



Silence, Stigma, and Survival: Psychological Dimensions of Illness in One Part Woman Pallavi Ghadge¹, Dr Waheed Sultan Bhat²

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the psychological aspects of illness, stigma and survival in the context of novel *One Part Woman* based upon the concepts of feminist medical humanities, psychology of illness and trauma studies. *One Part Woman* is written by Perumal Murugan. Madhorubhagan is an original novel in Tamil which was translated into English by Aniruddhan Vasudevan. The novel not only covers the issue of infertility as a biological problem, but also as a stigma that goes deep within the human personality, marriage, emotions and social life. Ponna and Kali is the way Murugan gives expression to the inmates' suffering due to a culture that equates a woman's reproductive cessation with psychological and emotional isolation. The paper suggests that emotional trauma is exacerbated by silence, shame and social pressure, and that it is a form of resistance to oppressive cultural structures to survive. The novel also uncovers the role of disease and stigma in the construction of identity in the context of sexist and caste-based societies

1. INTRODUCTION

The themes of emotional and psychological aspects of sickness, suffering and social marginalization have been developing in Indian literature. Illness is not only a medical problem in contemporary Indian fiction but it is also a social, emotional and cultural condition that is influenced and constructed by patriarchy, stigma, caste and expectations of the society. In many stories, women's bodies are places of social evaluation and emotional regulation, of identity crisis. Therefore, illness has a psychological impact on the individual's mental health, emotional self-worth and social identity. *One Part Woman* is one such powerful exploration of psychological suffering, the question of infertility. The novel, set in the rural Tamil community, follows the lives of the couple, Kali and Ponna, who cannot conceive a child, and are thus subjected to the constant social ostracism, emotional stress and psychological anguish of their neighbours. As they experience the frustration of not being able to have a child, they slowly move from the private to the public sphere and begin to feel the stigma of being a childless couple. Their childlessness slowly becomes a public matter that begins to affect all aspects of their life, becoming a stigma of being a childless couple.

The novel uncovers the importance of the 'value' of women in the society of men based on their motherhood and fertility in terms of reproductive expectations. As society perceives her as not being able to conceive as her personal fault, Ponna's identity becomes split in two. Murugan shows that there are emotional loneliness, marital tension and psychological suffering arising from social stigma attached to the issue of infertility. The absence of any being becomes a survival instinct and a prison of emotions.

The paper looks at the psychological aspects of illness, using feminist medical humanities and psychoanalytical approaches to examine the experience of *One Part Woman*. It posits that infertility is a socially constructed illness experience that is influenced by patriarchy, gender expectations and cultural morality. Eventually the novel is a depiction of emotional endurance and identity construction in oppressive social systems in the process of survival.

1. Prevention of Illnesses and Awareness of Social Stigma.

One Part Woman is more than just a condition of not being able to bear children, it is a social stigma. The rural society sees motherhood as the main role of woman and those who fail to have children are seen as "unlucky, or socially inadequate". Not only is Ponna suffering from not having children but she is suffering from being continuously judged by her family and community. Murugan illustrates the social stigmatisation of being unable to conceive. All rituals, celebrations and family events remind of the failure of the society. Ponna and Kali are continually asked questions, ridiculed and pitied for not having kids. Their secret sorrow is made public.

One of the painful moments in the story suggests: “A childless woman carried silence like a wound that never healed” (Murugan, 2013). The emotional stress that comes with the social stigma is encapsulated in this statement. Society's messages of shame and failure can take a toll on a woman's psyche, leading to the psychologically devastating effects of infertility. The novel illustrates the social construction of illness, as a result of cultural attitudes. Illnesses are not just medical problems, argues Susan Sontag, but are also invested with symbolic meanings by the society and become moral or social judgments. (Sontag 1978) In the book “*One Part Woman*”, the problems of being infertile are linked to impurity, incompleteness, and failure in the social sphere. Ponna is further tormented by the emotional distress of being seen as her body is tied to the reproductive function in patriarchy.

