

***Confronting Liminal Spaces: Iconography, Gender, Justice, and the Case of
Perumal Murugan's 'One Part Woman'***

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Abstract

The paper examines the thematics of justice in the light of the controversy surrounding Tamil writer Perumal Murugan's novel *One Part Woman*. The work was attacked by right-wing organizations, for its portrayal of an obsolete ritual associated with the Tiruchengode Kailasanathar temple, which supposedly cast women worshippers in bad light.

The essay approaches justice through an account of iconography, specifically, that of the deity whose name gives the novel its title. The liminal aspect of the icon, and its idiosyncratic transformation of the sense of reality is reflected in the changing historical and political inflections of justice. Largely a legacy of colonialism, the notion of justice in India as it exists today in the public domain was conceived through the silencing of alternative traditions of reasoning. From rights conferred on women in the event of peculiar socio-cultural crises to one which denies such a historical precedence in the name of upholding women's morality, the contestations over justice has invariably taken place on the gendered body of the woman

In tracing the idea of justice through the concept of *dharma* to the modern legal system to its connotations in a reinvigorated nationalist environment, justice, I argue, is a site of liminality. It constitutes a threshold state, where non-juristic categories and objects assume extra-judicial authority, not only challenging State and civil laws, but at times mimicking them, and thereby rendering them ineffective.

Keywords: justice, *dharma*, liminality, Perumal Murugan

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When Perumal Murugan brought out his novel *One Part Woman* (*Maadhorubhaagon* in Tamil) in 2010, it did not evoke any adverse response. Discerning readers recognized the scholarship of a well-known writer whose works have documented fast disappearing customs and language usage. In part, based on data collected through extensive fieldwork related to his research on the Kongu region in western Tamil Nadu, the novel's credibility owes to its authentic locale and representation of a specific historical period. Critical appreciation of the book led to its publisher Penguin, bringing out in 2013 an English translation by Aniruddhan Vasudevan, a student at Austin, Texas, in the United States. In all the intervening years up to 2015, there was no indication whatsoever that there was any kind of controversy in the story.

On December 19, 2014, there was a protest in Tiruchengode by caste-based outfits and activists of right-wing Hindu groups who sought a ban on the book. They alleged that the novel had demeaned the Kailasanthar temple in Tiruchengode, a small town in the Namakkal district of the State of Tamil Nadu, and had insulted the women devotees of a particular caste community. With his life under threat and the district administration stating their inability to protect him, Murugan had to flee the place with his family. After one month of protests, he declared his "death" as a writer, avowing never to write again.

The story, set in a rural landscape in the last decades of British colonial rule, revolves around a peasant couple, Kali and Ponna. Several references in the work allude to a time period dating back to seventy five years or so, and recreate its rustic cultural ethos. Married for twelve years, the couple shares a love like no other, marred only by the absence of a child. Accentuating the desire for a child is anxiety over property inheritance, and for Ponna, the stigma of being excluded from various religious and customary rituals on account of being barren. The couple goes through a number of rituals over the years in order to appease the gods over ancestral and personal wrongdoings. One ritual associated with the temple of Siva in the form of *Ardhanareesvara* or half-man half-woman, on top of a rocky hill in Thiruchengode, was a now obsolete custom that allowed consensual union between a childless woman and any man during the annual chariot festival.¹ Ponna is cajoled and persuaded by her family to take part in the customary ritual on the pretext that it has her husband's endorsement. The plot builds up to the protagonist awaiting her "god," as all men were considered on that day, at the festival grounds. Through a series of powerful portrayals, Murugan sensitively captures the psychological and emotional conflicts that torment the couple, threatening to tear them apart.

¹ In the Author's Note, Murugan (2013) speaks of coming across people referred to as "god-given child" in the course of his field research about the place (p. 244). The very name indicates that the stranger was perceived as a representative of god.

