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Fragmented Bodies, Forbidden Rights: Gender Equality in Murugan's *One Part Woman*

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Abstract:

Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) stresses the importance of achieving gender equality by getting rid of unfair practices that are built into social, cultural, and institutional systems. In order to disclose gender disparity; women's socio, economic, cultural hindrances in their day to day life are narrated through literary works. For instance, Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman;* is a powerful critique of patriarchal customs that keep women from being equal in a rural area of Tamil Nadu, a marginalized community that is already on the outside. This paper analyzes the role of cultural traditions, reproductive expectations, and community surveillance as instruments of patriarchal domination over women's bodies and identities. Murugan, through the character Ponna, shows the emotional, psychological, and social effects of not giving women freedom and vigor. By placing the novel in Dalit feminist perspective literary discourse, the current study shows how important marginalized literature is for reaching the goals of SDG 5. The paper contends that the novel not only illustrates gender-based oppression but also advocates for critical examination of entrenched traditions that sustain inequality which in turn helps in their eradication.

Keywords: Dalit Feminism, Gender Equality, SDG 5, Caste Patriarchy, Marginalized Literature, Perumal Murugan, Dalit Reproductive Politics

Introduction

Globally, gender inequality is still a problem, especially in underprivileged areas, communities and families where patriarchal norms and traditional practices still govern women's lives. By advancing women's rights, bodily autonomy, and social empowerment, Sustainable Development Goal 5 aims to alleviate these disparities (United Nations). In order to reveal lived realities that are frequently hidden in prevailing narratives, literature from marginalized spaces is essential.

Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* is a prominent novel of Indian regional literature that looks at how gender, tradition, and power come together. The novel is set in a

marginalized rural society and follows Ponna, a woman whose worth in society is based on her ability to have a child. Murugan depicts a society in which traditions disguise themselves as moral imperatives, bolstering male supremacy and constraining female autonomy. Thus, the paper examines how *the novel* discloses and critiques patriarchal traditions and aligns with the overarching objectives of gender equality as outlined by SDG 5.

Theodore Baskaran, prominent historian and writer opines, *the novel* is widely regarded by the academicians as a potent critique of three main areas such as reproductive politics, caste, and patriarchy. It reflects through his statement: "[Murugan's work] foregrounds the violence of silence imposed on women in the name of culture" (Baskaran 112). Likewise, feminist critics state the text reveals how patriarchy functions through social structures that normalize gendered oppression (Geetha 89). Both the perspectives unveil that women are trapped in the clutches of insidious male domination. According to studies on gender and reproduction, women's bodies are frequently regarded as communal property in traditional societies, irrespective of the caste. However, Dalit women experience gendered oppression twice than that of Non-Dalit women by Dalit men as well as Non-dalit men unlike Uppercaste women who are usually encountered by Non-Dalit men only. (Rege 56). In accordance, Gayatri Spivak's concept of the subaltern woman, demonstrates that women's voice is routinely silenced within patriarchal discourse, which echoes with Ponna's marginalization (Spivak 83). Hence, critics have also connected Murugan's writing to subaltern and Dalit literary traditions that subvert prevailing social hierarchies (Rao 134). Additionally, fewer studies specifically relate the text to global frameworks like SDG 5, even though existing scholarship concentrates on caste and cultural conflict. Thus, the research paper fills that gap by placing the book in the context of current debates about women's rights and gender equality.

The Denial of Bodily Autonomy

From a Dalit feminist perspective, *One Part Woman* systematically restricts women's freedom through caste patriarchy that governs female bodies under the guise of tradition. Ponna's freedom is not only limited in public spaces but is also denied at the most personal level, her body and reproductive abilities. Her value is assessed primarily by her capacity to conceive, illustrating the subjugation of women's autonomy to societal expectations. Murugan emphasizes this point when Ponna internalizes the blame for her childlessness, despite the lack of medical certainty, illustrating how patriarchy normalizes women's suffering (Murugan 38). Thus, the theory underscores that the bodily autonomy of marginalized women is often compromised to preserve caste hierarchy (Rege 9). In the novel, it concretes through the character Ponna. She is not allowed to define her womanhood in any other way than being a mother. Her wants, fears, and emotional needs are made unimportant, showing how women's freedom is limited to following oppressive rules.

On top of that patriarchy is sustained through rigid customs that equate womanhood with motherhood. Ponna's identity is reduced to her reproductive capacity, while her emotional suffering is dismissed as personal failure rather than social injustice (Murugan

47). The pressure to conceive becomes a form of psychological violence, reinforced by gossip, ritual practices, and collective surveillance. Adding to that her mind socially conditioned her cogent thinking process, and goofy visualization of the concept called complete women through giving birth and becoming mother only.

Essentially, Murugan exposes how customs function as instruments of control rather than cultural preservation. The temple festival ritual, presented as a socially sanctioned solution to infertility, reveals the hypocrisy of patriarchal morality: while women bear the stigma, men remain socially unaccountable (Murugan 132). This imbalance directly contradicts the principles of gender equality emphasized in SDG 5, particularly the right to bodily autonomy and dignity. Consequently, the novel illustrates internalized patriarchy, as women themselves become enforcers of oppressive norms. Ponna's isolation demonstrates how the denial of choice leads to emotional alienation and loss of agency. Through realistic narration, Murugan challenges readers to question traditions that normalize inequality under the guise of faith and culture.

