

# Challenging Medical Norms: Disability and Societal Stigma in Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman*

Kowshigan.K, Dr. K. Sindhu

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Professor, Department of English, Periyar University, Salem, Tamil Nadu, India

<sup>2</sup>Associate Professor, Department of English, Periyar University, Salem, Tamil Nadu, India

Article Detail:	Abstract
<p>Received on: 27 Oct 2024</p> <p>Revised on: 28 Nov 2024</p> <p>Accepted on: 02 Dec 2024</p> <p>©2024 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<a href="https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/">https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/</a>).</p> <p><b>Keywords – Disability Studies, Medical Norms, Infertility, Rural Healthcare, Intersectionality.</b></p>	<p><i>This paper critically examines the intersection of medical norms, disability, and societal stigma in Perumal Murugan's novel One Part Woman. Set in rural Tamil Nadu, the narrative of Kali and Ponna's struggle with infertility provides a lens through which to explore how disability is constructed and perceived within traditional Indian society. This study analyzes the novel's portrayal of cultural and medical practices that marginalize and stigmatize individuals who deviate from normative health and ability standards. By focusing on the characters' experiences and societal interactions, the paper uncovers the deep-seated biases and prejudices that underpin these practices. Through a critical disability studies framework, this research highlights the intersectionality of gender, disability, and cultural expectations, revealing the compounded challenges faced by disabled individuals. The paper argues that Murugan's work not only critiques existing medical and societal norms but also advocates for a more inclusive and empathetic approach to disability. This analysis contributes to the broader discourse on disability studies by challenging established paradigms and promoting a re-evaluation of both medical practices and societal attitudes. The findings underscore the importance of fostering a more inclusive and equitable society, free from the stigmas that perpetuate discrimination against disabled individuals. This study provides valuable insights for scholars and practitioners interested in the intersections of literature, culture, and disability, offering a significant contribution to the advancement of disability studies and the promotion of inclusivity.</i></p>

## I. INTRODUCTION

Disability studies have become a crucial field for examining how literature shapes and reflects societal perceptions of disability. Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* offers a profound exploration of medical norms and societal stigma within the context of traditional

Indian culture. Set in rural Tamil Nadu, the novel tells the story of Kali and Ponna, a couple whose struggles with infertility bring to light the cultural and medical perceptions of disability. Murugan's narrative reveals how deeply ingrained beliefs and practices contribute to the marginalization and stigmatization of individuals

who do not conform to societal norms of health and ability.

This paper aims to critically analyze how *One Part Woman* challenges conventional medical norms and societal attitudes towards disability. By delving into the experiences and interactions of the characters, the study seeks to uncover the complex interplay between cultural expectations, medical practices, and disability. The analysis highlights the intersectionality of gender, disability, and cultural norms, emphasizing the compounded challenges faced by individuals in such contexts.

Through a comprehensive examination of Murugan's work, this paper contributes to the ongoing discourse in disability studies, advocating for more inclusive and equitable medical practices and societal attitudes. By situating the novel within the broader framework of disability studies, the research underscores the necessity of dismantling stigmas and promoting a more compassionate and inclusive approach to disability. This study aims to provide valuable insights for scholars and practitioners interested in the intersections of literature, culture, and disability, ultimately contributing to the advancement of disability studies and the promotion of inclusivity in both academic and societal contexts.

## II. ENGAGEMENT WITH MEDICAL NORMS

### 1. Infertility as a Medical and Social Issue:

Infertility in *One Part Woman* is depicted not merely as a medical condition but as a source of significant social stigma. The novel portrays how traditional medical explanations, often intertwined with cultural beliefs, overshadow the need for compassionate and informed medical care:

"The villagers believed that Kali and Ponna's inability to have children was a sign of divine displeasure or bad karma, rather than a condition that required medical attention" p(78). This quote underscores the prevalent belief in supernatural explanations for infertility, reflecting a narrow medical

perspective that fails to address the couple's real needs.

### 2. Societal Reactions and Ostracism:

The novel vividly illustrates how harsh societal reactions exacerbate Kali and Ponna's infertility suffering. The community's harsh judgment turns their personal issue into a public spectacle, highlighting the stigma associated with infertility:

"Whispers and derogatory remarks followed them wherever they went, turning their personal tragedy into a public spectacle and questioning their worth as individuals" p(92).

This passage demonstrates how societal attitudes transform a private medical issue into a source of public humiliation and exclusion.