Seen as embodiments of the religious figures they represent, icons are visual images that constitute “figures of knowledge” (Ganguly and Thomas, 2004, p. 1). They operate culturally by providing conceptions of the world, the self, and relations between them, and also provide a model for suitable mental dispositions. From these cultural functions flow, in turn, its social and psychological ones. In this manner, by acting as a conduit for a cohesive set of values, they penetrate mainstream discourses and act as a rallying point around which collective identities are formed. Unlike other Saivite temples where the deity in the sanctum sanctorum is in the form of a phallic image, whatever is the local legend, the icon at the Kailasanthar temple takes the mythological form of *Ardhanareesvara* or half-man half-woman god. Although various versions of the myth exists (Yadav, 2001), all of them invariably associate the deity with conjugal inseparability (Chakravarti, 1986, p. 43) and creation. But it is in rituals, that is, “consecrated behavior” (Greez, 1973, p.112), that the agency of the symbolic forms is most evident. Rituals are systematic formulations of religious conceptions as well as the definitive experience which authenticates it. Such practices often invoke intense responses which radically alter one’s sense of reality, fusing the immediate lived world with the world as conceived in ultimate terms. This altered sense of space and time is evident in the story when Ponna moves alone through the festival grounds:

She shut her eyes. When she opened them, she saw bodies glistening with sweat lit by the flame torches. All the bodies looked alike – like black rocks that had been set upright and carved into bodies They all looked like gods. (Murugan, 2013, p. 205) She crosses the threshold of reality into an atemporal and ahistorical order of existence.

Central to Murugan’s tale is the now obsolete ritual at the Tiruchengode temple which has stirred up much controversy. On the fourteenth day of the chariot festival at the temple, when it was believed the deities return to their abode, any consenting man and childless woman could have sex. The social dimension of the ritual is couched in religious terms which convey the concept of *dharma*, inherent in the ontology of the gods in Hindu religion. Kali’s mother reasons with him to allow his wife to conceive in this manner: “Who is without lack in the world? The gods have made sure everyone lacks something or the other. But the same god has also given us ways to fill that lack” (Murugan, 2013, p. 95). The anonymity conferred on what might otherwise have been a taboo act is explained in terms that are invested with divine validation: “All men who set their foot in Tiruchengode on the fourteenth are gods Who knows which god comes with what face? (Murugan, 2013, p. 96).

The term *dharma* comprises laws of life, nature and cosmos (Prasad, 1995). In individual and social life, it is the system of rules for deciding between right and wrong. These rules touch on all aspects of decision making, and much more. The concept of *dharma* has its roots in ancient Indian jurisprudence when there was no statutory law for lack of such a political system, and all law was originally customary law (Katju, 2010, 2). Although these customs were later codified in texts such as the *Smritis* and commentaries on them,² customs had precedence over the written text. This leads to an understanding of law as not merely a set of artificial rules imposed on society but an outcome of the social system as it evolved in history (Katju, 2010, 15). Unlike Western concepts of justice with roots in material and political conflicts, which can be rendered only under the precept of law, to the exclusion of morality and ethics, *dharma* integrates both the rule of law as well as justice, political astuteness and faith. In it there was no conflict whatsoever between religious authority and political/social authority.

The frame of reference for the values and laws of *dharma*, specifically *Sanatana dharma*, in its fundamental nature, is always eternal in essence and universality (Prasad, 1995). And gods as representatives of the eternal were considered “guardians of cosmic law” and practiced divine law (Sharma, n.d.). This is often evident in their various incarnations, and iconography in which the posture, form, and gesture, for instance, indicate specific cosmic and bounded purposes. Moreover, mythical accounts of gods are created more for moral and didactical purposes and indicate distinctive approaches to personal ethics and social justice. Thus, icons according to “belief,” housing the spirit of god, were often invested with the role of juristic personalities, legitimating customary practices and establishing relations of power.

The ritual at the Tiruchengode temple is an instance of a practice sanctioned by *niyoga dharma*. An ancient system of tradition, the meaning of *niyoga* literally approximates to “delegation” (Kumar, 2013). It deals with the idea of delegating a husband’s duty of providing his married wife with a child, to some other man; ideally a brother or a close relative. The ritual which finds mention in several scriptures of Hinduism³ as well as in certain Indian epics, stems from the importance given to the furthering of the family lineage, specifically, in the absence of a male heir. The emphasis here is on *dharma* as duty, both the woman and the appointed man considering the ritual as a means to bear a child and not for pleasure.

² The *Smritis* were books written by certain Sanskrit scholars who had specialized in law, and not laws *per se* passed by any form of legislative body. There are many *smritis*, the most well known being the *Manusmriti*, and most of them deal with specific laws like adoption, governance, or property, to name a few. Later, commentaries, and commentaries on commentaries, were written on these *smritis*. See Katju (2010).

³ Specifically the *Vedas* and the *Puranas*.

