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COUNTERACTING THE NORMAL; THE CARNIVALESQUE IN PERUMAL MURUGAN'S *ONE PART WOMAN*

Aswathy G Nath

Independent Scholar

ABSTRACT

Perumal Murugan, the contemporary Indian writer, has introduced new facets to the literary world through his novels, short stories, and poems. His writings are famous for portraying the social issues of the common man. Through his novels he unfolds the age-old traditions of perspectives in the Tamil literary milieu. The present paper is an analysis and explanation of Bakhtin's concepts of Carnivalism and grotesque realism in Murugan's *One Part Woman*. *One Part Woman*, the English translation of Murugan's iconoclastic novel *Madhorubhagan*, is set on the outskirts of Tamilnadu. It narrates the story of a childless agrarian couple Kali and Ponna. They perform some rituals based on superstition at the Chariot Festival of their native temple, which later destroys their marriage. Festival/Carnival is a season of merry making without limitations. Here society subverts the social norms which govern gender relations at least temporarily. They counteract the normal, the social hierarchies are dissolved, and the sacred and the profane are mixed.

KEYWORDS: Perumal Murugan, Carnivalism, Bakhtin, Superstitions, Rules, Family.

INTRODUCTION

Perumal Murugan, the reputed Tamil writer, scholar and literary chronicler, was born into a family of marginal farmers in the village near Tiruchengode. Murugan's writing career started at a very early age. His themes were primarily about the region and community of his origin and real life experiences. His adherence to Marxian ideologies made him write about common people and their surroundings. Murugan has written ten novels, five collections of short stories, and four anthologies of poetry. Among his ten novels five are translated into English. Most of his novels and short stories evoke the sense and sound of peasant life in Kongunadu, western Tamil Nadu. His stories were well received, and established him as a path-breaker of Modern Tamil literary milieu. Perumal Murugan's first novel *Eru Veyil* translated into English as *Rising Heat*, sketches the problems faced by a peasant youth torn apart by the pressures of urbanisation. His novel *Koolamadari* is translated as *Seasons of Palm*, is widely considered as his masterpiece. The novel narrates the adventures and sorrows of Kooliyan, a pre-teen drover boy from Chakkili caste bound to work in a Gounder household. Murugan is not a Dalit but his fictions mirror the Dalit genre. Through his fictions he

depicts the everyday brutality of caste society in relentless detail. And he writes as a critical insider being from a dominant caste. His novel *Pookuzhi*, which is translated into English as *Pyre* is a perfect exemplification of Dalit theme. It tells the deep love story of Saroja, a girl from the city, and Kumaresan, a poor village man. They get married and elope to the Kumaresan's village, where they face many problems due to their different castes. The novel also shows us the wild mind of humans, which is projected in honour killings, otherwise known as shame killings.

ONE PART WOMAN: AN OVERVIEW

Murugan's most popular and powerful novel is *Madhorubhagan*, translated into English as *One Part Woman* by Aniruddhan Vasudevan. The novel portrays the conventions which once existed in Tamil Nadu. The story moves through the life of an agrarian couple of Tiruchengode. Kaliyannan; otherwise, Kali is a born farmer and his wife Ponna, a caring and dutiful lady. The only crisis in their relationship is the absence of a child. The couple perform countless acts of penance, entreating various deities, but everything becomes invalid. Being a childless couple, they were mocked by everyone from society. In the view of Kali's grandmother and other members of the patriarchal society, especially the woman flocks, the impotency is because of the curses of gods and goddesses. So the elders advise them to practice several rituals. And they started offering it to countless deities. But no god seemed to pay any heed. Here Murugan describes the story in relation to the Tiruchengode temple. There are many idols in Tiruchengode Hill; each one is capable of giving a specific boon. One among them is the *Ardhanareeswarar*, an idol of Shiva who has given the left part of his body to his consort Parvathi. It is said that this is the only place where Shiva is sacralised in this mythical form. On a particular evening of the annual Chariot Festival in the temple of *Ardhanareeswarar*, childless women would come alone to the area alive with festival revelries. Each woman is free to couple with a male stranger of her choice, who is 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. Life of Kali and Ponna went jovial until his mother came up with the suggestion which both families took up jointly. They planned to send Ponna to the Chariot Festival without Kali's permission. The tradition of seeking impregnation by an anonymous male in the name of god seems to have died out decades ago. Kali and Ponna must have been among its last victims. It also points its fingers to a similar contraption of a highly patriarchal society. The novel concludes when Kali realizes that she has gone to the Chariot Festival without his permission. The novel lays bare with unsparing clarity how a relationship is caught between the dictates of social and personal anxieties.

