

# DIFFERENT COUNTRY, DIFFERENT CULTURE, BUT SAME SOCIAL EXPECTATION: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF PERUMAL MURUGAN'S *ONE PART WOMAN* AND AYÒBÁMI ADÉBÁYÒ'S *STAY WITH ME*

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**Abstract:** Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* deftly interweaves many complex emotions such as love, marriage, intimacy, duty, ritual, superstition, infertility, sexuality and betrayal to tell the tale of a rural couple. Ponna and Kali is the victim of Indian society. On the other hand Ayòbámi Adébáyò's *Stay With Me* deals with almost the same questions in Nigerian society. Yejide and Akin suffer in the same manner. Though the culture is different but the beliefs, traditions and superstitions are same at different levels. Both novels add a new perspective to the still taboo subject of conception, and explore the intricacies of parenthood as well as the pressures of tradition and stigma. Both are breathtaking and tragic books about marriage, family, and the lengths one will go to bring a child into this world.

**Keyword:** Superstition, infertility, sexuality, heterosexuality, polygamy, masculinity, femininity, barrenness.

Perumal Murugan is the star of contemporary Tamil literature an award-winning writer, poet and scholar. His best-known work, *One Part Woman*, was shortlisted for the Crossword Award and won the prestigious ILF Samanvay Bhasha Samman in 2015.

The novel is named after deity Madhorubagan reigning in Tiruchengode. Like the Greek god Hermophroditus, one half of the body of Madhorubagan is female and the other half is male. Like the Greek god Hermophroditus, Madhorubagan is also considered a symbol of desire, and fertility. Set in 1930s the novel is based on the popular myth that worshipping this deity would endow childless couple with an offspring.

Ayòbámi Adébáyò born in 1988 in Lagos is a Nigerian writer. She holds BA and MA degrees in Literature in English from Obafemi Awolowo University, Ife. She also has another MA, in Creative Writing from the University of East Anglia where she was awarded an international bursary for creative writing. Her stories have appeared in a number of magazines and anthologies. *Stay With Me* published in 2017 is her debut novel and was shortlisted for the Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction, the Wellcome Book Prize and the 9mobile Prize for Literature. It was also long listed for the International Dylan Thomas Prize.

*Stay with me* digs deep into the emotional trauma of the characters. The novel thrums with the expectation of having an offspring, the only way in which you will be accepted as a human being by the society. Although this story is predominantly set in 1985, childbearing is still revered in the Nigerian society as the supreme validation of womanhood; a sort of prestigious accomplishment. In this culture a woman's role is seen as bearing a child for her husband and for this multiple wives are acceptable, especially if the first wife has not had a child.

While the major themes of both the novel are the experience of being childless, the guilt of not fulfilling societal obligations and the psychological impact of not getting pregnant. They force us to think is child really so important for married life or its time to demystify the motherhood.

In the evocatively written novel, Perumal Murugan deftly interweaves many complex emotions such as love, marriage, intimacy, duty, ritual, superstition, infertility, sexuality and betrayal to tell the tale of a rural couple. Protagonists Kali and Ponna, a couple madly in love with each other, remain childless for more than 12 years after marriage. During those years, they have run the gamut of prayers to various deities, vows, and penances, but to no avail. In the 6th month after marriage Ponna's mother-in-law 'She kept a watch on Ponna's menstrual cycle that month. As soon as it came to pass, she told Ponna to drink the juice of some shoots on the morning of the third day. She said forcefully, "don't eat anything else even by mistake. The juice will be bitter. Goal was to beget a child and she was ready to do anything to attain this goal." (OPW 43)

*Stay With Me* considers a patriarchal, patrilineal, heterosexual society's expectations of a married couple. It examines the pressure for couples to produce children; the value that's placed on the continuation of the bloodline. The story revolves around a Nigerian couple—Yejide and Akin, who get married after falling in love with each other at university. Yejide is almost an orphan. Her mother died and her father's other wives do not regard her with affection. Her life becomes happier after she meets Akin. Although they are situated within a polygamous society, they remain fully committed to each other and decide that they will not entertain a third party. But four years into their marriage and they have no children. They consult doctors and healers, try all manner of remedies. Desperate to have a child, hopefully a son, the couple struggle to meet the expectations of family and society.

Akin's mother, whom Yejide considers as her own mother and who was very sweet to her when she was a new bride. Moomi's warmth is replaced by hostility, and it soon becomes clear that Moomi's affection is largely dependent on Yejide's ability to "manufacture" grandchildren. Moomi tells Yejide that "Women manufacture children and if you can't you are just a man. Nobody should call you a woman."(SWM 47)

Moomi forces Akin to take a second wife. She brings home another wife Funmi for her son, saying that perhaps Yejide's womb will open up later, once there is already a child in the home.

She goes on: "We are not asking you to stand up from your place in his life; we are just saying you should shift so that someone else can sit down."(SWM48)

She is willing to do anything to please her mother-in-law, the only *Moomi* she has ever had. She gets hospital tests, and the names of doctors, pastors and herbalists.

