

Cultural Semantics of Perumal Murugan's novel *One Part Woman*: A Roland Barthes Mythological Exploration

¹Mr. A. Rajesh Kannan^a, Dr. P. Nainar Sumathi^b

Ph.D Research Scholar, PG and Research Department of English, National College (Autonomous) (Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli), Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu, India.

Assistant Professor, PG and Research Department of English, National College (Autonomous) (Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli), Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu, India.

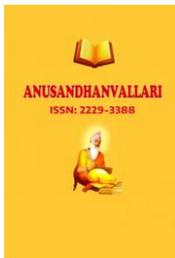
Abstract

Myths are part and parcel of Indian society. Myths and superstitions are entwined in rural India and are still being passed on to generations and followed heedlessly. Variations in myth are inevitably embedded in region and community. Whenever we come across any myth that is dealt with in any work of art, it must be subjected to the questions of rationale. To reason the majority's belief, it has to be discussed by readers worldwide. *One Part Woman*, a narrative discourse set in the Kongu region, around the town of Tiruchengode in the Salem district of Tamil Nadu, entwined with myths surrounding the issue of the childlessness of a young couple, Kali and Ponna, who wait for almost 12 years to bear a child, provides the space for the study. Despite their love and care for each other, they fail to prove it with a child. Thus, Ponna is advised to follow the myth, which was widely believed to be the ultimatum to bear a child in the given space Karatoor. The chariot festival is the thick description with which the myth is to be studied in the light of Structural Anthropology. The spectacle of such anthropological study leads us to examine, for a deeper understanding, the binary oppositions, symbolic elements, social structures, and kinship dynamics. The findings could shed light on the intricate interplay of conventional rules in modernity. This enables the reader to infer the socio-cultural context of the story, especially in the novels of Perumal Murugan, which pertain to the conflicts that arise between characters in the novels. Thus, this research paper intends to trace the conflicts convoluted with meanings and also demonstrates the ability of structural analysis to unravel the complexities of literary texts.

Key Words: Structural Anthropology, Binary Oppositions, Symbols, Myths, Kinship, Perumal Murugan

Introduction:

Humans, in general, have developed within themselves what Levi Strauss refers to as a 'deep structure' in his lecture on 'Structural Anthropology.' He argues that a common deep structure exists in cultures across the world, and they share homologous features within themselves. Levi Strauss claims that these structures persist and share traceable common traits. Everybody has to get a grip on their lives after every stroke of bad luck. Despite their control over it, one, as the characters of *One Part Woman*, has to admit to the implications of conventional social norms. The cordial connubial life of Ponna and Kali ends in adversity with their constant effort to bear a child. In India 'May you bathe in milk and bloom among sons' meaning a traditional blessing to become the mother of a child, preferably sons, where motherhood is recognised as a socially powerful role. Situations such as these, where women are accustomed to being the victims of societal implications and prejudices. These apprehensive stereotypes are maintained well in our society in the light of culture and tradition. Here is the line that shows his love for her: "You are the apple of my eye-my pearl, my treasure. How can I ever leave you?"



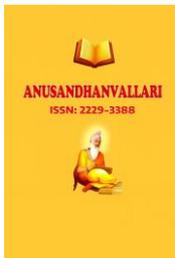
(Murugan, 2018, p. 259). His love, concern, and affection for his wife are unfathomable. Thereby, her visit to the chariot festival creates friction in his love for his wife, Ponna. Superstitious beliefs in the people are latent cultural codes that are social and culturally specific, though they seem to be lurking. It was unimaginable, and is tantamount to death, for Kali to be a possessive mate.

The narrated text, in the light of the cultural context, is embedded with cultural codes. These cultural codes are evident in the intended study of indigenous cultural practices and values, which carries scope for semiotic analysis. The researcher analyses embedded myths in the novel with the spectacle of Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*. According to Barthes, "Myths occur when society's dominant institutions imbue an image, object, or phrase with meaning. By forming these associations, the dominant social institutions create and reinforce cultural beliefs and values that are unconsciously adopted by the masses" (Barthes, 1972, p. 124). In "Mythologies," he argues that myths are a form of language, a way in which society communicates and makes sense of the world. He suggests that we can analyse these myths as we would any other form of discourse. (Barthes, 1972, p. 110)

Barthes explains that myths reshape reality, thereby emphasising certain aspects and downplaying others to convey a particular cultural message. The cultural myth surrounding fertility and childbirth continues to haunt the connubial life of Ponna and Kali. Vellivel's field was sown with the help of Ponna and Kali, but didn't yield as expected. When they were denied from the team of seed sowers for the reason of having allowed Ponna, 'a barren woman': that is how she was termed, as if she was a piece of land. People believed that they had an innate connection between them and the land, but the myth that crept in creates such a ruckus in the life of the poor pair. "Myth hides nothing and flaunts nothing: it distorts," says Barthes (86). Ponna retaliated and said that whatever she had planted that year yielded well, and the egg she incubated hatched a beautiful chick. But in vain, this myth, however, had affected her rationale and barred her from working in her field. Soon after Ponna was conceived, her mother said, "When we have a life growing here in the house, the field too should be tended to" (Murugan, 2018, p. 85).

