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Violence through Religious Rituals: The Critical Analysis of Perumal Murugan's One Part Woman

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Abstract

The paper attempts to investigate that patriarchy makes itself evident through religion. It manages to authorise religion to wreak violence on individuals who do not conform. It is through ethics that such a stifling situation marks the beginning of our perpetual oppression because ethics have the power to legitimise violence that comes out of religious practices. The paper investigates how the central female protagonist Ponna is caught in the vortex of violence that promises her maternal bliss, the bliss that can even transcend the crude forms of violence to make her a 'complete woman'. The novel in the final analysis attempts to reveal how she finds herself in "a theatre of the absurd" situation where in this world of absurdist bandwagon, the idea of sustaining hope seems to be a utopian reality. Does belief in religious practices provide her the necessary oxygen? Does she manage to survive or come out of the situation in which she has landed?

Keywords: Religious ethics, religious violence, biological essentialism

1. Introduction

The novel under critical scrutiny is Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman*. The analysis of the novel brings forth the idea that the central female character Ponna gets entangled into the convoluted patriarchal norms and religious ethics. The novel presents the deeper socio-religious failure which pushes the central character Ponna to psychological and sexual violence through false religious practices at the local temples and at Tiruchengode carnival.

The central conflict of the novel focuses upon the lives of Ponna and her husband Kali who have been married for twelve years but no issue has come out of that wedlock. The Portia tree planted at Kali's in-laws is the symbol of fertility that indicates towards infertile womb of Ponna who has not been able to beget a child even after the nagging gap of twelve years after their marriage. "She must have been thinking about how the tree had grown so lush and abundant in twelve years while not even a worm crawled in her womb" (*One Part Woman*: 8). She is the victim of 'Biological essentialism' in which a female has to live under the burden of fixed female identity and her failure to beget a baby results in the oppression and repression of her individual self. After her marriage, she is also green with envy by looking at the cows that she has: brought from her father's home "It delivered seven or eight calves, populating Kali's barn with its offspring (ibid). She shows her predicament by comparing herself to the 'mute creature' cow that is more proficient in bringing small calves into the barn of Kali. In a similar fashion, Ponna expresses her predicament to one of the ladies:

The plant I planted is flowering now, the tree I planted is bearing fruit, the calf I brought has grown and birthed many of its own, and the egg that I helped incubate has hatched a beautiful chick. (116)

The idea of her barren womb keeps on haunting her but somehow she partially manages to come out of the psychological dilemma when she seems to have found the solution to her problem by invoking local gods and goddesses.

Before reaching the last resort, i.e., Tiruchengode carnival, Ponna and her husband have to adopt so many measures to appease the local gods and goddesses. The politics of appeasement does not work out according to their wishes for them. They invoke the god Murugan and the goddesses Pavatha in their own strange ways to appease them but they don't seem to understand the language of appeasement. They also lit sixty lamps for sixty days and prostrate at the feet of Murugan, pleading for his blessings. "The entire castor seed yield from that year became the oil in those lamps" (23). Ponna, with a lump in her throat states that "seeking a

life, we have pawned our lives” (56). She faces the entire rigmarole of empty rituals in order to get the object of her desire. Therefore, she and her husband assiduously court their gods in all possible ways.

The major focus of this paper is to bring into critical scrutiny the events at Tiruchengode carnival where Ponna, the central female character, has to face the biggest paradox of her life. This typical Indian lady is stuck in such a position where only the idea of conceiving a child by a god overpowers all other ideas. The writer castigates the empty religious practices at Tiruchengode festival. Even the business in the prostitutes’ street does not flourish at the time of this festival. The writer remarks: “That night there was no business in the prostitutes’ street that was right in front of the temple at the foot of the hill” (98). The men at this festival belittle their own importance by saying “Who is going to look at us? Today, every woman is a prostitute” (ibid). The beleaguered men in the crowd look like gods to her who would fill her years long desire of wanting a child that she could not conceive since her marriage with Kali. She is made aware of the heavenly powers by her mother by saying that every man is a god that night. Here it is relevant to quote a few words from Foucault’s book *Discipline and Punish*:

Religion thus can be construed as a patriarchy-infested, disciplinary institution that operates on the underside of the law. It reinforces and multiplies the asymmetry of power and undermines the limits that are traced around the law.
(*Discipline and Punish*: 222-23)

The men dancing with sticks at the ‘Tiruchengode’ carnival who want to get physical with Ponna can never stick to her mind. She can go to any extremes to get her unfulfilled maternal instincts fulfilled. The unfulfilled desire haunts her and looks more significant and weightier than the desires that have already been fulfilled. It is the belief that on the 14th day of the festival in Tiruchengode celestial beings and even the three gods- Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva along with their consorts are considered to be staying on here (213). What more can a lady like Ponna expect in this festival. She has the firm belief in these superpowers and feels that it is a place of divine feats and her wish can only be achieved by mingling with the unknown faces in the crowd.

