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Narratives and functional elements in showcasing culture and life in Perumal

Murugan's *One Part Woman*

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Abstract

Narratives are beautiful stories studded with an interesting sequence of events conveyed through a synchronized language. The ingrained characters of the story communicate a message effectively to reader. These narratives exclusively revolve around the background defining various aspects of human beings and their beliefs as the centrifugal force.

In general terms narratives comprise a beginning, middle and an end. The effectiveness is increased manifolds when it is told in particular situations for particular purposes. *Great Stories from Modern India* by Suresh Koli states in his Introduction "Indian literature is a vast reservoir with hundreds of authors in each language, enriching it with themes through a more conversational tone of communication, without being cowed down by any dogma or social limitations in tackling these themes more forthrightly"

In this connection, I have analyzed *One Part Woman* by Perumal Murugan an [Indian](#) author, scholar and literary chronicler who writes novels in [Tamil](#). The novel is set in South India during the British colonial period that reverberates with powerful resonance on beliefs and ingrained aspects of custom, heritage and tradition prevailing among people. It tells the story of a couple, Kali and Ponna. Their marital bliss doesn't stay longer since they remain childless. The entire chapters are studded with nature and its entirety. The day to day conversation, simplicity of village life style and nature's bounty invariably brings out the intricate connection between man and nature. Amidst these the defaulting comments and criticism people undergo for remaining childless echo the stereo typical mindset in people and their sentiments passed over to succeeding generation.

KEY WORDS:

Ingrained sentiments, Stereo typical mindset, Individuals, Age old beliefs, Customs, Traditions, Feministic perspective.

FULL PAPER:

Narratives and functional elements in showcasing culture and life in Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman*

Narratives are beautiful stories studded with an interesting sequence of events conveyed through a synchronized language. The ingrained characters communicate a message effectively to reader. These narratives exclusively revolve around the background defining various aspects of human beings and their beliefs as the centrifugal force.

In general terms narratives comprise a beginning, middle, and end. The effectiveness is increased manifolds when it is told in particular situations for particular purposes. *Great Stories from Modern India* By Suresh Koli in his Introduction speaks about the under currents of Indian Literature "Indian literature is a vast reservoir with hundreds of authors in in each language, enriching it with themes through a more conversational tone of communication, without being cowed down by any dogma or social limitations in tackling these themes more forthrightly." Perumal Murugan is a great writer who plays with words that travels along with the wavelength of readers. His narration ability reminds of Further Henry Glassie's ". . . . Stories are narratives artfully ordered to do the serious work of entertainment, pleasing their listeners in the present, then carrying them into the future with something to think about. . . . a story is a plot, surrounded by words, set in a situation, followed by functions" (1982, 39, 40).

These stories consider for want of new message according to changing times inspire intense debate over the use, meaning, and boundaries of the term. In this connection, I have analyzed *One Part Woman* by Perumal Murugan an [Indian](#) author, scholar and literary chronicler who writes novels in [Tamil](#). The novel is set in South India during the British colonial period that reverberates with powerful resonance on beliefs and ingrained aspects of custom, heritage and tradition prevailing among people. The entire chapters are studded with nature and its entirety. The day to day conversation, simplicity of village life style and nature's bounty invariably brings out the intricate connection between man and nature. Amidst these the defaulting comments and criticism that people undergo for remaining childless echo the stereo typical mindset of people and their sentiments passed over to generation .

The story is woven around a childless couple, Kali and Ponna. Their marital bliss doesn't stay longer since they are subjected to criticism for remaining childless. Towards the end, Ponna decides to listen to her mother in law telling her to attend the chariot festival, the age old custom prevailing since ages where the lady, perfectly decked will be taken to the chariot festival and a god man would bless and impregnate her. The child born out of the union would be taken as the God's gift and a heir to the family.

