

Performance of the Liminal: A Critical Analysis of the Experience of Liminal in PerumalMurugan's One Part Woman

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ABSTRACT: *The inbetweenness attributed to liminal that negates the binaries is made evident through the homogenising principles that are part of the experience of the ritualistic liminal. This forms the centre of analysis of the paper. The idea of liminal, the ritualistic/performative aspect of it is presented through the lens of chariot festival that finds mention in PerumalMurugan's One Part Woman.*

KEY WORDS: *liminal, liminal entity, chariot festival*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The idea of liminal can be subsumed in the definition of being neither here nor there, an in between space. It negates identities of fixed categories that primarily serve to create divisions and in contrast homogenises entities.

Liminal can be used in its application in three perspectives in the analysis of One Part Woman. Each of them is based on the assumption of self-sealing logic based on David Grey and his notion of the liminal. David Grey argues that there are the beliefs aka self-sealing logics that contain individuals as 'me' and 'you,' margin and centre. The matter of analysis I have taken for study is a thread from the novel One Part Woman: The chariot festival.

First, there is the pre-colonial understanding of the episteme- the chariot festival. Then there is the "epistemic overhaul" (Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak" 2), during the colonial era. That is, how the system of knowledge was subjugated during colonialism due to the civilising mission. Then there is the post-colonial understanding of the episteme, which has to be understood as an offshoot of colonial interpretation of the native tradition and culture.

All three, the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial understanding of the subject of study should be conceived as individual bubbles (Dave Grey), each of which have their individual take on the subject based on ideological under currents defining the period.

Concerning the idea of liminal, first there is the notion of liminal as driven by the principle of time and context. How each experience is marked by a transition from observation to reality (Dave Grey), based on ideological oddities, which can be called assumptions. Then, there is the ritualistic liminal, which operates on a similar principle: how the performances of a community is based on the belief systems of a community, which can be reached using climbing the ladder called rites de passage (Turner 96) or the process (ritualistic stages).

II. ANALYSIS

Let us analyse the experience of liminal on the light of One Part Woman, with special focus on the characters Ponna and Kali:

In 2016, R. Venkatchelapathy wrote an essay demanding solidarity from the public in support of PerumalMurugan, who's Madhorubhagan (One Part Woman) was mired in controversy over the obscene representation of women of Kongu region: "portrayed as a slur on Hindu /Kongu Vellalar woman," Murugan was derided for "denigrating Tirucherangode and its people" (Venkatchelapathy 107). In the Vaikasi Visakam Chariot Festival, during "pre-electricity times" childless women were allowed consummation with a man other than their husband. Such children are termed as Sami Kodutha Pullai (Venkatchelapathy 107). There are evidences that are in support of the "consensual sex" (Venkatchelapathy 106). Venkatchelapathy quotes the example of Periyar E. V. Ramaswamy (107) who was born out of such a union.

Ancient lawmakers of Hindu tradition outline Niyoga Dharma that governs the fundamentals of such a practice. Niyoga Dharma, is an ancient practice that was used to facilitate conception during pre-modern era.

In Manusmriti Niyogais specified in Chapter 9, Clause 59 (Doniger 171):

On failure of issue (by her husband) a woman who has been authorised, may obtain, (in the) proper (manner prescribed), the desired offspring by (cohabitation with) a brother-in-law or (with some other) Sapinda (of the husband).

“To follow the path of [Niyoga] Dharma” constitutes the central theme of the Oscar entry movie *Ekalavya: The Royal Guard* (2007). In the movie, Prince Harshvardhan (the character played by Saif-Ali-Khan) is born to Rani Suhasinidevi (Sharmila Tagore) via Niyoga. In the movie, Eklavya, the character played by Amitabh Bachan (one with whom Rani cohabits) regards Niyoga as his duty to the royal household and remains in compliance to the tradition- that the one with whom the woman “cohabit” should remain “silent” (The Laws of Manu, Chapter 9: Clause 60) and the man (the man appointed for consummation) shall have no say in the child.

