction, it is the society who has the power to make moral decisions- when a boy or a girl should get married, whom they should marry, even the process of procreation is under constant monitoring and supervision of society. So if you cannot get pregnant within one year of marriage, society starts piercing through your window to take care of your privacy. Kali and Ponna are leading a peaceful life until the society feels the urge that it is high time for the couple to reproduce. Following the customs, Ponna's mother-in-law forces her to drink juices extracted from different soots. The juices are so bitter that her tongue feels numb for several days. Ponna retorts in utter disgust- "Should I put a child on her lap the month after the wedding? I can only drop a grinding stone on her lap. Can't she be patient for a year or two?" (44)

When all such remedies fail to provide a child, they turn towards divine intervention. In order to get a child, they have worshipped almost all the gods and goddesses of the village- near or far. They go to astrologers. All of them talk positively and hopeful about the couple but their pieces of advice bring no good to them. Sometimes the idea occurs to them that it is due to a curse over their family and it comes down from their guilty ancestors. To calm down Lord Murugan, Ponna makes him bathe in castor oil for several days and finishes all the oil produced that year in their field to appease the wrath of the god. But to no avail. In this context it is noteworthy to mention how the author skillfully uses language and picks daily conversations among villagers and between Ponna and her mother-in-law to elaborate the plight of the distressed soul, i.e., Ponna. Now for the older generation, the only way remains is that of sending Ponna to the chariot festival of Ardhanarishvara temple. Every year the chariot festival is observed for eighteen days. The people of Tamil Nadu have deep faith over their religion. Kail's mother's faith reflects in her words- "Karattaiyan and Devatha of Karattur have so many ways of helping people. From the moment the flag is hoisted to when the Gods come down and go back up the hill, how many miracles they perform for how many people!" (94-95). Then she commands something which changes their lives forever.

“This year, we need to send Ponna there. And you must agree to this.” (95) It is like a bolt from the blue for kali. The festival is very common and popular to others but one single custom or practice is important to remember. Childless women are sent in that festival deliberately and on the eighteenth day they can have consensual sex there with anybody they want and it is socially acceptable. For a single day, they soften the grip over morality. According to this ‘bizarre’ custom, all the males are considered as Gods for that night. Their mating is overlooked by the society, the information remains secret among the partners and if a child is born out of that union, it is accepted as boon from divine. Kali is shocked by the idea of sending Ponna to the festival. He reacts- “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’... While a man feels so shy about these matters, look at these women!” (117)

He is not in a mood to permit Ponna anyhow to the festival. Therefore, he does not send Ponna to her mother’s place to avoid the consequences. But at the end, the other family members trick them and cunningly take Ponna away to the festival.

Kannan Sundaram, the publisher of the book brings out the political angle of majoritarian influence over publication industry. One finds peculiar similarity between Lorca’s Spanish Play *Yerma* (1934) and *One Part Woman*, instead of having difference in setting and theme. What connects them is the equal amount of obsession over Womb, i.e., the importance of giving birth to child after marriage, in small communities. Besides that, Willow Heath, too, talks about the sexual priorities and promiscuities regarding the Chariot Festival.

The fate of people still hangs in the hands of religion. Their lives revolve around their cultures, belief, customs, and social constructions. At the end of the novel- *One Part Woman*, kali feels betrayed by the act of Ponna. Though Ponna is innocent, she becomes the victim of her family’s over-ambition and faith over religious practices. Again human relations are subdued before religious forces. The novel ends with the vision of kali thinking of hanging himself up with a rope. Whether he dies or not that is left to the reader’s imagination.

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