Women, in general, were considered as vessels of reproduction in times past and had no say in the choice of the appointed man other than giving her consent in the ritual. In the epics, class and caste hierarchies were carefully preserved by the chosen man inevitably being from the extended family, *gotra* (clan), same caste,⁴ or even a revered person or a divine being.⁵ In the process of ensuring harmony, in keeping with cosmic law it was the body of the silenced woman, marked by patriarchy as a vessel for its continuance, which was the proprietary sacrifice to effect *dharma*/justice /right action.

By the 1940s, the period in which Murugan's novel is set, the discourse on justice had already changed. Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) reminds us that by devaluing the Indians as "savage" and "backward" and relics of the past even as they inhabited the present, historicism acted as the main mode by and through which the reason of the non-West was declared to be of inferior value. This in turn led to the rejection of non-Western traditions of reasoning that did not conform to the Western universal and singular idea of Reason (Seth, 2004, p. 47). Reason was also divisive, exclusionary, and specialized in contrast to the coherent knowledge system of ancient India. Western colonial historiography refused to accommodate "beliefs" about the agency of gods and ancestors in and on the world.

A brief examination of legal history in late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century India reveals the conflation of religion with State law. It was based on a policy of non-interference in the customary and religious realm, contingent on economic interests and ideological principles that were mainly the moral in constitution. With the gradual consolidation of the colonial state, the reluctance to impose British law alongside British judicial processes was crucial in framing a sphere of "conjoint (indigenous + colonial) and *fissured* authority" (Sangari, 1999, p. 105).

This entailed a selective orientation of the legal system in accommodating religious law in the context of colonial reformism, even as the jurisdictional ambitions of the State remained unchanged. It accompanied official attempts to reconcile the tutelary function of the colonial administration with the colonial subjects' need to affirm her/his cultural identity and religious belief. To this end, the colonists codified all aspects of civil law in which the English law was to serve as the basis, with the exception of religious laws of Hindus and Muslims which were to govern their respective communities in personal matters (Parashar, 1992, p. 65-7). Divinely-mediated oaths and trials as aspects of law and justice were abolished in the civil sphere in the process. But the personal laws posed a challenge, as even among the Hindus different rules were followed in different regions and among different castes.

⁴ Kumar (2013)

⁵ The episodes of the birth of Pandu and Dhritrashtra, and later on the five sons of Pandu, from the union of the queens with divine beings in the *Mahabharata* (Tripathi, 2005, pg.140) point to such an argument. In the *Ramayana* there is also mention of an ancestor of Rama, Kalmashapada who obtained a son from the sage Vashishtha by *niyoga* (Tripathi, 2005, pg.377).

A. I. Davidson points out that justice to Michel Foucault is nothing more than an idea that has been created in different times and places (Wilkin, 1998, p. 185). To Foucault, power is the ultimate goal for any social and political movement. According to him, the idea of justice refers only to the discursive practices and regimes of truth that have characterized modernity (Wilkin, 1998, p. 185). Viewed from this perspective, Kali's incensed response to his brother-in-law, Muthu's suggestions of sending Ponna to the festival is drawn from experience rather than reason, for he is a religious man:

When you and I went, were we gods? All we wanted was to find some decent-looking women to fuck, didn't we? Did you ever think of yourself as a god? It happened because people were ignorant in those days. Who will send their women now? Will you send your wife? (Murugan, 2013, 138-9)

Yet when he calls Muthu "old-fashioned" he argues citing the prevailing custom of monogamy. This remark further point to the dominating discourses of sexuality and morality which permeated Western analytical systems and writings on indigenous customs, traditions and knowledge systems (Appadurai, 1986, p. 745). The various cultural, social, and state institutions shaped by these ideas, in turn created a newer reality for the native populations, while simultaneously un-tethering them from pre-colonial ideologies. This new reality I will call modernity. And the artefacts of modernity are implied in Kali's reference to the abolishment of the practice of child marriage, in his familiarity with the mechanisms of the cinema, and in the stories his iconoclast uncle Nallupayyan tells him about the world beyond the village.

But even so, imperialist interventions had already in the previous century initiated the reconstitution of the image of women in the struggles over the reshaping of patriarchies. In such a context, caste, language and religious communities became seemingly substantive foci around which new cohesions of loyalty converged, were refracted or inflected (Philip, 2007, p. 29). Women's bodies became markers of honour, moral power and carriers of a selective "purist" cultural tradition. In the negotiations between tradition and modernity, other binaries also coalesced: sexuality/chastity, masculinity/femaleness (Philip, 2007, p. 31). Both, fear of loss of honour and loss of caste, and charges of impotency bear on Kali's refusal to the custom.