These are evidences enough to prove that such practice were prevalent in India (Though the law is anti-female in several ways). In fact, such pre-modern consummations mediated by an institution, the rituals facilitated the purpose, can be found in several other ritualsocieties (communitas).

For instance, in Deuteronomy 25: 5-6 (Bible,175), the Levirate marriage finds mention: If a woman is left childless after the death of her husband, it is accorded that she should take the brother of the deceased husband in marriage, and the first son born in the relation “shall succeed in the name of his brother that is dead.” In Levirate marriage, the brother of a deceased man is obliged to marry his sister-in-law. This might seem what appears from a “modern perspective... exotic, even immoral solution” (Venkatachelapathy 107). Here the word ‘modern’ is significant as it is what which establishes the new benchmark regarding what is right and wrong. The modern is the aftermath of expansion, conquest and civilising mission: the colonial modernity gave new definitions to what seems appropriate, what inappropriate.

The context of the novel *One Part Woman* is British India: “... but it is the British who are still ruling” (Murugan190). How the colonial disregard of the native traditioninterpellated the natives to think in a way that would result in the impression: everything that has to do with transgressing the appropriates of body politics (as laid down by the masters) as inappropriate. PerumalMurugan’s description of how the practice of Niyoga Dharmawas conceived by Kali is the best example to show how much colonialism has inflected the natives to think in terms of the Victorian prudishness: He decided that he should find an opportunity to tell Ponna very firmly that he did not want children. It was much better than losing one’s honour”(Murugan107).

This difference in pre-colonial and post-colonial can be best exemplified through an analysis of liminal experience that is the chariot festival, which finds mention in the work and the deviancy that it was condemned of that resulted in humiliations later on. An analysis of how liminal operates in the work is to present the contrast between past and present: how a work was conceived and accepted once and how it is treated now.

The ritualistic liminal

The three stages of a ritual- pre,liminal and post experience (pre-colonial consummation ritual)- constituting the Niyoga Dharmacan be eked out from *One Part Woman*. Victor Turner explains the three stages of ritual in “Liminality and Communitas,” an essay taken from his seminal work *The Ritual Process*. There is the “separation” (94), then the “limbo of statuslessness” (97), or “margin” (94) or “communitas” (97) and finally “aggregation” (94).

Seperation amounts to the pre-stage, immediately before initiating into the communitas. Therefore, separation can mean a liminal entity preparing to accept the liminal experience. There is always a reason that spurs the separation: death of a previous head, or the resignation of the head of the institution (Pope Emeritus and Pope Francis is an example).

The aggregation refers to how the person is reinstated in the ‘normal’ systemafter passing through the liminal stage. In this phasethe person/the liminal entity is no more the same as before. The word aggregation has been used to indicate that though the person becomes different after transition,the change is accepted by the society, since it is ritually ordained. For example, how an ordinary person assumes reverence when he becomes the head: there shall be a certain sanctity ordained by law to his position.

In *One Part Woman* the decision to send Ponna to the Chariot festival is the pre stage. As in any ritual the elders of the family decide it and the consent is expected of Kali to whether or not Ponna should be sent to the festival, for he is the ritualistic head, the decision maker in the case (the law).Kali’s mother seeks permission:“This year, we need to send Ponna there [chariot festival]. And you must agree to this.... This will be done in secret,... but only with your permission. She is yours, after all” (Murugan 95).

The reason for having to initiate into the ritual is barrenness. In order to authenticate, consolidate a need for ritual barren motif reappears in several sections of the novel. The contrast between the “bare front yard” in the beginning of the novel and Kali’s desire to have a “tree” (Murugan 1) to give him shade is an instance. The tree that could be subsumed as symbolising life and bare front yard signifying barrenness is the quest theme delineating the work: it is the journey of Ponna and Kali to have a child to escape from the stigma of childlessness. There are other such contrasts available in the work that underlines the motif of life/barrenness in the novel. The image of Ponna struggling hard to have a child and the “two nanny goats; one of them had four kids” (Murugan 122), which Ponna has taken the responsibility to take care of is another example. Again, the

motif reappears: "Their barnyard always had little calves and kids for her to play with" (161), suggesting her desire to have a child.

