ECOFEMINISM AND 'MAN' IN PERUMAL MURUGAN'S *ONE PART WOMAN*

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ABSTRACT

There is a significant development in 'Ecofeminism' in the present world. Ecofeminism brings in the idea of the interconnection between women and nature. Nature has always been portrayed as feminine, and thus women considered very close to nature. But it is incorrect to believe that 'man' never feels the interconnection with the environment. This idea is usually kept away from representation by the writers, because of the consensus that man is always violent and an oppressor. The present study focusses on the relation that a 'man' feels with nature, with reference to Perumal Murugan's novel One Part Woman. The plot revolves around a childless couple, Kali and Ponna, who faces all the harshness of the society. The portrayal of the male character, Kali, makes the readers feel for his continuous agonies; the society moves to the extent of questioning his manhood. Kali seeks refuge in 'nature' to feel a little joy amidst all the mental tortures, and to forget all the pains and odds in his life.

KEYWORDS: *Feminine, Nature, Environment, Ecofeminism*

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INTRODUCTION

Literature has one of the most remarkable impacts in the study of social background and context of a nation. Among the various elements constituting a society, gender issues, especially feminism, has occupied a significant position in literature since ancient times. The issue of feminism is a very broad area covering numerous concepts, amongst which 'ecofeminism' is gaining importance in recent times, mostly due to the increase in the use of science and technology parallel to the destruction of 'nature.'

Ecofeminism depicts ideas and philosophies that interlink ecology with feminism. Ecofeminists attempt to put forward the relationship between the human world and nature, to which the literary persons have added through their writings. In the notable paper entitled *Ecofeminism at the Crossroads in India: A Review*, Manisha Rao compares ecofeminism in the West with that in India as,

"A large and growing body of literature on ecofeminism in the West relates gender and environment mainly in ideological terms. In India however, growing protests against environmental destruction and struggles for survival and subsistence point to the fact that caste, class and gender issues are deeply interlinked." (Rao 124)

According to ecofeminists, there can be no liberation for women and solution to the ecological crisis within a society unless domination is removed from various relationships and the signs of dualism are erased, as destruction of 'nature' invariably leads to oppression of 'women.' According to Bronwyn James,

"Ecofeminists believe that women interact with the environment in a spiritual, nurturing and intuitive manner." (James 8)

Writers usually portray women as the ones caring for nature, ignoring the contribution of men in conserving the environment. The present paper aims at focussing on the interconnections between 'man' and 'nature' with reference to Perumal Murugan's novel *One Part Woman*. Richard Twine in his paper *Masculinity, Nature, Ecofeminism*, comments

"I feel that there is an absence of writing on the relationship between masculinity and nature..." (Twine 1)

In this paper, the researcher tries to analyse and discuss noted novelist Perumal Murugan's novel *Madhorubagan*, later translated to English with the title *One Part Woman*, and attempt to show that one of the main characters, the protagonist Kali's troubles in life are somehow being resolved through his connection with 'nature.' Of course, Kali failed to solve all of the mess in his life, but atleast for a certain period, he was able to comfort himself and leave all the agonies behind. Murugan brings out all the complexities as well as tensions that might occur in the surrounding when a couple remains childless for more than a decade of their married life. The author also portrays the culture, tradition, religious norms of the *Gounder* community residing in Tamil Nadu, himself belonging to that particular society.

Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman*

Perumal Murugan is an author, scholar, literary figure and a Professor who writes in Tamil language. He has authored six novels of which three have been translated to English. Most of his works may be classified as regional fictions that portray the peasant life of Kongunadu. It is believed by the Indian literary world that Murugan's contribution to his language, his region as well as his community is incomparable and immense.

Originally written in Tamil with the title *Madhorubagan*, the novel was published in 2010, later translated by Aniruddhan Vasudevan. It is based on a cultural practice of Ancient India, especially Hindus, known as *Niyoga*. The plot revolves around the lives of a childless couple, land-owning peasants, Kali and Ponna residing in Thiruchengode, the city of temples; the complexities and trauma they have to undergo for not having a child. The gossips and social stigma grew to such an extent that their marriage came on the verge of being broken, when Ponna expresses her desire to conceive by any means. There is a mention of the ancient Hindu Chariot festival where on the fourteenth-day consensual union between any man and woman is allowed, to which Ponna wants to go. This point portrays the pathetic condition of our society which leaves no stone unturned to set the couple apart and destroy their marriage, just for the sake of a child. They criticize the couple to that extent that the desire of having a child grows to the limit of submitting her body to a 'man' she doesn't even know, and the society accepts the union, the 'man' considered as an incarnation of God. If the lady gets pregnant, the child is also accepted with love as a gift from God.