Patriarchy, Fragmented self, and Female Complicity

Patriarchy in the novel operates collectively. Older women encourage endurance and silence, treating suffering as responsibility. Murugan notes that advice was given "as if pain were something she had failed to bear correctly" (63). The statement demonstrates how women themselves become carriers of patriarchal values. Adding to that Paik observes that marginalized communities often reproduce patriarchy internally due to limited social power (77). In the context of Ponna's social milieu, her silence reflects structural silencing rather than personal weakness.

Thus, the main theme of *One Part Woman* is Ponna's existential quandary. She grapples with reconciling the identity society imposes upon her with her own. Murugan illustrates her increasing alienation as she begins to see herself as a "deficient" woman rather than an individual. Her internal monologue, where she constantly questions her worth and place in the community, demonstrates this fragmentation (Murugan 52).

The author crafts a deeply unsettling narrative about how reproductive expectation becomes a mechanism of patriarchal control. The childless protagonist, Ponna, is subjected to relentless scrutiny, as her worth within marriage and community is measured solely by her capacity to bear a child. Though infertility is medically ambiguous, it is culturally assigned to the woman, revealing how patriarchal societies naturalize female blame. Ponna's body becomes a contested terrain governed by kinship anxiety, caste pride, and ritual prescription. This erasure of bodily autonomy reflects what Simone de Beauvoir theorizes in *The Second Sex*: woman is reduced to biological function, defined through maternity rather than individuality. Murugan's rural setting intensifies this condition, where lineage purity and social honor override personal agency. Ponna's silence is not passive acceptance but the symptom of systemic containment; she is gradually alienated from her own desires, fragmented between internal selfhood and externally imposed identity.

To exemplify, the ritual at the *Ardhanareeswarar* temple festival, which permits anonymous intercourse for conception, dramatizes the commodification of female sexuality. Though culturally sanctified, the ritual operates as reproductive coercion. Ponna's participation is framed as communal necessity rather than autonomous choice. Her psychological rupture mirrors the dystopian reproductive politics of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, where women's bodies are appropriated for state survival. Similarly, in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, motherhood is entangled with trauma, ownership, and the haunting legacy of slavery; demonstrating how reproductive capacity can become a site of violence rather than empowerment. In the South Asian context, Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* also portrays fertility as both survival and burden within agrarian patriarchy. These texts collectively reveal that motherhood, when stripped of consent, produces fragmentation rather than fulfillment.

Tersely, the title *One Part Woman* itself denotatively reflects incompleteness. It is a metaphor imposed upon Ponna by societal standards that equate womanhood with maternity. Her identity is halved, reduced to reproductive potential. This fragmentation resonates with Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, where social expectations fracture female subjectivity into competing selves. Likewise, Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* interrogates the irony embedded in glorifying maternity while exploiting women's labor and emotions. Across these works, the denial of bodily autonomy leads to psychic division: women become estranged from their own bodies, caught between compliance and resistance.

Thus, Murugan's novel ultimately exposes how reproductive ideology sustains patriarchal continuity under the guise of tradition. By portraying the devastating consequences of stigma, Murugan aligns with contemporary feminist critiques articulated by Silvia Federici, who argues that control over women's reproductive labor has historically underpinned social and economic systems. The tragedy in *One Part Woman* is not infertility itself but the communal insistence that a woman without a child is incomplete. In denying Ponna sovereignty over her body, society fractures her sense of self, transforming intimacy into surveillance and ritual into coercion. The novel thus stands as a profound indictment of reproductive patriarchy and a compelling literary intervention in debates on bodily autonomy.

Fundamentally, Dalit feminism asserts that the interlocking structures of gender oppression and caste shape the identities of marginalized women (Guru 254). Thus, Ponna's crisis is a result of social factors rather than a singular existential problem. She becomes emotionally and socially invisible as a result of her disregard for reproductive norms. Spivak's assertion that the subjectivity of the subaltern woman is methodically erased is supported by the novel's depiction of how caste society only allows women visibility when they conform to assigned roles (Spivak 287).

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Reproductive Politics and Motherhood

Murugan exposes social customs as powerful mechanisms of patriarchal and caste control rather than neutral cultural practices. Rituals surrounding fertility, temple worship, and community gossip function as disciplinary tools that police women's behavior. The much-discussed chariot festival ritual exemplifies this contradiction: while it appears to offer a solution to infertility, it ultimately reinforces patriarchal authority by placing the moral burden entirely on women (Murugan 128–130).

From a Dalit feminist view, such customs sustain caste endogamy and male dominance while disguising exploitation as tradition (Rege 14). Women are expected to participate silently, regardless of emotional or psychological cost. Ponna's distress during these rituals illustrates how customs deny consent and normalize coercion, exposing the gendered hypocrisy embedded in caste morality.