A strong rendering of barrenness is made with the evocation of several myths whose sole purpose is to show why Ponna is barren. Her barrenness is attributed to the curse in the family: Kali's great-grandfather stole a bag of castor seeds and lied before the god Murugan, the deity in Karattur Murugan Temple:

Thinking of Murugan as just an image scratched on a rock, he swore at his feet. For just a sack of castor seed, for a meagre five rupees, he perjured in front of Gods.

They say that soon after the incident, Nachimuthu [great-grandfather] lost his mind... Kali's grandfather was his only child. His father, too, had been his grandfather's only child. They both died young... Seeking redemption from this curse, Kali and Ponna scaled the hill [that leads to Karattur temple]... tried pacifying Murugan's anger by smearing oil on the deity's body. (Murugan 22-23)

Then there is the myth associating how a girl was brutally ravished by one of Kali's ancestors, and that it is the girl's curse that has left him childless: "Devatha, our Goddess who resides up in that hill, will seek justice from those who did this to me. No girl child will ever be born in their families. Even the male children shall grow up to be impotent and die young" (Murugan 27). These are coupled with several rituals that Ponna and Kali have to go through to be done with their curse: "beg for alms" (24), "pray and offer pongal to... Devatha" (33), "drink the fruit of some shoots" (43), walk around "barren rock" (56) that stretches out to cliff.

Along with this should be understood the mental state of the liminal entity, which also constitutes a major role in necessitating the need to go through the ritual experience. Ponna's desire to have the child of an untouchable is the point deserving mention. The word desire is symbolically characterised by how humans begin to merge to becoming part of a system. In the novel, it is seen that the taunts and contempt that Ponna has to suffer exacerbates her desire to have a child: she is not welcome to any auspicious occasion, not even death. The mental state of the liminal entity can be resolved only through passing through the liminal phase presided by the sacred.

Turner mentions this in his essay "Liminality and Communitas" as the "ritual power of the weak" (102). The initiation ceremony of the Ndembu chief shows how the commoners are "privileged" over those in the higher status. They can curse or humiliate them in any regard. Similar situation can be seen with Ponna, just prior to her going into the liminal phase.

When Ponna and Kali think about adopting a child, Ponna makes it evident that she wants a child "from the same caste" (229), if at all they were to adopt. However, a shift in the perspective occurs as she is traveling in the cart to the chariot festival. She is completely encapsulated by the child of Maran who accompanies them, who is of a lower caste: Maran was allowed in the cart on the condition that he would ride the cart. Ponna's thought about the child (of Maran) is significant: "In her mind Ponna lifted the child and kissed her" (163).

This thought could be taken as an example to show the separation from the past, which initiates the liminal experience. The fixed hierarchies (past) of caste disintegrate in Ponna's desire to have a child. A complete rapture occurs in the status system as the neophyte enters the liminal stage. This sense of statuslessness continues until the end of the liminal stage. The liminal entities, here Ponna, have to go through the liminal stage to have the desired change (have a child).

The liminal stage is featured with several characteristics, one of which is invisibility (Turner 102). Ponna who has been given a new name in order to conceal her identity in the chariot festival is an example: "He [the God, the person with whom Ponna is to consummate] has given me a new name so that no one around gets suspicious" (Murugan 225). In the novel, the word 'God' is used to refer to the person with whom the consummation is to be done to denote the religious sanctity attached to the process: the law of the religion ordains it.

The second characteristic is passiveness: "... liminal entities are characterised by passiveness. Their behaviour is normally passive or humble" (Turner 96). In the novel, for example, after encountering her God, Ponna allows him to lead her: "She decided to let him lead... she did not know the way and she had no sense of the people around her. 'He is my god. My job is to go where he takes me,' was all she would think" (Murugan 224-25). Here, Ponna, the liminal entity can be treated as a tabula rasa, over which is inscribed the knowledge of the "group" (Turner 103), that demands her to comply, to obey, what is willed of her. Ponna is stripped of all her agency. Here there is the homogenising of the hierarchy occurring.

