



INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

## CULTURAL AND ECOLOGICAL INTERSECTIONS IN PERUMAL MURUGAN'S *ONE PART WOMAN*

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### Article info

Article Received:24/10/2023

Article Accepted: 29/11/2023

Published online:04/12/2023

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.11.4.133](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.11.4.133)

### Abstract

In Perumal Murugan's novel, *One Part Woman* (*Madhorubhagan* in Tamil), the theme of cultural and ecological interdependence is intricately woven into the narrative. The story is set in a rural Tamil Nadu community, and the characters' customs, traditions, and their deep connection to the land play a central role in the novel. In this novel, Perumal Murugan, skilfully, explores the complex interdependence between culture, tradition, and the environment in the rural context of Tamil Nadu. The novel raises questions about the sacrifices individuals and communities may be required to make in the face of cultural expectations, shedding light on the delicate balance between preserving traditions and adapting to changing circumstances in an ever-evolving world. This portrayal of cultural and ecological interdependence makes the novel a rich and thought-provoking work of literature.

Keywords: culture, ecology, ritual, agriculture, fertility, society, harvest

*One Part Woman* by Perumal Murugan tells the poignant story of Kali and Ponna, a married couple living in a rural village in Tamil Nadu. The novel is set in the pre-independence era, and the couple's lives are deeply entrenched in the customs and traditions of their community. The couple's life takes a dramatic turn due to their inability to conceive a child. In Tamil literature, motherhood is viewed as bestowing women's bodies with divinity and purity. The mother's body is construed as a means of asserting the purity of a lineage (Laxmi 2). In the conservative society they inhabit, the pressure to bear children is immense, as it is seen as a crucial duty for married couples. This societal expectation

weighs heavily on Kali and Ponna, leading to personal and interpersonal challenges.

The narrative unfolds against the backdrop of a festival where, according to a local custom, childless couples are allowed to participate in a ritual that might lead to conception. During this festival, known as the chariot festival, consensual relations between any man and woman are permitted. Ponna, feeling desperate to conceive, contemplates participating in the ritual despite its potential consequences. Because, "barren women are marginalized from a culture that derives purity from the ability to bear children. Hence, Ponna's angst over the inability to conceive is also because the task of proving her purity belongs to her child. Therefore,

until she gives birth, her body is considered both impure and unnatural. Through the creation of the mother metaphor, the purity and chastity of any other element, is validated.” (Laxmi 4). The decision they make has profound implications for their relationship, the community’s perception of them, and their place within the cultural and societal framework. According to Sita Raman, “Perumal Murugan’s ‘One Part Woman’ challenges our understanding of cultural traditions and their impact on individual lives. Raman contends, “The intricate portrayal of rituals forces readers to reconsider the nuanced intersections between tradition and individual autonomy” (102).

As the couple grapples with the emotional turmoil caused by their childlessness, the story delves into their individual struggles, societal judgments, and the toll the situation takes on their relationship. The novel explores themes of societal expectations, personal freedom, and the complex interplay between cultural norms and individual choices.

### **Cultural Interdependence**

In Perumal Murugan’s novel, *One Part Woman*), cultural interdependence is a central theme, highlighting the profound influence of customs, traditions, and societal expectations on the lives of the characters. The novel vividly portrays the customs and rituals of the rural Tamil community to which Kali and Ponna belong. These rituals are deeply ingrained in their lives, from agricultural ceremonies tied to the land’s fertility to rituals associated with marriage and fertility. For example, the Pongal festival, a celebration of the harvest, is a significant cultural event in the story. The cultural norms and expectations regarding marriage and parenthood are central to the characters’ lives. The societal pressure to have a child to continue the family lineage is palpable throughout the narrative. The community expects Kali and Ponna to fulfil their duty as a married couple.

The characters’ lives are closely intertwined with their extended families and the larger village community. The decisions they make are not only personal but also have implications for their families and community. Family gatherings, interactions with

neighbours, and communal events are integral to the narrative. Religious practices and beliefs are an essential part of the characters’ lives. The characters seek solace and guidance from their religious rituals and beliefs, especially in times of personal and emotional turmoil.

The cultural interdependence becomes particularly evident when Kali and Ponna face the conflict between their personal desires and the expectations of their community. Their internal struggles are exacerbated by the pressure to conform to cultural norms, creating a poignant exploration of the tension between individual desires and communal obligations. Kali’s mother conveys to him the decision to send Ponna to the eighteenth day festival to beget a godchild. It is stated, “All men are gods on this day of the festival. it is god who is giving this. it is not a problem if we keep our mind on god. . . . At the peak of the celebration all rules were relaxed, that night bore witness to that. Any consenting man and woman could have sex. Bodies would lie casually intertwined, darkness cast a mask on every face, it is in such revelry that primal being in man surfaces” (98). Towards the end of the novel, the resolution of the conflict involves a reconciliation of cultural values and personal choices. It highlights the complex process of negotiating cultural interdependence while seeking individual happiness.