Stories were presuming that the plight of the pair was because of the curse of a tribal girl who was ravished and strangled to death centuries ago. It was then believed that the dead girl was enshrined in the middle of the desert, and the family called it Devatha. Kali's grandmother explained the curse of Devatha, the affected girl, which meant that no girl child would ever be born in their families, and even the male children would grow up to be impotent. Women in Manipur have recently endured such violations, marking the plight of being a woman. According to Barthes, 'myth is neither a lie nor a confession: it is an inflection'. The researcher sees here an inflection of the myth; the women were ruthlessly assaulted in all the ways socially, carnally, and politically at times. The worst part is that such myths are still being created, and there seems to be no end to this. Barthes encourages readers to deconstruct myths by unravelling the abstract concepts and values they convey and examining the concrete details that make up these myths. The concrete detail behind this abstract notion of myth creation, as research sees it, is heart-wrenching, where Ponna and women like her in the past were bad-mouthed in the community. Though Myths serve as a reflection of the complexities and subtleties inherent in human experiences, they inflect, or modulate, the understanding of cultural truths, values, and archetypal concepts. They operate in a realm that transcends the binary distinctions of truth and falsehood, serving as profound expressions of human thought and experience.

The researcher here studies what structures the myth that insinuates the fidelity of women and observes that it does not pertain to Kongunadu alone, but to most patriarchal societies and their mental constraints. Another significant but inflected cultural myth is the chariot festival. What makes this novel controversial is this myth, which informs the reader that the community that Ponna belongs to follows on the 14th day of the chariot festival. Those who are not able to conceive a child with their partner are allowed to have consensual sex with any stranger

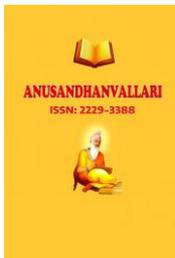


they meet at this time. They believed whoever women met on that particular night was equal to God. Ponna was made to get on such a trail, which resulted in the death of Kali. Perumal Murugan, without naming any community, denoted historical references to the people's belief in the myth. Upon deconstruction of this myth, the researcher observes that behind the abstract concept of consensual sex hides the concrete detail that it is the societal norms that inflicted the affinity between them, in various instances. Barthes rightly observes this as neither a lie nor a confession, but an inflection, in the milieu of culture.

Barthes views myth as a structured and systematic way in which society communicates its values, beliefs, and ideologies. "Myths serve to reinforce and legitimise certain cultural norms"[Mir et al., 2015, p. xx], he said. The practice of widows wearing a white saree is deeply rooted in societal and religious beliefs, and its significance can vary among different communities and regions. In India, the meaning and significance of white saree can vary depending on the context and cultural practices of different regions and communities. Here Ponna was made to wear a white saree after the death of Kali. In her community, Ponna was shunned because of her childlessness, but even after conceiving, she had to be aloof because of being a widow. As the consumer of myth must always find the naturalness which the system requires, Barthes views myths often present themselves as common sense or natural, making it difficult for individuals to question or challenge the underlying cultural assumptions. People assumed that the ladies in white were equivalent to God. When Kali's mother invited a white-sari-clad distant relative, a granny of over 100 years of age. It was believed that receiving something from her was like receiving from God. But when Ponna was wearing the saree, she insinuated, "The respect for this white sari would not go further as it would just be like that deity staying confined to the temple, I would be restricted to the house and the barnyard" (Murugan, 2018, p. 121). The researcher thereby observes the fact that even God is being excommunicated or maintained aloof in society in a conventional restraint.

The myths vary with communities in the same region, as Perumal Murugan represented every detail in the novel. When Ponna and Vengayi were discussing the societal politics around women, Vengayi said, "In our community, they say a woman should not stay widowed because a woman needs a husband to take part in all the wedding rituals and that's how we poor people do things"[Murugan, 2018, p. xx]. The researcher observed that the community serves as an alternative way to escape societal pressure, but only to some extent. This widow remarriage in the community of Vengayi was not up to the mark of praise, as someone who is already married or someone elderly in the family would marry the widow, and that is not always her own decision. Thus, women's consent has no meaning and is again an exertion of patriarchal domination over them. As Barthes rightly calls these inhumane myths are contending which often neutralise or depoliticise social and political issues by presenting them in a way that seems universally accepted and uncontroversial. Semiotics is the study of meaning-making, the philosophical theory of signs and symbols. This includes the study of signs and sign processes, indication, designation, likeness, analogy, metaphor, symbolism, signification, and communication. Roland Barthes argues "Myth as a semiological system". (Barthes, 1972, p. 110)

