

## Interrogating the Theme of Incarnation and ‘Ardhanarisvara’ in Perumal Murugan’s *One Part Woman* and *Poonachi*

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### **Abstract:**

Stories of various incarnations or the embodiments of spiritual figures are widely discussed in the texts like *Vishnu-Purana*, *Rig Veda* and *Upanishad*. These stories tell about the important role of incarnations, which are either in animal or human forms, in regenerating the degenerating societies at different periods of time. Perumal Murugan, the contemporary Tamil writer of *One Part Woman* and *Poonachi or the Story of a Black Goat*, narrates about the ordeal of a woman and a female goat in the texts respectively, and also he narrates about the miracle of the female goat in order to rejuvenate the society. These two texts are not sequel but they are complementary in many ways. If the human protagonists struggle to find happiness in one text, the nonhuman protagonists have to deal with same fate in a morally unscrupulous surrounding. To what extent the condition of woman and animal is same is a point that the

paper has tried to establish. The alteration of characters from human to nonhuman serves poignantly to dispose hypocrisy in human society. Another important aspect is that the author narrates about the nature of animal without trying to anthropomorphize the nonhuman characters to tell a different story or many different stories. Also, how the role of nonhuman in the texts can be compared to incarnation and how the theme of 'ardhanarisvara' is apt, are some other objectives of this paper.

**Keywords:** Incarnation, Nonhuman, Nature, Anthropomorphize, 'Ardhanarisvara'

### **Introduction:**

Perumal Murugan, a vital cog not only in Tamil literature but also in present Subaltern literature in India and South-Asia, gained controversy as well as popularity through his novel, *One Part Woman* (2013). It is a translation by Aniruddhan Vasudevan from Murugan's Tamil novel, *Madhorubagan* (2010) which criticizes a heinous traditional culture that allows immoral and insensitive acts towards childless women on a particular night of annual chariot festival at the 'Ardhanariswara' temple. After the publication of this book, local religious groups became furious and demanded the withdrawal of the novel from market. They also asked Murugan for "unconditional apology" for hurting the religious sentiments. Deeply saddened to see such incidents, the writer gave up writing but later on when he got strong supports from various parts of Tamil Nadu as well as from other parts of India, he took up his pen again. After a lengthy break, he wrote a novel called, *Poonachi or the Story of a Black Goat* (2018) in which his main characters are nonhuman animals rather than the human ones. If we look at both the novels, we understand that he shifts his protagonists from human to nonhuman in order to maintain his 'truth' towards the society more vehemently as a writer. The two texts are not twins or sequel but they have complemented each other quite well in order to criticize certain customs of society. The societies he talks about in both the texts are not limited to the locale of Kongu or Namakkal in Tamil Nadu rather they epitomize the rural places of India where human beings are survived by confounded customs. Struck by poverty, people have no other options left but to depend upon livestock and subjects like marriage and childbirth. Marriage and specially, childbirth are two grave issues in any class and strata of society of our country. Those who beget child are escaped from the rude scorns and derogatory attitudes which persons with no issue face throughout the life. Kali and Ponna in *One Part Woman* lead such

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life. Their minds are full of love and jest but the only sore is their childless connubial life. All the happiness is withered in their lives for this one reason. They become isolated gradually from the villagers. They are ridiculed and cursed which is quite common in a large part of our society. The author has beautifully highlighted their agonies by depicting the barrenness and void in their lives while fertility is seen everywhere among the nonhuman nature and animals.

‘A shadow fell on her face. She must have been thinking about how the tree had grown so lush and abundant in twelve years while not even a worm had crawled in her womb. Every wretched thing reminded her of that lack. After the wedding, she had fought with her father and had taken a cow from here. It delivered seven or eight calves, populating Kali’s barn with its offspring. She’d tear up just looking up at that cow. She had once cried out loud, “I don’t have the boon that even this mute creature has been blessed with.” (Murugan: 8)

If we look in the text *Poonachi*, the female goat, Poonachi, has a fertile womb inside her and it produces seven litters in the time of delivery each time. So, as one can see that the subject of fertility or creation has some significant importance in both the novels and most importantly, nonhuman animals are portrayed as foil of human being. Due to social constructions, human and nonhuman animal have an abysmal difference but human’s basic difference with nonhuman animals lies on their instinctive nature or ‘animality’. Human beings are similar in many ways but they are not ready to accept it. As John Berger said:

Animals are born, are sentient, and are mortal. In these things they resemble man. In their superficial anatomy—less in their deep anatomy—in their habits, in their time, in their physical capacities, they differ from man. They are both like and unlike. (Berger: 13)

Instinctive nature of animal differs from the human’s nature because human being is a ‘social animal’. Though he/she is an animal biologically but his nature is belonged to the social and ‘cultural’ constructions which strip off his/her natural essence.

