

CHAPTER III

EMPOWERED VERSUS SUBDUED WOMEN

Ending gender inequality is not just the right thing to do, it is the smart thing to do

giving women farmers access to the equal resources they need would lift up to

150 million people out of hunger

- Ertharin Cousin

Women contribute and participate in the development of any society. Besides working hard to fulfill their family needs, they contribute to the nation's development. The growth of women from the suppressed past has not been easy. Being belittled in the name of gender, they have been trying to escape the stigmas and prove that they can also perform their duties independently. From birth to death, women have survived threats like infanticide, child marriage, lack of education, sexual abuse, dowry, and widowhood. Many revolutionaries like EVR Periyar, Moovalur Ramamirtham Ammayar, Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy, and Dr. Dharmambal have worked tirelessly for women's empowerment. Today, women are playing a significant role in maintaining the nation's social and economic development besides successfully fulfilling their home-making roles.

Women in general are survivors of hardships, and women of rural India are more than just survivors. Lacking access to all the basic rights and support, they are not given primary education too. Before that the female sex ratio in villages is considerably low. Many female foetuses are aborted. Children who escape infanticide are forced to get married in childhood in India. There are still cases where children below twelve years are married to older men in rural villages. Moreover, they attain puberty at their husband's house. It is very painful to note that girl children who have not attained any level of physical or emotional maturity are given in marriage. If their husbands are supportive,

they can lead a happy life. Independence can be achieved only later. When the husband or the family is not supportive, the woman struggles alone to raise her children and family.

The term subaltern also includes women. Subaltern refers to individuals or groups who are subordinate or marginalized within a social, economic, and political hierarchy. Women have traditionally been treated as subalterns in many societies and cultures across the world. They are subjected to discrimination, violence, and exclusion from all spheres. In many parts of the world, women face obstacles to their empowerment and equality. These include beliefs that restrict their rights to education, work, and political participation, as well as cultural attitudes and religious practices that bring about gender roles and stereotypes. Among all the subalterns, women are the most marginalized, especially when the society is patriarchal. They have to undergo double oppression. Their voices are silenced both in society and at home.

Submissiveness is considered the basic characteristic of girl children. This is because of the stereotypical ideas. What Niraj Dang says in his review article on “Women as Subaltern: A Critical Evaluation of *That Long Silence* and *A God of Small Things*” is very pertinent in this context: “women as nurturers and men as protectors are instilled as impressions inside the childhood to be consolidated very firmly into maturity. . . . they are taught strict lessons in submission, sacrifice and self abnegation that men comfortably approve of” (1). Feminist movements have emerged all over the world to challenge these social and cultural norms that subjugate women. These movements aim to empower women, change societal attitudes towards gender, and fight for gender equality and women’s rights.

Women are victimised and stigmatised. Rural women are the epitomes of hard work. They run their families with a very meagre income and save for their children’s career and education. In villages, most of the women suffer because of alcoholic husbands

who do not earn. All the responsibilities fall on their shoulders, and they go for daily labour, work as home maids, rear cattle, and do agriculture. From ancient times till date, they have been working hard on par with their male counterparts enduring many kinds of struggles. Even when they are deprived of education, they work hard to support their families financially. Frailty is always associated with women. They are treated as the second sex. Prolonged suppression has made women confine themselves inside their homes.

Women's contribution to the family is always ignored. They never receive consideration and credit for all their hard work and sacrifices. When man wants his wife acknowledge him for being the man of the house, he does not even take time to compliment his wife's cooking. However, for him, his wife is just a being who remains idle, killing her time at home. Only when the male stands at the point of losing the woman in his life, does he understand her importance. The most unnoticed woman character of Murugan is Mangasuri of *Estuary*. When Kumarasurar loses his sanity, confused by the evil effects of modern technology and worried about his son's future, it is Mangasuri who comes to help. "He began to cry. Mangasuri hurried to his side. He held her and wept on her shoulder. . . . She wiped his face, switched on the fan, patted him on the chest and lulled him to sleep as if he were a baby. He seemed to need the pampering. . . . Kumarasurar curled his body into the foetal position" (169). Kumarasurar understands her importance when he goes to town to meet his friend. He realises that he has always taken his wife for granted. When he receives compliments from his friend for his cooking, he understands how compliments could become their sunshine making their lives bright.

Murugan says that he is not a feminist. However, his portrait of the female characters makes one understand how independent his women are. The majority of his women are decision-makers and strong-willed. Murugan also shows subdued women.

When asked about patriarchy and the control men wield over women, he says, “Whether it is money, or caste or religion, dominance can never give happiness. Those who are oppressed can enjoy the pleasures of life amidst suffering. But the oppressor would always be restless thinking about the ways to suppress, the ways to express their power and keeping a preying eye on others” (21).

Like Tamil Nadu, the Kongu society is also patriarchal. Besides normal women’s familial and social life, Murugan also exposes the state of Dalit women in the Kongu society. Murugan takes time and care to present the reality of the life of his male and female characters of the region. In the Kongu region, which is basically farmlands, women have more affinity towards nature than men. They are connected to the soil. Whether they are of land-holding caste or lower castes, they are women of the soil.

Women of Land:

Women are more connected with nature than men, whether it is mountains, plains, agriculture or fisheries. Femininity and nature are closely interrelated terms. In most South Asian Countries, every element of nature is associated with women and Mother Earth; rivers and mountains have feminine names. Women are worshipped as forest goddess(Aranyani), goddess of fertility(Parvati), and goddess of food and abundance (Annapurani). Furthermore, the degradation of women and the degradation of nature also have a close link. Women and nature’s reproductive ability are associated.

In Indian Cosmology, the world exists because of two contradictory processes; “in both exoteric and esoteric traditions, the world is produced and renewed by the dialectical play of creation and destruction, cohesion and disintegration”. The two opposites produce tension, and a dynamic energy called Shakti appears. The Communion of Shakti (the energy and feminine power) with the creative power of the cosmos (masculine power), which is Purusha, is called nature (Prakriti). Everything is the manifestation of this energy.

Without Shakti, Purusha becomes powerless (Shiva 38, 39). Moreover, nature is seen as the expression of feminine energy.

Women's ability to create, their diversified nature, sustenance, tolerance, and flexibility are symbols of nature. Every element of nature is independent but intimately related to other elements. Similarly, women are individual souls but connected with male energy. Murugan's animals symbolise women and daughters. He uses the symbol of Poonachi to represent the daughters of Indian villages. He calls the goat 'she'. Her life is the portrayal of women. She is independent, humble, loving, and sacrifices herself for her family. She brings happiness to a lonely couple, grows as their daughter, sacrifices her children in times of drought and at last gives her life and is transformed into an idol.

The association of women with nature and women's degradation to nature's destruction is called ecofeminism. Also called ecological feminism, the term was coined in 1974 by the French Feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne. The concept is further split into Radical, Cultural, and Social ecofeminism. Radical ecofeminism deals with man's patriarchal dominance over women and nature, which has led to the degradation of both.

Understanding man's authority over others becomes an essential characteristic of this type of ecofeminism. Whereas, Cultural ecofeminism does not go deeply into stereotypical concepts but is focused on the biological relationship between women and nature, the similarities, and their sensitivity to changes. Social ecofeminism does not stop with biology but says that nature and women are connected through social and other material factors. (Das)

Women, like nature, produce; they not only reproduce but also help maintain the neutrality of family and society as the food chain for ecological balance. Murugan's women do more than have a family and bear children. They cultivate, protect the land and participate in food production for the society. As Vandana Shiva says, "Peasants, as

experts, as plant breeders, as soil scientists, as water managers, have kept the world fed all these centuries” (98).

The destruction of nature is considered similar to the marginalisation of women. Women understand nature better and they are more sensitive to the anti-ecological activities like deforestation, pollution and depletion of natural resources. The old woman in *Poonachi* worries about the reduction of animal ratio and deforestation and she laments, “once upon a time, wild hounds, jackals, leopards and herds of deer had lived in that forest. Now, there were only wild boar. ‘People keep destroying everything and shoving every last bit into their mouths. How then can anything or anyone survive here apart from human beings? In the end, can even people survive for very long?’” (85).

Women love their environment. Murugan in his *Resolve* shows Marimuthu’s grandmother Poovayi’s life attached to her land and the neem tree. It was a part of her husband’s inherited property. Both of them have toiled hard for bringing it to a good condition so that it becomes arable. Poovayi becomes very much attached to the land and the neem tree. When her husband dies due to a family dispute over the land, the land is left unused. Since both of them have been closely associated with the land, she feels that her husband’s soul is in the land. She wishes to get back to the land and work there at least once before she dies. While dividing the land after settling the dispute, Marimuthu gets that part of the land without the neem tree. Both of them feel very sad.

Murugan’s women are closely linked with the productive part of nature. They are farmers. Like all the other occupational titles, the term farmer is also gender specific. Even in agricultural families, the father’s occupation is mentioned as farmer and mothers’ as merely housewife though the woman performs equal labour. Marimuthu’s grandmother Poovayi performs all types of agricultural work. Even at her old age and diminishing eyesight, she earns her livelihood by herself. These women have a close bond with the

land and plants. Murugan's narration helps readers understand how the emotions of his women are reflected in nature. In *Pyre*, Murugan describes the environment as 'arid', 'white summer heat', 'ashen dryness' when Saroja enters the village, full of fear.