Thus, the novel provides a powerful exploration of how cultural interdependence shapes the lives and decisions of its characters. It offers a window into the rich tapestry of rural Tamil culture, its customs, and the societal expectations that influence the characters’ choices and relationships. The novel ultimately raises thought-provoking questions about the role of tradition and community in individual lives.

### **Ecological Interdependence:**

While the primary focus of Perumal Murugan’s novel, *One Part Woman*, is on cultural interdependence, the narrative also subtly addresses the ecological interdependence that exists within the rural setting. The novel is set in an agrarian society, and the characters’ lives are deeply intertwined with the land. The agricultural cycles,

the fertility of the soil, and the success of harvests directly impact their well-being. The characters rely on the land for their sustenance, and their daily lives are dictated by the seasons and the fertility of the soil.

Environmental factors such as rainfall, drought, and the general climate play a significant role in the characters' livelihoods. The success or failure of crops is contingent on these natural elements, illustrating the vulnerability of the characters to the whims of nature. The characters in the novel are not isolated from nature; they coexist with animals, wildlife, and the natural surroundings. The well-being of livestock, which are crucial for the characters' agrarian lifestyle, is directly tied to the health of the environment. The cyclical nature of agricultural life is reflected in the narrative. The characters engage in rituals and practices that are attuned to the natural cycles of planting, growth, and harvest. This cyclical pattern reflects the ecological interdependence between human activities and the environment.

The novel subtly addresses the impact of changing times and modernization on the traditional ecological practices of the community. The encroachment of modern values and practices disrupts the harmonious relationship between the characters and their natural environment. The land itself becomes a symbol of fertility and life. The characters' struggles to conceive are not only personal but are also intricately linked to the fertility of the soil. The narrative weaves a metaphorical connection between the barrenness faced by Kali and Ponna and the challenges posed to the land. The novel subtly explores the harmony that exists when the community lives in sync with the ecological rhythms of the land. Simultaneously, the disruptions caused by external pressures, including societal expectations, symbolize a dissonance with the natural order.

While the primary emphasis of the novel is on the cultural aspects, the ecological interdependence is interwoven throughout the narrative, reflecting the symbiotic relationship between the characters and their natural environment. The novel invites readers to contemplate the delicate balance

between human life, cultural practices, and the ecology of the land.

#### **Intersection of Culture and Ecology:**

In this novel, the intersection of culture and ecology is vividly portrayed, illustrating how the cultural practices of the characters are intricately woven into the ecological fabric of their rural setting. The cultural practices in the novel, especially those associated with fertility rituals, are deeply intertwined with agricultural cycles. Rituals aimed at ensuring the fertility of the land often mirror the characters' desperate desire for a child, creating a symbolic connection between human fertility and the fertility of the soil. The characters' lives are deeply connected to the land. Their agricultural practices, the tilling of the soil, and the cycles of planting and harvesting are not only economic activities but are also integral to their cultural identity. The health of the land directly impacts their well-being.

The pressure from society to bear a child has broader ecological implications. The characters' attempts to conform to societal expectations impact their relationship with the land. The ecological consequences of not having an heir are intertwined with the cultural expectations of the community. The novel explores the clash between traditional cultural practices and the encroachment of modern values. The disruption caused by changing societal norms and external pressures reflects not only a cultural conflict but also poses a threat to the ecological harmony that existed in the traditional way of life.

The novel metaphorically connects the barrenness faced by the central characters with the challenges posed to the land. The struggles of Kali and Ponna to conceive are mirrored in the challenges faced by the land, symbolizing the delicate balance between human life and the ecology. Certain cultural rituals in the novel serve not only as expressions of faith but also as means of harmonizing with the environment. The Pongal ceremony, for example, is a celebration that aims at aligning human endeavours with the natural cycles of the land.

Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* masterfully portrays the intersection of culture and ecology, illustrating how the characters' cultural practices are intimately connected to the land they inhabit. The novel invites readers to reflect on the intricate relationships between human culture, traditions, and the natural environment, and how disruptions in one realm can reverberate through the other.

Thus, in the novel *One Part Woman*, Perumal Murugan masterfully weaves together the cultural and ecological elements to create a narrative where the lives of the characters are inseparable from the land they inhabit. The novel serves as a poignant exploration of the intricate web of relationships between culture, tradition, and the environment in a rural setting.

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