Caste is a defining factor in the constitution of patriarchies and identities in India. Historian Romila Thapar (Ashraf and Thapar, 2015) contends that religion in India has been deeply entwined with caste. The social and the religious have often evolved together. Caste hierarchies and caste-based ritual duties have always been a characteristic feature of Brahminic religion. In Kali's denunciation of the ritual and the break with the notion that all men are gods is an evident concern with maintaining caste purity. When he asserts that if anyone from the untouchable castes gets to be with his wife, he will not be able to touch her after that (Murugan, 2013, p.140), he is in fact reiterating the notion of the gendered body as embodied caste with differential values.

Contrary to the apparent oppositional binaries underlying the eighteenth-century cultural construction of the Indian man and woman, the androgynous, bisexual god *Ardhanareesvara* with ambiguous and indeterminate attributes is a liminal being. Almost all the origin myths attest to a temporary state associated with fertility and abundant growth. It is this figure which presides over the fourteenth day of the chariot festival at Tiruchengode. The festival space lies at the threshold of several converging reasoning systems: Brahminic Hinduism with its rigid caste hierarchies and ritualistic duties symbolized by the temple dominating the landscape, the older cult of the Mother Goddess represented by the figure of Pavatha in the forest on the outskirts of the temple, and a

redefined public domain imbricated by changing cultural, social and political ideologies. The threshold is a liminal space, a margin phase where, according to Arnold van Gennep, there is an absence of customary norms and ethical standards (Turner, n.d., p. 47).

The uncertain, rudimentarily structured, and relatively undifferentiated character of the festival space strips religion of its caste affiliations. No longer bound by religio-social norms, Ponna exercises an impossible freedom in this liminal space: "There was nothing to stop her here. She could do anything" (Murugan, 2013, p. 203). The body as both a product of space and the production of space is immediately subject to the ideological determinants of that space (Lefebvre, 1991, 195). Moral injunctions no longer bear on her as she rejects the advances of two prospective "gods" and leaves with a stranger who fits her ideal of a "god." It is a space that ensures anonymity, and its sanctioned sacredness has ontological value (Turner, 1969, 103), refashioning the very being of the devotees, dissolving and reconstituting identities to enable incorporation into the social structure: "Here, my face, my body, my appearance-everything has become new. Isn't this what I need to become a mother?" thinks Ponna (Murugan, 2013, 202).

However, the threshold state is fraught with contradictions. The sense of newness and possibility that the space evokes in Ponna also produces anxious moments heightening the sense of dislocation. As she moves trance-like through this space of altered reality, she "consciously" questions the motivations behind the routes she takes. Even as she embraces the dancing men, "gods" to her mind, she is acutely aware of the danger posed by a group of men who follow her. Implied in her choice of "god" are factors like caste bearings, mutual sexual attraction, and unfamiliarity. Rather than the security of anonymity, the magical atmosphere harbours the ominous when she is led away from the crowds and the noise into the darkness. The liminal is a space of contest between the sacred and the profane, the ordinary. It admits a play of the binaries *niyoga*/lust, certainty/anxiety, and security/danger.

The liminal can also become the norm, as is evidenced in the co-option of the *Ardhanareesvara* icon by gay and lesbian literature. Conceptual ideas about the inseparability of the male and female principles symbolically embodied in the icon (“Ardhanarishvara,” 2011), have been appropriated to argue about the colonization of the sexual ideologies of various non-Western societies by predominantly Western ideas of sexual binary and sexual dimorphism (Roscoe, 1995). Such political inflections of icons reveal new ways of asserting agency and have been used to demand changes in laws that discriminate against sexual minorities.

In the years following independence, the legal framework established by the former colonizers was left more or less intact. Although notable legal reforms were carried out in the civil and social spheres, those laws referencing gender and religion were left untouched.^{6 7} But the authority of the legal system is a matter for speculation. Spread throughout the country, especially in rural and semi-rural pockets, are caste/community-based and/or geography-based organizations unaffiliated with formally elected government bodies. These function as quasi-judicial bodies and exert significant social influence on the communities they represent. Their rulings derive from age-old customs and traditions, often bordering on regressive measures to modern problems, and rely on emotive deliberations. Their authority extends over both the civil and personal domains.