Adding to that Reproductive pressure culminates in symbolic violence. Ponna's body carries caste honour and masculine pride, reducing her humanity. Murugan describes her as feeling "emptied of everything that made her human" (145). This moment reveals the devastating impact of reproductive injustice. Hence, Dalit feminism frames this as a denial of reproductive justice, freedom, dignity, and choice (Rege 18). Murugan's narrative exposes how caste patriarchy sacrifices women's well-being to preserve social order.

United Nations' United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) seeks to "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls" (United Nations). While policy frameworks emphasize legal rights, education, and economic participation, deeply entrenched social norms continue to undermine gender justice, particularly through the cultural construction of motherhood as a woman's primary identity. Across societies, infertility or childlessness is disproportionately blamed on women, even when medical evidence establishes male-factor infertility as equally prevalent (World Health Organization). This gendered blame operates not merely as private prejudice but as a systemic form of oppression embedded in custom, religion, and kinship structures. Feminist theory has long argued that women are defined in relation to reproduction; as Simone de Beauvoir observes in *The Second Sex*, woman is historically constructed as "the womb," reduced to biological destiny rather than recognized as an autonomous subject. Such essentialism transforms motherhood from a choice into a compulsory social expectation, thereby reinforcing patriarchal control.

Globally, literary works powerfully illustrate how motherhood becomes a site of coercion and humiliation. For instance, in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, Nnu Ego's value is measured entirely through her fertility; her initial inability to conceive renders her socially worthless, exposing the cruel paradox embedded in the title itself. Motherhood, far from being a source of fulfillment, becomes a structure of sacrifice and erasure. Similarly, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* dramatizes a dystopian regime in which women's

bodies are reduced to reproductive instruments. Infertility is blamed on women, while male sterility remains unacknowledged; mirroring real-world patriarchal denial. Atwood's fictional Republic of Gilead exaggerates but does not invent this logic; rather, it reveals the latent violence within reproductive nationalism and religious fundamentalism. Both texts expose how the cultural sanctification of motherhood simultaneously glorifies and imprisons women.

In the Indian context, literary narratives further reveal how stigma surrounding infertility intersects with caste, class, and economic dependency. Bama's *Karukku* highlights the layered oppression faced by Dalit women whose bodies are policed not only by patriarchy but also by caste hierarchy. Social stigma becomes an instrument of collective discipline. Likewise, Baby Halder's memoir *A Life Less Ordinary* demonstrates how reproductive expectations intensify women's vulnerability within abusive marriages and economic precarity. Feminist political economists such as Silvia Federici argue that capitalism depends upon the unpaid reproductive labor of women, naturalizing motherhood while refusing to recognize it as labor. Thus, the social compulsion toward motherhood is not merely cultural but economic: it sustains both patriarchal lineage and capitalist reproduction.

The World Health Organization confirms that infertility affects men and women in roughly equal measure globally (World Health Organization). Yet cultural narratives overwhelmingly attribute the "failure" of reproduction to women. This asymmetrical blame sustains domestic violence, abandonment, forced remarriage, and psychological trauma. UN Women reports that discriminatory gender norms remain a major barrier to achieving SDG 5, particularly where women's social worth is tied to marriage and childbirth (UN Women). The persistence of such norms reveals that policy reform alone cannot dismantle oppression; transformation must also occur at the level of narrative and representation. Thus, literature plays a crucial role in this process by challenging hegemonic myths and restoring women's subjectivity beyond biological reproduction.

Achieving SDG 5, therefore, requires confronting the ideological construction of motherhood as destiny. It demands a shift from viewing women primarily as reproducers of the nation or family in recognizing them as rights-bearing individuals with agency over their bodies. Feminist literature, theory, and policy discourse converge in exposing how stigma operates as a subtle yet devastating mechanism of control. By interrogating imposed customs and redistributing reproductive accountability, societies can move toward substantive gender equality. Hence, Until motherhood becomes a choice rather than a compulsory measure of womanhood, SDG 5 will remain an aspirational goal rather than a lived reality.

Conclusion

Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* explores gender inequality among oppressed communities, highlighting the struggles and resilience of women. The narrative reflects on societal norms and the impact of patriarchy, emphasizing the need for change. By examining these themes, the novel aligns with sustainable development goals, advocating for justice and

equality. Through its portrayal of characters illustrate the intersection of gender and social issues, urging readers to reconsider their perspectives. Ultimately, Murugan's work serves as a powerful commentary on the importance of gender equity in achieving broader societal progress. Thus, the text stands as a powerful example of marginalized literature that exposes the deep-rooted customs and patriarchal structures suppressing female equality. By portraying the lived experiences of Ponna, the novel critiques a social order that denies women autonomy, voice, and dignity. When examined through the lens of SDG 5, the text underscores the urgency of dismantling discriminatory traditions and re-evaluating cultural practices that perpetuate gender injustice. Thus, the study affirms that literature plays a crucial role in advancing gender equality by fostering awareness, empathy, and critical reflection. Hence, the text not only documents oppression but also serves as a call for social reform aligned with global efforts to achieve gender equity and justice.

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