2. The Psychological Trauma and Emotional Isolation.

Emotional isolation is one of the most important psychological aspects dealt with in the novel. Yet, Ponna is almost as lonely as if there were no one to notice her pain, suffering, or cries of help, as it is ignored by everyone, except for the public gaze. People discuss her barrenness with a lot of words but without comprehension of her emotional torment. Murugan is a man of silence, and sees silence as psychological oppression. Ponna chokes off her emotions of anger, humiliation and despair as it is expected under patriarchal culture for women to suffer in silence. Her emotional repression eventually leads to a division and loathing from within, causing her to become psychologically drained.

The novel is a very reflective, emotionally charged text, one that indicates: “Words cannot explain the emptiness that was building up in her, day by day” (Murugan, 2013). This is an emotional void which represents psychological estrangement. Ponna attaches herself more and more to her inability to have a child, leading to a decline in self-esteem and in emotional confidence. Kali's mental anguish is also depicted in the novel. Kali suffers from wounded masculinity and emotional frustration as the primary culprit in patriarchal society is to place women at fault for being unable to have children. Being a man and a husband is in danger, because of childlessness, in the traditional rural culture. But, compared to Ponna, more sympathy is given to his suffering because there is a difference between the evaluation of men and women by the patriarchy. As Kali and Ponna slowly move away from each other emotionally, their intimacy and relationship are impacted by the social stigma. The pressure, the gossip and the insecurity in their relationship takes a toll on their marriage.

3. Silenced Bodies and Controlled Lives of Women: Patriarchal Dominance

The novel sharply challenges the patriarchy's body and identity politics of the women. The value of Ponna is almost completely linked with her reproductive capacity. Her individuality, emotional needs and intelligence take a back seat to motherhood. In society, she is only seen as a living body that serves a purpose. This is a representation of Simone de Beauvoir's claim that the patriarchal systems define women not by his/her autonomous individuality, but by the roles of a woman: biological and reproductive (Beauvoir, 1949).

4.1 Motherhood as Social Obligation

Motherhood is not a choice, but a social need in *One Part Woman*. Ponna's body is the space of social surveillance, judgment. Her family, neighbors and elders always intervene in her life, giving her a lot of advice, rituals, and criticism on her fertility. The society takes ownership of women's reproductive life which violates their emotional boundaries.

Murugan also highlights hypocritical morality of the patriarchy. While both the husband and wife may be socially and biologically responsible for some cases of infertility, the responsibility lies more with the wife. When women feel guilty and the society makes them feel similarly, they are conditioned to think so and Ponna internalises that. Often, silence can be psychological oppression. In many cases silence is psychological oppression.

4.2 Silence and Emotional Suppression

The novel's psychological theme of silence is one of the main ones. Society does not allow for women to voice their pain, anger or dissatisfaction, and so Ponna rarely does so outright. Emotional silence becomes a coping mechanism in a very oppressive social system. But it is also a psychological wound that is inflicted by this silence. Repressed emotions contribute to loneliness, anxiety and emotional disintegration. Ponna is caught in a dilemma; either suffer or live up to the society's expectations.

Elaine Showalter claims that in patriarchal cultures women's suffering has been hidden or ignored (Showalter, 1985). In *One Part Woman*, the character of a woman who is psychologically tormented, but socially unnoticed, is reflected in the constant public examination. Murugan shows how silence can be an illness. The childlessness plus the difficulty in expressing emotional verisimilitude may result in greater psychological suffering than merely childlessness.

4. Interconnectedness of Trauma, Desire and Identity Crisis

5.1 Trauma, Ritual, and Female Agency

The annual festival of the temple is the emotional and psychological culmination of the novel because it is a situation for



Ponna to face an unavoidable conflict between desire, shame, duty and identity. During the festival night, women can conceive children in the absence of marriage with the influence of social pressure, which leads them to join in a ritual. This is very psychologically damaging as Ponna has to balance her own dignity, marital fidelity and the expectations of society of being a good mother. Her emotional struggle is a metaphor for violence of patriarchy and women's options against her body.

