

# The Land, the Man, and the Stigma: Fertility and Fragile Manhood in One Part Woman

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## Abstract

This paper examines Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* as a powerful story that shows how rural customs and social norms can damage a man's sense of self. The book shows how a man's sense of self-worth slowly crumbles in a society where being a good parent and being accepted by others are the most important things for a man to do. This is seen through the eyes of Kali, a man torn between his love for his wife and the heavy burden of social norms. This study looks at how men feel, especially those who feel proud and purposeful because they can have children, rather than just the experiences of women or the ceremonies that happen around conception. The rural environment serves as a living force that observes, nourishes, and occasionally condemns in Murugan's work, rather than only serving as a passive backdrop. Animals, land, and silence are all extensions of Kali's inner world, reflecting the emotional void created by social criticism. This essay argues that infertility in the book serves as a covert form of psychological violence that affects a person's sense of self, interpersonal relationships, and social standing. The approach emphasises how cultural continuity and environmental embeddedness frequently shape personal suffering by looking at the intersections of masculinity, ecological symbolism, and traditional systems. A terrible stillness rather than rage is left behind as *One Part Woman* ends with a nuanced but potent critique of how inherited social and spiritual institutions can erode male identity.

**Keywords:** Masculinity, ecological symbolism, infertility, spiritual institutions, interpersonal relationships, environmental embeddedness, gender roles.

## Introduction

*One Part Woman* by Perumal Murugan is a fantastic illustration of a tale with deep local roots but resonance that transcends the place. The novel uses the customs, traditions, and rituals of rural Tamil Nadu to tell a story that is both socially and personally significant. It centres on Kali and Ponna, a couple whose marriage begins to deteriorate as a result of the stress of infertility and the ongoing pressure of social criticism. Their struggle is not driven by a loss of love, but rather by the oppressive expectations that tradition and surveillance have placed on them. Murugan not only writes about rural life but also the emotional toll of living in a culture where identity is defined by conformity.

Kali presents masculinity in a nuanced and complex way. He is neither an oppressor nor a heartless husband. On the other hand, he is polite, considerate, and loyal to his wife. But as the years pass without a child, his worth as a man is no longer regarded as personal; rather, it is examined by the general public. His identity is undermined, his manhood is questioned, and his silence is misconstrued as strength by a

culture that confuses virility with worth. Not in anger but in quiet resignation, Kali retreats into the rhythms of the countryside, the companionship of animals, and the daily routines. His bucolic surroundings are both a refuge and a continual reminder of his flaws.

This paper focuses on *One Part Woman* as a powerful examination of how masculinity is constructed and destabilised in cultures where reproduction is intimately associated with honour, acceptance, and legacy. Ponna's role, specifically, the controversial ceremony intended to "solve" their childlessness, is a major topic of discussion surrounding the book. This study, however, shifts the emphasis to Kali, whose quiet unravelling is equally important. His story illustrates how men are shaped and sometimes broken by the same patriarchal systems that are often seen as serving their best interests.

### Methodology

This study approaches literary analysis qualitatively, focusing on character interpretation and subject investigation. The article uses close reading to examine how masculinity is created, emphasised, and ultimately destabilised within the cultural and ecological context of rural Tamil Nadu, using *One Part Woman* as the main text. The lived textures of the book, such as the conversations, silences, geography, and social customs that characterise Kali's world, are used in this study to interpret the book.

The research is shaped by an interdisciplinary lens, integrating elements of gender studies and ecocriticism to understand how place, tradition, and social expectations impact male identity. In particular, the study draws on critical perspectives that examine how masculinity is not a fixed quality but rather a socially constructed and context-dependent identity. The cultural framework against which Kali's experience is analysed is shaped by the insights offered by academics who research South Asian rural patriarchy and fertility stigma. Furthermore, it is emphasised how Murugan's narrative style, which is characterised by atmosphere, repetition, and simplicity, adds emotional depth to the protagonist's inner life, especially when words fail him.

