One Part Woman: An Ecocritical Perspective

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Abstract

Perumal Murugan is a popular and versatile contemporary male Tamil writer and poet. One Part Woman is a novel about agrarian society and sexual passion. Madhorubhagan was translated into English by Aniruddhan Vasudevan as One Part Woman and in 2015 it was banned for its controversial content; this paper is a study of its translated version. The text focuses on young couple Kali and Ponna who are happily married but childless. The center of this research paper is to explore One Part Woman from Ecocritical perspective and its dynamics as the text proves that human beings, fauna and flora must coexist which signifies cultural identity through its immense use of symbolic representation from nature. Major themes in the novel are ancient cultural practices, humiliation, social stigma and relaxed taboos. The purpose of this paper is to explore an ecocritical perspective in One Part Woman by Perumal Murugan.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, agrarian society, nature and human sentiments

INTRODUCTION

US critic William Ruecket in 1978 is believed to have explored the term ecocriticism. The main goal of ecocriticism in literary texts is to define the place of ecology, nature, environment, landscape, and man. During 1990’s ecocriticism was witnessed as a movement. Henry David Thoreau claims in Walden that divinity was present in nature and the human soul. Perumal Murugan celebrates nature in One Part Woman giving equal spaces to nature, agriculture, mundane lifestyle and proves how important is nature to hold cultural harmony in a society.

According to Lawrence Buell “a commitment to environmentality from whatever critical vantage point” is heart of ecocriticism, which is well proved by Perumal Murugan. With The publication of Silent Spring by Rachel Carson’s, ecocriticism has been and continues to be an earth-centered approach in 1990’s. Today ecocriticism scaffolds itself as interdisciplinary school in literary studies.
In other words Ecocriticism is a wider path for cultural and literary scholars to examine the ecological crisis through intersection of the physical environment, literature and culture. Ecocriticism originated as an object called “literary ecology” (Meeker 1972, cited under General Overviews) and was later coined as an “-ism” (Rueckert 1996, cited under General Overviews). Rueckert 1996 (first published 1978) actually coined the term ‘ecocriticism,’ arguing for a way “to find the grounds upon which the two communities—the human, the natural—can coexist, cooperate, and flourish in the biosphere” (p. 107).

Ecocriticism is a criticism on environment represented in literature. India compresses variety of ecosystems which ranges from Himalayas in the north to plateaus of south and from the dynamic Sunderbans in the east to dry Thar of the West. With time, however, these ecosystems have been adversely affected due to increasing population and avarice of mankind which at present in the form of Covid-19*. Time has proved that change in tradition and culture or civilization leads to changes in the relationship of nature and human beings.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Twenty journal papers were reviewed for the research. This research paper aims to study One Part Woman in an Ecocritical Perspective. Most of the existing papers in the work of Perumal Murugan discussed about how the writer centers or foregrounds nature as a major subject on themes of own fears and longings, primordial urges and survival tactics. The research gap found is that Perumal Murugan had advocated in One Part Woman to create harmony between nature and human beings which has been addressed in the present paper.

METHODOLOGY

- Textual analysis
- Close reading of text
- Explorative and Interpretive approach

*an infectious disease caused by coronavirus

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The creator of nature and human species is believed to be neutral or one being, who by birth inserted harmony in his creations. This study tries to forecast that contemporary writer like Perumal Murugan has given an upper hand to nature signifying its importance as the writer does for his protagonists.
Ecocritical approach in One Part Woman

The term ‘ecocriticism’ first appeared in an essay ‘Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism’ by William Rueckert’s in 1978. In simple words ecocriticism is the relationship between literature and earth’s environment. Perumal Murugan in his first published work One Part Woman discusses basically about two characters Kali and Ponna he also has given equal space for elements from nature. In One Part Woman it is identified that nature and human emotions coexists. Perumal Murugan has taken a step forward to bring in togetherness and most of his texts are concern to nature.

