

Bearing the Blame: Infertility, Patriarchy, and the Female Body in Mala Mahesh's Padma and Perumal Murugan's One Part Woman

Divya. J¹, Dr. R Geetha²

¹Research Scholar, Bangalore University

²Research Supervisor, Bangalore University

Abstract

This paper undertakes a comparative reading of Mala Mahesh's *Padma* (2022) and Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* (Tamil *Madhorubagan*, 2010; trans. Aniruddhan Vasudevan, 2013), two novels separated by language, region, and a century of setting, yet united by an identical structural premise: a loving married couple, a diagnosis of childlessness, and the systematic transfer of blame, shame, and corrective intervention onto the wife's body. Reading the two texts alongside feminist body theory, Adrienne Rich's distinction between motherhood as patriarchal institution and motherhood as lived experience, Martha Nussbaum's theory of objectification, and the sociology of assisted reproduction and commercial surrogacy in India, this paper argues that both novels expose infertility not as a private medical condition but as a socially manufactured crisis of female legitimacy. *Padma*'s dual timeline, Kerala in 1900 and Mumbai in the present, stages the transition from ritual and second marriage to IVF and surrogacy as the sanctioned "solutions" to childlessness, while *One Part Woman* locates an equivalent, though historically distinct, negotiation in a colonial-era Tamil Nadu temple festival that permits a childless woman ritual union with a stranger. Despite their differing solutions, both texts reveal that the underlying logic, blame assigned to the woman, her body treated as a site of familial and communal investment, and other women recruited as instruments of patriarchal continuity, remains remarkably stable across a century of ostensible progress. The paper concludes that both novels function as critiques of compulsory motherhood and of the persistence of patriarchal control over reproduction even as its technological and ritual vocabulary changes.

Keywords: infertility, patriarchy, motherhood, feminist body theory, surrogacy, Perumal Murugan, Mala Mahesh, Indian women's fiction

1. Introduction

Few experiences in South Asian domestic life carry as much socially manufactured weight as childlessness. Despite advances in reproductive medicine and shifts in the legal and economic status of women across the Indian subcontinent, the inability to conceive continues to be read, in fiction as in life, as a distinctly female failure, one that invites communal scrutiny, familial intervention, and, frequently, drastic corrective measures imposed upon the woman's body rather than shared between spouses. Two novels published more than a decade apart and set in entirely different regions and registers of Indian life stage this dynamic with striking structural symmetry: Mala Mahesh's *Padma* (2022), a work of

contemporary Indian women's fiction, and Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* (Tamil Madhorubagan, 2010; trans. 2013), one of the most significant, and most controversial, Tamil novels of the past two decades.

Mahesh's *Padma* unfolds across two timelines a century apart. In 1900s Kerala, the young bride Padma is adored by her husband Seshadri and his family, yet her failure to conceive eventually forces Seshadri, under sustained familial pressure, into a second marriage to Padma's cousin Lalitha. In present-day Mumbai, Padma's descendant Naina, happily married to Naveen, discovers that she cannot conceive naturally; the couple turn first to IVF and then to surrogacy, enlisting Naveen's colleague Vinita to carry their child, an arrangement that resurfaces buried insecurities and threatens the marriage's stability. Murugan's *One Part Woman*, set in colonial-era Tiruchengode in the Kongu region of Tamil Nadu, follows Kali and Ponna, a couple married twelve years and deeply in love, whose childlessness exposes them, and above all Ponna, to escalating communal taunts, ritual remedies, and eventually the pressure to participate in a festival at the temple of the half-male, half-female deity Ardhanarishvara, where the ordinary rules of marital fidelity are ritually suspended for one night so that childless women may conceive through union with a stranger regarded, for that night, as an incarnation of the god.

Read together, these two novels offer an unusually clear comparative frame for examining how patriarchal societies across a century, and across the considerable cultural distance separating rural colonial Tamil Nadu from cosmopolitan contemporary Mumbai, have continued to displace the burden of infertility onto women, even as the specific institutional vocabulary for doing so, ritual, remarriage, biomedicine, commercial surrogacy, has changed considerably. This paper argues that both texts function as sustained critiques of what Adrienne Rich termed the patriarchal "institution" of motherhood, exposing infertility as a socially produced crisis of female legitimacy rather than a private medical circumstance, and demonstrating that the recruitment of a second woman, a second wife, a ritual partner, a paid surrogate, as the instrument through which that crisis is resolved is a structural constant that survives the transition from tradition to modernity largely intact.