### **Relevance of God, Demon and Incarnation:**

In the preface to the original Tamil edition of the novel, *Poonachi or the Story of a Black Goat*, Perumal Murugan writes:

“I am fearful of writing about humans; even more fearful of writing about gods. I could write about demons, perhaps. I am even used to a bit of the demonic life. I could make it an accompaniment here. Yes, let me write about animals.”(2016: v)

Quite naturally, the presence of god and ‘asura’ or demon pervades both the texts. And animal serves as the perfect vehicle or ‘vahana’ for the author as it does for gods and demons or ‘asuras’ The relation between fertility and god is a commonplace picture in Hindu myth and also in the large part of our society. The protagonists in *One Part Woman* seek god’s blessings and turn into devotees when they fail to beget child for many years. When their miseries pile up, they even go through more rigorous penances. Perumal Murugan writes:

In the matter of offering prayers, Kali and Ponna left no stone unturned. They did not discriminate between small and big temples. They promised an offering to every god they encountered. (Murugan: 47)

But what the author has done through these texts is that, he has exposed the falsity, hypocrisy and morally unscrupulous nature of human beings on the pretext of god. Murugan’s novels are commentaries of the various problems and darker sides of society. The settings and vivid descriptions of classes and power structures of society are very common not only in the Southern part but all parts of India. In many ways, his settings are symbolic of whole India. As time passes, in *One Part Woman*, the members of both families are getting impatient and anxious about the wrong or evil that might have barred Ponna from getting pregnant. Different speculations from family members are rife and these make Kali and Ponna confused and splenetic. They just start doing things whatever they learn from people. Ultimately, to ‘meet’ the god, she reaches the temple of Karattur where the annual chariot festival takes place for eighteen days with the hope of child. Ironically, ‘all men who set their foot in Karattur on the eighteenth day are gods.’(Murugan: 96). The human beings hold the righteousness under the darkness of these nights. In the crowd, all rules are relaxed and men could have sex with any woman who has been preoccupied with the thought of begetting child by any mean, moral or immoral. Kali, the protagonist mocks Muthu:

All we wanted was to find some decent-looking women to fuck, didn’t we? Did you ever think of yourself as a god? (Murugan: 138)

The horrible story of a tribal girl who was brutally raped and killed by four young men near a temple is like a prelude to the rape of Ponna and other women who share similar agonies

like Ponna in the name of god. Obviously the female protagonist does not come to the temple by her own consent rather she is brought there by cheating by her own mother and brother and even without the knowledge of her husband. Consequently, a rift in the relationship between husband and wife takes place and no other than god and his human-followers are responsible behind this.

One thing is clear that the author believes only in 'asuras' because he is disgusted with the ideas of god. In *Poonachi: or the Story of a Black Goat*, the machination of Bakasuran who belongs to the clan of 'Asura' or demon is happened at the very earliest. Interestingly, the giant-figure is represented quite mysteriously and without any grandeur. Even his face can't be seen when he came to hand over the goat-kid to Samiyov, the farmer who also belongs to the clan of 'Asura'. Bakasuran's back is described as broad as a slab of granite and 'in the space between his one giant step and the next, he thought, a six-footer could lie down and extend his arms freely on either side'. (Murugan: 2). The goat-kid's colour was all black in its body as suggested by the subtitle of the text. The colour here symbolizes the darkness with which the demons are generally associated. But in contrast, this demon or demon's gift is neither evil creature nor belongs to the harmful darkness. Thus, the ideas of good and evil are here altered to the 'asura' and the god, respectively.