In future Perumal Murugan would be celebrated as an important figure in Indian literature. The text begins with

‘The Portia tree was dense with foliage. If you looked closely, you could see the yellow trumpet-like flowers with their flared mouths, and the drooping, fading red ones with their inviting smiles. Portia flowers always grow more beautiful as they fade. The sight of the flower on the tree was more beautiful than its scent.’ (pp: 1 One Part Woman)

Portia tree holds great importance throughout the text, not just signifying nature but also symbolic of human emotions and support. Tree stands as a gift treasured by Kali who is son-in-law, this proves to be a change or reformation in the Indian dowry system. Portia tree is symbolic of great heritage, culture, tradition and symbolizes content family Indian system. What must be appreciated in Perumal Murugan’s work is that he has advocated for men through images from nature. Portia tree witnesses Kali’s joy, insults and sorrows. As mentioned by Henry David Thoreau ‘ Why has man rooted himself thus firmly in the earth, but that he may rise in the same proportion into the heavens above? - for the nobler plants are valued for the fruit they bear at last in the air and light, far from the ground, and are not treated like the humbler esculents, which, though they may be biennials, are cultivated only till they have perfected their root, and often cut down at top for this purpose, so that most would not know them in their flowering season’. (pp: 18 Walden)

‘Twelve years went by in a flash; the tree kept growing and spreading every year. Now ten cots could lie in its shade. It didn’t shed much, but when it did, his mother-in-law would complain, ‘this is an endless task- this sweeping, cleaning and taking care of my son-in-law’s dowry!’ His father-in-law delighted at the sight of the compost pits getting filled with the tree’s leaves. The tree gave as much manure as a cow did, and it was definitely enough for one enclosure. What the son-in-law had given them was certainly a gift! In the past two years or so, when kali did not visit, the arms of the tree stretched towards the sky. Only when a tree is small can you notice its growth. When it is bigger, it continues to grow, but imperceptibly. Kali, however, could always size up a tree. For instance, he could now see that they had trimmed a branch that had outgrown the yard and started reaching into the house. It looked like a deformed body part. But he stood looking at the tree’s wound for a while.’ (pp: 3-4 One Part Woman)
Ancient India worshipped nature in a holy form. It is noticed in the text that Gods and Goddess carried flora and fauna names such as vultures and goddess koli; koli in Tamil represent chicken. Twelve years and the tree’s growth and spreading also indicate the twelve years of trauma and stressful life by the two childless couples. ‘Each one plant a tree’ has become a huge matter of importance in most of the universities and countries in 2019-2020; here the writer highlights how planting one tree can be of great help to the surrounding area helping the cattle’s and human being. Here the writer has stressed upon the three sixty degree outlook or uses of trees as shade or shelter to productive manure. When Kali did not visit the tree the arms stretched towards the sky and when he did he gave a deep glance to its wound; with this the writer ensures the bond or how strong is the relationship between human and nature. Perumal Murugan personifies the part of the tree equal to human body parts, which also reflects Murugan’s interest in evoking sense and highlights emotion in nature.

‘Two vultures circled around in the endless expanse of the sky. They seemed motionless, their wings stretched wide without a discernible flutter. They blessed her. She held her palms together over her head and prayed.’(pp: 56 One Part Woman)

The writer has maintained complete balance in ecosystem through this writing. As readers one can notice that he has highlighted chicken – palm tree – vultures – bulls. Vultures hold an important role in Indian mythology. In Ramayana Jatayu was in the form of god which sacrificed itself in the process of saving Sita. Today vultures are under the edge of extinction we see projects like tiger project in India similarly Jatayu conservation breeding Centre in Pinjore, Haryana works to save vultures.

‘In the month of vaigasi or aadi, depending on when the rains arrived, they would sow groundnuts. There was only one plough to each field. And it took two or three days to plough a field with one. It could get tiresome. But if four or five of them got together to work on each field, not only was it fun, they could also finish ploughing each field, not only was it fun, they could also finish ploughing each field in a day. Sometimes, they would even take five ploughs at once to a field and be done in half a day. They first ploughed those fields which had loose topsoil that didn’t hold water for long. Next, it was the elevated fields with red soil. Low-lying ones were ploughed last. The order of preference was based on the soil and its moisture content. Women went to sprinkle manure water in the ploughed furrow and to lift and give seed baskets to the men.’(pp: 114 One Part Woman)