Despite all types of penance that the couple had to undergo, Ponna failed to conceive, to which Kali's mother tells him the story of their family being cursed by a ferocious female deity, Pavatha. They even offer sacrifice at the altar of Pavatha, but all in vain. With passing time, Kali's sexual potency is being questioned and Ponna being criticised by other women using her childlessness as a subject of mockery. Ms. T. Mangayarkarasi summarizes people's judgment on Kali and Ponna as,

"In *One Part Woman*, Murugan turns an intimate, crystalline gaze on a married couple in interior Tamil Nadu. It is a gaze that lays bare the intricacies of their story, culminating in a heart-wrenching denouement that allows no room for apathy." (Mangayarkarasi 56)

Kali and 'Nature'

Cultivation and harvesting can be said as a part of Indian culture. In an agrarian country like ours, the economy and food habits depend on both. Murugan being himself from a peasant's family, presents his ideas through Kali, the male protagonist of the novel, who cultivates the land throughout the year, thus producing various crops. He also has a barnyard of his own, that he kept neat and clean, spending most of the time over there, amongst his pets and cattle. It somehow diminishes his agonies.

"Fencing it around with dried, thorny twigs, Kali had kept his barnyard very well. The fence, which sagged nowhere was strewn with creepers here and there. The thatched roof was stitched close and tight. A bullock cart could easily go in and come out. And then, of course, there was the portia tree. It had spread, arresting time in its branches. In its shade were tethered two bulls and a cow." (Vasudevan 122)

The barnyard is Kali's most intimate niche, which may be seen in the following description:

"The barnyard occupies his mind wherever he was. It was only there he felt safe. It was enough to be there and talk to the cattle." (Vasudevan 70)

Dr. M. Nazir Ali elaborates on the connection that Kali felt with the barnyard in his paper *The Human and the Non-human in Perumal Murugan's One Part Woman*,

"The barnyard that Kali maintains is an object of envy to all for its cleanliness and orderliness. The barnyard has space enough for a calf to gambol and it is Kali's second home. With the innuendoes and insinuations increasing, calling into question his potency, the barnyard becomes his sole refuge." (Ali 663)

Kali feels ecstasy amidst the natural environment prevailing in his barnyard. Along with the barnyard, the Portia tree at Ponna's courtyard is another symbol of his 'happy place' to be mentioned. A very intimate connection between Kali and the Portia tree can be seen. He feels relaxed in the 'cool shade' of it to savour moments and the gentle breeze that touches his closed eyelids. He was so attached to it that his in-laws named it 'the son-in-law's dowry.' He planted it while it was a stalk and

"Kali's mind could see the tree it would grow into one day...." (Vasudevan 2)

He always felt some sort of resemblance with the portia tree. Even Kali's in-laws felt "What the son-in-law had given them was certainly a gift!" (Vasudevan 3) as it produced as much manure as a cow did, a great positive for any farming household. In the beginning of the novel, he plucked a flower from the portia tree not being able to resist himself, but later feels sad for his act,

"The sight of the flower on the tree was more beautiful than its scent." (Vasudevan 1)

He was able to feel the pain of the tree, such level of intimacy he had with it, when some of its branches were trimmed as they had outgrown the yard, Kali felt that it looked like a 'deformed body part', "...he stood looking at the tree's wound for a while." (Vasudevan 4) The deformed body part phrase somewhat pointed towards his physical deformation of not being able to impregnate his wife, and becoming an object of ridicule and mockery. Kali was also very much attached to the land he was born into and raised. The following oft-quoted passage can be seen as the connection Kali had with his barnyard and pets.