SUBVERTING THE NORMS IN ONE PART WOMAN

Carnavalesque is a term developed by Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, the Russian philosopher, literary critic, and semiotician. It relates to the medieval idea of carnival held in the sub-deacons of the cathedral. In a Carnival people were temporarily excused for their usual behavioural expectations. All layers of merriment were allowed in a Carnival except violence. *One Part Woman* is an archetype of Bakhtin's concept of Carnavalesque. It also speaks to the idea of grotesque realism. Bakhtin employs four categories of Carnivalistic senses and some elements are evident in this novel.

In the first part of the novel, Murugan portrays a society which is steeped in religious beliefs. The novel opens with a brief description of the Gounder community. The Gounders are a group of farming people in the interior part of Tamil Nadu. According to the perspectives of the Gounder community, the lack of male heirs for their family property is a great curse. The adult life of a Gounder male is meaningless if there is no son to inherit the fruit of his hard work. As a result childlessness is brutally stigmatised in the community. Childlessness created crucial problems in the life of Kali and Ponna. Like all other females, she too is bound by patriarchal norms. The patriarchy always questioned her baroness directly and indirectly. Also, the community discretely

forbids Ponna from participating in the harvesting and sowing festival, fearing that she might jinx the next harvest. In order to overcome the baroness she is ordered to perform various rituals on the basis of religion. Here, Murugan portrays a highly superstitious society. They are blind to the truth. They are highly hardworking people and at the same time highly religious. Their religious beliefs are surrounded by myths, rituals, legends, superstitions, and certain dogmas. As part of these social dogmas they perform various rituals in front of gods and goddesses, from *pongal* to sacrifice. The veil of superstitions leads them to perform irrational and insensitive customs that will appear strange to a logical mind. Ponna- Kali's wife, is depicted here as a typical rural belle who obeys all the rules of this patriarchy as well as strange conventions. The incidents that happen to Kali and Ponna, once her seemingly barren state becomes common knowledge, illustrate this unfortunate state of affairs.

In the second part of the novel the writer goes directly into the Chariot Festival at Karattur Hill Temple. *Maadhorubaagan*, the half-female god, Mother God, One Part Woman are the other names of the deity. The lord stands in a combined form. The lord has given his half part to his consort. The right part is *Eeswaran* and the left part is *Ambal*. The Chariot Festival at *Maadhorubaagan* temple is a grand festival for the villagers. The festival lasts for eighteen days. To their strange custom, on the last night of the festival any childless married woman is allowed to couple with a male stranger who roams around the temple. The child thus born will then be known as *saami kuzhanthai* or *daivamthannapillai*. By portraying God in humans, the sacred is transformed into parody. In every human being there resides some godly elements and devilish elements. The harmony of it is human nature. We pray to the Almighty to save us from suffering and to bless us with goodness which includes good health, shelter, family life and children. But here, God only gives children to married women who were unable to conceive for some hidden reasons. And society considers them gods. This is a complete reversal of convention or reversing faith in humans based on some superstitions.

