

Silenced Masculinity: Kali's Trauma and the Burden of Infertility in *One Part Woman*

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Abstract

*This paper aims to analyze the role of Kali, a character in Perumal Murugan's novel *One Part Woman*, as a symbol of male trauma influenced by hegemonic masculinity and fertility issues. The novel has been interpreted as a reflection of female subjugation, but this paper aims to look more into the trauma experienced by Kali, a male character who was both infertile and socially marginalized. The paper will use R. W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity and trauma theory to show how Kali's trauma was influenced by his internalization of patriarchal values that linked masculinity with virility and fertility. The paper will look into how Kali's inability to perform his role in fertility led him to suffer silently, thus revealing how gender stereotypes harm men too.*

Keywords: *Hegemonic Masculinity, Male Infertility, Trauma, Patriarchy, Identity Crisis, Tamil Literature*

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I. Introduction

In Perumal Murugan's "*One Part Woman*," the author offers a richly layered story that is situated in a rural Tamil Nadu setting, and the author delves into themes such as marriage, fertility, and social constructs. While a lot of scholarly work has gone into the portrayal of the female protagonist, Ponna, and her reproductive exploitation, the character of Kali offers a fascinating yet untapped area for understanding male suffering and patriarchal constructs. The fact that Kali is a husband is directly linked to his capacity to procreate, and his inability to do so makes him socially inadequate.

Patriarchal cultures tend to define masculinity in terms of dominance, control, and reproductive capacity. Connell explains that hegemonic masculinity is the culturally dominant form of masculinity that subordinates other masculine identities (77). Kali's character defines a crisis in terms of this concept, as he cannot live up to these standards. This paper will show how Kali's story defines how patriarchy does not only oppress women, but how it creates emotional and psychological burdens on men too.

Hegemonic Masculinity and the Politics of Fertility

Hegemonic masculinity creates an idea of fertility that is essential to male success. Fatherhood is not just an achievement but an expectation in traditional societies. Kali's infertility is an issue of public interest, thus placing him under constant scrutiny and ridicule. Masculinity is challenged not just by society but also by one's self-perception.

Connell also argues that hegemonic masculinity is mediated through social organizations that promote dominant masculine ideals. These organizations in *One Part Woman* are family, religion, and community. Kali's inability to produce an heir undermines his place in these organizations, thus leading to his marginalization.

In addition, fertility is linked to power. According to Foucault, power is mediated through the body and reproduction (Foucault 145). Kali's body is thus an object of power, with his worth defined by his ability to produce an heir. His failure to comply with societal expectations reveals the vulnerability of masculinity based on biological determinism.

Kali's Emotional Trauma and Silent Suffering

The trauma experienced by Kali can be seen in terms of silence. Unlike other forms of suffering, where people openly display their pain, Kali's suffering is internal. It can be attributed to the cultural expectation for men to be brave and not show signs of weakness. Trauma, according to trauma theorists like Cathy Caruth, occurs outside of language and can be difficult to articulate (Caruth 4). Kali's inability to articulate his suffering can be seen in terms of this concept.

Throughout the novel, Kali can be seen going through different emotional states like denial, anger, and despair. His love for Ponna is genuine, but it is complicated by his feeling of inadequacy. He feels guilty for his wife's suffering, which is a direct result of his failures.

Male infertility is a stigma that further alienates Kali. In most societies, infertility is considered a female problem, and men can be excused for it. However, in Kali's case, it is the men who are at the center of blame. It reflects the reality facing men who do not fit cultural ideals.

Marriage, Masculinity, and the Burden of Support

Kali's position as a husband is filled with contradictions. On the one hand, Kali is expected to stand by Ponna through the humiliation and emotional agony that the social order imposes on her. On the other, Kali is the source of their childlessness. The tension between these two expectations leads to the paradox wherein Kali is expected to be strong and weak at the same time.

In patriarchal societies, the institution of marriage often perpetuates gender roles, with males being expected to perform the roles of protection and provision. Kali's failure to perform the reproductive function leads him to feel as if he is no longer fulfilling his purpose. According to Judith Butler, gender performativity is the idea that gender is performed through repetitive acts (Butler 25). Kali's failure to perform his gender role properly leads him to break down as a masculine individual.

The need to conform to social roles is exemplified through the controversial festival at the temple, wherein social roles are relaxed to allow for transgressive behavior. Kali's reaction to the festival is an indication of his innermost fears and insecurities, as well as his inability to cope with the loss of control.

Societal Surveillance and Masculine Anxiety

Kali's life is characterized by the pervasive nature of surveillance. This is evident in the interest the community shows in Kali's personal life. This is a classic example of the panoptic nature of power as noted by Foucault (Foucault 201). This situation makes Kali more nervous due to the perceived inadequacy he feels in the community.

Gossip is a significant tool of control in the novel. It ensures conformity among the members of the community by promoting norms and penalizing deviance. Kali's fear of ridicule is the motivation behind the internal conflict he undergoes in the novel.

This situation makes Kali feel ashamed of who he is. His sense of identity is no longer centered on his individuality but on the fact that he is a failure in the eyes of the community.

Male Infertility as a Site of Marginalization

The issue of male infertility is also not given adequate attention, either in literature or in social discourse. The character of Kali, therefore, plays an important role in highlighting the issue and its effect on men. It is also important to note that the story challenges the mainstream discourse on men and masculinity, which is often seen as a measure of power and virility.

According to Michael Kimmel, men are often seen as a measure that is opposed to weakness (Kimmel 56). The fact that Kali is infertile, therefore, means that he is weak, a situation that does not allow him to conform to the mainstream discourse on men and masculinity. The situation, therefore, shows that the discourse is limited and does not allow for variations among men.

The fact that Kali is also socially and psychologically marginalized is also an issue that is worth discussing. The situation, therefore, shows that there is a crisis among men, and this is because men are often forced to suppress emotions, a situation that led to his eventual mental breakdown.

II. Conclusion

Kali's character in the novel *One Part Woman* represents a scathing critique of the construct of hegemonic masculinity and its effects on male identity formation. His life represents the understanding that patriarchy is a complex construct and cannot be viewed as a singular force that benefits all men equally.

This paper's focus on the emotional trauma of Kali's character aims to expand the discussion of gender and oppression to include the male experience. His silence, suffering, and ultimate collapse represent the urgent need to challenge traditional notions of masculinity and create space for alternative forms of male identity formation.

One Part Woman challenges the reader to consider the effects of societal constructs on the individual and the understanding that true freedom can only be achieved by tearing down these systems of oppression on all levels.

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