These women who are involved in agriculture are more independent than other women folks of Tamil Nadu. They work in such an industrious manner to make sure of the economic, social and psychological sustenance of their families. These women of the villages are also more empowered than the educated women of the cities. They fulfil all their homely responsibilities, work in the fields or in whatever occupation they are capable of. They form self-help groups, and maintain the economical balance of their families. They are called the Women of Land – the women who strive hard in land, who are farmers, who work as farmhands, who are bread winners, who are born and brought up in land.

One of the best examples for women of the soil as given by Murugan is his mother, Perumayi. His *Amma* is a recollection of Murugan's experiences with his mother. In the book, Murugan brings his mother to life by his clear descriptions – his mother's habits and beliefs, hard work, and her way of farming. Murugan's father sold soda in a theatre and his mother took care of the farm. She taught him farming and cattle rearing. She was a traditional farmer who believed in the importance of cattle and traditional practices for the well-being of the land.

According to her, land is life giver and she explains to Murugan how farming provides many benefits to people other than money. There is a saying, "uzhudhavan kanakku paatha ulakkol kooda minjaadhu" (if a farmer makes account of the expenses, the profits won't be equal to the *ulakkol*). *Ulakkol* is a vessel used to measure grain. When Murugan said that there will not be any profit from agriculture, his mother proved to him that there are many other things a farmer can get other than money like, cattle feed, greens

and vegetables and the harvest, seeds for next sowing. And if the work is done by the farmer himself, it will save the expenses on labour.

Women based agriculture is more fertile than the modern agricultural revolutions. When men started going to other profit based industries, the women of the village took complete control over agriculture. Vandana Shiva in *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India* says, “For more than forty centuries, Third World peasants, often predominantly women, have innovated in Agriculture. Crops have crossed continents, crop varieties have been improved, patterns of rotational and mixed cropping have been evolved to match the needs of the crop community and the ecosystem” (98).

Women are still fighting for equal wages and safety in their working environment. This is one of the most important points always put forward by feminist activists. A major part of the labour force in the world is women. Nevertheless the wages they earn is considerably less. Sanjay Prakash Sharma and B.N. Singh in their book, *Women Education and Women Rights in India* point out that, “Women and girls constitute one-half of the world’s population, one-third of its labour force. They perform two-thirds of the world’s work hours. They earn, by estimate only one-tenth of the world’s income. They own less than one-hundredth of the world’s property” (16). These women do not have education or exposure to the modern world to get empowered. Land acts as their teacher and supporter.

It is land that uplifts women from their low level. Agriculture, unlike other fields, gives women their equal importance. Sharma and Singh validate the point by saying, “Worldwide, outside of the agricultural sector, in both developed and developing countries, women are still averaging slightly less than 78% of the wages given to men for the same work” (5). Women involved in agriculture related fields also are lowly paid in some cases. But that holds good with the women farmhands or daily wage workers,

whereas women who are directly involved in cultivation, independent farmers, earn on par with men.

Though Murugan's women characters are referred as 'women of soil', they can also be divided into two types; the empowered women and subdued women.

Empowered Women:

The Women farmers are the deciding force, independent, strong willed and empowered. Their life from birth to death is solely connected with the soil. His novels are set in 1980s and almost all of his characters are illiterate. Besides lack of education, they are married at a very young age. They work hard in fields to earn their livelihood. They are economically independent and save every penny for the future. They try to satisfy all their basic needs with the money they get from their agricultural produce.

The women collect firewood from forests and greens from the fields, thatch houses, and do all sorts of works available to them. Apart from having fields, they also maintain a small vegetable garden to meet the needs of the house. After taking whatever they require for the house, they sell the remaining vegetables. Once they taste the fruit of independence, they also support their fellow women to become independent.

Independence and hard work are the major traits of Kongu women. They do work equal to men. They do the works of men and in farming households there are no discriminations as men or women in terms of work. According to them, they have to work hard for the well-being of their family. Murugan in his preface to the book *Amma* praises his mother as a model mother and says,

My mother was the very embodiment of a woman from a farming family. She did not know much beyond her work, her labour. Amma handled all sorts of tasks usually considered the domain of men. She didn't think of work as belonging to men or women.

What she did care about was ensuring that her family led a life of dignity, holding their heads high. All her distress and worries were about her family. (x)

Murugan uses Poonachi, a goat as the representative of the women of the region. *Poonachi: Or The Story of a Black Goat* by Perumal Murugan is a simple novel about a goat kid. On further analysis, Poonachi can be considered an extended metaphor of all the women. The novel is an allegory, a beast fable, a political and social satire. Suppressed and controlled by her family, she brings joy and hope to lives of the people around her and dies for her family.

Chitra Ahanthem, in *Books and Conversations*, reviews the novel as, “Masterly and nuanced, Perumal Murugan’s tale forces us [to] reflect on our own responses to hierarchy and ownership, selflessness and appetite, love and desire, living and dying. Poonachi is every woman at the bottom of every social, political and cultural ladder where she has no say in what she wants and believes and who must breathe with fear and the threat of violence.”

The novel, *Poonachi* was published in Tamil in 2016 and was later translated into English in 2018 by N. Kalyan Raman. The novel has great importance in both the literary and social life of Murugan. She resurrected Murugan and brought him back to writing. She helped him do what he loved more than anything – to write. This proof is enough to show why Poonachi is the most revolutionary and powerful of all of Murugan’s characters. Murugan faced controversy because of his novel *One Part Woman* and he announced his own obituary. But after two years Poonachi gave him life again. In his Preface to *Poonachi*, he says about his experience of writing again, Poonachi is the child Murugan reared lovingly in his imagination.

I am fearful of writing about humans; even more fearful of writing about gods. . . . All right, then, let me write about animals. . . Goats are problem-free, harmless and, above all, energetic. . . . I didn't take very long to write this novel. Three months went by like a second. In that moment, pushing aside all the confusions, dilemmas and sorrows I had experienced so far, a great joy filled my being. The reason was Poonachi. It was a major challenge to create her on the page and the chief impediment was the diffidence that had come to reside in me. I believed that Poonachi would be able to break it. Having finished the novel, I feel now that my faith in her was not unjustified. (v-vi)

Surviving many obstacles, Poonachi holds that little life of her for her children and family. Her life is typical of girl children in India. She lives for her masters, separated from her love, and at last dies. After a long struggle, she manages to break free from the shackles. The couple, who is very loving towards her when her kids are sold for a higher price, curse her when they have difficulties caring for her. The old woman says, "Should we keep this cursed thing till the next litter?" (129).

The couple, who has been living alone after the marriage of their daughter, welcomes Poonachi happily. Being a motherless child, she was given special attention by them. After Poonachi was given to the old man by a giant, she starts her saga of suffering as a girl child starts living her life without knowing the wickedness of her surroundings.

As some lucky girl children escape infanticide, Poonachi escapes from an eagle which preyed on her. The author writes, "I don't know how many more hazards this creature has to face. Will she overcome them or go under? Who knows what is fated for her?" (10). And again she survives from the attack of a wild cat, "As if in a dream, she felt something seize her throat. Involuntarily, she let out a loud cry. It was the loudest she had cried yet" (22). The birth of a girl child is considered in two ways; a burden or a goddess.

In the case of Poonachi, the old woman at the beginning does not wish to have her but accepts her wholeheartedly later.

The old man considered Poonachi as a God given gift, and the woman feels as if “. . . she were seeing her own child after a long time apart. . . . [and she tells Poonachi] ‘Aren’t you lucky to come and live here?’ A determination that she must somehow raise this kid to adulthood took root in her heart. It had been a long time since there was such pleasant chit-chat between the couple. Because of the kid’s sudden entry into their lives, they ended up talking about the old days” (12).

After birth, girl children face health hazards due to malnutrition more than male children. Poonachi, as she has not fed on her mother’s milk appeared a dull child. The old lady tries to feed her in all possible ways but the other kids who are healthy and robust bully her. But Poonachi somehow survives illness and attacks. “This Poonachi will survive anything” (26). A girl child also undergoes sufferings, strives hard and survives. Her colour becomes a problem, as in the case of women children. But she is also unique by herself. Murugan says, “Her black colour was a problem. . . Their colour provoked instant hostility. When they saw Poonachi, the officials would go on the alert immediately” (31).

Like all girls who want to live their life boldly, Poonachi exhibits revolution and freedom. Women are shackled inside their homes, kitchens and society. However, if one woman breaks away the chains and attains freedom, she influences and helps her fellow women to taste freedom as well. Poonachi, who is a weak goat, is given enormous freedom by the couple. “her body was not used to the rigours of wandering around in the hot sun across fields and hilly terrain. But she liked it. From now on, she would come here every day” (59). Like girl children and women having a bond with nature, Poonachi too has her bond.