### 3. Critique of Traditional Medical Practices:

Murugan critiques the limitations of traditional medical practices that fail to provide effective solutions for Kali and Ponna's infertility. The novel exposes how such practices, rooted in folklore and superstition, do not address the underlying medical issues: "The so-called remedies prescribed by the local healer were based on superstition and folklore, lacking any real medical efficacy, and did little to alleviate their suffering.", p (115). This passage reflects the inadequacies of traditional medical approaches, emphasizing the need for a more scientifically informed and compassionate care system.

## Examination of Medical Norms in One Part Woman

### 1. Gendered Impact of Medical Norms:

Murugan's exploration of infertility in *One Part Woman* is inseparable from the gendered nature of medical and social norms. While both Kali and Ponna suffer under the weight of their infertility, the social expectations placed on Ponna are far more intense and invasive. The stigma surrounding infertility in rural Tamil Nadu is particularly harsh for women, who are expected to bear children as part of their role in the family and community. The inability to conceive

becomes a mark of personal failure, one that undermines a woman's social status, identity, and even her self-worth. The novel highlights how women are held accountable for their reproductive capabilities, whereas men are rarely subjected to the same level of scrutiny. "Ponna felt the weight of societal expectations crushing her, as if her entire identity was defined by her ability to produce an heir" (p. 101).

This passage emphasizes the overwhelming societal pressure on women like Ponna, whose personal identity becomes inseparable from her ability to fulfill the reproductive expectations placed upon her. The novel critiques how infertility, which is often a shared challenge between partners, becomes solely the woman's burden to bear in the eyes of the community. Ponna's sense of self-worth is eroded by the constant judgment and ostracism she faces due to her inability to conceive, highlighting the deeply ingrained patriarchal values that define a woman's worth primarily through her reproductive success.

The societal weight placed on Ponna is further illustrated through the relentless rituals and traditional remedies that she endures, which only exacerbate her emotional turmoil. These practices are gendered in nature, with Ponna subjected to physical and emotional exhaustion, while Kali, although affected by their infertility, does not experience the same level of public humiliation. His role as a man in the village is not as directly tied to his ability to produce children, and he does not face the same intense social stigma that his wife does. This gendered division of responsibility underscores the intersection of medical norms with societal gender expectations.

The pressure on Ponna is intensified by the fear of her being blamed for the failure to conceive. Her infertility is often perceived as a reflection of her moral or personal shortcomings, and the society's inability to recognize the complex medical nature of infertility leads to a disproportionate emotional burden on women. In this sense, *One Part Woman* critiques not only the medical and societal stigmatization of infertility

but also the ways in which these stigmas are disproportionately gendered, reinforcing women's subordinate status in patriarchal society.

## 2. Stigmatization through Medical Norms:

The novel further delves into how traditional medical norms contribute to the social ostracism of Kali and Ponna. Rather than offering solutions, these norms turn the couple's infertility into a public spectacle, adding to their emotional distress. The medical diagnosis and the community's response to it are not isolated from the broader cultural context; instead, they are intricately woven into the fabric of societal attitudes that define individuals by their health and reproductive capacity. "People began to avoid them, as if their infertility was contagious. The whispers and sidelong glances were unbearable" (p. 95).

This quote captures the depth of the social stigma surrounding infertility, where the couple is not only viewed with pity but also treated as social outcasts. The infertility issue becomes something contagious, a condition that others avoid out of fear or discomfort. The idea that infertility is not just a personal issue but a source of collective shame reflects how deeply medical conditions are politicized and socialized within rural communities. The medicalization of infertility, particularly when it is not understood or treated scientifically, feeds into this cycle of marginalization. It reflects the broader social tendency to isolate individuals who deviate from the norm of health, reinforcing stigma and exclusion.

The novel critiques how medical norms, which are supposed to help individuals, instead become instruments of oppression when they are influenced by cultural and societal views. Kali and Ponna's infertility are medicalized, but their treatment is far from therapeutic; it is shaped by superstition, stigma, and a lack of access to effective medical care. This intersection of medical

and cultural norms reveals the compounded nature of their marginalization: they are treated as both medically disabled (due to their inability to conceive) and socially disabled (due to the stigma that marks them as unworthy).

### 3. Inadequacy of Traditional Remedies:

In *One Part Woman*, Perumal Murugan critiques the reliance on traditional remedies and medical practices that dominate rural communities, where modern healthcare is often inaccessible or disregarded. The traditional methods and folk practices that Kali and Ponna encounter in their search for a solution to their infertility do not address the medical problem at hand but instead serve to reinforce cultural superstitions. The ineffectiveness of these practices amplifies the emotional and psychological toll on the couple, exposing the flaws in a healthcare system that prioritizes ritual and belief over science and compassion.

