
Erosion of the Self: Behavioural Change and Emotional Paralysis in Perumal Murugan's *A Trial by Silence*

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Abstract:

In rural patriarchal civilizations, infertility functions as a social crisis that alters individual subjectivities, gender roles, and familial relationships in addition to being a bodily condition. One Part Woman by Perumal Murugan and its follow-up *A Trial by Silence* provide a thorough examination of how ritualized reactions to childlessness exacerbate rather than alleviate psychological distress. This article explores how Kali, Ponna, and their parents are affected by the temple chariot festival, a culturally accepted remedy for infertility. It shows how communal intervention destabilizes generational authority and shatters marital intimacy. The same rite confronts Kali with emasculation, public erasure, and replacement as an attack on his masculine identity. Thus, the festival serves as a trigger that turns infertility into long-lasting humiliation, betrayal, and guilt. Kali's subsequent silence in *A Trial by Silence* is the result of untreated depression characterized by emotional disengagement, rage, and shame. His silence is interpreted as a trauma-induced reaction to prolonged psychological collapse rather than as harshness or apathy. The study expands critical conversations on masculinity, ritual, and mental health in modern Indian fiction by redefining infertility as a familial and communal catastrophe by emphasizing the shared but unequal suffering of all characters.

Keywords : Infertility, Ritual and Social Pressure, Male Depression, Psychological Distress

Introduction:

Perumal Murugan's *A Trial by Silence* has a prominent place in contemporary Indian English translations because of its complex yet tragic portrayal of psychological suffering brought on by cultural conformity. Unlike novels driven by dramatic confrontation,

Murugan's narrative develops through emotional restraint, muted conflict, and prolonged silence. Because morality, gender roles, and behavior are all restricted by unwritten norms, there is little room for emotional expression in the social milieu depicted in the book.

Silence is portrayed in the book as a lived experience that influences identity and mental well-being. Instead of being spoken or publicly acknowledged, the protagonist's sorrow is internalized and eventually builds up into psychological trauma.

Infertility is portrayed in Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* as a social catastrophe controlled by generational power and patriarchal ideals rather than just a personal misfortune. Mutual love, friendship, and emotional closeness are the foundation of Kali and Ponna's relationship. Their bond is first characterized by compassion, shared labor, and a sense of calm resistance to social intrusion, in contrast to many traditional marriages in their rural location. However, the constant pressure from family elders and social standards that associate marriage with procreation makes this love more fragile.

Kali and Ponna's parents are crucial in turning infertility into a point of contention. They see childlessness as a danger to family honor and masculine continuity, motivated by lineage anxiety and dread of societal mockery. The lack of an heir is seen by Kali's parents, especially his mother, as a failure that needs to be fixed at all costs. In a similar vein, Ponna's mother absorbs patriarchal ideas that determine a woman's value only by virtue of being a mother. Their behaviours demonstrate how strongly patriarchal logic influences parental authority, even when their intentions seem protective. Instead of treating infertility as a joint marital problem, the parents focus the blame on Ponna's body. The idea that infertility is intrinsically feminine is reinforced by the repeated ceremonies, vows, and degrading counsel she receives. Kali's parents' constant insistence that tradition must take precedence over individual dignity undermines his resistance to these intrusions. Parental concern turns into compulsion during this phase.

The most dramatic example of patriarchal authority is the temple chariot festival. The rite permits childless women to have anonymous sexual encounters in the name of heavenly blessing and is presented as a socially acceptable remedy for infertility. Despite being presented as a custom, the celebration serves as a tool of patriarchal aggression, allowing the husband to be replaced while maintaining ancestry.

Parents play a crucial role in normalizing this ritual. They use duty, honor, and maternal destiny to coerce, emotionally manipulate, and humiliate Ponna into thinking about taking part. Patriarchy stresses reproduction over marital consent, as evidenced by the dismissal of Kali's protests as foolish pride. Thus, the festival highlights the hypocrisy of a system that actively undermines marital trust while claiming to support family values. The emotional connection between Kali and Ponna is irreversibly harmed by their forced

participation in the event. A relationship that was previously based on love and respect for one another is now characterized by silence, guilt, and suspicion.