5.2 The Temple Festival and Emotional Conflict

The festival is a sign of losing the emotional stability and identity. Ponna's choice is now psychologically devastating as she no longer chooses to do whatever she wants to do, but feels compelled to do so under the emotional influence of years of humiliation and social pressure. Emotional issues make it impossible for Kali and Ponna to trust and feel intimate. The social stigma and patriarchal expectations prevail in their relationship, and it breaks. The novel, therefore, shows that the issue of trauma is not only related to infertility but to the oppressive culture that is enveloping it.

5. Emotional Survival and Inner Strength

Ponna's passage is a story of emotional survival and emotional resilience in the face of tremendous suffering. There does not seem to be any heroic or triumphant aspect to survival in the novel; it comes from the endurance and emotional persistence in an oppressive social situation. Murugan's emphasis is on the survival as a very human and psychological journey. What keeps Ponna alive is not the acceptance of society, but simply because she lives despite being made a laughing stock, by being silent, by being emotionally divided. In the novel, it implies that resilience can evolve subconsciously in an individual who is not recognized in society due to their suffering. A capacity for emotional stamina can be a resistance to systems which want to wipe out the individuality and dignity. This dovetails in with feminist psychology that has placed emphasis on women's emotional agency and survival in the face of patriarchal oppression.

6. Understanding the Novel through Feminist Medical Humanities

7.1 Understanding Illness beyond Medicine

Feminist Medical Humanities is a valuable interdisciplinary approach to the study of the psychological, emotional, and social aspects of illness in literary texts. Feminist medical humanities is a medical humanities perspective that moves beyond a clinical focus on the biological nature of illness and looks at the ways in which gender, patriarchy, culture, class and social structures influence women's suffering, healing and identity. This focus highlights how women's bodies are not only medical objects but also social and political objects where power, control and inequalities are at play.

7.2 Emotional Pain and Social stigma

In *One Part Woman*, the issue of infertility is not just a reproductive issue, it is a socially constructed stigma intimately linked with patriarchy, and its notions of what it means to be a woman, to be married, and to be a mother. The novel illustrates the society's binding stereotype of women by only defining them as their reproductive organs, which is biological. The social stigma and connotations of being infertile are thus central to Ponna's emotional sufferings caused by childlessness.

7.3 Medicalisation of the Female Body

The novel is a critique from a feministic medical humanities point of view on the medicalisation of the female body by a male-dominant medical system. There is a kind of control, monitoring, and judgment of women's bodies based on the norms of fertility and motherhood. Family, neighbours and others in the community talk about Ponna as though she is a part of society and not her own. Her emotions and her uniqueness are not taken into account because in a patriarchy, her value is confined to being a reproductive organism.

7.4 Silence underestimated by Patriarchal Societies

The novel also teaches about how emotional pain can be increased by the silence and social stigma. In feminist medical humanities, it is suggested that the emotional suffering of women is not recognized or underestimated in patriarchal societies. *One Part Woman* deems Ponna to be expected to endure humiliation, social judgment and emotional isolation silently. As a result, the suffering experienced by women is invisible, as is the lack of respect for their suffering. This is because women's suffering is normalized by society and therefore goes unrecognized.

Women's emotional pain has been ignored or misunderstood for centuries, due to the power of patriarchal culture that dominates the narrative around female health and psychology, and this is what Murugan's novel brings to light: a woman's emotional pain is being ignored even as her body is continually exposed to public view, her fertility is being discussed and debated, and her pain becomes the narrative of the novel.

7.5 The Intersection of Caste, Culture, and Patriarchal Control

The feminist medical humanities are also useful in uncovering the overlap of caste, rural values, religion, and social values and ethics in the context of illness. In the novel, in addition to being personal, infertility is communal. Culture-related

conceptions of lineage, family honour and social respectability create the pressure on Ponna and Kali. In rural society, childlessness is perceived as failure of the couple and is also psychologically violent affecting their emotional health and relationship with their spouse.

In addition, the novel illustrates the internalised suffering of a system of patriarchy. Slowly Ponna starts to see herself through society's judgmental eye, and begins to feel guilty and inadequate. Feminist medical humanities look at this process critically, illustrating how women internalize oppressive cultural values of beauty, fertility, purity and ideal femininity.