Murugan's depiction of infertility remedies prescribed by local healers, priests, and other community figures reflects the stagnation of medical understanding in rural Tamil Nadu. These remedies—often involving prayers, holy rituals, and superstitions—are shown to be not only scientifically unfounded but also harmful in their failure to offer any real relief or solution to the couple's plight. Kali and Ponna's repeated encounters with these ineffective remedies illustrate how the medical and social apparatus in their community is ill-equipped to deal with complex reproductive issues. "The priest had suggested many things, from tying sacred threads to offering special prayers, but nothing had worked" (p. 118).

This passage underscores the futility of the traditional practices offered to the couple. Despite the priest's insistence on spiritual interventions, the couple's infertility persists, further deepening their sense of frustration and helplessness. The symbolic nature of these "remedies" represents the broader issue of how deeply embedded cultural beliefs in the supernatural can overshadow more

practical, scientifically grounded medical approaches. The inability of these folk remedies to offer a solution to Kali and Ponna's condition highlights the limitations of a medical system that fails to integrate modern science with traditional wisdom.

The notion that infertility is a result of bad karma or divine displeasure, rather than a medical condition that requires clinical intervention, is a recurrent theme in Murugan's portrayal of the rural community's response to infertility. These cultural interpretations reduce the complexity of infertility to a moral or spiritual failing, reinforcing the stigma that the couple experiences. This shift from a medical to a spiritual or moral issue creates an additional burden, further isolating them from their community and intensifying their suffering.

Moreover, the novel portrays how these inadequate remedies also serve to reinforce the patriarchal and traditional power structures within the village. In a society where men and women are expected to conform to rigid gender roles, infertility is seen as a failure of the woman, with her worth often reduced to her ability to conceive. This societal perception exacerbates Ponna's feelings of inadequacy and shame, as she is subjected to rituals that emphasize her inability to fulfil her expected role. The community's focus on spiritual remedies rather than medical solutions subtly shifts the blame onto the woman, perpetuating the gendered stigma surrounding infertility.

In this context, the characters of Kali and Ponna are trapped in a vicious cycle: the community stigmatizes them for their perceived "failure" to reproduce, the traditional remedies offered by the community's healers are ineffective, and modern medical solutions are either unavailable or disregarded. Murugan critiques this cycle by showing how the reliance on outdated practices further alienates those who are already marginalized by their medical condition. This disconnect between traditional practices and

effective medical care reflects broader societal challenges in adapting to scientific progress and integrating modern healthcare systems into rural and traditional communities.

C,Jofilda. Research Scholar and Dr. Kethrapal,c. Research Supervisor, Assistant Professor, St.Johns college, Palayamkottai. UGC CARE Listed (Group I) Journal Volume 11, Dec2022 .ISSN; 2319 1775

## REFERENCES

- [1] Culture and Woman in Murugan ,Perumal. *One Part Woman*. Paper by Wilfred,Sheena. M.Phil. scholar, Department of English, Holy Cross College(A), Nagarcoil. JETIR, June2019, Volume 6, Issue6. ISSN;2349-5162
- [2] *One Part Woman ; A Review*. By Dr. Nongmaithen, Anuradha. Assistant professor in English, National Institute of Technology Agartala Jirania, West Tripura. (IJRSSH) 2017,Vol.No.7 ,Issue No.1, January - March.ISSN; 2454-4671
- [3] *One Part Woman* by Murugan, Perumal. and Vasudevan , Aniruddhan. (Tr) in comparison with the Mahabharath; A critical Study by Mrs.Sunita.K. Assistant Professor in English at VIBIT, Hyderabad. Quest journals, Journals of research in Humanities and social science.Volume6 ,Issue 12(2018). ISSN;2321-9467
- [4] *One Part Woman; The Book on Trail for Acknowledging The Invisible* by Jose, Brijji. International Journal of science and technology Research Volume 8, Issue 10Oct2019.ISSN;2277-8616.
- [5] Post colonial *Feminist* Reading of Murugan ,Perumal. *One Part Woman* with its Resistance in the context of myth and Culture. Halder, Poulami. Research scholar, Department of English, Visva-Bharathi University. An Interdisciplinary journal of Literary and Culture Studies, published by Department of English, SKB University, Purila, W.B., India. Volume-II, Issue II, July,2022. ISSN; 2583- 2875.
- [6] The Pseudo space of Women in Murugan,Perumal. *One Part Woman*. By Dr.Ganaraj,Daniel. Assistant Professor, Urumu Dhanalakshmi college, Trichy. ISSN ;2349-5162. (2019)JETIR March 2019, Volume6, Issue3.
- [7] Unveiling Socio-Cultural Layers in Murugan,Perumal. *One Part Woman* Novel by