2. Theoretical Framework

Adrienne Rich's foundational distinction, developed in *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976), between motherhood as a lived, potentially fulfilling relationship and motherhood as a patriarchal institution that regulates and controls women's reproductive capacity, provides the paper's central theoretical anchor. Rich argues that the institution of motherhood, distinct from the experience of mothering itself, has historically functioned to keep women's bodies, labour, and social value tethered to reproduction, such that a woman who does not or cannot bear children is treated not merely as unfortunate but as having failed a social obligation prior to any personal desire. Both *Padma* and *Ponna* are represented within precisely this institutional logic: their worth to their husbands' families is calculated almost entirely in terms of reproductive output, irrespective of their intelligence, charm, or the affection their husbands plainly feel for them.

Susan Bordo's account of the female body as a site of cultural inscription, and Martha Nussbaum's theory of objectification, particularly her categories of instrumentality (treating a person as a tool for another's purposes), fungibility (treating a person as interchangeable with other objects or persons of the same type), and denial of subjectivity (disregarding a person's own experience and feelings), have already been productively applied to Ponna's characterisation in existing scholarship on *One Part Woman*, and this paper extends that framework comparatively to *Padma* and *Naina*. Read through Nussbaum's categories,

both women are rendered instrumental to a reproductive project not fully their own; both, at different points, face the threat of fungibility, Padma through Seshadri's second marriage to Lalitha, Naina through the introduction of a third woman's body, Vinita's, into her own reproductive project via surrogacy. Finally, because Padma's contemporary timeline turns on commercial gestational surrogacy, the paper draws on the sociology of India's surrogacy industry, particularly Amrita Pande's *Wombs in Labor: Transnational Commercial Surrogacy in India* (2014) and Sharmila Rudrappa's *Discounted Life: The Price of Global Surrogacy in India* (2015), both of which theorise commercial surrogacy as a labour arrangement that reproduces, rather than resolves, the patriarchal and class hierarchies that structure Indian women's reproductive lives. Pande and Rudrappa's work allows the analysis of Naina and Vinita's relationship in Padma to move beyond a purely individual or psychological register toward a structural account of how commercial surrogacy recruits one woman's body in the service of another woman's socially mandated motherhood, a dynamic that, this paper argues, is continuous with rather than opposed to the older practices dramatised in Murugan's novel.

3. The Blame Falls on Her: Gendered Attribution of Infertility

In both novels, infertility is medically and narratively ambiguous in its origin, yet socially unambiguous in its attribution. Reviewers of Padma consistently note that the novel documents, in granular domestic detail, how Padma's inability to conceive is treated by her husband's household as her failing alone, notwithstanding the impossibility, within the novel's own early-twentieth-century setting, of any medical determination of which spouse might be responsible. The same asymmetry structures *One Part Woman* although Murugan is careful to note, through village gossip and the couple's private anxieties, that either partner could plausibly be the cause of their childlessness, the corrective measures the community proposes fall exclusively upon Ponna, culminating in the pressure for her, rather than Kali, to seek ritual intervention. Kali's own possible infertility is raised only obliquely and never subjected to the kind of public scrutiny, penance, or ritual remedy that Ponna endures for over a decade.

This asymmetry is not incidental but structural, and it persists into Padma's modern timeline. Even in cosmopolitan Mumbai, where Naina and Naveen have ready access to fertility testing that would have been unavailable to Padma or to Ponna, the novel depicts Naina absorbing a disproportionate share of guilt, anxiety, and self-scrutiny over their difficulty conceiving, suggesting that biomedical diagnostic clarity does not, by itself, dislodge the deeper cultural conviction that a wife's body is the primary and proper site of reproductive failure. The persistence of this asymmetry across a century, despite radically different levels of medical knowledge available to each timeline, is precisely the continuity this paper identifies as central to reading the two novels together.

4. Ritual, Remarriage, and Biomedicine: Three Eras, One Logic

Each novel stages a historically specific "solution" to childlessness, and comparing these solutions side by side reveals a shared underlying logic despite their superficial dissimilarity. In Padma's 1900s Kerala timeline, the sanctioned solution is Seshadri's second marriage to Lalitha, undertaken not out of any diminished affection for Padma but under sustained pressure from the extended family to secure an heir. In *One Part Woman*'s colonial Tamil Nadu, the sanctioned solution, after years of failed prayers, penances, and folk remedies, is Ponna's participation in the Ardhnarishvara festival's temporary suspension of marital exclusivity, a practice that Murugan researched from oral accounts of an actual, if historically disputed, custom associated with the temple at Tiruchengode. In Padma's contemporary Mumbai timeline,

the sanctioned solution is commercial gestational surrogacy, mediated through fertility clinics, contracts, and the recruitment of Vinita as a third party to the couple's reproductive project.