Murugan has authored six novels, four collections of short stories and four anthologies of poetry to his credit. Three of his novels have been translated into English: *Seasons of the Palm*, which was shortlisted for the [Kiryama Prize](#) in 2005, *Current Show* and *One Part Woman*.

The author effectively unveils the beliefs or otherwise called myths serve some social purpose. Any belief that aids to functional aspects, instill a constructive approach, worth examining. On the other, problem arises when these existential belief drive and destabilize the society. Anthropologist and folklorist Paul Radin considers myth as distinctive because of its function and implications that are determined by certain individual society members. In this connection Radin says "A myth is always explanatory. The explanatory theme often is so completely dominant that everything else becomes subordinated to it . . ." (370). Hence it is needless to say as long as belief serve to explain and encourage worldview in terms of goodness is considered to be a sign of good sport.

In this story we see Kali's mother telling her daughter in law about the annual chariot festival in celebration of the God Maadhorubaagan, who is one part woman and one part man, may provide the answer to their misery. On the eighteenth night of the festival, the festivities culminate in a carnival. On that night the rules of marriage are relaxed and consensual sex between unmarried men and women is overlooked, for all men are considered gods. Both their mothers pressurize Ponna to attend the festival which might bring their problem to an end. But sooner it drives the couple apart as much as to bring them together.

Kali's grandmother briefs the curse that runs through the family. His grandfather Sadaippan had cheated Britishers in a game they kept and won ten rupees. She tells that his cheating on them had made them heirless. Her words "We prayed to God, consulted him with flowers and bought this land with his blessing, dear one. So, nothing will happen because of that" (121). Her strong belief that nothing bad could happen to them imply the gullible mindset of ignorant people. At the same time their beliefs ensure in keeping with customs, traditions and its connectivity to family and general upkeep. These stories can construct and constrict opportunity and happiness at the same time. In this connection it is worth assessing Branislaw Malinowski, a functionalist who insisted that myths or beliefs serve as charters for social action.

The story can also be viewed as a powerful exploration of unending love strained by the expectations of the society. The ingrained beliefs prevent them from compromising at any level. The ideology of Indian feminism works on the acceptance and complaisance platform. Analyzing from this angle, the reader can clearly see Ponna's hesitation to attend the Chariot festival in the beginning. In spite of her mother and in law's coaxing her saying nothing wrong could happen in getting a child through a god man. Ponna refuse to do so. She feels that Kali will never forgive her since their marriage vows should remain sacramental. Little later she convinces herself thinking no harm could occur if she is invited by a Maadhoru baagan and child through him will be considered as a gift of God. She decides to go to the chariot festival thereby putting an end to all their misery. She looks for a god man, a perfect person who could make her dreams true. No one satisfies the image she has visualized inside her heart. At last she sees a perfect person who takes her happily. At this point the author leaves to the individual thought process of the readers. The line "She would find him in any man. She could recognize him in any one.....she decided to let him lead" (224). This open ended closure leads to many controversial ideologies. In terms of values and violating the norms of marriage life dutifully raised by many readers on this score. The concluding lines "The branches of the Portia tree had spread themselves across the sky" (240) indicates the expansive horizon and multitudinous ways people could react to given situations.

However a question unendingly arises in the readers mind, whether the decision taken by Ponna has helped her solve her current crisis. For Ponna secretly knows by heart that Kali could never take her back or accept some body's child as his. Is it society's compulsion and expectation that indirectly drove Ponna? Or the desire to enjoy the bliss of motherhood? Or the choice of individual as a separate entity matter! It is not beyond the knowledge of Ponna to think about the serious consequence that she has to undergo. In spite of this, she prepares to move ahead. Further looking down the lane, the modern scientific methodologies in conceiving a child depends on the concern of both the partners. Since marriage is a binding code where husband and wife willingly should stay complaisant and they should complement the role of an ideal mother and an ideal father to their offspring. It is necessary to cite that the Indian feminism in postmodern context implies marriage as not to outweigh the other but to stay together as fundamental necessity. It's a delicate situation to Ponna. Her expectation on motherhood blinds her thoroughly. She believes that Kali would listen to her. Kali simply refuses though he badly knew that she deserves to undergo the process of mother hood like any other woman. His rage knew no bounds once he realizes that Ponna has left him. He calls her "Whore! Have you really gone? Have you really gone despite my saying no?" (239) "All of you have gotten together and cheated me" (239) His crumbled voice implies that of an anguished soul beaten down by people whom he loved and cared for. It is one more challenge to reader to understand Kali's outburst. As though who has gone wrong? Analyzing from this angle, it seems to be a shattered dream for some and hope to other.