Ponna experiences intense guilt and inner turmoil when she attends the festival because her love for Kali conflicts with her forced obligation to become pregnant. Kali views the ceremony as a symbol of social erasure, betrayal, and emasculation. He interprets the deed as a symbolic admission of his insufficiency rather than as supernatural intervention. The brutality Kali inflicts on Ponna at the end of the novel is the tragic result of mounting psychological pressure rather than an isolated act of cruelty. The private space of love is destroyed and replaced with control and surveillance by patriarchy, which is mediated through ritual tradition and parental authority. Thus, the novel *Trial by Silence* illustrates how infertility erodes connection and turns love into trauma when it is mediated via patriarchal ideals.

Perumal Murugan depicts Kali's psychological melancholy in *A Trial by Silence* through a slow deterioration of daily intimacy, conversation, and emotional connection rather than overt confession. Kali's infertility-related trauma, which was exacerbated by the temple festival incident, shows up as extreme melancholy withdrawal characterized by animosity, quiet, and seclusion. His actions with Ponna demonstrate how unresolved trauma turns love into violent emotions.

In *A Trial by Silence*, Kali's changing relationship with the Portia tree—once a source of solace and childhood memories—powerfully externalizes his psychological pain. In the past, the tree served as a shield; Kali could easily climb its low branches, which provided shade, elevation, and emotional solace.

It represents steadiness, rootedness, and a peaceful closeness to nature that reflects his previous emotional equilibrium. However, Kali's view of the same tree changes in an unsettling way as his depression worsens. The tree seems to be calling to him now, its limbs inviting rather than supporting. It is no longer a harmless companion. This change is indicative of a common indication of psychological trauma, which is the acquisition of threatening or intrusive meanings by familiar items. The tree becomes an outward representation of Kali's internal conflict, representing his thoughts of suicide and his need to flee. Depression distorts memory, location, and emotional attachment; what once lifted him up now suggests destruction. As a result, the Portia tree silently observes Kali's mental breakdown, changing from a representation of safety to one of psychological peril and illuminating the extent of his estrangement and hopelessness.

The unsettling development of Kali's feelings toward Ponna in *A Trial by Silence* further reveals his psychological disintegration. Driven by humiliation, betrayal, and wounded masculinity, his anger first takes the form of a want for immediate violence. But

this impulse is dynamic. Kali's anger grows more deliberate and internal as his depression worsens, indicating a mind stuck in compulsive rumination rather than fleeting fury.

He starts to think that killing Ponna would allow her to be freed, while keeping her alive would condemn her to a life of agony. In the end, he turns his violence inward and decides to destroy himself.

Kali says, "You should suffer for the rest of your life" (Trial by Silence 3)

Kali's attempt at suicide, which is the result of protracted depression, sexual humiliation, and social erasure, is the pinnacle of his psychological collapse. This moment is depicted as the result of ongoing emotional pressure brought on by infertility and the perceived loss of manly dignity rather than as a sudden urge. The deed is physically stopped by his mother's rescue, but the psychological sorrow that motivates it remains unabated.

Rather than expressing thankfulness for rescuing him, Kali reacts angrily and verbally, focusing his suffering on his mother. His outburst, in which he questions the purpose of living under such humiliation and accuses his family of plotting to dishonor him, exposes the extent of his internalized guilt.

Kali exclaims in despair, "All of you have conspired to dishonour me! Why do I need to live? How can I claim to be a man in this world ever again?" (Trial by Silence 6)

Fertility, sexual prowess, and the capacity to carry on a family line are all essential components of masculinity in the rural patriarchal society. Being impotent means losing one's social standing as a male in addition to not having children. But his sense of intimacy is drastically changed by despair. Kali turns his anguish outside because he is unable to express how humiliated and emasculated he feels. It seals his retreat into silence by substituting censure for communication. Ponna asks Kali why he tried to hang himself and begs him to talk to her. Kali doesn't talk out loud. Rather, he discreetly forms the word "whore" with his lips.