The Carnavalesque elements predominate in the last part of the novel. Without the permission of Kali, Ponna goes to the temple with her parents to engage in the ritual in order to get a child. All the rules were relaxed for a single night's ceremonial. The night bore witness to everything. Ponna partakes in the event for the sake of her family. When she reaches the temple ground, she becomes a new person. Everything was new to her. She realizes that she is free from patriarchal rules. She had a sudden desire to jump amid the crowd. She wanted to explode into laughter. There was nothing to stop her. She could do anything she wanted. She pulled each figure away from the crowd. She wanted to make full use of the opportunity to walk towards the new and the unknown. Hinduism proposes the notion of monogamy in the marriage system, both physically and sexually. It is the ideal form of family. But the complete opposite of monogamy happens here. Ponna practices the ritual not with her husband, but with an unfamiliar man. She completely ignores her husband in every sense. It happens only at a carnival. The unacceptable behavior or eccentric behavior is blindly accepted by society. Here society seems to be in a position which gives more importance to sexual and sensual pleasures.

The Carnavalesque concept is related to grotesque realism, sometimes known as the grotesque body, which is counterposed to the classical aesthetician of ready-made, completed beings. Here they gave more importance to the lower part of the body rather than the upper part. The upper part implies mind, reason, spirit, and the lower part to sexuality. The materialism, which includes sexuality, eating, drinking, and so on, are evident in this novel. Sexuality is expressed through Kali and Ponna. Their love-making moments without considering surroundings show this. Muthu and Mandayan are the other characters who represent the stereotypical hedonistic man who loves to drink and eat. They celebrate each moment with arrack and coconut toddy. Most of the time they forget themselves and their belongings, which is another facet of Carnavalesque.

Another major element of Carnavalesque employed in this novel is laughter; the open public mocking laughter directed towards authority. The clown creates such laughter through a play, enacted in the *Poovayi* temple.

The play is a part of a festival and the authority is society itself. Every individual in society is an authority. The clown uses filthy language to laugh at the audience. He also mocks the temporary reversal concept of humans being gods and gods being humans. The clown then wishes all married ladies to be blessed with a child, and those without husbands would be blessed with husbands, and those who do not have wives would be blessed with wives. The Carnavalesque elements such as laughter and celebrations are inculcated through the clown and the crowd.

CONCLUSION

In *One Part Woman*, Perumal Murugan seems to be making an oblique reference to the fact that the concept of boon/bane is entirely a cultural construct and the deities are seldom involved in such affairs. The narrative of such boon/bane existed around the *Maadhorubaagan* or Half-Female God who resides in the hill top of Tiruchengode temple. The certain ritual on the last day of the Chariot Festival should be strange to traditional patriarchal society. And here, Carnavalesque society closes its eyes at the unconventional customs. Sleeping with an unknown man for a child, with a still-living husband is a barbarous act by the normal mores of society. The blindness of society towards truth is evident here. The basic truth behind barrenness is the impotency of either male or female. They can overcome it only through treatments. The next solution is the adoption of a child. But society is against the two things in the case of Kali and Ponna. They are abound with gods and goddesses, and believe that gods will offer a solution to it. Thus, they perform several rituals instead of taking proactive steps towards resolving issues, even if it is a health issue. Ponna is an ideal wife, daughter, and sister as portrayed in the novel. She is forced to perform such a ritual by society. They do all these things for the sake of their individual happiness and development. The same society questioned her baroness on one side, and on the other side it relaxed the rules for doing the abnormal. It shatters all the ideas of the conventional marriage system. But at the same time society does not accept pregnant Ponna and her child after birth. The ambiguous nature of society is seen here.

Intentionally or otherwise, the novel becomes a powerful illustration of Bakhtin's concept of Carnival and Carnavalesque, which is primarily about the temporary relaxation of rules. Festivals and celebrations are always a part of happiness. Here society is at the peak of enjoyment, and reverses all the rules. Kali loses everything at this festival and he is in a state of hysteria. Through Kali and Ponna Murugan symbolizes those various human beings who went unnoticed by society in spite of being victims of ritualized superstitious acts. A society can alter its existing rules for some development, without causing any harm to the individuals. Superstitions always create complications in our lives. Illiteracy plays a huge role in furthering superstitions through generations. Perumal Murugan bravely portrays the various ways in which superstitions, conventions and myths are misused by society, eventually leading to the destruction of kinship structures. The irony is that this same society provides pockets of Carnavalesque to provide a sense of relief from these stringent norms and mores.

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