

The Ideals of Motherhood: A Feminist Deconstruction of Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* and Jude Anthany Joseph's *Sara's*

Anagha Sreenivas

MA Graduate, Department of English, Kristu Jayanti College, Autonomous, Bengaluru

ABSTRACT

Patriarchy has always been the driving force of societal 'rules' and expectations. Society divides people based on their colour, caste, religion, economic background, etc. Perumal Murugan and Jude Anthany Joseph tried to bring such sensitive issues to the community through their artistic contributions. *Madhorubhagan* is a 2010 Tamil novel written by Perumal Murugan and translated into English as *One Part Woman* by Aniruddhan Vasudevan in 2013. The novel explains how external forces can impact an individual's happiness through the protagonist Ponna. She is convinced by society that love is not enough to sustain a relationship. She is forced to attend the chariot festival to sleep with a stranger to conceive and maintain the lineage. *Sara's* is a 2021 Malayalam film directed by Jude Anthany Joseph. The movie pictures the active involvement of society in Sara's married life, and it ends with a note that personal space is a necessity and pregnancy should be a choice of the woman. The film bravely questions the existing norms based on motherhood. This paper is an attempt to compare and contrast the behaviours of Sara and Ponna under the light of feminist theory and to draw the psyche of these women characters by focusing on the marginalised space they have been given by the society as individuals.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Motherhood, Individual space, Marginalization.

INTRODUCTION

Films and novels have immense power to influence the thoughts of the people. Writers and film makers adopt different techniques to express and explore their ideas. They can either stand with the societal rules to avoid controversies or initiate revolutions by challenging the constructed beliefs. Even though the Indian constitution supports freedom of speech and expression, society becomes uncomfortable when it comes to sensitive topics like religion, gender, race, etc.

Perumal Murugan's novel *One Part Woman* (2010) was burnt to ashes by a group of people, claiming that the text distorted the Gounder community of Tamil Nadu. His works translated into English are *The Goat Thief*, *Seasons of Palm*, *Poonachi: Or the Story of a Black Goat*, *One Part Woman*, and *Pyre*. The English translation of *Mathorubagan* (*One Part Woman*) was done by Aniruddhan Vasudevan. The novelist used his pen to criticise the perverted aspects of society and to point out the unwanted glorification given to the concept of motherhood. The story revolves around a childless couple, Kali and Ponna, who belong to the rural area of Tamilnadu. Even though they have an understanding and loving relationship, the community always separates them based on Ponna's 'barren' state, and they expect Kali to be more responsible by remarrying a 'fertile' woman. The novel questions the idea of parenthood by forcing Ponna to have an extramarital relationship through the chariot festival at the temple of Ardhanareeswara, which is treated as a way of relaxation of sexual taboos, where stranger men are considered as the incarnations of God, and they can have consensual sex with any woman. Murugan bravely questions the hypocrisy of society through his work.

Sara's is a Malayalam movie directed by Jude Anthany Joseph, who is known for his debut film, *Ohm Shanthi Oshaana*, which won the award for best film in the 45th Kerala State Film Awards. The story shows the revolutionary journey of Sara's to a successful film director. The director has created a conflict by combining Sara's decision of living a child-free life with the maternal glorifications of society. Jude Anthony points out the involvement of the public in

one's personal space and breaks the notions of a traditional family. He used abortion as a tool to make the audience think of the space a woman should possess as an individual.

Society views motherhood as an inescapable duty of women. The abnormalising trends of community works if she fails to conceive. These two texts picture a universal issue through the lives of Ponna and Sara.