Here the writer mirrors the agricultural base of the peasants’ life and later addresses the superstitious belief set by patriarchy. Ecocriticism is when a writer addresses ecological or environmental issues through literature thus Perumal Murugan succeeds by throwing light upon agricultural process from ploughing to harvest. Usually down south in Tamilnadu people believe to sow in the month of Vaigasi or Aadi that is during rainy season. Ploughing was not an easy task either as there is procedure; firstly they till top soil the next step being elevated fields and the low lying were the last. Women were given the task of sprinkling manure because of the
belief that women create the next offspring’s as a result they perform minor task on the other hand men drop the seeds. Perumal Murugan has captured lucid process which beautifies the images of mundane life and produces a picturesque landscape.

‘Then one year, something happened. That year too, they ploughed in a specific order, working together in everyone’s fields. On the last day, they focused on Thangavel’s field. He was from Vadamankaadu. There had been no rain for five days, not even a drop. So the land was not very wet on top. As long as the soil was wet underneath, there was no big problem. So, they went ahead and sowed the seeds. Originally, her task had been to sprinkle seed-water, but Thangavel’s wife, Karuvachi, who was supposed to do it, came down with severe leg pain and couldn’t be part of the work. Sprinkling only involved walking behind whoever ploughed. But lifting the seed baskets also involved running back and forth. The seeds were all kept amassed in one corner of the filed. They would have to keep replenishing the baskets with the seeds and be ready. The moment the sprinklers signaled, the lifters would have to run carrying the baskets. If any one of them delayed, even for a bit, it would halt the work of all five ploughs. Also, they had to walk along with the sprinklers and drop the seeds evenly.

The following year, they did not include Kali in their sowing team. He worked alone in his field and Ponna did the sprinkling. They didn’t know the reason. Then they heard that Thangavel did not get a good yield the year before, and whatever he got was of poor quality.’(pp: 114-115 One Part Woman)

In the above lines it is understood that the process of ploughing took place in Thangavel’s field among which Ponna was a part of. In rural place peasants believe in good and evil times, healthy and unfit for sowing for example a married woman with children, wealth and husband is considered eligible for sowing compared to a childless and widow. As Ponna was childless Thangavel noted this to be the reason for failed crops. Which is a common belief even today but Perumal Murugan considers this to be a social and patriarchal trap as he proceeds with the text.

‘The plant I planted is flowering now, the tree I planted is bearing fruit, the calf I brought has grown and birthed many of its own, and the egg that I helped incubate has hatched a beautiful chick… There is nothing I have touched that has not flourished. Anything sowed in a dry land will go waste, no matter who helps in carrying the seeds. If you –wife and husband – had taken better care of the land, maybe it would have all grown.’(pp: 116 One Part Woman)

Here Ponna try to reform the old patriarchal norms. Ponna being the captain of ship voices against Patriarchy imposed barriers. She advocates that though being childless the plants she planted are flowering, bearing fruit. The calf she purchased was matured and gave birth. The egg that she incubated had hatched chick. All that she did never failed rather flourished. She also gave a scientific and sensible comment that nothing would grow in dry land the land that she specifies is not just the asset but also the mind and thoughts of individuals. Here writer states that
our love, emotions and family like care helps in happy results; as we care for green vegetation and environment so will be its yield.

‘If you let the hen out of the coop after it hatched ten or fifteen little chicks, then in a month all you were left with were four or five of them. That’s because crows bothered them incessantly. Eagles too. Even when the chicks grew bigger, they could not escape the claws of the large kite. It would lie concealed in the dense foliage of a tree and attack suddenly. Whenever it swooped down, it always left with a chicken held tight in its beak. It was almost impossible to save the chicken from them. But then how did Kali manage to keep so many of them alive? With a smile, Kali pointed to the two palm trees at the back of the shed. The blackbird built its nest only on palm trees with dense fronds. From the time it begins to build the nest to the time it lays its eggs, incubates them, and nourishes the little ones, no other bird can come near the tree. The male and female blackbirds would take turns guarding the nest. If another bird approached the tree, they would peck at it and chase it away. These birds might be small and fit into the palm of one’s hand, but they were courageous. They could even daringly chase away an eagle. And if you let the chicks out during this time when the blackbirds were nesting on the tree, the chicks would be safe. In this way, the blackbirds guarded the little chicks too.’ (pp: 124-125 One Part Woman)

Here Murugan has pictured the process of food chain. The text also shows how human being saves domestic birds from other wild birds with a smart procedure. Writer portrays how birds stand as a warrior to save its young ones.