In this story love, emotion and time are intricately intermingled, influencing each other strongly. This calls into question on binding expectations, individual conscience and collective as a whole. When narratives like this are rendered as texts, they are bounded by so many factors, possible and impossible. Thereby, rendering readers to pliable and plausible options.

In this connection it is worth analyzing Richard Bauman summarizing on the importance of narratives as events based on situation. He explains the distinction between literary and anthropologically based notions of stories and texts: "Literary theorists occasionally look outward from the texts toward the relationship between narratives and the events they recount, whereas anthropologists tend to look in the other direction, toward the relationship between narratives and the events in which they are performed" (3). Further narration is considered to be a mode of communication . . . like all human activity, [it] is situated, its form, meaning, and functions rooted in culturally defined scenes or events – bounded segments of the flow of behavior and experience that constitute meaningful contexts for action, interpretation, and evaluation" (3-4).

The emergent situation towards the conclusion should be understood from the individual point of view. Ponna's decision seems to be a choice based. One side it is the custom of the society, caste and tradition that continues to constrict opportunity

and happiness of individuals. These various attitudes or otherwise worldview shifts and changes time to time. On the other Ponna as an individual has every right to undergo the bliss of motherhood.

Such shifts, personal and social influence and find representation in narratives. The readers expect connection and details of their journey through the characters. They relate and re relates their personal interpretations and understands world view along with these processes.

The author's interpretation may vary in a way similar to the reader or of his own. This can be taken as philanthropic gesture towards harmony and co-existence of rights bestowed on individuals by and large.

Further the process of cultural renewal in which people are involved is an important factor taken into special consideration by the author. An example of this concern is seen when Ponna decides to go ahead in seeing the god man .Other than this the author refers to such kind of age old practices for child insemination issues as existing for a long period of time. It is an agreeable fact that culture and practices are evolutionary. They can never remain static. They keep changing according to the need of the society and to people by and large.

Questions arise when there is a slight deviation from the existing standards. But one should not fail to understand that these existing standards are purely created by man given to the 'then' situations that existed. The gullible mind set of people is capitalized as norms of the society. As mentioned earlier, society is nothing but a contribution of a whole lot of individuals. Individual's desire and dream vary. They need not be the same. They alter at every level and at every walk of life.

Taken from this perspective, the author's implication on societal ways and individual's contribution should aim to lead one's life in a better way. The author intentionally choses to teach people and culture through narratives since narratives are communicated in a symbolical manner. They invite interpretation of all kinds. Interpretation in turn is evolutionary and they convey messages according to the reader's inference to look at and solidify in terms of their personal understanding and good self.

Towards the conclusion, individual beliefs, insights, ideals, values, attitudes, and codes must be studied. And this is done purely to gain insight on fundamental understanding of diverse forms of life & existence and to be passed on. In short these should be considered as a form of symbolic cultural expressions as Amar nath Prasad & Kanu priya in *Indian Writing in English: Tradition and Modernity Techniques* surmises these expressions as, "heightens the effects of the story, while helping the narrator as an effective tool in building up a proper rapport with the reader and in making an on him through indelible impressions on men and their manners" (215) The characters in this story are not types but individuals. Murugan's characters are best delineated through realms of humanism on earth, noteworthy mentioning.

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