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# Cultural Violence and the Infertile Body: A Study of Ableism in Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman*

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## Abstract

*This research investigates the intersectional expedition of a stigmatic couple's domestication as a sterile litany in a heterogeneous existing structure pictured by Perumal Murugan's One Part Woman. It exposes the irrepressible violence of ableism against unproductive individual survival through the phenomena of intersectional disability studies. The study explores the complex play between victims' existential crisis and dominant ableism beliefs by venturing into the stratification of cultural ideology. Drawing upon the theory of intersectionality and ableism, the research aims to expose the exaggerated adoration of culture within evil-rooted existing structures. Burning with discrimination and humiliation, individuals act as objects to intersubjectivity of terrible sterility stigma in Tamil rural society. The true nature of the infertile scandal is exposed through the distressed cultural sluggishness within underdeveloped horrific traditional barbarism. Trapped in the crouching atmosphere, the wounded individual, especially woman character Ponna, determined to prove her identity emerges as a weapon against sterile prejudices and flaunting violence in the guise of socio-cultural traditional beliefs. The analysis helps to understand the psychological trauma of infertility of both genders and how sterile stigma imprisons the affected individual by exploiting women's bodily autonomy by prioritizing the social role under the merciless glare structure.*

**Keywords:** Infertility Trauma, Cultural Violence, Sterile Prejudices, Social Seclusion.

Ableism stems from the ideology of social inequality and reinforces the idea of stereotypes to influence the social structure with domain stigmatic discourse. It imprisons or secludes disabled people through specific mobilization. Michelle Nario expresses, "Ableism is painting our lives like a tragic story" (Nario - Redmond 2). Moreover, the subject of ableism dooms the lives of disabled individuals by implementing culturally validating practices. This cultural contradiction ravages the psyche of unproductive people and apparently results in the enslavement of disabled persons within the internal power dynamics.

The term Motherhood whispers eternal ecstasy, globally flowing like air and contributing an important dimension to social existence.

On the contrary, in contemporary cultural society, the manifestation of motherhood causes dilemmas in women's identity which is completely shaped by cultural context. Motherhood discourse emerges as a formidable social tradition that created outrage by implementing traditional motherhood ideology superimposed on sterile litany individuals. This biological determination unflinchingly led to social ill-treatment including social prejudices, repressible bodily exploitation, and stripping of individual autonomy and agency.

Perumal Murugan utilizes literature to throw light on the atmosphere of women's bodily exploitation in the name of sterile prejudices that seek to dehumanize infertile women as 'inferior subjects' of social life. Through the novel *One Part Woman*, Murugan powerfully paints the branding trauma of barren and how the woman character saliently heals from her wounded spirit by enduring cultural obsession. Simon De Beauvoir in her work *The Second Sex* quotes Aristotle's words, "The female is a female virtue of a certain lack of qualities" (Beauvoir 25). By restating Aristotle's observation on the nature of women, Beauvoir deplores the recurring vitiating issue of the natural defectiveness of women's bodies.

The novel *One Part Woman* illustrates the social constraints in the lives of Kali and Ponna, an exhausted childless couple for twelve years, bearing the despairing atmosphere of dehumanization and stigmatic prejudices by performing rituals at several temples around the Kongu region for fertility to dismantle the deeply ingrained intersubjectivity of inescapable sterility imputations. In many cultures, especially in Tamil rural society, the prime aim imposed upon women is compulsory procreation besides their natural defectiveness, which ultimately impedes women from embracing their autonomy. And this counter patriarchal motherhood discourse urges women to shape their identity to achieve maternal status by ensuing colorblind ideologies including harmful religious practices and superstitious mythological beliefs.

Murugan's *One Part Woman* explores through the lens of a psychoanalytical approach by illustrating the dichotomy between the value placed on the ideology of motherhood as a cultural heritage and the devaluation of infertile women among the mechanized social evils which is deep-rooted in the existing power structure to torment the unproductive people. Through the prevalent characteristic view of Ponna and Kali, Murugan unveils the masks of human reality in an ambitious dominant cultural hegemonic structure that governs social life.

Culturally constructive society mocks the disability bodies through the subject of cultural pride and persuasive socio-traditional beliefs. The inculcation of social norms influences the gendered mechanism by validating cultural imperial ethics. In *One Part Woman*, Kali and Ponna's infertility status becomes a contempt subject to the performative asset people who prioritize social expectations over individual agonies. It is evident when a man named Chellapan, a cattle dealer, mocks and compares Ponna's infertility to non-breeding cows. He ridicules, "It is fate, mapillai... that is just some cows are. No matter what you do, they never get pregnant. Just quietly change the cow. If you say yes, I can fetch you one right away" (10).