"I had expected them to talk about my childlessness. I was armed with millions of smiles. Apologetic smiles, pity-me smiles, I-look-onto-God smiles - name all the fake smiles needed to get through an afternoon with a group of people who claim to want the best for you while poking at your open sore with a stick - and I had them ready. I was ready to listen to them tell me I must do something about my situation". (SWM 11)

Yejide is an educated woman with her own hairdressing salon business. She is smart, confident and independent, but the society she lives in isn't constructed to recognise women as such. The lack of a pregnancy is seen as her shortcoming. The novel portrays how even an educated woman might succumb to superstitions because of the unbearable pressure of bearing a child. Yejide is financially independent modern woman contrary to Ponna. But we can easily feel that both are victimized at same level.

On the other hand Ponna is illiterate village girl but she knows the humiliation of being childless. The novel traces the lives of this couple knotted in passionate love but eventually torn apart by the societal accusations and obligations. Didn't she remember the humiliation they suffered at the puberty ceremony of Chellama's daughter? The humiliation she had to suffer because of this one problem was endless. She could not even go to their own fields during the sowing season for fear that others would broach the topic.

While Ponna is happy with Kali, she sharply feels the lack of a child; especially because childlessness bars her from full participation in the communal life of the village. At various times, she cries out for a child and finally reacts in the following manner:

'I don't know what you will do and how. I want a child right away'. This was not a doll he could get immediately from the shop, was it? He tried to soothe her, but to no avail. Go somewhere and get me a child!' Ponna raged. 'I don't care even if it is from an untouchable woman. I don't care if you have to buy one for money. I don't want anyone to be able to say that this property of ours has no inheritor. Go now!' And Ponna physically pushed Kali out of the barnyard". (OPW231)

At every juncture, she is reminded of her childlessness which evokes a deep sense of frustration. 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". (OPW 8) 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. 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"(OPW116). Ponna undertakes penances with ever increasing severity to appease the gods so that she would conceive a child. But none bears fruit. Kali refuses to the repeated requests from the family members for a second marriage. His refusal partly stems from his love for Ponna and partly from the fear that if the second wife also does not conceive, people may openly mock him as barren.

Though unlike Ponna, Yejide wants to be a mother not only for others but for herself and for her own mother who died to make her live. She wants to pay homage to her mother, by being mother.

"My mother had become an obsession for me, a religion, and the very thought of referring to another woman as Mother seems sacrilegious, a betrayal of the woman who had given up her life for me to live". (SWM 45) She knows "there is no god like a mother. I had no father, no mother, and no sibling. Akin was the only person in the world who would really notice if I went missing. These days I tell myself that is why I stretched to accommodate every new level of indignity, so that I could have someone who would look for me if I went missing".(SWM 81)

For his part, Akin, a modern banker who is profoundly in love with his wife, is repulsed by the possible second wife. Yejide knows it's imperative that she get pregnant or she'll have to share her husband with a woman no matter he wants it or not. Akin will do anything to make Yejide happy. But a childless married life became an inextricable puzzle for him. He says, "Before I got married I believed love could do anything. I learned soon enough it couldn't bear the weight of four years without children. If the burden is too much and stays too long, even love bends, cracks, comes close to breaking and sometimes does break. But even when it's in a thousand pieces around your feet, that doesn't mean it's no longer, love."(SWM 21)

Kali is a simple mind farmer, passionately in love with his wife. It annoyed him why people are so much interested in his child if he is not paying much heed to it. He says, "though they might have a million things wrong with their own lives, people found great pleasure in poking and prodding other people's miseries".(OPW19)

One day a pregnant customer at Yejide's salon tells about Prophet Josiah at the top of "the Mountain of Jaw Dropping Miracles" in southwest Nigeria. She has to bring a white goat "without wound, blemish or a speck of another colour". He has instructed, it must be pulled up the mountain single-handedly by the miracle seeker. There follows some frenzied chanting, singing and dancing around the swaddled animal beneath a blazing sun. Childless Yejide is so desperate to get pregnant that she breastfeeds a goat. She soon believes she's pregnant, despite doctors' insistence that there is no baby. As Yejide relates, "the goat appeared to be a newborn and I believed". (SWM 52)

Yejide is terrified that Funmi will replace her, develops a false pregnancy. Akin is worried about his wife that she may lose her mental equilibrium develops a bold plan to save their family. Though, he later grieves for it which turns everything as: "All the mess of love and life that only shows up as you go along." For Akin having a son meant he was a man, for Yejide, having a child meant fulfilling the role she was expected to fulfil. Yejide knows the only way to save her marriage is to get pregnant, which, finally, she does, but at a cost far greater than she could have dared to imagine. *Stay With Me* asks how much we can sacrifice for the sake of family.

On the other hand Ponna climbs the Varadikkal, barren woman's rock, on the hill of Thiruchengodu. The couple 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" (OPW 23). Ponna, with a lump in her throat states that "seeking a life, we have pawned our lives" (OPW 56). But these efforts do not bear fruit. Meanwhile, both endure, in their own way, an endless stream of taunts and insinuations from everyone around them.