Unlike studies that focus exclusively on female characters and their negotiation of ritual or bodily autonomy, this research aims to reposition the male character as equally limited by patriarchal systems, often in subtler, less obvious ways. The technique seeks to highlight how, despite their seeming advantage, traditional gender norms can also render men emotionally and socially vulnerable when they fail to meet expectations. It makes no effort to draw comparisons between the suffering of men and women.

The primary source of insight in this text-driven approach is the story itself. This allows the novel to be read organically, with meaning arising from the intersections of language, setting, and character action. By adopting this stance, the paper hopes to promote a more nuanced understanding of how masculinity operates in literature that is often interpreted solely in terms of the oppression of women.

### Fertility and the Weight of Masculinity

In *One Part Woman*, fertility is not seen as a personal problem but rather as a highly socially expected characteristic, especially for men whose identity in rural patriarchal communities is associated with procreation and inheritance. For Kali, not having children is not just a personal sorrow but also a public symbol of inadequacy. Rather than being openly ridiculed, Murugan's persona is progressively secluded, whispered, and subtly removed from the traditions of masculine validation. In a society where a man's value is based on his ability to continue the family line, Kali's childlessness has a long-lasting effect on his reputation [1].

Scholars examining South Asian masculinity claim that it is strongly rooted in authority, fertility, and lanh-

olding, with little room for emotional sensitivity or perceived failure [2]. As a capable farmer, a diligent worker, and a husband to his wife, Kali deserves respect. However, when a child is absent, those virtues lose their significance in the eyes of the culture that surrounds him. The pressure rises when family members and religious leaders begin to propose rituals to “fix” the problem, as this reinforces the notion that masculinity is a performance that requires community or divine approval rather than a state of being [3]. Murugan does not dramatise this burden with outright violence; rather, he displays its weight via the gradual unravelling of Kali and Ponna’s once-stable marriage.

This portrayal’s emotional impact is increased by how realistic it is. Instead of exploding in rage, Kali shrinks inward. His sedentary demeanour, slow movements, and increasing devotion to his routine and the animals he cares for are all signs of his emotional breakdown. His surroundings get more subdued and smaller. Mayuri Pathak claims that in a society that places a high value on bloodline, fertility stigma not only makes Kali stand out but also fractures his identity by turning infertility into a symbolic castration [2]. In the modern world, infertility is a social and moral concern rather than merely a biological problem. In his narrative, Murugan places no blame on anyone. There isn’t a clear antagonist here. The evil comes from tradition itself, with its rituals, gossip, and religious justifications. This covert violence highlights a reality that is often overlooked: men who fail to meet the high standards of patriarchy are devalued equally to women. Kali’s story serves as a warning that when masculinity is defined too narrowly, it becomes brittle, incredibly lonely, easily broken, and hard to re-establish.

### **Land as Companion and Cage: Masculinity Rooted in Soil**

The land in *One Part Woman* is a dynamic, emotional force that reflects Kali’s inner life rather than merely being a physical place. As Kali spends his days tending to his fields and livestock, the farm provides him with stability, security, and a sense of purpose. These rituals provide him with emotional relief from the upheaval of his social life. Readers can see how Kali finds comfort in the soil despite the quiet breakdown of his personal life because of Murugan’s painstaking depiction of the rural countryside. Beyond mere practicality, he forms an intensely emotional, almost mystical connection with the land [1].

However, this relationship is complicated. The property serves as a reminder of Kali’s shortcomings, even though it also provides him with comfort and control. Its fertility stands in stark contrast to his purported infertility. Snehapriya Pius notes that the land is both judgmental and life-giving, often reflecting the protagonist’s psychological state in Murugan’s story [4]. Although Kali excels at growing crops, his inability to conceive overshadows this achievement. Even the most abundant land cannot save a man in a society that bases its value on biological continuity. Rather, it strengthens his sense of failure.