As mentioned earlier, every male figure in the chariot festival is a "God (Murugan 221)," and there is no sense of discretion on what caste to which they belong or what people they really are. Muthu, Ponna's brother, explains to Kali that the men in the festival are not "strangers, but "gods," when Kali regards the entire ceremony as sham:

Mappillai. Don't call him a stranger. Who remembers faces? All men are gods that night. Think of him as god, you might even feel happy about it. Isn't it a great blessing if our child come from god? Haven't you heard

people remark, “This child is a boon from god?” Those children were born exactly this way Mapillai.’ (Murugan 138)

“Sexual continence/sexuality” (Turner 104-106) is a binary that is significant in analysing the liminal entity who passes through the liminal stage. The liminal entity is characterised by sexual continence, a feature that is seen in the movie *Ekalavya: The Royal Guard*. Rani Suhasinidevi consummates Prince Harshvardhan on the basis of the fundamentals of Niyoga Dharma that denies the pleasure quotient in the act of consummation. This is cited in Chapter IX, Clause 62 and 63 of Manusmriti (Doniger 173):

62. But when the purpose of the appointment with the widow has been completed in accordance with the rules, the two of them should behave towards one another like a guru and a daughter-in-law.

63. If the appointed couple dispense with the rule and behave lustfully, then they both fall as violators of the bed of a daughter-in-law and a guru

In *One Part Woman*, Ponnais found to agree to go to the chariot festival in her desperation for having a child. She addresses the man with whom she has the cohabitation as “god,” and there is no other relation established between them. In fact, she sees the men who have come there as Gods: “It looked like there was away leading out in every direction; there were Gods wandering everywhere” (221).

It is in the liminal stage that the myth of the Madhorubhagan finds space. Piku Chowdhury in “Tagore’s Gender-Consciousness in his Perception of the Divine in his “Pooja:” Deeper Folds of Anxiety,” while referring to Tagore’s *Gitabitan* portrays Ardhanareeswara (Madhorubhagan): “...for the right comprehension of words and their senses, I salute Parvati – the mountain’s daughter and Parameswara – the supreme lord, the parents of the universe, who are perpetually united even as words and their meanings are...” (Chowdhary 26). This Chowdhary borrows from the first canto of *Raghuvangsham*.

In Tagore’s rendering the God-human relation assumes the dimension of male-female union, and it is realised that the ‘Transcendental’ can only be reached via such a union. Piku Chowdhary explains it as the “highest spiritual experience (24).” These lines from Tagore’s *Gitabitan* (*Garden of Songs*) are an example:

You alone I hold as near

You’re my Mother, And Father too, All my world, I find so dear (Trans. Majumdar)

The divine is addressed as lover and Tagore (taking cue from the vaishnava tradition) takes the female voice, and it presents a “kaleidoscopic variety of love, ... unconditional surrender, intense longing... (Piku Chowdhary 24)” suggesting the need for union with god and the female. This repeats in the union of Ponna and God-figure in the novel. The union is required for the divine experience to take place: to bear the seed of divinity.

The story of Madhorubhagan is presented in the novel through the frame of a folk theatre. There is the description of Madhorubhagan by the clown:

I was talking about... about Madhorubhagan, the one who is one part female. The god who stands on the Karattur hill and has the goddess for the left half. That is why he is called Madhorubhagan... the male and female side cannot touch each other despite being so close (Murugan 216-17)

‘The male and female side cannot touch’ suggest sexual continence, the experience of transcendental, which Ponna goes through.

Then there is the post-stage, where in the liminal entity is reinstated (transition) into the society. This is evinced in the acceptability (law) seen in what she has done. Muthu brings consent of Kali to Ponna, though he did not give one, and in approval of what she is about to do Muthu says: “You go on Ponna. Think of God in your mind (149).”