The 'Womanisation' in Society: Choice and Space

Indian mythologies and religious fables have a substantial role in fabricating contradictory views on women. Gandhari, Kunti, and Kausalya are treated as the 'great' mothers of all time, even though they are unempowered and not fully independent. The Manu smriti views that "A barren wife may be superseded in the eighth year, she whose children (all) die in the tenth, she who bears only daughters in the eleventh, but she who is quarrelsome without delay". This has been considered a legal text for a long time, and the impact of the ideas has been so deeply embedded in the communal psyche that undoing it will require a lot of effort. Ponna's suffering in *One Part Woman* is basically because of the community's traditional beliefs. The novel shows how women are being victimised by the involvement of patriarchal forces. The couple is constantly reminded of their 'lack', and Ponna is viewed as the main reason for not rectifying the lack. Perpetual comments on her role made Ponna question her 'feminine' abilities. When Ponna's husband Kali decides to sell a sterile cow to his mate Chinnapa Gounder, he indirectly mocks Ponna by saying, "that is just how some cows are. No matter what you do, they never get pregnant. If you say yes, I can fetch you one right away" (Murugan,10). Linking the infertile state with nature in a derogatory sense has become a trend in literature for years.

There is an instance in the novel when Sarasa, a friend of Ponna, sarcastically comments, "Did you get delayed in getting your daughters ready?"(65) when Ponna reached late for a function. The public enjoys treating her as a bad omen by emphasising Ponna's 'fault' for not producing a child. The treatment Ponna receives from society forced her to evade the public and the private space. "Will they let me just lie here and rot? I don't want to go anywhere. And no one needs to come here either. It is enough if they leave me alone"(66). Ponna's uncertain state can be connected with Desai's character, Sita of *In Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975). She draws Sita as a confused, isolated mother torn between the family and the community. "I think....what I'm doing is trying to escape from the madness here, escape to a place where it might be possible to be sane again"(35). Quest for oneself is painful, leading to a terrible state of mind.

One Part Woman also acts as a social criticism of rural communities founded on superstition and unwanted beliefs. The collective consciousness of the community-made Ponna realises that love is not enough to sustain her marriage. Years of abuse forced her to attend the festival to sleep with the 'God' without her husband's consent. Societal hypocrisy overlaps the love-life of Ponna and Kali by giving importance to lineage. "If a child is so important to establish oneself as a human being in this world, why shouldn't I dare to do what it takes to accomplish that, thought Ponna"(113). Society wants Ponna to conceive by any means to elevate her status from a 'barren cow' to a 'real' woman. Deshpande states that motherhood doesn't change someone to a whole new person by erasing their human complexities. "When I became a mother, I found such a discrepancy between what I was told about how mothers felt and what I felt that I was deeply disturbed. You are the same person, except for the enormous bond that suddenly appears between you and the newborn." The society Ponna lives in treats parenthood as a defining factor, but Deshpande's experience clashes with that view.

Jude Anthony Joseph's *Sara's* is a realistic movie that didn't sugar-coat the motherhood journey. The main character, Sara, is an assistant film director and is adamant about living without conceiving a child. Later she married Jeevan, who supports her choice. As the film progresses, Sara becomes pregnant due to failed contraception, and she reveals that she doesn't want to be a mother. The film shows the 'convincing' abilities of Indian families to have children by covering the thought process of two generations in the form of an argument between Sara and her mother-in-law. Using the concept of the cinematic gaze, Ritu Sen, in her article, examined the representation of Indian women as objects and subjects in contemporary Indian cinema. She put forth the idea of a feminist film genre, which can create a new perspective on women's challenges in India. The film connects with the concept of Sen by giving an independent voice to Sara. She stood up for her beliefs, questioned the necessity of parenthood, and revealed motherhood's problematic ideals. The director used abortion as a tool to provide more significance to Sara's decision. Sara's behaviour is a response to the patriarchal film thoughts. The film conveys that women can beat collective pressures and do more than childbearing.

Ann E. Kalapana presents her view on the "depiction of sex, work, and motherhood in films, which has a meaning at odds with feminist discourses". A revolutionary change happens when Sara tells "I don't want to conceive" to the world. The film is viewed as 'the other' in a conservative context, and the character's actions may not cause comfortability to

the traditional thinkers. When ‘popular’ films like *Mimicrate* the idea of a ‘complete’ woman to a mother, *Sara’s* “highlights the need of depicting bold women battling hardships into the reel” (Garima Dixit).