The lack of sound indicates that Kali's trauma has progressed to the point where speaking is no longer feasible. His body refuses to articulate the language that his intellect generates. All that's left is a silent charge that hovers between contemplation and speech. The word's psychological impact is increased by the fact that it is mouthed rather than uttered. Here, silence is suppression rather than emptiness. Because of his sadness, Kali is unable to describe his suffering; he is unable to reply to Ponna's request for connection or explain why he attempted suicide. His inner universe has shrunk to moral censure, as evidenced by the one word that appears—silently. Even still, the inability to publicly express this censure suggests severe emotional paralysis.

Murugan, then, turns quiet into a kind of terrible speaking. Kali's lips move to reveal the ferocity of his thoughts and to show that he is unable to speak. His implicit insult to

Ponna serves as both his initial and last outburst. Murugan highlights that Kali's breakdown is complete by rejecting the word sound: closeness breaks down, language fails, and silence triumphs—not as serenity, but as the final sign of psychological destruction.

Kali and Ponna had a loving and caring relationship prior to the breakup. Ponnas' mother, Vallayi, once said, "I have never seen a husband like him." "(Trial by Silence 55)

One of the most potent symbolic actions in Trial y Silence is Kali's reluctance to consume the food prepared by Ponna. Shared meals are a symbol of trust, love, and marital harmony in rural households. Kali rejects Ponna and the fundamental framework of home closeness by refusing her meals. He is unable to engage in routine caregiving activities due to his depression; food itself becomes unbearable when connected to emotional intimacy. This behavior is indicative of anhedonia, a well-known sign of depression in which people are unable to find solace or purpose in everyday tasks. Kali's hunger is emotional rather than bodily, and his refusal to eat signifies his disengagement from society.

The emotional severity of Kali's despair is exacerbated by his decision to cut off communication with Ponna. Instead than being a sign of passive apathy, silence in this situation serves as a psychological shutdown. Being silent becomes a means of self-preservation because words have the potential to reveal suffering, guilt, and dread. Murugan portrays silence as a form of both protection and punishment, keeping Kali from facing his traumawhilepunishingPonna.

The societal inability of male emotional expression is also reflected in his silence. Kali's mother encourages him to talk to Ponna and other family members in an effort to mediate the breakdown. Her intervention represents a generational notion that speech and conformity may bring societal harmony back. But Kali doesn't back down. The extent of his psychological collapse is indicated by his unwillingness to participate. He is emotionally frozen due to depression; reconciliation necessitates articulation, and articulation necessitatesfacingintolerabletruths.

Thus, Kali's silence defies social expectations as well as family authority. It is paralysis rather than stubbornness. His silence turns into a silent critique of a system that puts ancestry ahead of mental health.

Ponna's attempt to hang herself is the result of the accumulated effects of emotional seclusion, verbal abuse, and rejection. It is the terrible result of prolonged emotional neglect rather than as a sign of personal weakness. Ponna's action highlights the deadly consequences of quiet in marriage, where a lack of communication can be more harmful than open confrontation.

Ironically, the cruelty that society once imposed upon Kali is indirectly reproduced by his trauma. He becomes an agent of emotional harm instead of a victim as his despair spreads. In *A Trial by Silence*, Kali's psychiatric melancholy manifests as verbal abuse, emotional disengagement, rejection of closeness, and unwavering quiet. His change from a devoted husband to a reclusive and antagonistic person serves as an example of how untreated trauma damages relationships and perpetuates harm. Silence is a language formed by social erasure, melancholy, and humiliation rather than emptiness. The tale highlights the terrible consequences of depriving males of emotional speech in patriarchal societies through Kali.

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