

Patriarchal Politics in Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* and Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*

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Abstract

Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* presents patriarchal structures that regulate female life in Indian society, especially in rural areas. The novel exposes different aspects of married life for woman and shows how the ages old set pattern is followed in order to circumscribe woman's life to home. Motherhood is presented as a social obligation rather than a personal choice. The novel also presents how childlessness is transformed into a marker of social disappointment. Through the experiences of Kali and Ponna, Murugan demonstrates how the sensitive matter like reproduction becomes a mechanism of social control. This paper examines the politics of patriarchy in *One Part Woman* and compares Murugan's representation of patriarchal oppression with Shashi Deshpande's portrayal of women struggling against gendered expectations in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. The study argues that both writers reveal that patriarchal societies construct of female identity through domestic and reproductive roles. These traditionally governed societies also deny women autonomy over their bodies and lives. The selection of these two novels is based on the fact that social obligations remain restraining whether woman is financially independent or not.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Fertility, Childlessness, Politics, Motherhood, Reproductive Politics

Research Paper

"The soul of feminist politics is the commitment to ending patriarchal domination of women and men, girls and boys. Love cannot exist in any relationship that is based on domination and coercion. Males cannot love themselves in patriarchal culture if their very self-definition relies on submission to patriarchal rules."

Bell Hooks, American author, feminist theorist, cultural critic, and activist wrote these lines that explains how men regardless of time, clime and situation take advantages of patriarchy. There have been myriad faces of patriarchy while the result of all is female dominion. The two novels *One Part Woman* and *The Dark Holds No Terrors* which are primary sources of this study carry the same crux of patriarchy where male members enjoy in the suffering of woman. The dominion over woman has been done through different agencies like family, caste, religion, traditions and even myths. Patriarchal structures regulate both women's bodies and men's identities through social expectations of marriage, fertility, and lineage. This imbalance harms both women and men as the most important of human capabilities get utilized in unconstructive works of subjugation and power.

Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman*, situates his narrative in the rural agrarian landscape of colonial

Tamil Nadu, where social customs, religious rituals, and communal beliefs govern individual lives. The novel explores the trauma experienced by a childless couple, Kali and Ponna. Their inability to conceive becomes a source of public humiliation, familial pressure, and psychological distress. The institution of patriarchy has historically regulated women's identities through marriage, motherhood, and fertility. In many traditional societies, a woman's worth is often measured by her ability to bear children. One of the central concerns of *One Part Woman* is the obsession with fertility. The community constantly reminds Kali and Ponna of their state and suggest rituals, remedies, and religious practices to beget a child. The repeated social scrutiny transforms fertility into a public matter rather than a private concern. Ponna's body becomes a site of communal intervention. Many people even suggest the option of Her reproductive capacity is evaluated, discussed, and judged by others. A significant moment occurs when society treats childlessness as a defect. Ponna realizes that her identity has become inseparable from her inability to bear children. Her value as a woman is measured through reproduction rather than individuality. Ponna asks Kali, "We lack in nothing. We can be happy. It doesn't matter if we don't have a child. How long will these morons in the village keep harassing us? May be for another ten or twelve years, By then we would have grown old. So what if we don't have children? We can still triumph..." (P.55)

Murugan exposes how patriarchy reduces women to biological functions. The pressure exerted on Ponna reflects a cultural belief that motherhood is the ultimate purpose of female existence. The female body is thus transformed into an instrument for preserving lineage and social continuity. The novel shows how societal pressure, rather than personal desires, causes a couple's anguish. Their suffering arises "not from their own desire to have a child, but their community's stigmatization". This indicates that morality is externally imposed rather than internally felt. From a critical perspective, this aligns with sociological theories that view morality as a social construct rather than an absolute principle. In Murugan's narrative, the "moral" expectation to produce offspring becomes only motive of a married woman, forcing individuals into ethically questionable decisions.

The novels also illustrate different manifestations of patriarchal control over the female body. In *One Part Woman*, Ponna's body becomes a site of communal regulation. Her infertility is perceived not as a private concern but as a public issue requiring intervention through religious rituals and social customs. The Ardhanareeswara temple festival, which permits consensual sexual relations outside marriage for childless women, exposes the contradictions of patriarchal morality. While female sexuality is otherwise rigidly controlled, it is temporarily sanctioned when it serves the patriarchal objective of reproduction. Murugan critiques the instrumentalization of women's bodies, revealing how tradition legitimizes oppression under the guise of religious faith.