Goats are very different from sheep. Though they are tethered or bound by ropes, they hold their heads high while walking, climb on bushes with two legs to eat the leaves. The sheep on the other hand are not tethered. However, they do not make use of their independence. On seeing the sheep walking with their heads low, she says,

Why did these lambs keep their heads down even while walking? Can you call it a living when you live without looking at anything but to the ground? The trees, the moon, the stars, daylight- had these lambs ever looked at those marvels? Unless we look up, how can we see the sky? They even sniffled, cleared their throats and sneezed while looking at the ground. They didn't see the faces in front of them Look at the goats. . . . They always stood with their heads held high. They focused only on the leaves that they could eat with their heads up. While walking, they looked straight ahead. . . . Goats always tried to break free their shackles. Sheep had none, so they didn't need to make the effort. If it was your nature to bow down, why would anyone shackle you? (60, 61)

Poonachi teaches independence in her own way. She is proof to the point that the society will try to control anyone who tries to revolt against many of the stigmas. Those who bend down will have to bend lower and lower. One should try to break free from their shackles. Poonachi loves the freedom when she gets lost on her way to the old woman's daughter's village. She enjoys her time playing in the wild. She loves the trees and feels that it is her real home.

When the couple takes her to their daughter's house during the festival, Poonachi happens to see Poovan and starts loving him. Poovan is fully white except for a mole in his jaw. She first feels that he will not like her as she is black with a protruding belly. But he likes her and is friendly. They play catch-me-if-you can. He is so concerned about her.

He shows her all the best places to find fodder. But after a week, when the old couple returns home, they are separated. Poonachi is reluctant to part from Poovan. Knowing her love for Poovan, the lady ties her with a rope and thus, Poonachi is in shackles.

When Poonachi attains puberty, she is made to mate with an old ram, and she becomes pregnant. The old lady cares for her like her own daughter. Poonachi gives birth to seven kids and this helps the couple greatly even though Poonachi has to bear the pain of pregnancy, childbirth, and feeding. As there are seven kids, she becomes very weak. The couple sells the kids and fulfills their needs. After a few months, Poonachi gets a chance to go to the old lady's daughter's house and she meets Poovan again. They are delighted, and mated. However, their happiness does not last long. The next day Poovan is sacrificed for the village god. Poonachi becomes pregnant, and again she gives birth to seven kids. She loses all her strength. As there is a drought in the village, there is no food and the couple kills her kids one after the other for food. Poonachi dies the next time she becomes pregnant again.

Thus, Poonachi sacrifices herself for her family like all women who give up on their dreams, health and well-being for the sake of their families. At the end of the novel, Poonachi dies and Murugan uses the term 'a stone idol' to refer to the goat. As Kannagi turned into a stone idol, Poonachi has become one with gods and becomes an idol as the old woman once remarked "You are the deity of our clan, Messaya himself" (144).

Although many of Murugan's women are strong and empowered, the most strong-willed are the single mothers. In many of Murugan's households, single mothers work hard in the fields like their male counterparts and fulfill all their responsibilities at home. They take great care in rearing their children. Even when they cannot work in the fields, they go to others' fields for work and take up small works for their family's sustenance.

These mothers are like nature, especially the trees, which offer themselves to others till their final stage. Ashish Kothari in his article “Sunderlal Bahuguna: Himalaya’s foot soldier” quotes Bahuguna’s Right Livelihood Award Speech, which is one of the messages of Chipko Movement: “Both the trees and the mothers teach that to live and also to be ready to die for the sake of others proves to be the real fountain of bliss.”

Murugan’s diligent women are, Marimuthu’s grandmother Poovayi in *Resolve*, Kumaresan’s mother in *Pyre*, Kali’s mother and Ponna in *One Part Woman*, Thannaya Patti in *Aalandapatchi*, the old woman in *Current Show*, who are widows. Widows are traumatised and treated inhumanly in Indian society, mainly Hindu society. Nevertheless, these women characters gain strength from the land and prove their resilience by showing their revolutionary nature. They are strong women who plough, till, sow, irrigate, weed and harvest.

Autumn Stanely in her “Daughters of Isis, Daughters of Demeter: When women Sowed and Reaped” credits women for the use of ash as fertiliser; the creation of work tools such as the hoe, spade, shovel and simple plough; fallowing and crop rotation; mulching, terracing, contour planting, irrigation and land recuperation through the tree planting. She [also] says that the eight most important cereals (white rice, maize, barley, oats, sorghum, millet and rye) were all domesticated by women. (qtd. in Shiva105)

Likewise, Murugan’s women are efficient. They are equal to male farmers. Even when they rest, they make brooms from coconut fronds and set up gardens or shell groundnuts. Poovayi of *Resolve* is a remarkable empowered woman. She is Marimuthu’s paternal grandmother. A widow of around eighty years, she lives alone in a small hut in her field. Even with a few appearances, she gains prominence in the novel. Marimuthu is very fond of his grandmother. When Marimuthu asks his grandmother to rest, she does not like the idea of being idle in old age. She feels, “She had never thought about simply

enjoying the fruits of her hard work. She had never considered the possibility that there could be happiness in doing nothing” (105). In addition to contributing to farming and cattle rearing, they trade, maintain finances and save for hard times like drought.

Most of Murugan’s women characters are illiterate rural women, but their independence and intellect are awe-inspiring. Thus, the Kongu women contribute to the family’s economic welfare. Poovayi is very independent and hard-working. She has her son and grandson but does not rely on them for anything except when she needs something from the town.

Marimuthu feels that she does not need to work hard in such an old age. As she has bequeathed her land to her son, she works in others’ fields, weeding, harvesting, reaping, shelling groundnut and making brooms from the coconut leaf. She never misses any opportunity to make and save money to be self-sufficient and prevent people from talking ill of her after her death.

Though she has lost her husband, Poovayi did everything towards her children as her husband would have done. Even when her eyesight started failing, she does not seek anyone’s help. Marimuthu says, “patti had endured much hardship in her life and had made sure things were alright for the family.” (101). According to her, being alive is being active and independent.

Poovayi feels proud that she can work hard even in her eighties: “Even a twenty-year-old girl cannot work as efficiently as I do” (102). Marimuthu calls his grandmother a banyan tree which stands firm even after losing the root. (101). She has kept a large amount of money in the crevices of the thatches of coconut frond roof. Similarly, Marimuthu’s maternal grandmother also saved much money. Unlike Poovayi, she is greedy and selfish. Poovayi’s soul is connected with her land and she has many memories to cherish. A piece of land lies uncultivated due to a problem between her late husband

brother. Her last wish is to get that part of the land with the neem tree after division. The economic independence of these women is surprising. Unlike men, they do not have a proper job. They do the works available to them. Though born in a community of landlords, Poovayi did not hesitate to work in other's fields. Selvan's grandmother in *Rising Heat*, after their lands are taken for urbanisation, does not go to her sons' houses but independently works in other's fields.

The next notable woman of Murugan is Kumaresan's mother Marayi in *Pyre*. She is seen as an evil, casteist and cruel mother-in-law. She is a single mother who cares for the land, cattle and her son Kumaresan after becoming a widow at a very young age. She is able to send him to a school and takes good care of him. Marayi is one of the empowered and self-sufficient women. The trauma of losing someone close is tragic, and the pain agonising. To add to the loss of her husband and her sufferings, her family is ostracized due to her son Kumaresan's inter caste marriage. The little help she has been getting from her parents is also denied to her because they also do not accept the marriage. Moreover, her fear of losing her son also may be one of the reasons for her attitude towards Saroja.

In Indian society, as much as marriage and married women are considered sacred, the widows are marginalised. The treatment given to widows differs in every community. In the past, widows had undergone self-immolation practice. Their heads were shaven, and they were forbidden to use bright colours, and given white clothes, food without salt, onion, garlic or spices; they were ostracised from the family and social gatherings and confined to in a separate part of the house. In Kongu society, the widows' heads are not shaven, and they are not given white clothes; but other practices like ostracising from gatherings and events continue. In his article "Remembering a Kongu Woman Widowed in her Childhood", Meenakshi Sundaram remembers the story of actor Sivakumar's aunt,

who was widowed when she was just seven. She was married at the age of seven to a nine-year-old boy. The boy died while playing in a well and the girl was given a white sari, and she died at the age of ninety as a widow without experiencing any happiness in her life, like motherhood.

Even when widow remarriage is accepted, widows with children do not opt for remarriage but decide to live their entire life for their children. Kumaresan's mother Marayi, who has become a widow at twenty years, sacrifices her life for her son. When a woman lacks the support of her husband, the next problem she faces is the transgressions of other men. They will have to protect themselves from such violations. Controlling their bodily needs, the young widows sacrifice their life.

After the death of Kumaresan's father, Marayi's parents helped her till Kumaresan reached adolescence. She did not want to go to her parent's house. As a single woman, she has managed to raise her son. She felt, "Even if all she could get every day was a bit of gruel, it would be enough" (94). When Kumaresan goes to the town to learn soda business, she lives alone. When Kumaresan comes back to the village after marrying Saroja, she cannot accept her because of her caste. She starts living alone by rearing goats.