One Part Woman and *Sara* explores how supremacism above women links them with the concept of gender essentialism. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler states that "One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one". The collective consciousness of the society connects the ‘feminine’ traits with females and claims infertility as a burning issue. *One Part Woman* and *Sara's* show different times and the unchangeable attitude of society, where the idea of gender performativity would quickly get rejected.

CONCLUSION

Ponna and Sara, irrespective of the age gap, are the victims of societal expectations. Ponna was entrapped, and she couldn't survive the 'collective' pressure. She believed that the lack of a child makes her incomplete. Sara's ideologies are entirely different from Ponna's. As an educated woman, she knows how to live her life without depending on someone. She alone fought the battle for her happiness and grew up to a level of a survivor from the victimised state. The psyche of these women is getting affected by societal involvement differently. Ponna simply accepts her 'lack' and tries to 'fulfil' her life by adhering to the pressures. Sara takes a revolutionary turn by resisting the masses. Unlike Ponna, she threw the moral consciousness and fought for what she wanted. Society represented in these two texts never blamed Jeevan and Kali; instead, they sympathised with them for their faith to live with 'incomplete' females. Impregnating a woman is indirectly considered a masculine 'success' in a patriarchal circle, and the community blames their wives for showcasing them as ‘failures’. These two texts question females' marginalising trends and victimisation based on biological processes. Society wanted them to prove their 'female essence' by entering motherhood. The recent debates on abortion cling in between morality issues and the woman's personal space. If her choice doesn't match the public, she is thrown out from the 'feminine' definition. Individuals will get criticised if they fail to perform the constructed gender roles. The only solution for this issue is social progression by liberating ourselves. A positive development is possible if a person can think beyond religion and tradition, if someone is willing to break the existing-perverted customs and if the collective identity doesn't overlap an individual's space.

REFERENCES

- [1]. A, Aashmika. “How Motherhood Is Portrayed In Indian Literature.” *The Curious Reader*, 4 June 2020, www.thecuriousreader.in/features/motherhood-indian-literature.
- [2]. Desai, Anita. *Where Shall We Go This Summer*. 1st ed., South Asia Books, 1991.
- [3]. Dixit, Garima. “Cenima and the Dusillusioned Female Psyche- The Reel and The Real.” *VIGYA 2015 A STORY UNFOLD 1* (2015): 65-68. Print.
- [4]. Kalapan, E. Ann. “Sex, Work and Motherhood: The Impossible Triangle.” *The Journal of Sex Research- Feminist Perspective of Sexuality* 27.3 (1990): 409-425. web. 28 July 2016.
- [5]. Murugan, Perumal, and Aniruddhan Vasudevan. *One Part Woman*. Grove Press, Black Cat, 2018.
- [6]. *Sara’s*. Directed by Jude Anthany Joseph, performances by Anna Ben and Sunny Wayne, Anantha Visions, 2021.
- [7]. Sen, Ritu. “In Search of Indian Film Feminism: Theory and Praxis.” *IMPETUS Xavier’s Interdisciplinary Research Journal* 4 (2015): 125-130. Print.
- [8]. Staff, F. “Whither #NaanumPerumalMurugan? The Absence of Outrage Is as Shameful as the Self-Ban Itself.” *Firstpost*, 14 Jan. 2015, www.firstpost.com/living/whither-naanumperumal-murugan-the-absence-of-outrage-is-as-shameful-as-the-self-ban-itself-2045195.html.
- [9]. “Why Do Some Hindu Scriptures Say Sonless Women Must Be Abandoned?” *Hinduism Stack Exchange*, 14 June 2017, hinduism.stackexchange.com/questions/18920/why-do-some-hindu-scriptures-say-sonless-women-must-be-abandoned.
- [10]. “Writing From the Margin and Other Essays by Shashi Deshpande.” *Goodreads*, www.goodreads.com/book/show/124891.Writing_From_The_Margin_And_Other_Essays. Accessed 29 Dec. 2021.