Land ownership has both financial and symbolic meaning in a rural community. According to Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic capital, property is a symbol of male power, prestige, and a generation’s continuation. But when that continuity is disrupted, the land’s social significance is also diminished [5]. Kali’s retreat into the tedious tasks of farming is more a sign of desperation than strength. He keeps moving, feeding, and ploughing, not because he has hope, these activities help him maintain a facade of control in a world that makes him feel less and less significant.

Murugan avoids romanticising this relationship with nature. Without offering him comfort or catharsis, nature only takes in Kali’s suffering. The daily routines don’t have any new meaning or emotional breakthrough. As Nazir Ali observes, Murugan’s depiction of rural landscapes subverts the romantic idea that nature heals itself; for Kali, the land becomes a silent accomplice in his emotional deterioration [6]. It used to be a place of growth and connection, but now it is a place of loneliness, reminding him of

everything he cannot change. Despite his deep connection to the land, it becomes a trap, a location that represents both his immobility and his rootedness.

### **Ritual, Religion, and the Masculine Void**

Rituals and religion are used as methods of pressure rather than as consolation in *One Part Woman*, especially for people who don't fit the community's expectations regarding childbearing and ancestry. A lot of critical attention has been paid to the chariot festival, which encourages childless women to get pregnant through anonymous encounters during a religious ceremony. While much scholarly attention has been focused on Ponna's forced participation, Kali's predicament, his exclusion from the ceremony and its emotional ramifications deserve equal consideration [1].

This exclusion has deep symbolic and emotional meaning. Instead of receiving ceremonial support, Kali is made irrelevant. His community's choice to seek a solution that excludes him subtly erodes his already brittle masculinity. As Subhash Chandra Yadav has observed, religious rituals during periods of social unrest often serve to strengthen the power structures they purport to oppose [7]. The chariot celebration destroys a man's sense of self in private while maintaining the appearance of heavenly order in public. Despite its assertions of anonymity, the ceremony is also extremely public. Without Kali's knowledge or involvement, her female relatives and the village priest whisper about Ponna's involvement. His opinion is neither sought nor valued, even though he is her husband and the alleged head of the household. The removal of Kali signifies a significant reversal of the power that men typically possess in patriarchal cultures. Instead of taking charge of the narrative, he turns into a silent victim.

Murugan has a complex perspective on religion. Although he does not specifically condemn belief, he does show how religious systems can be appropriated in order to maintain social control. Ritual is not used to heal the spirit in *One Part Woman*, but to control shame. The festival pushes Kali farther to the outskirts rather than solving the couple's problem. It becomes clear that religious responses often serve to protect the community's reputation at the expense of individuals rather than to promote reconciliation.

Kali is left with a spiritual, social, and emotional emptiness. He is silently written out in addition to being abandoned. His suffering goes unnoticed by the community, and the god offers no consolation. Not through denial, but through a ritual that seems to bring closure while deepening the wound, his pain is rendered invisible.

### **Silence as Resistance and Rupture**

In the novel, silence instead of simply being the absence of speech becomes a language of loss, disengagement, and quiet defiance. Kali's disengagement from conversation and social engagement is not passive; rather, it is an expression of pain that is too intense to explain. Infertility changes his role in the family and community, and he stops talking—not because he doesn't care, but because words seem meaningless in a society that has already condemned him. Rather than using dramatic scenes, Murugan skilfully portrays this decline through routines, pauses, and the quiet of spoken grief [1].

In literature, silence has always been seen as a form of control exerted on women. Here, however, it is the man who is silenced, not by an external oppressor, but rather by the internal breakdown of his social standing. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity explains this shift: that a person's identity starts to disintegrate when they are unable to fulfil the role that gender norms have assigned them [8]. Kali deviates from the ideal of masculinity because he is unable to fulfil the duties of a father, a guardian, or a

contributor to society. Both the signs of that unravelling and his silent refusal to keep up the appearance are evident in his silence.