Thannaya Paati in *Alandapatchi* is also a widow. She is the maternal grandmother of Perumayi, Muthannan's wife. She loves being with the birds, translating their screeches and working in the fields. Though she has had her son, daughter-in-law and grandchildren, she desires independence. She does whatever she can. She says, "Until we have strength in our hands, we should do our work by ourselves. Why should we trouble others?" (215). Her son requests her to take rest and not do anything. She could not sit idle and eat without working. She is the one who brought up Perumayi, and she feels that she should be of some help to her in the last phase of her life. When Muthanan lives in the new fields he

has bought without any help, Thannaya Patti voluntarily comes to help him. When the and separation from his wife and children and other troubles strike Muthu hard, Thannaya Patti comes to him as a blessing.

Women are the most competent in providing emotional support to their families. Whether in a working environment or family circles, they think through the situations and support their loved ones. Working women create an equilibrium in maintaining their work and family and render a supportive hand regardless of work stress or other demands. When men of the house are affected and feel low, the women help in every possible way. When couples doing the same work with the same amount of stress are compared, women are found to have offered higher emotional availability and support.

The study, “Research: When Juggling Work and Family, Women Offer More Emotional Support Than Men”, dealing with work stress and emotional support, says, “Women provide emotional support regardless of their demands in another role, and they also ‘pass on’ the support they receive in one role by giving more emotional support in another role, thereby boosting relationships” (Brummelhuis, Jeffrey H. Greenhaus). Kongu women who are always with their husbands in the fields understand their husbands better. They solve problems or misunderstandings soon. When Muthannan happens to buy a piece of land and builds a hut, he cannot bring his wife Perumayi to the new land because of certain problems. Thannaya Patti gives hope to Muthanan.

Thannaya Patti is an example for future generations of women. Her empowerment is expressed through three of her characteristics: First, her independence and love for the family. She earns her livelihood by herself. Though she knows that she can rest in the house, she chooses to be of some use to her granddaughter. When Muthannan is worried about her and suggests that he will take her back home, she says she will do whatever she

can in the natural surroundings and that nothing can give more comfort and solace than nature.

Thannaya Patti's care towards the farm workers is another remarkable trait in her character. Generally, the landlords are oppressive towards the farmhands and workers. But she is generous and considerate. Through Kuppan's narration of her past, her supportive nature can be understood. Giving the field workers their share of grain after the harvest is a usual practice. Thannaya's mother-in-law has never given the share to the workers. However, Thannaya Patti is not profit minded or greedy. Thannaya says that "we won't be affected by giving. Our happiness in giving and the word of content by the workers will increase the yield. Only when the workers are satisfied and happy, will the land owner prosper. We can give their share as per the yield" (221).

Thannaya is noted for her perseverance, also. It is believed that men are physically strong and women weak. Men have the muscle power, whereas women have perseverance. When Thannaya says that she can clear the entire field of stones, Muthannan feels that it is impossible. She takes a week and cleans the whole area using a broom made of twigs. "On seeing the mass of the stones, Muthu was awe struck. In ten days, she has made a huge pile of odakkal (a type of limestone), small stones and vengachangal (Tormaline). She is not a normal woman. She will clean the stones in the entire field and will prepare it for harvest" (225).

Ponna and Seerayi in *One Part Woman* and its sequels have important roles to play. Murugan, while giving importance to the women farmers, their contribution and knowledge of farming, acknowledges the importance of men as well. As the novels are set in the 1970s and 1980s, agriculture in the Kongu region was the only prominent business. The other occupations next to farming are rig vehicle operators, drivers in heavy loads

transportation and weavers. A phrase in Tamil, ‘manna kelarite vazhndhu mudikiradhu’ describes the farmers’ love towards their lands. It means living and dying on the land.

Such is the bond of Kali with his land and thondupatti(barnyard), which is noteworthy. Kali does everything as per his wishes on his farm and will not allow his mother or wife to interfere with certain tasks. Everything on his farm, like the tools and seeds, is kept according to his wish. Anyone who enters his barnyard will be surprised at the way of its maintenance. When in the farmyard, Kali feels as if he is inside his mother’s womb.

Ponna, Kali’s wife, is shown to be ineffective in *One Part Woman*. She “would clean the floor of the cattle shed right away. She would give the calves a bath and tether them elsewhere; then she’d feed them. Mostly, it was she who cleaned out the goat refuse” (10) and does all the works in the kitchen. However, Murugan makes readers feel that besides love for Kali and her sharp tongue, there is nothing else Ponna can be associated with; her real self comes out in the sequels.

In *One Part Woman*, Ponna undergoes trauma because of the society’s pressure. Though she is very happy with Kali and her family, she is abused for not having children. The pressure of society over childless couples is well known. Balen and Bos in their research article, “The social and cultural consequences of being childless in poor-resource areas”, points out the effects of being childless. Community effects include status loss for being a failure, verbal abuses that include insults and ridicule, marginalization and isolation. Economic effects include lack of economic security, loss of such support from family, exploitation and abuse perpetrated by in-laws. Legal and family aspects include inheritance restrictions such as property rights and burial rights, marital instability (fear of husband marrying a second time or divorce), abandonment, divorce, expulsion from home, physical abuse and violence by the partner and in-laws. Religious and spiritual effects

include the person taking it as an after effect of not fulfilling religious obligations, witchcraft, and being considered accursed.

Ponna has to listen to people's taunts, escape men's sexual advances, and the abuses of the society. Though Kali has to undergo the same pain, Ponna's situation is the worst. According to society, the child gives the couple the identity of masculinity and femininity. The two women abandoned by Kali are his mother Seerayi and his wife Ponna – after his death in *A Lonely Harvest* and due to his negligence in *Trial by Silence*. They maintain the field, cattle and the family. When they find things difficult, they seek the help of their neighbours and Ponna's brother Muthu, because of Seerayi's old age and Ponna's pregnancy. As Shiva says, "Without these women, their households would not have survived" (109). Without these women, neither Kali nor the farm would have sustained.

After her husband's death at a very young age, Seerayi takes the burden of caring for her child and maintaining the field on her shoulders. Like all young widows in India, Seerayi has endured many struggles, alienation, suppression and violence. She has never allowed anyone in the village to talk ill of her or her son. To protect herself from the rumours of the villagers, she never calls anyone to help her, even at difficult times. Her parents have greatly supported her, and she has maintained everything by herself. When people neglect her for being a widow, she proves herself by working hard. Murugan comments on her attitude, "It was his mother who had raised him. And she made sure no one had the chance to say that a child raised by a widow would amount to nothing. She was adamant that they be treated equal to everyone else. She knew everything from ploughing the land to drawing water for the fields. 'We should not depend on anyone' she would say" (5).

Widows are generally kept alone in a corner of the house. They are not allowed to gatherings and auspicious events. In villages, the situation is worse. Women are not called

for sowing and harvesting. Seerayi expresses her feelings, “They said ‘Nothing would grow when sown by a woman in white,’ . . . she said, ‘Let whatever grows grow. Or maybe nothing will. Then that’s fine too. I don’t care.’ And she sowed the seeds herself. Nothing untoward happened; her yield was as good as anyone else’s” (6).

Seerayi has a thorough knowledge of land and cattle. She has taught Kali to do the work in the field. Until he learns to do the works alone, she lets him do under her supervision. As Shiva says,

The feminine principle of food production is based on the intimate links between tree, animals and crops and on the work of women in maintaining these links. . . . Agriculture modeled on nature and based on women’s participation with nature has been self-reproducing and sustainable because the internally recycled resources provide the necessary inputs for seeds, soil moisture, soil nutrients, and pest control. (96)

During Kali’s childhood, Seerayi has maintained the land’s nutrients with the help of cattle. She has taught the same to Kali. But she has kept the finances until Kali becomes old enough to go to markets, trade goods and take care of the monetary issues. She gets him married to Ponna, and when they are not present in the house, she will take care of everything by herself, even in old age. In *A Lonely Harvest*, after her son’s death, she helps her daughter-in-law to overcome the sorrow.

Ponna becomes much depressed after Kali’s death. She will be sitting under the Portia tree where Kali has hung himself. She will cry, hurt herself with bristly plant stems, and witness Kali’s ghost. But Seerayi and Ponna’s mother Vallayi, help her come out of the depression. They take care of the field, the cattle and the child born to Ponna. Seerayi acts as a mother to Kali, Ponna and the child. Likewise, in *Trial by*

Silence, Ponna's mother-in-law fully supports her when Kali shirks his responsibilities because of his depression and addiction.

Due to Seerayi's help and the strength she gains from the land, Ponna returns to normalcy. Ponna's change is shown as, "If you won't go, I will. Or else, I will bring the bulls myself and draw water from the well. Do you think I don't know how to lift water from the well and irrigate the channels?" (40). They prove that women can take care of the family's well-being without men's support. She starts working as if she was possessed. "Even though she had little physical strength, she was strong mentally. . . Ponna kept at her task, wiping away her sweat with the loose end of her sari" (*A Lonely Harvest* 47).