“...the dog barks and he wakes up. If the chicken started chuckling, that was it; he could not sleep any more. So was the case with the calf’s moo....” (Vasudevan 122)

Twine’s comment “....the man who makes a concerted attempt to exit from traditional masculinity remains a rare and collectively unpoliticised figure.” (1) is applicable in Kali’s case. Kali was all happy and content with his wife Ponna inspite of the fact that she failed to provide him a child; he never backed out from asking Ponna every now and then if she was happy with him. This is a rare case in our society. Through this, Murugan has proved Twine’s comment; Kali wanted to break free with the stereotype, that too a century ago, and became the reason of ridicule. Society would have held him high if he had left Ponna and gone for another woman. This directly portrays the ‘patriarchal’ notion of societal norms, where at times even the ‘man’ has to suffer. Kali’s love for animals is vivid clear and expressive when he feels uncomfortable at the sight where “the priest slashed the rooster and let the blood flow at Devatha’s feet.” (Vasudevan 36) When societal thoughts began to impact their lives, and even Kali and Ponna’s mothers came up with the suggestion to go for *Niyoga*¹, Kali’s heart broke into pieces and he started to fall apart, yet he confined himself to nature that kept his hopes of survival alive.

“...There were a number of things Kali used to do. Now he confined himself to the barnyard. The cattle and the portia were all he needed.” (Vasudevan 127)

The barnyard worked as a living being, a friend that never left him alone both during his best and worst mental states, including all sorts of feelings, pain, joy, excitement.

“It felt like the whole barnyard was trying to contain a great excitement within it.” (Vasudevan 129)

The author himself amazed the readers with his beautiful description of nature through the eyes of Kali,

“The moon had slid slightly down the sky to the West. He did not even think about the long distance he had to walk. Lying on the cot under the portia tree, Ponna was beckoning him with outstretched arms....” (Vasudevan 234)

The tree became such a symbol of interconnectedness with Kali that he related everything with it, from his personal life to his dreams and desires.

“Even from a distance, he could see his portia tree shaped like an umbrella of shadows. The wind had died. The tree looked like darkness itself....” (Vasudevan 239)

The quoted passage presents Kali’s state of mind, when he was in the midst of indecisiveness whether to trust his wife or not. The novel is an open-ended one, and even the last line brings out the intimacy Kali felt for his portia tree. When he came to know that Ponna had cheated on him, he drank arrack and saw the cattle munching fodder under the tree.

“The branches of the portia tree had spread themselves across the sky.” (Vasudevan 240)

All of these instances clearly make the reader feel the irreplaceable intimacy between nature, in the form of tree, animals, and a ‘man.’ It adds to the thoughts of ecofeminists, who believe that only women can feel it or are the only ones close to nature, at times men may also feel the same, which remains unrepresented. The reasons behind it are various movements and societal traditions.

Richard Twine in his paper *Masculinity, Nature, Ecofeminism*, mentions of Val Plumwood—one of the noted ecofeminists in the contemporary world. He states,

"She believes what is required is an understanding of a more complex dominator identity which she terms as *master identity*. This term it can be argued allows us to think out the importance of other categories alongside gender. Just as we cannot reduce all oppressions to class, we can neither reduce all to gender." (Twine 4)

CONCLUSIONS

"Environment includes all living and non- living beings and it plays a very significant role in human civilization. We live in the environment and use the environmental resources like air, land and water to meet our needs. Development also means meeting the needs of the people. While meeting the ever-growing needs of humans, we pressurise the environment. When the pressure exceeds the carrying capacity of the environment to repair or replace itself, it creates a serious problem of environmental degradation. Therefore, there is a need to create awareness about environmental protection. Promoting environmental awareness will create a brighter future." (Michael 11)

As per the present condition of the planet, we should really be very concerned of the dangers that are approaching, the real threats to human civilisation. Breaking down all the barriers created by men, religion, class, gender, race, caste and all others, we should work together for the conservation of our home, the earth. She has been through the hottest of times as well as the coldest of times, so she would definitely survive anything that follows, but we, the human civilisation, are on the verge of being wiped out from the planet. It is high time to preserve nature. Like Kali, who found refuge and satisfaction in nature, the entire world would one day long for peace amidst nature. Science and technology might help us replace everything, but all of that will be artificial. These replacements, including food and water, might lead to severe diseases and other health issues. As the ill effects of nature's destruction have already started, it is better for humans to strictly focus on developing a sustainable world.

Note

¹ Many a time varied reasons like death and disease cause separation between the husband and wife at a young age when they are childless, so what is the way out to enable the separated man or woman to fulfill the religious duty of leaving behind a son or a daughter so that the human race not only survives but prospers and the answer to it is NIYOGA. <http://www.vedicgranth.org/misconceptions-on-vedas/misconception-6---vedas-contain-niyoga-which-means-exchanging-wives-many-muslims-use-this-misconception-to-derogate-vedas>

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