This communication breakdown also negatively impacts his relationship with Ponna. Their intimate bond, which was once marked by warmth and respect for one another, begins to deteriorate, not through betrayal, but rather through avoidance. They are no longer able to talk to each other about the things that matter most. The proposed temple ceremony becomes a turning point because neither side can fully express their position without hurting the other. So, they don't say anything. In the end, this silence is alienating, burdensome, and communal. As feminist researcher Susan Friedman notes, silence is often preferred when language is too fragile to express lived experience [9]. That decision becomes irrevocable for Kali. Murugan's tales avoid being overly sentimental. There are no loud fights or dramatic outbursts. The emotional devastation is instead communicated by nonverbal cues like missing conversations, incomplete gestures, and growing emotional distance. In a society where being a man is usually associated with decisiveness and verbal dominance, Kali's silence is striking. It represents an implicit rejection of his role in a narrative that has rendered him invisible.

The only thing that gives him some dignity is his silence, but it does not spare him from pain. He keeps control of the one thing he has left, his inner world, by refusing to strike out. Tragically, though, the world stops paying attention unless there is violence or rage to break that silence. Kali doesn't offer either. Instead of rebellion, he dissolves in silent destruction.

In this way, Murugan reinterprets silence as a form of both collapse and resistance. It is a form of protest and a sign of emotional exhaustion. In a culture that only recognises masculine suffering when it is loud, Kali's silence becomes a powerful critique of cultural indifference. His experience demonstrates that, as opposed to shouting, not being heard at all can lead to some of the most severe rifts.

### **Stigma, Shame, and the Disintegration of Identity**

In *One Part Woman*, social judgment is not loud; rather, it is silent, unrelenting, and deeply painful. Kali is not publicly ridiculed or denigrated. Instead, he is increasingly ignored, pitied, and forced to shoulder the invisible weight of social disenchantment. The absence of a child damages his masculinity and turns it into more than just a personal tragedy. Eventually, he internalises this humiliation, turning it from a feeling into a component of who he is. What once made up his identity - his marriage, his property, his love begins to crumble under the unrelenting scrutiny of others [1].

According to Erving Goffman, stigma is an attribute that causes a person to become "discredited" in the eyes of society, rather than "whole" [10]. Kali experienced precisely this. The community views him as "defective" because he hasn't performed his reproductive role, but he hasn't failed as a spouse in any overt manner - he is responsible, caring, and hard-working. The response is gradual erasure rather than outright confrontation. He has been disregarded, overshadowed, and kept out of decision-making. His sense of self is progressively undermined by this invisibility.

Kali's changing view of his own life is the clearest example of this slow breakdown. Where he once found purpose in farming and love in his relationship with Ponna, everything begins to become mundane. The land becomes routine, the animals become burdens, and the intimacy they once shared becomes strained as a result of everything that is left unsaid. Stuart Hall's theory that identity is formed in reaction to others becomes brutally relevant in this instance; Kali's collapse is not merely internal, but rather the result of how people relate to him now, or rather, no longer relate to him at all [11].



Instead of using combat, the final blow is delivered quietly. Rather than being a betrayal, Ponna's eventual participation in the temple ceremony validates all of Kali's concerns. It tells him that the world has decided that he is the problem. Murugan does not dramatise this scene. No anger, no tears, no sincere farewells. Only the heartbreaking, silent realisation that he no longer fits into the life he made.

The book presents the horrifying fact that guilt doesn't always show up. Sometimes it happens gradually, transforming a person from the inside out. Kali's decline into emotional oblivion is prolonged rather than sudden. He doesn't disappear out of anger or shame. The silent brutality of social expectations merely causes him to fade.

### **Comparative Analysis: Repositioning Masculinity in Gender Narratives**

The struggles of women, their resistance, survival, and silence, rightfully take centre stage in many works of South Asian literature that question patriarchy. But *One Part Woman* offers an alternative. The story revolves around a man who is not in a position of power but is instead overthrown by the very system that was intended to grant him privileges. Kali's failure to meet the rigid expectations of masculinity, not a position of power, is what ultimately brings her down. Because of this modification, readers can reconsider how men can also fall prey to the roles assigned to them. His internal breakdown is comparable to the emotional disarray more frequently seen in female characters, as those in Mahasweta Devi's or Bama's writings, where women's identities are frequently defined by the weight of reproductive failure [12].