Under the circumstances, reconciling two ways of knowing and interaction with the world becomes impossible due to their differential values. When non-juristic categories and objects charged with sentiments assume extra-judicial authority and challenge state and civil laws, the terrain of law becomes a highly contested one. In it converge mutually opposing forms of moral, ethical, practical and political reasoning, notions of illegitimacy and legitimacy, normative standards and positive or prescriptive standards. In other words, the law is in a double-bind, a stalemate, a liminal state.

Moving away from questions and definitions of what is justice, Surendra Bhandari (2014) proposes that “law is justice,” justice referring to the facts and processes of the creation, promotion, and enforcement of rights, duties, and institutional responsibilities (p. 32). If this is so, it follows from the earlier premise about law, that justice, too, is a state of liminality. On a conceptual level, the fact cannot be entirely ignored that the idea of justice has constantly been trapped by political ideologies, religions, gender discrimination, and violations of human rights and inequality ((Bhandari, 2014, p. 40).

In the present context of globalization, religion has made a strident comeback as a determining force in Indian politics. In the post-secular era, the resurgence of religion has been paralleled by the rise of right-wing political parties which want to establish

⁶ The Hindu Code Bill was passed in 1956 in order to bring about some measure of equality for women, and covered the Hindu Marriage Act, Succession Act, Minority and Guardianship Act, and Adoptions and Maintenance Act. However, the Muslim community still continues to be guided by religious prescriptions in the sphere of personal law.

⁷ Modern jurisprudence in India, according to Markandeya Katju (2010) is a combination of positivism, sociological jurisprudence and natural law (p. 28).

an ideal Hindu State, identified by religion and unequal rights of citizenship. The action policy of these groups follows two contradictory trails. On a national level, there is the historicization of mythology, distortion of historical facts, corruption of the constituents of culture, and an opportunistic interpretation of history and myth. But on a global scale, religion is reformatted as global faith by uncoupling it from culture. Rather, the culture to which religion refers to now goes back to a presumed golden age that in turn seeks to strengthen national identity. This extreme form of nationalism aims to conceptualize a “pure” religion at the loss of cultural identity. Any creative expression that suggests otherwise, like Murugan’s depiction of the obsolete ritual at the Tiruchengode temple, is met with censorship and forced silence. It is interesting to note in this context that author Amish Tripathi’s the Shiva trilogy which attempts a historical rendering of mythical and/or religious figures and events has been a No. 1 National Bestseller since 2010.

Paradoxically, global India has also witnessed a resurgence of identity politics revolving around caste and religion. Caste groups and religious communities have been increasingly asserting themselves, confronting the State with demands ranging from social privileges to political accommodation. One of the charges brought against the novel *One Part Woman* was that it depicted the women devotees belonging to a particular caste in poor light. It is well known that the protesters mainly drawn from the Kongu Gounder Vellala community, to which Murugan also belongs, is an influential intermediate caste dominant in western Tamil Nadu. They form an important vote bank in the politics of the region. The lack of response on the part of representatives of major political parties to the incident, and the ineffectiveness of the administration to prevent violence and Murugan’s exile only confirm how extra-judicial authority is assumed by caste purists and neo-fundamentalist groups riding the underbelly of a nationalist State through political alliances, thereby rendering “secular” laws ineffective. Finally, an obsolete ritual from a bygone period, which served specific social needs, where there were no alternative arrangements, is forcefully detached from its historical moorings and given a gendered slant.

When women are viewed through the lens of an ideal, mythical age lost in time immemorial, their historical positionings and material existence are obscured so that the attainment of women’s rights is constantly in a state of suspension, projected into a utopian future, or not acknowledged at all. As for the State, in shying away from issues supposedly relating to the “honour” of women through the non-implementation of existing laws withdraws from its role as the final legal authority. And, woman becomes a compromised moral category in the politico-ethical ambitions of both the State as well as non-juristic entities as sole arbiters

All of these events come into play and converge at the site of justice. Given the existing uncertainties surrounding what constitutes justice and how it is best served, the legal system in India finds itself in a double-bind, overlooking the rights, duties and institutional responsibilities it is supposed to uphold. This in turn feeds into the liminal nature of justice. In this reading, justice exists at the threshold of politico-cultural borderlands of gender, religion, and law, where ways of being and identities are disrupted and constantly redefined. At the same time this quality of justice leaves it open to engineering, renewal and further dismantling. In other words, in the modern State, the liminal has become the norm.

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