The other industrious women characters of Murugan are: the old woman who has a make shift shop in *Current Show* and Belly in *Seasons of the Palm*. The old woman in *Current Show* sells mangoes, sweets and peanuts. Except for educated women, farmers and women in the city environment, other women going to work are linked with failure most of the times, the causes of failure being husband's death, addiction, unscrupulousness, or divorce. The old woman is a widow supporting her family with what she earns from the shop. She has a young daughter at marriageable age. For her, honour is more important than anything. After the death of her husband, she starts working hard and escapes the advances of many evil men. When someone asks about her daughter, she says "I'll kill her, push her into the well, before I hand her over to the likes of you. What do you think I am? My husband's been dead for how many years? But have I gone to another man?" (109)

Belly in *Seasons of the Palm* is a Dalit farmhand. She is suppressed, ill-treated and abused by her mistress for her caste. Despite the social seclusion, she keeps herself happy with the help of her friends and acts responsibly. She has certain characteristics which represent empowerment. She supports Shorty, as he says, "Once she is there, the world

seems right. Her laughter and mocking voice hold the air, and he is not alone any more” (5). She is cautious of her pay. Pay and expenses should always be noted, and it is a small step in maintaining the finances for the future. Unlike Shorty and others, who leave it to their parents, Belly keeps track of the amount spoken for, her pay, money her father received as advance, what her Master keeps as remaining and how much her father would ask for the temple festival. As a responsible child, she helps in the maintenance of her family. She collects firewood while grazing sheep and takes it home in the evening, so it would greatly help her mother, who slogs all day.

These women of Murugan are empowered despite all their odds. Their association with nature and the land has taught them resilience. Every sprouting seed teaches tolerance and resistance. Trees teach sacrifice, mountains persistence, plains freedom, wells solace and palm trees independence. Farming teaches them to stay connected with their roots despite the storms and to be grateful for life, sustenance, and patience, and farmers teach the same to society.

Sharma and B.N.Singh point out five important dimensions for women empowerment: Economic participation, Economic opportunity, Political Empowerment, Education attainment, Health and well-being. Murugan’s women possess all the basic requirements for women empowerment except political empowerment. They sell their agricultural produce and act as financial advisors to their husbands. They take care of the family’s finances by efficiently using money. They lack formal education but gain the necessary knowledge for life from their land. They are strong, and the food they take is filled with nutrients.

Though women are more connected to the land and act as the backbone of agricultural labour, it is still sad that they do not have equal rights to land ownership. An article by *Oxfam India* says that self-employed women farmers make upto 48% of the total

farming community, and in rural villages around 60-80 % of food is cultivated by women.

The same article talks about patriarchal traditions and gender socialization:

. . . the women farmers of India, whose voices often go unheard owing to their gender, and who struggle to establish their identity at a grassroots level due to patriarchal traditions and gender socialization. Women's work in agriculture is in addition to her role as a wife, a daughter-in-law and as a mother. However, gender based discrimination continues in multiple ways: women are not recognized as farmers in Indian policies thereby denying them of institutional supports of the bank, insurance, cooperatives, and government departments.

Men migrate to towns and cities in search of jobs, and there is 'feminisation' in agriculture. It is high time to recognise the part played by women in both the household and agriculture and reduce the gender gap. By abolishing gender discrimination, women could be given due recognition. Though they seem to be in the periphery, they are the ones who feed the millions of the Indian population.

Women should have more access to resources like men for the sustainable development of society. Victoria Ogoke in her article on "Role of women; critical to nation building" in *The Guardian* exhorts women "to fully utilise their innate talents, harness them while raising their children and contribute positively to the growth of their homes, communities and the society at large".

Murugan's way of writing does not reflect only the strong and positive aspects of life. His works mainly focus on the weaker sections –subdued, oppressed, and victimized. His writings target the sufferers. Gomas says about Murugan's writing, ". . . tragedy unfolds before us again and again. It has to be endured. Living itself is a punishment for Murugan's characters. People like them inspire him to write a lot. That's his message. We must repent" (36).

A few women characters of Murugan are marginalised by society. In addition to the suppression because of their gender, they suffer caste discrimination also. The caste oppression and the victimisation of Dalit women and men in Kongu Nadu are considerably higher. There are instances when Dalit women cooks are stopped from cooking in Government schools in Tirupur and Salem. Moreover, Dalit women are abused sexually by their masters.

Some of Murugan's women are subdued and pushed to the lowest extent. They are Saroja of *Pyre*, who loses her life due to caste discrimination and Ramayi in *Rising Heat*, who ends in prostitution because of urbanisation and an irresponsible husband. Even after modernity, women are still under patriarchy. They suffer due to domestic violence, harassment and inequality in the workplace and frequent threats from society. One of the problems Murugan's women face is female infanticide.

Violence against women has considerably increased, and Sharma and Singh, in their *Women Education and Women Rights in India*, point out the major violent actions targeted upon women's bodies like, "rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment or intimidation, sexual slavery, forced pregnancy, enforced prostitution, sterilization and forced abortion, prenatal sex selection and female infanticide" (183).

Female Infanticide is the deliberate killing of female infants or sex-selective abortion of female foetuses due to the preference of male babies because of socio-cultural norms. People prefer male children to female children because they feel that female children are an unnecessary burden because women are not considered heirs, and in countries like India, the family has to give a considerable amount of their fortune as dowry. Female infanticide may result in a fall of gender ratio, a shortage of women, which again may lead to men remaining unmarried or wife-sharing. Sexual violence against women may also increase in such situations.

Female infanticide is a violation of human rights and a threat to humanity as a whole. The main reasons for female infanticide are—that male children are considered heirs, whereas female children may not provide for their family once married; dowry, and lack of awareness. The families accept the firstborn, whether it is a boy or a girl. They expect a boy the second time if the first is a girl. When the mother becomes pregnant again, the parents try to identify the gender of the baby. Once they know it is a girl, they abort the foetus. If it becomes impossible and the born baby is a girl, they kill the baby.

Sex-selective abortions and murders have been more prevalent in the villages. People in villages do not have enough awareness about contraceptive measures, which leads to continuous pregnancies. In order to protect the life of female children, The Government of India banned Prenatal Sex determination in 1994 with the Pre-conception and Pre-natal Diagnostic Techniques Act. Under the act, requesting for identifying the sex of the foetus is a crime, and both the family and the hospital management involved will be imprisoned and fined. Medical Termination Act of 1971 also helps in regulating abortions.

Statistics and reports on female infanticide in India give alarming data. The United Nations report says that around 2,000 girl foetuses are aborted in India daily, roughly three babies every two hours. What is the purpose of having all the laws when unborn girls cannot be protected? An article by *Down to Earth* reports, “According to the Population Research Institute, at least 12,771,043 sex-selective abortions had taken place in India between 2000 and 2014. It takes the daily average of sex-selective abortion to 2,332”. Those parents who cannot opt for sex-selective abortions do not give necessary medical support to their girl children. Male children receive exceptional medical care even in poor households, whereas female children are left to die. Besides abortions, mortality due to illness and lack of adequate medical care cause many female children’s deaths.

Female infanticide is common in all parts of India, but the western region has a higher degree of female infanticide. The article “When Mothers Kill Daughters: the Cultural Reproduction of Female Infanticide Practices in Tamil Nadu, India” says,

A state-wide sample survey undertaken in 1996 by the Directorate of Public Health claims to establish the widespread prevalence of the practice of female infanticide in Tamil Nadu by suggesting that there exists a ‘hard core’ female infanticide region in Tamil Nadu consisting of the northern blocks of the district Salem, the southern blocks of district Dharmapuri, a cluster of southern blocks of district Dindigul and of the western half of district Madurai. (1)

All the districts mentioned are parts of the Kongu Region. Kongu region, the western region of Tamil Nadu, has a long cultural history. It has its unique culture. Nevertheless, every region has its social evils. The land-owning communities are the most powerful in the area. The sons inherit their land. They believed, “Aasai ku pulla, aasthi ku payyan” (girl for desire, boy for wealth). So, they plan for one male child and not more than one girl child in the family. The 1989 legislation has given women the right to inherit. This law is a milestone in women’s empowerment. This property right helped women, especially the rural and uneducated women to be independent. Without education and occupation, women gained support from land. Land ownership allows them to decide their life when their family breaks due to various reasons like divorce, death of husband. “Property rights for women can have an impact on decision making, income pooling, acquisition, and women’s overall role and position in the community.” (Property Rights of Women in Tamil Nadu)

This legislation increased the gap between the family and the girl children. The land-owning communities who could afford dowry also did not want to give a share of

fortune to a girl who would not be their heir. In the Introduction to *Resolve*, Murugan remarks, “when they married off their daughters, the property they gave, especially land, effectively went to ‘some stranger’, an outsider” (vi). They accepted the first baby; they aborted it if the second one was also a girl. There are many families where parents try conceiving and aborting continuously, expecting a male child.