Ponna gravitates towards Tiruchengode with her brother Muthu and her husband decides to come on the 14th day when the gods go back to the hills. They set on the journey with the religious fervour “They carried on as if the dust was nothing but holy ash smearing itself on them” (151). She has the conviction that she is heading towards spiritual kingdom. The place where Ponna has come is so crowded that it looks like an ocean of human faces. She is standing in midst of unfamiliar faces to get familiar with them. Ponna in her heart of hearts feels that men in the crowd are the incarnation of Brahma, Vishnu or Shiva- the three superpowers. She goes to the fair to put her loyalty, honour and chastity at stake. All of these traits of her personality are now going to become the relics of the past. She, in reality, falls prey to the conspiracy and irony of circumstances.

In the crowd of gods, Ponna finds it very difficult to find the right god. She thinks that the man in the crowd who will start the act of pressing her right shoulder can be the right person for her. Ponna cannot decide whether to sacrifice her chastity to that stranger or not. She shows her disapproval as if she were little bit ready to be one with that person (219). The face of that person reminds her of the face the boy with

whom she fell in love in her childhood. Ponna prays “Please appear with a new face, one I am not familiar with (221). She prays more fervently “Come to me with a form I like” (ibid). The religious realm that she enters, measures her devotional gestures through the lenses of patriarchy that pushes her individual self into the abyss of lust and mistrust.

The crowded place provides Ponna with aesthetic pleasure. She is enchanted by theatrical performances and dancers who dance seductively and sensuously in rhythm to the drums (222). Oyilattam dancers that are the group of twenty men attract her a lot for they dance vivaciously and show themselves to be the proven dancers. They dance with such magical acrobatics that Ponna feels like joining this band of dynamic dancers. “Looking at the dancers, she wondered if men were really such beautiful creatures.” (ibid). The man clad in dhoti with dishevelled hair appears before her. She feels that it is her god. He welcomes her in a ‘permanent grin’ but grin can not guarantee her the permanent source of happiness for which she attends this carnival of religious significance. She knows that this fellow wants to build proximity with her. But she has never thought even in her wildest of dreams to be touched by somebody else other than Kali. It is something against her moral conscience. He takes her to the north chariot street to concretise and normalise libidinal liaisons with her. He also feeds her with local delicacies. He addresses her as ‘Selvi’ and serves her food with his own hands that she gallops as if it were the divine food to bestow her with divine energy. She feels “He has given me a new name so that no one around her gets suspicious” (225). Her diffidence can not last more and she reciprocates his advances. She utters religiously “He is my god. My job is to go where he takes me...Like a rain-soaked chicken, she huddled in his warmth” (ibid). The law of attraction comes full circle for this coy mistress. She thinks that the god would provide her with perennial delight and readily agrees to follow the divine act of fulfilling her maternal instincts.

Ponna feels strongly that her act of copulation with the god would be the exact replica of the meta-physical dimension of sexuality. According to Zizek:

The becoming cultural of sexuality is thus not becoming cultural of nature, but the attempt to domesticate a properly unnatural excess of the meta-physical sexual passion (*Agitating the Frame*: 50). In a way, she sacrifices her chastity at the altar of a practice mistaken to have religious backings.

The novel also throws light on how patriarchy in connivance with religion legitimises violence against the central female character Ponna. A critical examination of the novel lays bare the manner in which a community imposes unethical demands on women because they are sanctioned by the patriarchal order in which she exists. It is the force of the patriarchal set-up in her psyche that makes her sacrifice her innate dignity at the altar of maternal instincts. Society fosters the desire to be a mother in the mind of Ponna and this is evidently patriarchal in its principles and gendering the desire of lineage.

Ponna has to face coercion both in marital relationship and the so-called divine intimacy that she develops at the Tiruchengode carnival. Her act of hoping against hope causes her sexual exploitation at home as well as the place of religious significance. The feminist in Ponna can never raise its voice because she can go to any oppressive heights to

fulfil her maternal instincts. But ironically, she fails to conceive even after passing through the ultimate test at Tiruchengode. The grandiose claims and reiterating commitments made by Ponna's mother and her brother result in her sexual exploitation, the exploitation that is divine in nature but not so divine that can fulfil her motherly ambitions. This crude form of lust seething into these so-called gods can only fulfil their libidinal desires and Ponna's desire can only be materialised at the next year's fair that would be held in Tiruchengode with the same fervour and religiosity. All in all, her phantasized meta-physical realm is the "drama of false appearances" (Agitating the Frame: 67). This is a different brand of violence that is not discussed in Western feminist theory as well as Indian feminist theory. Ponna is the victim of irrational violence supported by rational patriarchal ideologies. Her life hurtles on the path of violence that is different from physical form of violence. In the light of the foregoing discussions it is clear that in this novel, Perumal successfully captures those nuances of violence that have been normalised by patriarchal ideology.

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