‘In this respect, the blackbirds were far more intelligent than human beings’. (pp: 126 One Part Woman)

Perumal Murugan emphasizes on the intelligence of blackbirds which signify nature. The writer is straight to the point that nature is far intelligent than human beings. Kannaaya though having children fails to be a good mother in terms of their cleanliness and safety or guarding, as Ponna brushes their hair and takes care of Kannaaya’s children though she is a neibhour. Thus the writer attempts to address that nature with null sob or complaints takes complete care of itself but on the other hand human beings happen to be careless and negligent about their surroundings and offspring’s in some point of time.

‘On the other side of the Portia tree was the enclosure for goats. There weren’t too many of them, however. Just two nanny-goats; one of them had four kids. And looking at them, you could say how full of milk the goat was. The other goat was pregnant, its tummy bulging. There were also two sheep wandering about untethered. The little hut inside the enclosure was meant to keep the goats from the rain. Next to the enclosure were stacks of harvested groundnuts and corn’. (pp: 122-123 One Part Woman)

In the above lines writer appreciates the spaces provided to animals by human beings. Portia tree was not just helping human beings but also stood as a shade for goats. There seem to be clear maintenance for these animals as there is clear demarcation between nanny goats, kids, full of
milk, the pregnant ones. With this there is equal space for vegetation as the harvested grains have a separate cabin through which it is evident that nature is superior to human beings and both nature and human beings must coexist.

‘Kali was in the habit of gathering the cow dung from the floor well before the chickens got down from the tree. And only after throwing some kambu millet in front of the shed would he even let the little chicks out of the large hay basket’. (pp:123 One Part Woman)

Even the waste of animals was of great help to agrarian society. Human beings, animals and birds bond and coexist as an ecosystem. The writer foregrounds the point repeatedly; as it’s highly important to have an ecological balance.

‘The cattle and the Portia were all that he needed’. (pp:127 One Part Woman)

Kali’s comfort was cattle and tree. As mentioned by Henry David Thoreau ‘A very Agricola laborious was I to travellers bound westward through Lincoln and Wayland to nobody knows where; they sitting at their ease in gigs, with elbows on knees, and reins loosely hanging in festoons; I the home-staying, laborious native of the soil’. (pp:135 Walden)

‘He said, ‘Don’t worry, daughter-in-law. Enjoy the calf’s happiness. That is a child, too’. (pp:134 One Part Woman)

Ponna being childless mourns as the patriarchy mocks at her for being childless. For which there comes the voice of uncle stating that enjoy the happiness given by calf as it’s a child too. Writer had tried to bring human emotions, insults and how it could be suppressed or overcome by love for nature.

‘After that, everyone started visiting the spot, if only to marvel at Muthu’s genius. If there was an argument or a fight at home, he would run away and spend at least a night and a day there’. (pp:146-147 One Part Woman)

“When Kali said, ‘You should have been born a crow or a cuckoo,’ he replied, ‘I would have been much happier that way, you know’.” (pp: 147 One Part Woman)

Kali and Muthu have secret spot amidst nature. Nature is shown as a way to escape materialistic or made-up world filled with terror, trauma and down fall.

**Conclusion**

“All ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it” mentioned Cheryll Glotfelty. (Source:https://lifefortposts.wordpress.com/2010/08/29/ecocriticism/) Perumal Murugan through this text One Part Woman concentrated on nature and how nature helps human beings in coping
up with their own human emotions. Nature had been connoted and personified with human beings, human emotions and as everlasting truth. The center of this research paper is to explore One Part Women from Ecocritical perspective and its dynamics as the text proved that human beings, fauna and flora must coexist which signifies cultural identity through its immense use of symbolic representation from nature.

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