Both the mother and the girl child undergo life threats. In the majority of the cases, the mothers are under coercion. They are threatened by their families of exclusion, second marriage for the husband or divorce. Murugan, in his *Estuary*, expresses his concern regarding this issue. Kanakasurar, after having two daughters, aborts the third foetus in six months as they knew it is a female. When the women of the house cannot conceive a male child, the women are called bad omens.

The women have to face the wrath of their family members. The attitude of mothers-in-law towards their daughters-in-law becomes ruthless. In the novel *Estuary*, when Druvasuri comes back from the hospital after undergoing an abortion, “her mother in law,

Madyasuri had arrived like a raging storm from their village, grabbed her by the hair and slapped her across the face. Pushing her to the ground, Madyasuri had screamed, ‘Why does a creature like you, who can’t even birth an heir for the family, deserve to wear a sari?’ She had begun to strip Druvasuri of her clothes.

The neighbours had had to intervene to save Druvasuri from her wrath. (7)

Many mothers die due to complications in continuous abortions and delivery. Some men marry the second time, hoping to have a male child. Druvasuri survived though it was a miracle. Murugan describes her state as “canals of blood had flowed from Druvasuri’s body” (7).

It is a matter of prestige to the family when a woman bears two or more male children. When female children are born, the families employ many techniques to kill the baby; milk from *erukku* shrub, turning the baby on its stomach, adding paddy grains to milk and many slow killing processes like insufficient medical care and providing less nutrition. The deaths of girl children lead to a sudden fall in the female sex ratio in the Kongu region.

Murugan describes the effects of female infanticide in the Kongu Region in his novel, *Resolve*. The novel focuses on female infanticide in the region among the land-owning communities and the impact it had on the men of the region. The novel is described in the following lines in the dust wrapper of the book,

But this is no comedy of manners, and before long we find ourselves reckoning with questions of agricultural change, hierarchies of caste, the values of older generations and the grim antecedents of Marimuthu's poor prospectus, as decades of sex-selective abortion have destroyed the fabric of his community and its demographics. Perumal Murugan's *Resolve* is both a cultural critique and a personal journey: in his hands, the question of marriage turns into a social contract, deeply impacted by the ripple effects of patriarchy, inequality and changing relationships to land and community.

In the novel *Resolve*, Murugan expresses the effects through the character of Marimuthu. A bachelor in his thirties, Marimuthu cannot get married because of the lack of a prospective bride. The novel also deals with caste hierarchy, bonds and land. The author vividly portrays the emotions of Marimuthu. Marimuthu associates himself with the lonely palm trees. He feels that he has to be alone when every soul around him has someone to rely on. The novel goes through Marimuthu's love, his search for a bride in his

teenage, failure with the marriage brokers, the fight between his body and mind, the lack of support from his family, his ignorant father, controlling mother and the scornful looks of the relatives and friends. More than anything, what tormented him the most is his loneliness.

Marimuthu's search for a bride lets him understand the base of the problem, the lack of women due to infanticide. He feels, "He wanted to have at least ten children, and he wanted them all to be girls. The world should never again witness the sorrow of a man like him" (22). His dreams, thoughts and imaginations are all filled with his longing for a woman. He dreams of a world bereft of women. "These forms take over the world. But they are all men. A world occupied by men. In this crowd, he goes looking for a woman. Not any specific woman. He has no clear image of her. He doesn't know what she looks like. She is lost among this deluge of men, all of whom are not but himself. But she is the only woman in the world. Where is she hiding?" (18).

Marimuthu has had a chronicle of looking for a bride. The fact that there is a demand for women makes him struggle more. When his farmhand comes to him asking for money for his son's marriage, Marimuthu thinks of using this as a chance to hasten the process of his wedding. One of the most common problems women or girl children face is fitting themselves into the world's beauty standards. Any such standards do not bind men. The idea of associating women with attraction and beauty increases the degree of suppression. Appealing and pleasant looking with an attractive body has become the essential requirement of being a woman. Girl children from their birth are brought up to unrealistic standards. They are made to believe they should be attractive to the male gaze.

Women who do not fit into such standards are categorized as ugly or unwomanly. These standards have a negative impact on women. They see themselves as ugly or unimpressive. The grooms expect fair skin and slim body while looking for a bride. In the

novel, when Marimuthu goes to see a girl, he likes the girl. However, his mother rejects the girl for her dark complexion. “His mother, however, constantly referred to that girl as ‘that blackie.’ And when she said that, her face was twisted in disgust. He could not understand how anyone could take a dislike to that sprightly and beautiful face” (49).

Women are still told to lose weight and use fairness creams to look attractive. These standards are made by men. There is no need for a woman to look appealing to someone. And this makes women consider themselves inferior and look for motivation from outside. A man can be himself for being a man, but a woman by attraction. Mary Wollstonecraft in her book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, describes the idea of beauty imposed on women. “To preserve personal beauty, woman’s glory! the limbs and faculties are cramped with worse than Chinese bands, and the sedentary life which they are condemned to live, whilst boys frolic in the open air, weakens the muscles and relaxes the nerves” (43). Moreover, this results from the girl’s wish to attract men, as she has been taught from her childhood. Poonachi in the novel *Poonachi* considers herself ugly before the male goat Poovan. “She had a great liking to Poovan, the buck kid. His whole body was white except for a mole-like black patch near the jaw. He had a round face, with a bulging snout. His body was robust and strong” (87).

Murugan’s short story “Beloved Face” features the pain and harassment undergone by Saraswati because of her dark skin and her crush for the actor Aravindswamy. From a village, Saraswati goes to town for higher studies. The author describes how her friends make fun of her, “They made her stand so her body was on display. . . . the girls approached her one after the other, pressed their index fingers hard against her midriff, and made a show of applying kohl to their eyes and pottu on their foreheads. Even after fifty girls had helped themselves to her body, its blackness hadn’t waned”(33). Even when

the girls love their dusky skin, the parents and relatives treat the skin colour like a disability and show their worries which is primarily about the girl's marriage.

One of the significant causes of female infanticide is dowry. Right from their birth, girl children are considered financial burdens. Parents have to accumulate wealth, particularly when they have girl children, because if the girls do not take a considerable amount of wealth as dowry, they are looked down by the groom's family. In the Kongu society, parents give cattle as a parting gift. Ponna refers to the cow she has brought from her mother's house in *One Part Woman*; the old couple gives a goat to their daughter in *Poonachi*.

There are also cases of women sent back to their parents or murdered by in-laws in demand of dowry. Kitchen fire which is said to be the cause of many bride deaths is the intentional burning of brides due to dowry-related problems. In the novel *Resolve*, Marimuthu's mother is very keen on dowry. In order to compensate for the dark skin of Rosamani, fifty sovereigns of gold and fifty thousand rupees are offered as dowry. However, Marimuthu's mother demands a motor vehicle on the day of marriage. When the bride's parents promise to get the vehicle in one year, his mother tries to stop the marriage. At last, when Marimuthu is left with no other choice but to marry a poor girl from another caste, his mother still talks about her jewels.

But in contrast, there are also matriarchal tribes (Khasi, Gora) in India's North Eastern states (Meghalaya, Assam). They are the 'women of the house'. They have matrilineal inheritance and bride price. The family's eldest daughter holds the governing power; the youngest daughter gets the inheritance and stays with the family with her husband. Men also have their representation in the family's economic and social concerns. If no daughter is born in the family, they adopt a daughter to inherit the ancestral property. (Kumar)

Women become the bearers of honour which in turn leads to gender victimization. Gender Victimization is a concept that refers to the threats that a person faces because of his/her gender. Subalterns are usually victimised, and women are the most victimised. This is a typical problem women have been facing right from ancient times. They face double marginalisation due to gender and caste or race.

Murugan expresses the family's control over women's likes and marriage preferences. Women are not allowed to marry without their parents' consent, which extends to the community's concern. Love marriages and widow remarriages are not accepted, and the victim is killed for honour when the marriage is out of the community. Control over a woman's body is seen as a natural right of the man of the family. Uma Chakravarti quotes Nur Yalman, a Turkish anthropologist who says that the basic principle of social organisation in Hinduism "is to construct a closed structure to preserve land, women and ritual quality within it" (63). She also says that the purity of other ideas cannot be preserved without protecting women.

This becomes the base of every community. They make women the holders of family's honour, and so men always control women's wishes and sexuality. Women's sexuality is the most crucial concept of preserving honour. When women go against the family's idea of dressing, and societal and personal relationships, they are punished by ex-communication, mutilation or murder.

Honour is a vague idea, an attribute endowed on women. It is an idea commonly accepted by society—the family's honour lies with the women. Contemporary Indian Society is filled with vices like caste abuse, honour killing, bigotry, body shaming and judgemental criticisms, which lead to identity crisis. *Pyre* by Murugan expresses the idea of honour killing with the background of the Kongu Society in the 1980s.

In his article, “Murdered women: A history of honour crimes”, Husseini quotes Burckhardt, “It was common throughout Europe for men to murder their wives because they suspected infidelity and to kill their daughters because they eloped. It was also common for brothers to kill their sisters because they refused to marry the man their family had chosen for them”. When the women of modern countries face the issue of honour killing, the state of rural women of India is unexplainable. The inter-caste marriage of Kumaresan and Saroja and its effects leading to Saroja’s death forms the base of the novel.