The persistent sterile trauma of Ponna and Kali operates as a parameter to uphold social dignity as woman and man, which ultimately results in a gender matrix within a systematic social structure. The emergence of gender sensitivity issues is naturally wrapped deeply by constructive socio-cultural expectations. It demands both genders to conform to traditional gender roles that seek to manipulate them to assume their social role and aid an impel foundation in the cultural evolution process. In *One Part Woman*, both Kali and Ponna bump into an abject plight of sterile litany that confines them within the walls, to worse they cannot have the courage to attend any social gatherings in the village. Productive people view the disabled as their prey to hunt and traumatize through their sarcastic satirizing words.

Murugan discursively paints the emotional violence of sterile traumatic experience through the novel *One Part Woman*. The interpellation of the cultural gender identity crisis is reflected when Ponna belatedly attends the social function of her neighbor Sarasa's brother-in-law's wedding. To humiliate Ponna socially, Sarasa comments, "Despite my telling you to come early, you are arriving only now. Did you get delayed in getting your daughter ready?" (65). Meanwhile, Kali's masculinity is questioned based on the mythical cultural belief that a man should impart morning sickness to his wife within one month of marriage. "And the entire bunch of Kali's friends had insinuated this several times... He also knew that they had nicknamed him 'the impotent one'" (83).

As Susan Wendell in *The Rejected Body: A Feminist Philosophical Reflection* states, "Many people who identified themselves as disabled because their bodies cause them great physical, psychological, and economic struggles... these people often long to be perceived as disabled, because society stubbornly continues to expect them to perform as healthy non-disabled people when they cannot, and refuses to acknowledge and support their struggles" (Wendell 25). In *One Part Woman*, Ponna and Kali despite their barrenness lead a euphoric life. But it is due to the stubborn nature of social expectations that Ponna and Kali experience social humiliation and prejudices by reason of their childless status in the rigid constructive society. As a result, Ponna and Kali lurk within avoid space of social life and completely ignore social functions including weddings or funerals.

A sharpening view of intersectionality through the lens of ableism provides an ideal frame of how women's bodies are seemingly normative as objects for procreation rather than considering holistic social subjects as every being in the universe. Fiona Kumari Campbell in her book *Contours of Ableism: The Production of Disability and Aabledness* defines ableism as a network of beliefs, processes, and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical, and therefore essential and fully human. Disability then is cast as a diminished state of being human" (Campbell 44).

The intersection of ableism and disability defined by Campbell proves that women's bodily autonomies are stripped off under the guise of culture, tradition, and religious practice. These internal social elements in an unjust society create a blind ideology that establishes a strong environment of submission to diminish inadequate individuals and mutilate themselves within a suffocating societal structure. *One Part Woman* clearly projects how the absurd religious socio-traditional beliefs exploit the bodily autonomy of Ponna by manipulating her to uphold the family's dignity through her identity as motherhood.

Ponna is trapped in the social dilemma of whether to submit herself to the oppressive norms of cultural rituals to bear a child to prove her gender identity or to defy the tradition and suffer by being humiliated as an inauspicious object. Because of her social and family pressure, she is coerced to mutilate herself by participating in absurd religious practices, stressing the idea that if a barren woman sanctioned a libidinal relationship with a strange man whom the custom accords as a god on the particular eighteenth day of chariot festival, she will be blessed with a child.

Ponna, please go to the eighteenth day of the festival this year, said her mother-in-law to her happily. Your brother will take care of everything. How long can we keep looking at each other's faces in this house? Don't we want a child to bounce around in this place? We have a lovely home. Don't we need a child to crawl around all this space? Everything will go well. Be ready to leave tomorrow. (121-22)

The systemized concept of constructive normalcy is endorsed in many cultural societies. Most significantly, cultural coherence plays a crucial role in recasting the identity of disabled people as marginalized or unproductive. Moreover, the social norm condemns the unfruitful individual to

be retained in the submissive environment as inescapable vulnerable prey and forced to sustain among the hungry social predators. This handcuffed demarcate causes catastrophic psychological trauma to the disabled individual, which ultimately acts as a barrier to rise from their peeling-back oppression.