Kali's mother tells him that his family is cursed by Devatha, a ferocious female deity in the jungle, for a past crime against a young girl, and that the males in his family are doomed to remain childless; if a child is born to them, it will be short-lived. To appease the anger of this Devatha, the yearning couple makes offerings 'of new clothes and pray to her'. 'Gods cannot be angry with people for too long' is what the grandmother says. "Kali visited the shrine whenever he was on the hillside...He felt the curse of the tribal girl would have been lifted after his diligent efforts at appeasing her anger. Ponna too was full of hope after praying to Devatha. God please fill my womb at least this month" (OPW37).

Kali and Ponna's efforts to conceive a child have been in vain. Hounded by the taunts and insinuations of others, all their hopes come to converge on the chariot festival in the temple of Ardhanareeswara, the half-female god. Everything hinges on the one night when rules are relaxed and consensual union between any man and woman is sanctioned. Childless woman is allowed to have sex with a male stranger of her choice, who was considered an incarnation of god. If the woman got pregnant, the child was considered a gift from god and accepted as such by the family, including her husband. This night could end the couple's suffering and humiliation. But it will also put their marriage to the ultimate test.

"What is there to think about? This is God's work. You are going to be with whoever appears as god for you.... Ponna, this is a tradition that has been going on for ages. Don't worry about anything, just think of God" (OPW136).

Ponna's mother and mother-in-law, in the hope that it is Kali who is the cause of their infertility, suggest the solution of sending her to participate. The resulting anxieties and attendant manipulations challenge the marriage, and alter its course. He is not ready for this and convinced that women are terrible creatures. Mother tells the son, 'Send your wife to another man.' The other mother is ready to take her own daughter to it. And Ponna says, 'I will, if you are fine with it.' No one seemed to have even an iota of hesitation anywhere. He, on the other hand, was still hesitant to talk about those long-gone days when he had been to the fourteenth day of the festival. He thinks, "While a man felt so shy about these matters, look at these women! What they dared to do! If someone told them that the only way to have a child was to drop a rock on his head while he slept, would Ponna be ready to do that too? These thoughts drained his trust in her. Falseness entered in his sweet words to her. His embrace was no longer wholehearted. There was no softness when he made love to her, not the usual generosity that let him include her in its sway. He came to be possessed by a fury for revenge, a desire to pound her

violently and tear her apart” (OPW 96). Ponna can go to any extremes to get her unfulfilled maternal instincts fulfilled. She goes to the fair to put her loyalty, honor 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. 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. This night can put an end to all the humiliation and constant grief. But this also might put a big question mark on the sustenance of their marriage. The story is left open ended for the readers to draw their own conclusions.

Both Kali and Akin are not much concerned that their lineage would continue. They are caring and affectionate son and also passionately in love with their wives. Moreover, they clearly do not think that there is any need to priorities fatherhood more than emotions. But both are victims of hegemonic society for which the desire of the individual is meaningless over his duties towards his family and community.

Kali and Akin being pressured try every method to ensure that they have an heir. Kali’s brother-in-law and best friend, Muthu, is attempting to convince Kali to give permission to Muthu to take Ponna so that she can participate in the festivities at the Ardhanareeswara temple. Muthu tries to convince Kali to accept a proposal which has social sanction. He says that child would belong not just to Kali and Ponna but to the entire family. By accepting the proposal, Kali would not only gain the status of fatherhood but will also fulfill his societal duty.

While Akin himself does convince his younger brother Dotun to have sex with his wife Yejide so that he can get a child. Even Akin’s thoughts are the same when he convinces his brother. If Yejide conceives, he would both get rid of the dreadful label of infertility. They would find true happiness, no matter what had to be sacrificed to achieve that goal. It's easy to blind ourselves to reality and fool ourselves into seeing what we want to see. As Yejide says, “sometimes faith is easier than doubt.” Love is complicated. Sometimes problems are too big to overcome and love just isn’t enough. The constant pressure to measure up to society’s ideals makes honesty and open communication very difficult and prevent this couple to adopt adequate path.

The marriage of the couples, Kali-Ponna and Akin-Yejide is a battle within which tradition threatens the couple's own intimacy. Both the novels deal with a number of themes—barrenness, betrayal, the meanings of masculinity and femininity, societal pressure on couples to have children after marriage, and the limits and possibilities of marital love.

These two books provide the clear picture of how couples are subjected to criticism and humiliation in society if they fail to conceive a child. The woman is called barren and the man impotent. Both novels add a new perspective to the still taboo subject of conception, and explore the intricacies of parenthood as well as the pressures of tradition and stigma. Both are breathtaking and tragic books about marriage, family, and the lengths one will go to bring a child into this world.

Though the culture is different but the beliefs, traditions and superstitions are same at different levels. Both the novels leave us with this important message: children is important for us, they make our life beautiful, but our desire for them must not be so unchecked that it ends up frustrating our freedoms, eroding our sense of worth and damaging our existing relationships.

### Primary Source:

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