The complicated caste structure of the novel *Pyre* is described as “Kumaresan and Saroja stumble in the darkness, lost in the chaos of caste. They tend to avoid the anger and neglect of mother and other relatives. . . the tragedy due to the domineering mother, the judicious uncle, and the village which thinks that honour has become spoiled, arises again and again before us”(36). Sugamaram

A woman’s chastity is considered very important to uphold the honour of her household. Suzanne Ruggi writes in the article, “Commodifying Honor in Female Sexuality”, “A woman’s virginity is the property of the men around her, first her father, later a gift for her husband; a virtual dowry as she graduates to marriage.” Murugan himself says that a family loses all its love when it comes to the honour of the community.

Saroja of *Pyre*, a lower caste girl (leather workers) lives in Tholur town, where there is no open identification of caste, and so is unaware of the difficulties that may arise due to caste or identity. She loves Kumaresan (higher caste of land owners), marries him without family’s consent and goes with him to his village, Kattupatti. Though no one accepts her, she is not much worried because of Kumaresan’s love and presence.

Kumaresan has advised her to be in confinement, without talking to anyone, so that no one

will identify her caste. She cannot be on her own, in the village. The large field in the village cannot give her the freedom of the four walls of her house in town. This becomes intolerable to her. She finds the environment of the village threatening.

Saroja's mother-in-law, Marayi, who cannot accept the girl, starts living alone in a hut nearby. When Saroja dresses well, her mother-in-law calls her a prostitute who has bewitched her son. She abuses her, "After destroying his life and burying him alive, here she stands on top of his grave, lush like the erukku shrub . . . she has decked herself up in all her finery. Only prostitutes stand like this on the streets of Kunnoor town! And my son has brought one of them home! Has she bewitched him by mixing something in his foodA Cursed omen has arrived here too" (62,118).

Saroja is one of the hundreds and thousands of women victimised in the name of honour. There are no strict laws to stop this barbaric act. Nevertheless, the plight has not changed till today. It has become a community mentality, and the worst is that the women of the house support the murderer instead of supporting the victim. In the novel, it is the mother-in-law who plans with her people and kills Saroja.

Honour killing had been prevalent among people irrespective of their status. The much acclaimed Mughal Emperor Akbar executed the court dancer, Anarkali(Sharuf-un-Nisa) for being in love with his son, Salim (Jahangir). A research paper on "No Honour in Honour Killing: Comparative Analysis of Indian Traditional Social Structure vis-à-vis Gender Violence" about honour killing by Kaushal says, "In China, among the Ch'ing Dynasty, fathers and husbands had the right to kill females deemed to have dishonoured them. Control over women is one of the oldest phenomena which are used by ancestral societies of different countries" (8).

Women are the victims of honour killing. Honour killing is a gender-biased violence though it appears to be gender-neutral. There are instances like Ilavarasan

of Dharmapuri, Shankar of Udumalapet, and Hariharan of Karur. Generally, honour killing targets women. According to Uma Chakravarti, the belief that “the honour and respectability of upper caste men are regarded as protected and preserved by women who therefore must be closely guarded and whose sexuality is stringently monitored. Upper caste women [who] are regarded as the gateways –literally points of entrance into the caste system” (64-65), marginalise women more.

Women are strictly monitored concerning chastity, dress code, postures, gestures, and social behaviour. Honour killing is men’s way of using their power over women. The idea that a woman’s action will bring dishonour is enough for a family to kill or attack her. Kumaresan’s mother Marayi feels that her son has lost all his love and concern for her because of Saroja. Her close bonding with her community leads to the murder of Saroja. Marayi fails to understand the love between Kumaresan and Saroja. She humiliates Saroja saying, “What did you do to bewitch my son? How many men have you done this to? . . . Look at him pushing me away already! What dark magic has she cast on him. Everything is ruined.”(16)

Honour killing is one form of protecting the honour of the family, the other being coercive control employed by the family members to exhort their power. Using the emotions of the victim as a weapon, the family or community forces women into compulsive marriage. Coercion is as abusive as honour killing. The novel, *Neduneram* shows the love between Mangasuri and Maduran. Both being from different castes, Mangasuri’s father threatens Mangasuri with familicide to protect the family’s honour. Having no other go, Mangasuri yields to her father and marries her cousin, the choice of her family.

A similar incident happens in *Rising Heat* also. The way Murugan portrays Selvan’s sister and brother in the novel highlights the deeply ingrained gender bias and

double standards that exist in Indian society. Selvan's sister is subjected to violence and forced into a marriage that she does not want solely to protect the honour of the family. Selvan's sister's story is a powerful reflection of the injustice that women face.

The incident also highlights the prevalence of caste-based discrimination and oppression in Indian society. Even though Selvan's sister is a working woman and a source of income for the family, she is deprived of the right to choose her marriage partner; her father disapproves of her relationship with a lower-caste boy. When she elopes with the boy, her father seeks the help of a local politician to locate them, and the boy is handed over to the police and brutally beaten. The incident leaves Selvan's sister with a sense of isolation and despair as she experiences distance, hatred, and pain within the family. Eventually, she is married off to a widower, a fate she accepts.

When they are controlling the sister's actions, Selvan's brother's reckless and harmful behaviour is tolerated and ignored. The drunken brother does not contribute anything to the growth or maintenance of the family. No action is taken against him because he is a male. The father's actions in both cases illustrate the complexity of societal expectations, cultural values, and personal interests that shape decision-making in Indian families. It becomes clear that women often bear the brunt of these expectations and suffer the consequences when they dare to challenge them. Inter-caste marriage is still considered a taboo, and those who dare to challenge such norms are ostracized and subjected to violence.

Saroja, on the other hand is described as a fragile creature. She has never imagined that her mother-in-law will go to the extent of killing her. She keeps her entire faith on Kumaresan. Kumaresan truly loves her, but his blind trust in his mother prevents him from suspecting his mother of her evil intentions. Saroja understands that her mother-in-law is angry but Marayi does not reveal her evil side to her son. Saroja feels, "As long as

Kumaresan was at home, she didn't even raise her voice much, the force of her litany dwindling to a constant murmur. But the moment he went even a slight distance away from the rock, her voice would abruptly gather strength" (138).

Murugan uses several symbols to describe the hostility that prevails in the village. At the beginning of the novel, Kumaresan feels that Saroja "seemed like a fertile crop of corn –perhaps a little withered and dull right now, but easily refreshed with just a drop of rain" (4). While she enters the village, the path they walked appears as though it "was strewn with long, slithering white snakes whose heads or tails she could not discern" (9). When Kumaresan meets her for the first time, she is described as "shining in the sunlight like a heavenly maiden" (45), and after she starts living in the village, Murugan describes her state as "lying like a dried leaf" (20). She has started losing her lustre and freshness understands that her complexion and love are not enough to sustain in his village, where the caste matters the most.

With the comfort given by Kumaresan, Saroja felt that everything will become alright in due course of time. As she enters the village with Kumaresan, they take shelter under a neem tree. "She felt comforted by it, as though it had gathered her and seated her in its lap. She trusted that Kumaresan would similarly offer her refuge in his lap" But then when she comes to know that it is the village's cremation ground, she feels as if the "lap that had given her refuge only a moment ago now pushed her away and shrank back into itself. Fearfully, she looked at the cremation ground" (10-11).

Saroja is so innocent that even after she is alerted by an old lady who comes to her house, that she may be killed there. The old woman said, "'I don't know what caste you are from, but be careful with these people,' she whispered. . . They might strangle you to death, and then apply some blue dye on your body and claim that you were bitten by a

poisonous snake” (56). However, Saroja is pregnant then, and a ray of hope is born that her mother-in-law would accept her once the child was born.

Saroja loves Senkundranoor where Kumaresan planned to start his business and planned to settle there. The town is very good, and there is no caste discrimination. She imagines,

. . . herself as one in the crowd, walking among the multitudes. No one there to point her ask, ‘Who is she? What is her caste? No one to say, ‘She is a witch, she bewitched him.’ Nobody in the crowd cared about how many sovereigns of gold she had brought with her. No one who would say, ‘We are excommunicating you from the village.’ She didn’t have to hesitate or be afraid to bargain. She could fight. (153)

The life of a Dalit, especially the Dalit woman’s is never secure. As Yashica Dutt in her blog on “Documents of Dalit Discrimination” says, “Because Dalit women’s bodies are never their own. They can be used, abused and killed by any upper caste man, at his will”, her mother-in-law with the help of her relatives learns about her family. And when they know that no one would question Saroja’s absence, they plan to murder her when Kumaresan is away.