In short, the liminal entity (Ponna) can be seen as showing the following characteristics (described in terms of binaries as defined by Victor Turner (106)):

Table

The characteristics shown by liminal entity (Ponna):

LIMINAL	STATUS SYSTEM ^a
Transition	State
Homogeneity	Heterogeneity
Communitas	Structure
Sexual continence	Sexuality
Humility	Pride of position
Sacredness	Secularity
Sacred instruction	Technical knowledge
Absence of Rank	Distinctions of Rank
Equality	Inequality

Source: Turner, Victor. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*. Cornell Paperbacks: Ithaca, 1966. Print.

Performance of the liminal

The last part of the novel embarks on the experiences of Kali, the mental anguish he has to go through when he realises that Ponna has gone to chariot festival. The character in Kali demonstrates the divergence from the ritualistic liminal representing the chariot festival.

The way Kali responds is the paradigm constituting the compliance of the natives to something entirely rejected by the masters: "His lips murmured, 'she has cheated you, she has cheated you.' He banged his head against the door.... 'You whore!' He shouted. 'Have you really gone? Have you gone despite my saying no?'" (Murugan 239). This is similar to how ApffelMarglin describes Devdasis "as... prostitutes and hence as being immoral (ApffelMarglin 6)." The mimic man that Kali has become promulgates him to think in this strain.

The strategic essentialism facilitates a critique of this situation. "The idea of strategic essentialism accepts that essentialist categories of human identity should be criticised, but emphasises that one cannot avoid using such categories at times in order to make sense of the social and political world" (Spivak, Spivak Reader 247-276). The female body is used in this situation as analysing the self-sealing logic of colonialism and its arguments: females are supposed to behave in a way that is in accord of the ideals of colonial morality.

It cannot be avoided that the issues pertaining to having denigrated the Kongu Vellalar women should look at the female agency: that of Ponna. Here I have used the framework of colonialism and its aftereffect.

The representation of women, unquestioningly denies the voice of the female (Ponna): Kali decides whether she can go to the festival, Ponna becomes 'whore' when she goes there without the consent of the male head (Kali). Kali constitutes that class of 'interpreters' who will take forward the ways of the masters, as against the native tradition, which he treats as insensible. His mimicry is visible at his prospect of committing suicide on realising what his wife has gone to do: "He slid down to the ground. The rope running from the corn stacks pressed against his back. He looked above. The branches of the Portia tree had spread themselves across the sky" (Murugan 240). Here the motif of Kali as the colonial male figure is assuming shape: the dictums that colonialism has taught him is so significant, has impinged on his life to the extent that he cannot think otherwise. The extension to this argument can be seen in the recent hue-and-cry against Madhorubhagan: "outrage" (In defence of the opposition to Madhorubhagan) against the Murugan's historicising of generations of children born out of cohabitation. This was what Venkatachalapathy comes in protest against.

Another side pertaining to female agency is how Ponna receives support from all the other family members. Here also Ponna has no voice of her own.

However, from a post-colonial perspective Ponna as a site of recognition (of what she has done) and rejection (by Kali) is the example for the ambiguity surrounding the natives due to the effect of colonialism. They cannot completely move away from the roots, for they are natives, nor can they completely assimilate into the master culture.

What Murugan presents is based on history and it cannot be refuted, for there are evidences to prove. The pre-colonial representation of Niyoga Dharma is a bubble reached through a certain liminal phase, and that has become different in the colonial context: now it is understood through a different bubble. This can be represented through David Grey's representation of the liminal: The pre-colonial bubble conceives the Niyoga Dharma as ethical, institutionally constituted, while the colonial intervention has resulted in a different bubble that regards the practice as unethical (a different discourse validated by what Spivak calls as positional hazard). The archival knowledge such as by Margel has corroborated the discourse through the help of the mimic men. The relevance of liminal can be subsumed in the following arguments:

1. It gives a glimpse into the narrative different from colonial discourse
2. It helps interrogate our own petty prejudices that does not take the view of other as valid

This significance given to liminal and the historicising, the rendition of a bygone culture in the form of a tale, of the narrative is best marked in Murugan's presentation of Chariot festival. This is a proper response to the positional hazard to which the ritual of Niyoga Dharma has been reduced to. It also offers the readers the possibility of multiple narratives in the place of one history.

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