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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Epistemic Violence and the Silencing of the Subaltern Woman in Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* (2010) through the theoretical lens of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's subaltern studies, particularly her arguments in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (2009). The novel's female protagonist, Ponna, epitomises the doubly marginalised subaltern woman whose voice is silenced by patriarchal, caste-bound, and ritualistic structures. The study explores how society speaks for Ponna, overriding her agency through epistemic violence and cultural control in the name of tradition. Her body becomes a contested site where ritualised desire, reproductive expectation, and cultural authority intersect, echoing Spivak's critique of the silencing of the female subaltern.

Keywords: Subaltern, epistemic violence, gender, caste, patriarchy, ritual

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FULL RESEARCH PAPER

Introduction

Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* (2010), translated into English by Aniruddhan Vasudevan, presents a rural portrayal of Tamil Nadu, where caste hierarchies, patriarchal authority and cultural expectations decide individuals' authority. The narrative follows Kali and Ponna, a happily married couple whom the villagers exclude because they are childless. Though infertility appears as the central theme, the novel reveals a deeper crisis rooted in the social regulations of women's bodies and the systemic silencing of the Subaltern woman in a caste-bound community. Infertility in Perumal Murugan's novel is not a private or biological matter but a social stigma that makes judgments on an individual in the name of tradition and culture.

Although infertility and the pressures of rural life lie at the heart of the novel, Ponna's experience can also be questioned as a problem of representation: who has the authority to define her suffering and social status, and to determine the choices available to her? This paper approaches the novel through Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's critical analysis of epistemic violence and subalternity, discussing how social power governs cultural practices. Through this theory, it is evident that Ponna's childlessness becomes a collective agency rather than a personal or biological concern. It further explains how reproductive expectations are connected to the politics of representation and exposes the mechanisms by which all women are controlled by the dominant social structures.

Spivak's Subalternity and Epistemic Violence

By using the critical explanation of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theory of subalternity, particularly her critique of epistemic violence in the essay "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*" (2009), this paper explores the complexity of caste, gender, and tradition where a woman's voice goes unnoticed. Ponna mirrors the subaltern woman: her identity is entirely determined by reproductive expectation, where her internal feelings are neglected even by her own family members. Spivak argues that subalternity is not a fixed identity but a relational position; it refers to those who were limited to power and whose voices remain hidden.

Spivak's theory is significant for understanding the theme of silencing in the novel, which explores how marginalisation and societal stereotypes deny a woman her choice. The concept of epistemic violence shows how Ponna is not simply ignored but is being overwritten by societal and family pressure. Even when Ponna makes choices, her actions are interpreted and controlled by the village people, resulting in the loss of self-expression. By applying the Spivakian lens of female subalternity, this paper reveals how the themes of marginalisation, hypocrisy, fertility, oppression, belief, and habits participate in writing and erasing the history of women's voices in a community. By borrowing Antonio Gramsci's concept of the subaltern, Gayatri Spivak revises this idea in her essay "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*" by narrowing its meaning. She argues that not all oppressed people are subaltern. The subaltern are those who have no access to institutional power and whose voices are silenced by the community. She particularly points out the silencing of women whose words are being erased under traditional norms and societal pressures.

A key aspect of Spivak's argument, highlighted in this study, is the concept of epistemic violence. Epistemic violence is when an individual is not allowed to understand or explain their suffering, as society mutes them and decides the meaning for it on their own. Power decides whose knowledge is counted. Through the character of Ponna, it is depicted that harm or violence is not done only physically but happens at the level of body and mind as well. The society and her family suggest solutions to her without even asking about her concerns, which lead to the tragic conflicts between the couple at the end of the novel.

Spivak particularly emphasises the female subaltern, who is deeply in shadow in a patriarchal society. She argues that the female subaltern remains structurally silenced. The community translates, erases or prevents their speech from entering histories. Women are reduced to their reproductive functions in a male-dominated society. Their agency becomes invisible due to society's constant presence in an individual's life. This theoretical framework is significant for understanding Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman,* in which the protagonist portrays a subaltern woman trapped in the stereotypes of caste, tradition, ritual, belief, and habit created by society. Ponna's life reflects Spivak's concept of subalternity, in which women are dominated by cultural systems in which her words remain unheard.

Piermarco Piu's reading of Spivak's theory further explains how dominant narratives can construct representations of subaltern groups while obscuring their perspectives and voices from society. This explicitly illustrates Ponna's representation

in Murugan's *One Part Woman*, where the community speaks for her and shapes how her childlessness is understood.