The other major problem Dalit women face is sexual exploitation by the higher caste men. The concept of purity strictly followed by the upper caste men has loopholes. They are hypocrites because they keep a distance from Dalits, and consider their touch as polluting; but when it comes to sexuality, they do not stay away from Dalit women. When Marayi asks the help of her relatives to kill Saroja, the men feel that they should enjoy the girl before killing her. The major reason for opposing inter-caste marriages put forward by the protectors of caste hierarchy in the words of Uma Chakravarti is that, “a person’s blood is always bilateral, that is, its ritual quality is received from both parents. Thus

ideally both parents must be of same caste” (63). Moreover, sexual assaults on Dalit women by higher-caste men are not considered a sin.

When Dalit women are abused, such assaults do not receive much public attention whereas similar things happening to higher-caste women are given wider publicity. Some people even go to the extent of justifying such actions by saying that rapes are related to gender and not caste. Identity plays a major role in such crimes. Dalit women do not get as much support as others. Yashica Dutt, in her article in *Tumblr* validates the point by saying,

I referred the case of the young Dalit woman who was raped and killed in Jind, Haryana. The whole class and the professor began disagreeing with me vehemently, arguing that rape is a “gender issue” not a “caste issue”. I thought to myself that this was the rotten level of understanding in a Women’s Studies program. Being a woman did not mean much when they could not even sympathize with the vulnerabilities of a Dalit woman who had succumbed to severe violence.

In *Seasons of the Palm*, Murugan subtly suggests and implies the reprehensible behaviour of higher caste children towards their female lower caste counterparts. Through indirect inferences, Murugan draws attention to the saddening reality of caste-based discrimination and the dangerous ways in which caste prejudices are manifested in the Kongu society.

In the novel *Rising Heat*, Ramayi, a farmhand from a lower caste, has been employed in Selvan’s land for a long period. However, when the landowners are forced to evacuate their lands to make way for housing units, they are left with no choice but to seek alternative sources of income. While some have migrated to towns for work, others changed their professions. Despite Ramayi’s family’s age-old relationship with Selvan’s

family, they cannot help Ramayi in her need. As a result, Ramayi's father Kuppan is compelled to resort to mending slippers to earn a living. Ramayi cannot get any help from her callous husband, and in such a state, she has no other option but to turn to prostitution to make both ends meet. The plight of Ramayi and her father Kuppan exemplify the hardships that members of lower castes have to endure.

Selvan comes to know that Ramayi has become a prostitute when he and his friends are loitering around aimlessly. Trying to avoid the family feuds, Selvan starts spending more time with his friends. They take him to a lakeside area where prostitutes reside. Although Selvan is hesitant to go with them, he is compelled to accompany his friends to avoid their ridicule. As they approach the area, Selvan hears a voice that resonates with him on a deeper level. He recognizes that to be Ramayi's. "He felt an unbearable pain, as if his chest was being split open. Whose voice was that? A voice that felt like a sharp slap. A voice that had stroked him with comfort and protection. A voice that had embraced him, soaking in love" (172).

Imayam talks about a similar situation in his novel *Arumugam*. Arumugam, the main character leaves his mother in his childhood and goes. After many years, he goes to Auroville in search of a job. In Auroville he goes to a brothel house and the pimp takes him to a hut, where he can find a new woman. When he goes inside, it is dark and he lights a matchstick. He is shocked to find his mother there. "There, like a statue made of stone, sat Dhanabhagyam. Dhanabhagyam was clasping Arumugam, hugging him tight. Her face suggested that she would tuck him back into her womb, if she could. Arumugam gave himself up to her completely, yielding to her embrace like a baby clinging to his mother. Abruptly, she sobbed aloud" (227-228).

Selvan feels acute pain when he recognises the voice. The voice served as a touching reminder of the social inequalities and injustices in his society and how Ramayi's

plight has forced her into prostitution for her survival. The experience leaves Selvan with a heavy heart. Selvan's experience is a powerful observation of the societal issues that cause helpless women to resort to prostitution and the need for greater awareness and empathy towards them.

As Selvan reflects on his experience at the lakeside area and wonders if he too has been indirectly involved in the destruction of Ramayi's life, he is overwhelmed with a sense of disgust and self-loathing. He imagines a centipede crawling all over his body and ponders over the issues of sexual exploitation and poverty. The memory of Ramayi's kindness and care towards him during his childhood only amplifies the magnitude of his guilt and makes him feel lesser than a worm. Selvan talks to her in his mind, "Are you the leaf that the bottom-feeders lick the leftovers from? Are you in so much poverty? But I know. I can despise this water, but I can never despise you" (176), highlights the deep empathy that Selvan feels for Ramayi and the societal prejudices that make poverty end up in self-destruction.

Selvan rejects the idea of considering her action as moral depravity. In his remorse, Selvan wonders about the respectable jobs Ramayi could have pursued instead of prostitution but also thinks of how she has been caught in the web of societal oppression. Selvan's experience underscores the urgent need for social and economic reforms to attend to the root causes of poverty and inequality that drive lower caste women to prostitution. The state of Mangasuri in *Estuary* provides a poignant example of the marginalized position of women in male-dominated families in the Indian society. She is subjected to the whims and fancies of the men folk in her family and has little agency or voice in matters that affect her life and well-being. The story illustrates the deeply established gender norms and expectations that dictate women's roles and responsibilities in patriarchal families. Women are often relegated to subservient roles, expected to prioritize

the needs and wants of their husbands and male family members above their own desires and aspirations. It reinforces the idea that women are inferior to men and their opinions and ideas are not worth considering. It is an unjust and harmful belief system that must be changed. The state of Mangasuri stresses the need to create equal and just societies where everyone's voices are heard and valued.

Though Kumarasurar ignores the ideas and advises of Mangasuri in taking decisions, she comes to his help at the end. She becomes a bridge between Kumarasurar and her son Meghas. She understands the point of view of both and tries to solve the problem. When Kumarasurar becomes depressed and acts very confused, she helps him come out of the situation and return to his old self.

A similar state is that of Mangasuri in *Neduneram*. It is an example of how traditional attitudes about caste and family honour can severely restrict a woman's freedom and education. The story highlights how women in some Indian families are silenced and forced to comply with the wishes of their elders, often to the loss of their happiness and well-being.

Mangasuri's son comes to know about what has happened in her life before she was married to his father, Kumarasurar. She was in love with a person from a lower caste and faced significant opposition from her family. Inter-caste relationships are still stigmatized in some parts of India, and families often go to great lengths to prevent them. In Mangasuri's case, her family's persistence in upholding caste hierarchies led to her being forced into an unhappy marriage with her uncle. Traditional attitudes towards caste, honour, and family can cause great harm to individuals. When she wanted to study further, her family stopped her from doing so.

When Mangasuri protested against her parents' arrangement for her marriage, they locked her in a room and threatened her of familicide. Left with no other option, she

agreed for the marriage. She just lives in the house. Her husband's efforts to make her happy become futile. She begets children due to her husband's pressure and for the sake of the family. She felt that there is nothing called love in their relationship of thirty years.

The character of Karuvachi in *Current Show* highlights the struggles and marginalization that transgender individuals face in the Indian society. Transgender individuals in India are often stigmatized and discriminated against and face many barriers to accessing education, employment, and healthcare. Transgender individuals are frequently subjected to verbal and physical abuse, harassment, and violence.

The lack of understanding and empathy towards transgender individuals in Indian society is a complex issue that cannot be attributed to a single source or reason. However, transphobia and discrimination against the transgender community are deeply embedded in Indian culture. This leads to a lack of acceptance towards transgender individuals, forcing them into poverty and marginalization. Everyone deserves respect and dignity, regardless of their gender identity. Proper education and awareness are needed to combat transphobia and discrimination and provide equal opportunities and access to resources for transgender individuals. They deserve all basic rights as the common people.

Perumal Murugan's portrayal of subdued women in his works is an important commentary on the social realities women face in the Kongu region and in many parts of India. Though many of his women are empowered by the soil, there are limitations placed on women's education, political participation, and professional opportunities. These limitations are a hindrance to their ability to contribute to the society at large.

It is essential to recognize that women's empowerment should also be economic. Empowering girls and women is essential to creating a more prosperous and equitable society. It is important to break down traditional patriarchal attitudes that limit women's freedom so that they could come out of the social evils targeted against women like female

infanticide, child marriage, dowry killing, and honour killing. A society where women are respected and treated as equal partners in all aspects of life is the need of the hour.

Murugan's wife Ezhilarasi in her Foreword to Murugan's book *Amma* talks very proudly about her mother-in-law who has been Murugan's inspiration:

This book asserts that a woman does not work to build a foundation only for herself; her life's work is also for others. She achieves a lot even as she goes about her routine chores. This collection does not dwell on the everyday dilemmas of ordinary women, and this is its strength. It is an enduring chronicle of the life of a matriarch from an agrarian family –one who absorbed what was necessary from the urban life, adjusted to her new role in the village and managed to unshackle herself from the travails she was subjected to. (xxi)

No wonder Murugan depicted strong and empowered women characters in his works.

The female characters of Murugan come out of their oppressions and show their strength in all possible ways. Their resilience and strength to find a ray of hope out of darkness becomes possible due to the bond they have with others and the world of nature. An analysis of the characters and the relationship they develop during the course of their lives bring out the importance of humanity and the way it enhances the quality of lives.