In the mainstream literature, it is rare to find the machination of 'asura' in stead of god. It alludes to the eternal conflict of gods and demons in Hindu mythology. The myth of the churning of the ocean to obtain ambrosia is another example in which gods' deceitful nature prevails over the 'asuras'. The churning of the ocean is an example of creation out of chaos in which both gods and 'asuras' participated. In this course of this process, though they are united but later on they are opposed to each other as the elixir produced in the churning was not given to 'asuras' by trick or deceit. It has different connotations as well. The gods and demons were both born from Prajapati or the Brahma and it is said that god and demon are two states of our mind in which god represents goodness and demon represents evil. As Wendy Doniger connotes in her book, *Hindu Myths*:

The problem of differentiation between 'hateful fraternal enemies' and the conflict which arises out of the separation of truth from falsehood lead to certain logical circles in a myth in which the gods use deceit as their weapon. (Doniger: 272)

Thus the myth of gods and demons is alluded by the writer quite aptly. Another theme which is quintessential in the context is incarnation or avatar. Incarnation suggests the embodiment of God or any spiritual figure to generate poise and balance in a chaotic world. As Lord Krishna promises in *Bhagavad Gita*:

Yaada yaada hi dharmasya glaanirbhavati bhaarata

Abhyutthanam adharmasya tadaatmaanam  
srujaamyaham  
Paritranaaya saadhoonam vinaashaaya cha  
drushkrutam;

Dharma sansthaapanarthaya sambhavaami yuge yuge. (Bhagavad Gita, IV. 8).

Which means: 'Whenever righteousness declines and unrighteousness prevails, I manifest Myself; for the protection of the good, for the destruction of the wicked and for the establishment of righteousness, I am born in every age.' Many examples of incarnation are found in ancient texts of Hindu myth like *Vishnu-Purana*, *Rig Veda* and *Upanishad*. Lord Vishnu has ten incarnations. Among them, four incarnations are of animals---the fish or 'matsya', the boar or 'varaha', the tortoise or 'kurma' and the man-lion or 'narasimha'. Like the other incarnations, the four animal-incarnations are very powerful and significant in order to punish the evils in society. In the context of this article, the incarnations of nonhuman animals have relevance when Murugan literally fell 'upon the thorns of life' and bled between the years of publication of *One Part Woman* and *Poonachi*. In these years, he faced the wrath and bashes of Brahmins of South India who hounded him up to the point where the voice of an author is stifled or one may say death of an author. He took a sabbatical from writing for a lengthy period of time before he took up his pen to write *Poonachi or the Story of a Black Goat*. How the story of his confusions, agonies and dilemmas find voice through the meek and feeble goat, Poonachi, is trailblazing. The theme of fertility or creation is related to god who is the source of life. Andrew Linzey, an eminent theologian, said about incarnation that it is an objective reality with which god can have a providential relationship. He also said that this objective reality must be such that God can participate within it by incarnating into some living being with some material substance like flesh and blood in such a way that some purpose may be fulfilled. Flesh and blood are very significant as these are shared by human in particular with nonhuman animal in the process of redeeming. Paul Tillich, another theologian and eminent existentialist philosopher, writes:

Incarnation is special for the special group in which it happens, but it is not unique in the sense that other singular incarnations for other unique worlds are excluded. Man cannot claim that the infinite has entered the finite to overcome its existential estrangement in mankind alone. (Tillich: 96)

The nonhuman protagonist in *Poonachi* is blessed with a fertile womb unlike the human female protagonist in *One Part Woman*. Poonachi don't have the incapacity which Ponna has. For this incapacity of producing child, Ponna's life and the lives of her family members are turned into hell. On the other hand, Poonachi has 'miraculous' fertility and it not only gives happiness to her and her human guardians but it also helps them in overcoming their poor and wretched condition. In this way, the goat plays a perfect foil to her human counterpart and it can be said an incarnation which helps to survive the family and society. To the whole society, the goat is a miracle:

"Seven kids, huh?" he said. "This is a miracle even for the government." (Murugan: 119)

The old woman remembered the giant who has given the goat to them as gift as Lord. She said that Lord Mesagaran, who is a local deity, himself must have come in the form of giant. So, figures of god and miracle, 'asura' or giant and their incarnations are machinated to foreground the incarnation of the goat which turned into a stone at the end of *Poonachi or the Story of a Black Goat*. The image of 'stone', according to Hindu myth, only strengthens the idea of her stature of deity who ultimately turns into a stone after spending time in the earth.