Kali's response, though, is very different. Unlike many female protagonists who resist, rebel, or seek support, Kali retreats inward. He does not speak out or act defiantly; rather, he withdraws. This contrast reveals more than just individual differences; it demonstrates the gendered nature of coping. Men like Kali, particularly in rural India, are not raised to express vulnerability or seek assistance. If women are bound by control, men are broken by emotional isolation. As Raewyn Connell argues, dominant forms of masculinity frequently suppress men's emotional lives by portraying vulnerability as weakness, leaving them with few acceptable ways to process personal failure [3].

This dynamic also distinguishes Murugan's portrayal of rural masculinity from the kinds commonly found in urban Indian literature. In urban settings, crises of manhood may take the form of substance abuse, sexual escapism, or existential disappointment. In contrast, Kali's masculinity is anchored in his heritage, land, and community. His inability to become a father threatens not only his entire social life but also makes him feel like a personal failure. As a scholar pointed out, in Murugan's novels, infertility is not just a personal loss but also a community disruption, where a man's identity is determined by what he can contribute to the soil and the family [13].

By placing a male character at the centre of such emotional and cultural scrutiny, Murugan promotes a more thorough understanding of gender in literature. This is an attempt to broaden the discussion rather than diminish the significance of female suffering. In addition to power, this representation of masculinity also involves performance, pressure, and, at times, extreme frailty. Kali's experience challenges the reader to acknowledge the complexity of gender-based suffering. Rather than yelling, pain can occasionally be concealed by routine, resignation, and silence.

### **Conclusion**

*One Part Woman* by Perumal Murugan presents a sobering, subtly potent picture of masculinity disintegrating, not through confrontations or a dramatic breakdown, but rather through the gradual loss of identity due to cultural pressure. The story of Kali is not one of violence or defiance, but rather of retreat

and how a man starts to fade away when the things that once defined him, land ownership, fertility, and social approval, start diminishing. Kali's decline is not sensationalised by Murugan. He allows the silence to speak loudly about a type of suffering that is rarely given a voice in literature by letting it develop with emotional restraint and minimalism [1].

This study argues that ideas such as fertility, land, ritual, and silence are not merely new themes but rather the building blocks for the construction and ultimate deconstruction of masculinity. In addition to providing a beautiful backdrop, the rural area encloses and grounds Kali by reflecting his inner world. Similarly, in this context, religion and tradition, often depicted as stabilising forces in Indian myths, become tools of exclusion. Essentially, the temple ceremony intended to "solve" the couple's problem excludes Kali from the settlement of his own life [14].

Perhaps most strikingly, Murugan utilised silence, often construed as feminine in literary traditions, as Kali's final hope. His retreat is not an act of cowardice, but a rejection of a culture that does not accept his suffering. It becomes both his strength and his weakness. By refusing to act, speak, or engage in combat, Kali subtly challenges a culture that only tolerates masculine failure through violence or rage.

By concentrating on a male protagonist who is progressively crushed under the weight of tradition, not by losing voice, but by losing power, *One Part Woman* questions the concept of masculinity in South Asian literature. It does not defend male privilege; rather, it draws attention to its flaws and vulnerabilities. It suggests that even those who appear to benefit from patriarchal structures can be suppressed when they are unable or choose not to conform.

Ultimately, Kali's story is about more than just a man without children. It tells the tale of a man who is forgotten by a society that lacks a term to express his grief. Rather than being broken in a moment, he is worn down in silence. His failure to be a father is not tragic; rather, it is that it cannot be acknowledged, addressed, or resolved. Murugan's book serves as a reminder of how societies often demand consistency while ignoring the silent devastation that happens when someone fails to meet expectations without fault.

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