Representation and the Silencing of Ponna

Spivak further explains this silencing by distinguishing Vertreten and Darstellen. Vertreten refers to political representation or speaking on behalf of others, whereas Darstellen refers to the sense of portraying or re-presenting. By speaking for the woman, the power hierarchies are dominating again, which results in the silencing of women rather than empowerment. In *One Part Woman,* the villagers constantly talk about the couple's childlessness, making it a social failing. Even their own family members once planned Kali's second marriage to raise their generation, without even the couple's consent. Ponna's sleepless nights and Kali's mental suffering have been represented in the novel, which shows the social dominance over individuals' personal emotions. Ponna even decided to stay inside her home when people started speaking on behalf of society's standard. The novel thus brings a distinction between speaking for and re-presenting as a subject whose perspective has independent value. As Bhattacharjee observes, the dominant system of thought can erase the marginalised voices, revealing how subaltern women are shaped by unequal power and injustice.

Infertility, Patriarchy, and the Social Construction of Womanhood

The theme of infertility centres around the book as an important figure. Infertility functions not through biology but through ritual, belief, tradition and culture. Ponna is treated as communal property and raises cultural anxieties, representing the concept of Spivak's epistemic violence. The society names her infertile and calls her unlucky, less-than-a-woman, without thinking about her internal conflicts that she endured with no support even from her own family members. Everything reminded her of that lack. As Shalini Moorthi and Lakhimai discuss in their feminist reading of *One Part Woman,* women are subjected to gender-based discrimination when fertility becomes the central focus. Though Kali suffers from societal pressure, Ponna, as a woman, becomes the first victim among the villagers. Consequently, motherhood becomes more than a personal desire; it becomes a social expectation through which a woman is always judged.

The Temple Festival

The Ardhnareeswarar temple festival serves as a clear example in which choices of divinity become sacred. This is the festival where a woman without a child is allowed

to go to the festival and is expected to conceive with a stranger to fulfil the village's fertility tradition. Women are treated as the 'other' when men remain unquestioned by society. Women are treated only to satisfy the sexual demands of men and the cultural norms imposed by the community on them, just like Ponna in the novel. She has been sent to the ritual without her consent and by manipulating her. This reveals how collective authority can operate on someone who is particularly doubly colonised, like Ponna. She would have been termed a prostitute if they had not introduced the ritual as a rescue. Thus, cultural anxieties determine what is right or wrong by identifying the mechanism through which cultural authority works.

The dominance of collective identity over individual desire is highlighted in Murugan's novel. Kali's mother mirrors this idea when she says, "This year we need to send Ponna there. And you must agree to this" (Murugan 95). This proves that epistemic violence succeeds not through force but in the name of normalisation. The society's power highlights the act of being childless but wholly erases Ponna's internal conflict. Her desires are neglected by bringing solutions like rituals and a second marriage to Kali. Women are treated well only if they satisfy the cultural domain. As Murugan says in the novel, "If they'd children playing around the house, they would not have needed this" (Murugan 14).

The Limits of Female Agency

In the novel, Ponna experiences a fractured identity and struggles to navigate her role as both a wife and a woman. Ponna feels split into pieces and does not know what she is allowed to do. A woman who seeks love and prefers dignity is criticised as an incomplete woman and silenced by everyone. All her private emotions are turned into public chaos, and they decide what to and what not to do. Meaningful articulation never exists, and the community focuses only on tradition and culture. Her reproductive life becomes a public scrutiny, leaving her privacy and independent decision-making. The social pressure restricts her agency by turning the intimate aspects of her life into a matter of public judgement.

Research Findings

The analysis of Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* through Spivak's concept of subalternity and epistemic violence reveals that Ponna's marginalisation is not confined to the stigma of childlessness alone but is sustained by the cultural and patriarchal structures regulating her choice and identity. The findings demonstrate

that her position as a subaltern woman determines the possibilities available to her. A second significant finding is the relationship between representation and silencing. The study between Vertreten and Darstellen explicits how Ponna is being muted and marginalised in her own land. The temple festival further illustrates the conflict between cultural authority and female consent, revealing how tradition restricts women's authority. It proves that when something is deeply needed, challenging norms is not wrong - it is courageous. Through Spivak's concept of subalternity and epistemic violence, no matter how content an individual can feel, societal norms drag them back, demanding that every individual uphold pride and tradition.

Conclusion

One Part Woman offers no solution but explicits the unheard voice of the subaltern female. In Spivak's essay, "*One Part Woman*" shows the silencing of women through the concept of epistemic violence. The character Ponna depicts how society claims authority over a woman's body by rejecting her own desire to have her voice heard. Society speaks for her, decides for her and brings her personal emotions to the public. This study proves that, for subaltern women, silence is not absence but is edited and erased by the community. By foregrounding Spivakian critical theory, Perumal Murugan's novel structures the oppressive tradition and cultural anxieties of a stark portrayal of rural Tamil Nadu.

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