Disability is constructed by social structure and cultural ideals that influence the ideology of a group or community and manifest the disabled individual to submit to the roles of social demands. In most cultures, social expectations demand unfruitful women to perform the prime duty of procreation through the insinuation of religious rituals, superstitious beliefs, and herbal remedies, also even via negative stereotypes and cultural judgments. It is conspicuously revealed that disability is not a personal problem; rather it is socially constructed and also insists disabled persons to maintain the oppressive normalcy ideology. Susan Wendell in *The Rejected Body* exemplifies the attitude of patriarchal social construction:

“Attitudes that disability is a personal or family problem (of biological or accidental origin), rather than a matter of social responsibility, are cultural contributors to disability and powerful factors working against social measures to increase ability. The attitude that disability is a personal problem is manifested when people with disability are expected to overcome obstacles to their participation in activities by their own extraordinary efforts” (Wendell 52).

Murugan’s *One Part Woman* apparently projects the strong external and internal forces that urge Ponna towards a life of productivity by participating in the absurd religious practice of the eighteenth-day chariot fertility ritual. Having held her identity as a barren woman for twelve years, Ponna could not embrace the liberty to wander freely without any social prejudices, even in the fields. Ponna works in the field of Vellivel to replace the absence of Vellivel’s wife’s work. Unfortunately, at the end of the year, the production of crops becomes an utter failure due to its poor quality. This leads the people to validate their comparison of Ponna’s barren status with the failure of crops and marginalize her cruelly by commenting, “That barren woman ran up and down carrying seeds. How do you expect them to grow once she has touched them?” (115).

The dehumanization of Ponna as an untouchable and inauspicious object for her sterility condition reflects the cruel nature of constructive social life in which unproductive individuals are forced to be excluded from the so-called normative life that creates a social and psychological dilemma of emotional alienation, promoting Ponna to sacrifice herself in the socio-traditional repercussion. Ponna envisages that to survive in the threatened reality and to get freedom from social and cultural judgments will be obtained only through her identity as motherhood: “The only way to save oneself was to conceive in the first month of marriage... The goal was to beget a child, and she was ready to do anything to attain that goal” (43).

The predominant implementation of counter-patriarchal motherhood persistently effectuates Ponna to the circumstance of compulsory childbearing in the formidable social traditional environment. The evil social structure, emboldened by deleterious stereotypes, prevalently views the disabled person as an antagonist to their esteemed society, which is deliberately exposed through the silent cries of Ponna: “The plant that we plant grows; the seed that we sow blooms; it is only me who is the wasted land here?” (184). The desperate barren struggle of Ponna disharmonizes her and Kali’s social existence and strains them to live a life in the chasm of despair.

The ambivalence between cultural representation and social expectations always dawns upon women’s sexual production sphere. A never-ending explosion of sterile stigma miserably transgressed over ages and attempts to pass to posterity. Women are incessantly enslaved to the matter of reproduction, abasement orchestrated through cultural psychic violence. In *One Part Woman*, Ponna’s participation in the estranged fertility ritual on the eighteenth day of the chariot festival caricatures the ever-present ideal of cultural discourse and practices that liberally prevail

in the unjust society. The character Ponna represents the dilemma of real-life barren women's existential condition. She is inescapably caught between the tension of personal identity and the cultural ideology of procreation heritage.

Murugan highlights the consequence of Ponna's participation in the fertility ritual at the end of the novel. Ponna is unconsciously influenced by the reviving tradition ideology, and the jeopardy of Ponna's action is exposed when she acknowledges her husband Kali's suicide for her preformation of libidinal religious ritual results in weariness and delirium in her psychic conscience rooted as a phenomenon of religious extremism. Nevertheless, the exhorted healing power of Ponna is fascinatedly juxtaposed with the five elements of nature. As an earth, Ponna, though exploited by the aggressive cultural imperialism, steadfastly decides to survive alone in the environment of patriarchal devaluation of women. Similar to water, Ponna thrives strongly against the ideology of ableism. As an element of air, she comforts her disconsolate soul by finding resolve in her apocalyptic existence. As a fire, Ponna emerges from the irrepressible cultural violence that shatters her life. As a sky, Ponna embraces her transformation from barren woman to widow to motherhood.

This research paper merely outlines Murugan's *One Part Woman*, which deals with the subject of derivative cultural stereotype context rooted deeply in Indian society. Murugan uses the characters Ponna and Kali to unveil the pathetic reality of sterile individuals in rural Tamil Nadu who are frequently pressured to encounter displacement, social seclusion, and sterile ableism. Murugan merely draws an embattled dichotomy survival of Kali and Ponna as unproductive individuals within the hegemonic cultural community. He uses the character Kali to portray how some vulnerable innocent individuals are swallowed by evil socio-traditional violence. And by picturing the characteristics of Ponna, he depicts resilient individuals, though influenced by domain cultural brutality, healing from the scarring condemnation of cultural obsession through their identity transformation.

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