### **'Ardhanarisvara' and Nonhuman:**

The word 'Ardhanarisvara' means a lord whose form is androgynous or hermaphrodite. In Hindu myth, it is a composite figure of Lord Shiva and Devi Parvati. The symbolic intent of the figure is to signify that the male and female principles are inseparable and it conveys 'coniunctio oppositorum' or the unity of opposites in the universe. Creation and fertility are the two essences of 'ardhanarisvara' discussed in both the texts which are relevant for this article. In *One Part Woman*, which gets the very title from the word, the female protagonist ultimately reaches the temple of 'Ardhanarisvara' in the hope of child. At the last part of the novel, a drama is enacted in the temple and it perfectly serves the epilogue for the novel but in a manner which is ironical. Thus, it disposes the immorality and hypocrisy of the people by distorting the holy myth. On the other hand, in *Poonachi or the Story of a Black Goat*, the theme is manifested when the old woman said to the female goat:

You are the deity of our clan, Mesayya himself. (Murugan: 144)

It is very interesting from the author to fuse a nonhuman animal with a male deity named Mesayya who is also called as Lord Mesagaran. Poonachi, the female goat, is a

miracle not only to the family but also to the people of the society. People worship her in awe. The old couple even charges money to the people who come to visit the goat. She brings fortune to the wretched old couple. Also, they are fed literally and survived by her milk. It reminds the reader about the myth of Prithu, a king who is in the form of female cow resuscitates the world by yielding milk. Thus, a retelling of the theme of 'Ardhanarisvara' has been done through the novel, *Poonachi or the Story of a Black Goat*. One of the greatest poets in Bengali language, Jibanananda Das, out of deep love and infatuation for the nature of rural Bangladesh or the undivided Bengal, wished to lie under the beautiful nature of Bengal forever as 'ardhanarisvara' through his poem, 'Tomar Buker Theke Ekdin Chole Jabe' ('Shall Depart from Your Heart One Day') which belongs to the anthology of Bengali poems, '*Ruposhi Bangla*' ('Bengal the Beautiful') which is written in 1934 and published in 1957. Through the poem, the poet wished to mingle with his beloved nature as 'ardhanarisvara'. Here, nature is another nonhuman phenomenon which is similar to Perumal Murugan's nonhuman animal which is also a component of nature. Human beings are also a part of nature but in Western philosophy, an unsurpassable barrier or dualism has been established between humanity and nonhuman beings. As Kate Soper said:

...this dualism has its theoretical reflection in the debate between 'culturalist' and 'naturalist' approaches to the human-animal divide, with the one side claiming that human beings differ absolutely from animals in virtue of their symbolic capacities, the other insisting that the differences between humanity and higher primates are matters of degree. But whatever view we take on this issue, there is little doubt that, in the common way of seeing things, animals are opposed to human beings as creatures who belong to the order of nature. (Soper: 81)

Perumal Murugan has sought after the characters of nonhuman animals as P.B. Shelley sought to the 'Wild Spirit' of West Wind, to describe his condition and the condition of society. Murugan believes in the instinctive nature of nonhuman animals and he lets his characters to be transpired into their instinct. In doing so, he conceptualise the phrase 'Becoming-animal' of Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. Phrase like 'Becoming-Animal' never focuses on nonhuman animals in alienation but on nonhuman forces present in different forms of organisation of organic and non-organic life'. Deleuze and Guattari explain further that becoming is not imitation because imitation implies a shift from

one identity to another, from higher identity to lower one or the vice versa. Rather, it implies the deconstructing of identity itself. Thus, it rejects the hierarchical structure of human and nonhuman beings. They also elaborate that it is not an evolution but an involution.

Another important aspect emerge through these texts is the bond and connection between woman and nature. Theme of fertility is very dominant throughout the texts. Female body has the capacity of reproduction which is same with nature. As the female goat represents nature, her connection with the female protagonist only strengthens the idea of association of femininity with nature.

### **Conclusion:**

The whole literary oeuvre of Perumal Murugan is lightened with real-life characters, both human and nonhuman, and the focus remains on the ways of withstanding their mundane lives in a torrid socio-cultural condition. Ideas of a more unifying world and inter-connectedness between human beings and nonhuman beings are never overlooked but celebrated. 'Becoming-animal' is another vital issue addressed in this article and juxtaposition of the themes of incarnation and hermaphrodite or 'ardhanarisvara' is apt for this.

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