Shashi Deshpande's novels primarily explore the complexities of women's lives within the framework of a patriarchal society. Her works focus on themes such as gender inequality, identity, marriage, domestic violence, psychological conflict, female subjectivity, and the quest for selfhood. Deshpande portrays educated, middle-class women who struggle to reconcile their personal aspirations with societal expectations imposed by family and tradition. Rather than presenting dramatic acts of rebellion, she emphasizes the protagonists' inner journeys of self-exploration, emotional resilience, and gradual empowerment. Themes of silence, communication, motherhood, sexuality, and the burden of conventional gender roles recur throughout her fiction, highlighting the subtle yet pervasive nature of patriarchal oppression. Through realistic narratives and deep psychological insight, Deshpande critiques social norms that restrict women's autonomy while advocating the importance of self-dignity, and individual freedom.

Similar to *One Part Women* in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Sarita's identity is continually defined by patriarchal expectations. Despite being a successful doctor, she remains trapped within conventional notions of womanhood that demand submissiveness and domesticity. Her professional achievements threaten her husband Manu's sense of masculinity, leading him to assert dominance through sexual violence. Deshpande demonstrates that women's economic independence alone cannot dismantle patriarchal power structures. As Simone de Beauvoir famously asserts, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir 283). Both Ponna and Sarita are compelled to "become" women according to patriarchal definitions imposed by society. They both return home in a broken self and feel secure with their parents. This is how they are emotionally and psychologically exposed that they need shelter from their married lives.

Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* and Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* offer compelling critiques of patriarchal control in Indian society, though they emerge from distinct socio-cultural contexts. Deshpande in contrast to Murugan locates her novel within an urban, middle-class Indian setting, where patriarchy operates through familial expectations, psychological control, and marital relationships. Despite these contextual differences, both novels demonstrate that patriarchy is not merely a system of male authority but a deeply entrenched social institution that regulates women's identities, reproductive roles, and emotional autonomy.

One of the most striking parallels between the two novels is the reduction of women's identities to socially prescribed gender roles. In *One Part Woman*, Ponna's worth is measured solely by her ability to bear children. Although infertility is a shared condition between Kali and Ponna, society places the burden of childlessness mostly on Ponna. She becomes the object of ridicule, pity, and social exclusion, reflecting Kate Millet's argument that patriarchy is a political system in which women are systematically subordinated through cultural institutions. Millet famously quotes:

"Patriarchy, reformed or unreformed, is patriarchy still: its worst abuses purged or foresworn, it might actually be more stable and secure than before."

Murugan exposes how motherhood is constructed as the ultimate marker of feminine identity, denying women value beyond their reproductive capacity. In contrast, Deshpande focuses on patriarchal control exercised within marriage. Sarita experiences repeated sexual violence at the hands of her husband, whose fragile masculinity is threatened by her greater professional success. Marital rape, though rarely acknowledged in Indian literature when the novel was published, becomes a powerful metaphor for patriarchal domination. Manu's abusive behaviour exemplifies this destructive internalization of patriarchal norms, demonstrating that patriarchy harms intimate relationships by transforming love into a struggle for control.

Another significant similarity lies in the role of women as agents of patriarchy. Myths have been used significantly in both the novels. Ponna was told by an elderly woman that, "Any woman would be blessed with a child if she walked around the barren rock." There have been numerous other things that Ponna religiously completed with just one prayer, "God, please fill my womb at least this month." (P.37) Murugan portrays older women and female relatives as active participants in reinforcing oppressive customs. They constantly remind Ponna of her perceived inadequacy, encourage fertility rituals, and normalize social humiliation. Likewise, Deshpande presents Sarita's mother as a custodian of patriarchal values. She openly favours her son Dhruva and repeatedly blames Sarita for family misfortunes, reinforcing the belief that daughters are less valuable than sons. Both novels validate this insight by

illustrating how women often perpetuate patriarchal ideologies, not because they possess institutional power but because they have internalized dominant cultural norms.

Silence emerges as another shared theme. Ponna rarely articulates her emotional suffering, choosing endurance over resistance because social structures deny her a legitimate voice. Sarita similarly suppresses the trauma of marital abuse for years, fearing social judgment and familial disapproval. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the "subaltern" is particularly relevant here. Spivak argues that marginalized women are often denied the ability to speak within dominant discourses because their voices are mediated or erased by structures of power (Spivak 287). Both Ponna and Sarita exemplify this silencing, though their experiences differ in context. The women in these novels demonstrate a range of strategies to oppose the oppression of men and society. Most of the times education is perceived as a door for liberation from patriarchy but even Sarita who is a reputed Doctor cannot escape such behavior and situation. Though education has brought new avenues for women yet the ideal state where woman and man are on equal footing is still a dream.