What unites these three historically distinct solutions, second marriage, ritual union, and commercial surrogacy, is that each resolves the couple's childlessness not through any change internal to the original marital dyad but through the introduction of a second woman's body into the reproductive project, whether as a new wife, a ritual partner, or a paid gestational carrier. Pande's and Rudrappa's analyses of commercial surrogacy in India are instructive here: both scholars argue that the surrogacy industry does not represent a modern, technologically mediated escape from older patriarchal reproductive arrangements but rather their reconfiguration along the lines of class and market logic, with poorer women's reproductive labour recruited in the service of wealthier couples' socially mandated parenthood. Read this way, Vinita's role in *Padma* is not a rupture with the pattern established by Lalitha's second marriage or by the anonymous ritual participant in *One Part Woman*, but its latest iteration: in every case, a second woman's body absorbs the reproductive labour that the patriarchal household requires but that the wife's body has been deemed unable to supply.

5. The Other Woman: Rivalry, Solidarity, and the Instrumentalisation of Female Bodies

Both novels are notably attentive to the relationship between the primary wife and the woman recruited to resolve her childlessness, and in both cases this relationship is more complex than simple rivalry. In *Padma*, Lalitha, herself a young woman with limited say in her own marriage to Seshadri, is not depicted as a straightforward antagonist but as another woman conscripted into the same patriarchal reproductive economy that has already constrained Padma; the two women's relationship, marked by tension, jealousy, and eventual partial reconciliation, dramatises how patriarchal structures pit women against one another over a scarcity, reproductive legitimacy, that the structure itself manufactures. A similar dynamic organises the surrogacy arrangement between Naina and Vinita: although the arrangement is nominally cooperative and consensual, the novel traces how it reactivates Naina's insecurities about her own bodily inadequacy and about Vinita's proximity to Naveen, again staging female rivalry as a symptom of, rather than an alternative to, patriarchal reproductive logic.

Murugan's treatment of the ritual partner in *One Part Woman* operates differently, since the man who takes part in the festival is not narratively individuated in the way Lalitha and Vinita are, but the underlying structure is comparable: it is Ponna, not Kali, who must undergo the scrutiny, negotiation, and eventual transgression of ordinary marital norms, and it is Ponna's participation, rather than any equivalent expectation placed on Kali, that the community and her own family engineer and endorse. Existing scholarship on the novel has emphasised precisely this asymmetry, reading Ponna's eventual, deeply ambivalent decision to attend the festival as simultaneously an act of submission to patriarchal engineering and a fraught assertion of agency within an otherwise closed set of options.

6. Marital Bonds Under Strain

Both novels take considerable care to establish, before childlessness enters the narrative as a crisis, that their central marriages are marked by genuine affection, compatibility, and even, within Murugan's frank depiction of Kali and Ponna's intimacy, sexual satisfaction. This narrative choice is significant: it forecloses any reading in which infertility exposes a marriage that was already fragile, and instead insists that the crisis is externally manufactured by social and familial pressure rather than internal to the couple's relationship. Seshadri's love for Padma persists even as he is manoeuvred into a second marriage he never

sought; Kali's attachment to Ponna is such that Murugan's narration explicitly notes his inability to imagine another woman in her place, even as village pressure escalates around him. In the contemporary timeline of Padma, Naveen's commitment to Naina similarly persists through the strain of failed IVF cycles and the emotionally fraught surrogacy arrangement with Vinita.

Yet in each case, the external pressure proves sufficient to threaten, and in the case of Padma and Seshadri, to fundamentally alter, the marital bond, regardless of the couple's private feelings for one another. This suggests that both novels locate the true antagonist not in any failure of love between husband and wife but in the surrounding social apparatus, family, community, religious institution, and, in Naina's case, the emotionally complicated intimacy of the surrogacy arrangement itself, that insists a marriage cannot be considered complete, or a woman's identity fully legitimate, without biological offspring. The persistence of this insistence from 1900s Kerala and colonial Tamil Nadu into twenty-first-century Mumbai is, again, the crux of what makes reading these two novels together analytically productive.