Barthes' work is deeply rooted in semiotics, the study of signs and symbols. He emphasises that myths can be analysed as a system of signs, each with its meaning and significance. Here in the novel, starting with the Portia tree, white saree, and land, many more symbols carry a constructed meaning, and it foresaw the events that happen later in the end. The Portia tree with which the character Kali was introduced, and in the end, Kali hanged himself in the Portia tree. It stands as the alter ego of the character Kali. Kali was represented throughout the novel as a character who always wanted to be one with nature. After his death, Ponna didn't allow others to cut the tree and chose to be under the tree. And the field that Kali worked kept on remembering him whenever she worked. The White Saree is again a symbol of Patriarchal domination. The deities Devatha and others are symbols that manifest the hysteria of women in history. The Character, Nallayan, is a symbol of a licentious man of modernity, who disregards social structure. At times, with his comments on the ignorant society, he reflects the rationale of



disregarding conventional cultural constraints. His comments on women were not about them, really, but directed at society.

We know that in a language, the sign is arbitrary: nothing compels the acoustic image tree 'naturally' to mean the concept tree: the sign, here, is unmotivated. Yet this arbitrariness has limits, which come from the associative relations of the word: the language can produce a whole fragment of the sign by analogy with other signs (for instance one says aimable in French, and not amable, by analogy with aime). The mythical signification, on the other hand, is never arbitrary; it is always in part motivated, and unavoidably contains some analogy. (Barthes, 1972, p. 124)

Conclusion:

In Perumal Murugan's novel *One Part Woman*, myths function as a dynamic vehicle for signs and symbols, weaving deeper layers of meaning into the narrative fabric. Drawing on Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, particularly his concept of myth as a "spectacle" in *Mythologies*, these myths are not mere embellishments but transformative systems that naturalise cultural ideologies. Barthes posits myth as a second-order semiological system, where the sign (a union of signifier and signified) becomes a new signifier laden with ideological connotations. In the novel, this manifests through rituals, deities, and folk beliefs surrounding infertility and desire, which subtly encode societal pressures on marriage and procreation without overt preaching.

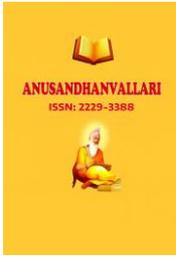
The researcher employs this lens to uncover the implicit significance embedded in human cognition, as revealed through these cultural manifestations. Myths in *One Part Woman* serve as mirrors to the subconscious, reflecting how communities process existential anxieties—like the protagonists Kali and Ponnuthayi's childlessness—via symbolic narratives. Rather than factual recountings, these myths distort and amplify reality, aligning with Barthes' view of myth as depoliticised speech that turns history into nature. For instance, the temple festival mythologises sexual liberation as a divine mandate, embedding signs of fertility (phallic symbols, rain imagery) that resonate with the characters' psyche, bypassing rational discourse.

At their core, myths encapsulate a culture's beliefs, values, and archetypal themes, functioning less as vehicles of truth and more as expressive modes. They draw from Jungian archetypes—universal patterns like the barren woman or sacred union—tailored to Tamil rural life, preserving oral traditions amid modernity's encroachment. This expressive role underscores myths as communal catharsis, allowing the novel to critique rigid customs without confrontation, much like Barthes' myths that "deform" meaning to sustain the status quo.

Crucially, myths transcend binary distinctions of truth versus falsehood, right versus wrong, or good versus bad, operating in a liminal realm of the culture's collective consciousness. In the novel, the mythical festival blurs moral lines: what society deems immoral (Ponna's potential liaison) becomes sanctified, challenging absolutist ethics. This echoes Barthes' idea of myth as an "alibi" for ideology, where contradictions dissolve into accepted spectacle. Thus, *One Part Woman* uses myths to probe the Tamil collective unconscious, revealing how symbols foster resilience, perpetuate taboos, and negotiate human desires beyond judgmental frameworks.

Works Cited:

- [1] Murugan, P. (2018). *One part woman* (A. Vasudevan, Trans.). Penguin Random House India Private.
- [2] Murugan, P. (2018). *A lonely harvest* (A. Vasudevan, Trans.). Penguin Random House India Private.
- [3] Barthes, R. (1972). *Mythologies: Selected and translated from the French by Annette Lavers* (A. Lavers, Trans.). The Noonday Press.



-
- [4] Gnanaraj, D. (2019). The Pseudo Space of Women in Perumal Murugan's One Part Woman. *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research*, 6(3), 493-496.
- [5] Boivin, J. (2018). What makes people ready to conceive? Findings from the International Fertility Decision-Making Study. *PubMed Central*, 6, 2.
- [6] Mir, R., Willmott, H., & Greenwood, M. (2015). *The Routledge companion to philosophy in organization studies*. Routledge.

A. Rajesh Kannan is currently working as an Assistant Professor in the Department of English, Bishop Heber College, Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu. He is pursuing Ph.D. degree at National College, Tiruchirappalli. His research interests include Structural Anthropology, gender studies, Indian Writing in English, Post-Colonial Literature, etc.

rkprofnt44@gmail.com