Despite these similarities, the novels differ significantly in their portrayal of resistance. Ponna's choices remain constrained by collective social pressures, and her fate is inseparable from the community's expectations. Murugan emphasizes the overwhelming power of tradition, suggesting that individual agency is severely limited within rigid rural social structures. Conversely, Sarita's return to her parental home initiates a process of introspection and self-recovery. While Deshpande does not offer simplistic solutions, she presents self-awareness as the first step toward resisting patriarchal domination. The novels also differ in their representation of masculinity. Kali in *One Part Woman* is not portrayed as inherently oppressive; rather, he is himself victimized by social expectations surrounding masculinity, lineage, and fatherhood. His emotional vulnerability distinguishes him from conventional patriarchal figures. Manu, however, consciously exercises patriarchal authority through sexual violence and emotional intimidation. This distinction highlights Murugan's broader critique of communal patriarchy, whereas Deshpande focuses more directly on gendered power within marriage. In the later part of the novel Murugan also shares Manu's behaviour of violence during intimacy with Ponna which is recorded as, "Whenever he crushed her underneath him, she begged, 'Mamma, please don't show your anger on me this way. It is unbearable. Just hit me, Get a club and beat me to pulp if you want...'" (P.119) Ponna is expected to perform the role of the fertile, self-sacrificing wife, while Sarita is expected to perform submissive femininity despite her professional competence. Their inability or unwillingness to conform fully to these prescribed roles generates conflict, illustrating that patriarchy depends upon the continuous performance of socially constructed gender norms.

India is a land of customs and tradition. With the help of myths a particular group of people gain advantages. There have been many such myths that Shashi Deshpande has exploded through her literature. Deshpande shows that society believes that woman's ultimate fulfilment lies in her roles as a dutiful daughter, obedient wife and self-sacrificing mother. Sarita's mother constantly reinforces this ideology by privileging her son Dhruva over Sarita, believing that a son is the true bearer of the family lineage while a daughter is destined for marriage. This cultural myth legitimizes unequal treatment and instils guilt in Sarita for aspiring beyond traditional feminine roles. Even after becoming a successful doctor, Sarita is made to feel that her professional success threatens the natural order of marriage because the patriarchal belief dictates that a husband must always be superior to his wife. Her mother's repeated insistence that a woman should "adjust" and remain submissive reflects the internalization of patriarchal myths by women themselves. As Sarita recalls, "Don't go out in the sun. You'll get darker. We have to get you married"

(Deshpande), Deshpande demonstrates that myths of feminine obedience and male superiority function as ideological tools that normalize discrimination and silence women's individuality.

Marriage is treated as sacred in Indian society and a wife is expected to suffer in silence to preserve the family. The novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* challenges the patriarchal assumption that a husband possesses unquestionable rights over his wife's body and that marital rape is either impossible or acceptable within the institution of marriage. Sarita's haunting confession, "He attacked me like an animal", reveals the brutality concealed beneath the cultural myth of the harmonious Indian family. Deshpande thus exposes how the sanctification of marriage often becomes a mechanism for legitimizing female suffering while protecting male authority. Sarita gradually questions these inherited myths and recognizes that silence perpetuates oppression. Ponna too has been loved by Kali till she follows him blindly, the day she gives her opinion for going to Chariot festival, the mutual and intimate relationship turns into that of a master and servant

Both protagonists experience patriarchal oppression, Ponna's struggles are rooted in caste, rural traditions, and religious rituals, whereas Sarita confronts patriarchal violence within an educated, urban, middle-class household. Murugan exposes how communal values transform women's reproductive capacities into public concerns, while Deshpande highlights the gendered discrimination. Both writers reveal the psychological and sexual violence concealed within respectable marriages. They advocate a reimagining of female identity grounded in autonomy, dignity, and equality.

Conclusion

Patriarchy functions as a dominant social system that regulates women's bodies, identities, sexuality, and social roles. Perumal Murugan in *One Part Woman* and Shashi Deshpande in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* expose different manifestations of patriarchal oppression in Indian society. While Murugan portrays the influence of caste, tradition, and community over a rural couple, Deshpande examines patriarchal violence within an educated urban middle-class family. Both novels reveal how patriarchal dominion extends beyond male authority and is sustained through social customs, family structures, and internalized gender norms. The fact that education leads to empowerment gets nullified when Sarita who is a reputed Doctor is sexually abused by her husband. The comparison and similarity between Murugan and Deshpande highlights the persistence of patriarchal politics in Indian society. Patriarchy is embedded in customs and caste traditions across In. The novels bring to fore that patriarchy is not merely a social system but a deeply embedded ideology that shapes institutions, relationships and individual identities.

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