7. Historical Progress or Historical Repetition?

Padma's own dual-timeline structure invites the reader to ask whether Naina's twenty-first-century experience represents genuine progress over Padma's nineteenth-century one, and the novel's answer, like Murugan's implicit answer when *One Part Woman* is read against contemporary reproductive medicine, is markedly ambivalent. Naina possesses legal and economic autonomy, medical options, and a marriage in which she is at least nominally an equal partner in decision-making, all of which were unavailable to Padma or to Ponna. Yet the underlying conviction that childlessness constitutes a specifically female deficiency, requiring a specifically female-bodied solution, survives essentially intact across this transition. As commentary on *One Part Woman* has observed, had Murugan set his novel in the twenty-first century rather than the colonial period, Kali and Ponna would likely have pursued artificial insemination or IVF rather than the temple festival, yet the substitution of biomedicine for ritual would not, by itself, have dislodged the prior expectation that the burden of proof, and the burden of remedy, rests with the wife.

This continuity across ostensibly incommensurable historical moments, colonial-era ritual practice and twenty-first-century assisted reproduction, is precisely what Pande's and Rudrappa's sociological accounts of the Indian surrogacy industry predict: modernisation and medicalisation do not, on their own, dismantle patriarchal reproductive logic but instead provide it with new institutional vocabulary. Read together, Padma and *One Part Woman* dramatise this continuity from opposite ends of the twentieth century, and their combined effect is considerably more powerful than either novel's individual critique: where Murugan's novel risks being read, in isolation, as a period piece documenting a now-superseded rural custom, Padma's explicit juxtaposition of 1900 and the present insists that the custom's underlying logic has not, in fact, been superseded at all.

8. Conclusion

Mala Mahesh's Padma and Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman*, despite their considerable differences in setting, scale, and literary register, one a work of accessible contemporary women's fiction, the other a controversial, densely textured work of Tamil literary realism, share a structural core that repays sustained comparative attention. Both novels demonstrate that infertility functions in South Asian patriarchal contexts not as a private medical circumstance shared by both spouses but as a socially manufactured crisis of female legitimacy, resolved, in every historical period each novel depicts, through the conscription of

a second woman's body into the primary couple's reproductive project. Read through Rich's distinction between motherhood as institution and motherhood as experience, through Nussbaum's categories of objectification, and through the sociology of commercial surrogacy in India, the two novels together suggest that the vocabulary through which patriarchal societies manage childlessness, ritual, remarriage, biomedicine, the market, changes considerably across a century, while the underlying distribution of blame, scrutiny, and bodily instrumentalisation remains remarkably constant. In this sense, Padma's explicit dual-timeline structure and *One Part Woman*'s historically specific ritual practice function as complementary rather than competing critiques, together offering a fuller, comparative account of how deeply compulsory motherhood remains embedded within Indian domestic life, across region, era, and social class.

Primary Texts

1. Mahesh, Mala. Padma. Mala Mahesh Iyer, 2022.
2. Murugan, Perumal. *One Part Woman*. Translated by Aniruddhan Vasudevan, Penguin Books, 2013.

Secondary Texts

1. Bordo, Susan. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. University of California Press, 1993.
2. Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.
3. Kandiyoti, Deniz. "Bargaining with Patriarchy." *Gender and Society*, vol. 2, no. 3, 1988, pp. 274–290.
4. Karthikeyan, P. "Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman*: A Critical Analysis of Violence via Religious Rituals." *ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts*, vol. 5, no. 6, 2024, pp. 1417–1419.
5. Kshirsagar, Yogesh V., and Sharad K. Binnor. "Traditions, Rights, and Individual Freedom: Human Rights Violations in Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman*." *The Context*, vol. 12, no. 6, 2025, pp. 27–34.
6. Nussbaum, Martha C. "Objectification." *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, vol. 24, no. 4, 1995, pp. 249–291.
7. Pande, Amrita. *Wombs in Labor: Transnational Commercial Surrogacy in India*. Columbia University Press, 2014.
8. Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. W. W. Norton, 1976.
9. Rudrappa, Sharmila. *Discounted Life: The Price of Global Surrogacy in India*. New York University Press, 2015.
10. Sujatha, S. "Feminine Quest for Freedom: A Re-reading of *Ponna – Perumal Murugan's One Part Woman*." *The Creative Launcher*, vol. 5, no. 3, 2020.