7.6 Body Autonomy and Patriarchal Violence leading to Psychological Trauma

Psychological trauma is then not a personal phenomenon but an 'in-between' phenomenon. Other feminist issues in the novel are also highlighted in the festival scene, where the concept of autonomy of the body is undermined by the control of the father. Emotional tension plays out in Ponna's body during the ritual, revealing the ways women's bodies have been used for ritualistic and social purposes. Her own worth is overshadowed by the expectations of society for motherhood. This pressure causes emotional trauma, a clear example of the violence made possible by a patriarchal culture, towards women, both psychologically and emotionally. Feminist medical humanities also highlight the theme of 'resilience' and 'emotional survival' at the same time. While Ponna is humiliated and torn apart, her experience brings into sharp focus the emotional toll of oppressive systems, and the viciousness of social narratives about women's bodies. The novel presents her suffering as being 'human,' which makes her sufferings into a general critique of Patriarchal culture.

The feminist medical humanities frame then enables readers to grasp how the real-life situation of infertility is not a failure of the body, but a complex emotional, cultural and political experience, influenced by gender inequality and social stigma. Murugan's novel is a call to readers to understand that the psychological anguishes of women come from a system of power that controls and shape's female identity and their autonomy over the body.

DISCUSSIONS ON THE STUDY

The study found that the experience of infertility in *One Part Woman* is not just a biological problem but also a very psychological and a socially-cultural problem, because of the patriarchy and social stigma. This analysis illustrates that women's emotional pain is heightened when society deifies women's identity to their reproductive function and their motherhood. The research also reveals that silence is oppressive and survival. Ponna is not able to admit emotional hurt, which is indicative of the way in which patriarchal societies silence women and the normalisation of female suffering. Social humiliation, emotional isolation and internalized shame, not infertility per se, are her psychological traumas.

The other significant result of this study is the acknowledgement that experience of illness is gendered and socially constructed. Feminist medical humanities help to expose the ways women's bodies are used in patriarchy to be controlled, judged and expected. The novel reveals the emotional violence that humanity experiences under the pressure of society on the issues of fertility, marriage and female respectability. It also points out the liturgical role as a means of humanizing the psychological suffering. *One Part Woman* is a film that sensitises the viewer to mental trauma, social stigma and emotional strength through its emotional realism and narrative depth. In the novel, the author invites readers to consider the nature of illness from "medical" and from "human" points of view, seeing sickness as not just a medical condition but as one of life's experiences that is painful, lonely, dignified and even survivable.

In sum, the study finds that Perumal Murugan makes infertility a bold criticism of the patriarchy, the social stigma and emotional oppression it has engendered. The novel is an important contribution to feminist medical humanities and psychological literary studies, since it demonstrates survival as an emotional endurance and process of preserving identity in limiting social systems.

Conclusion

One Part Woman finally becomes a strong examination of the psychological, emotional and social impacts of disease and stigma in a patriarchal society. The novel is concerned not just with infertility as a medical problem, but also as a social, cultural and emotional crisis as conveyed through the experiences of Ponna and Kali, whose lives are defined by the social, cultural and communal expectations that influence their gender identity, and the social and cultural norms that condemn those expectations when they don't go as planned. Murugan's attitude to illness is that it is a lived experience, impacting on identity, relationships, emotional stability and social existence. The research findings indicate that silence is one of the main elements in the novel. Silence is adopted as a strategy of survival and it's also a form of oppression. By not being able to express her own feelings of humiliation, anger, loneliness and emotional pain, Ponna exemplifies the wider experience of women in patriarchal societies – where suffering is normalised and feelings of emotion are discouraged. Her silence represents the unspoken burden of many women who are defined and constrained by societal norms on being a mother and a woman. The novel, in other words, demonstrates the way external social circumstances can disrupt the emotional closeness and personal identity. Overall, the novel is not only a tale of childlessness, but also a deep exploration of emotional anguish, gender oppression, identity crisis and survival. In feminist medical humanities and psychological analysis, *One Part Woman* becomes an important literary work that provides a critique on the patriarchal narrative of a woman's identity, and reveals the emotional



truths behind social expectations. The novel ends by articulating in a broader way than originally intended, a commentary on humanity, emotional justice and a call for social empathy and cultural change.

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