

Manhood on Trial: Kali's Emotional Trauma under Patriarchal Surveillance in One Part Woman

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Abstract

This paper explores the emotional agony endured by Kali, an infertile man in the context of patriarchal rural Indian society. Utilizing R.W. Connell's idea of hegemonic masculinity as a theoretical lens, the present work analyzes how the prevailing cultural standards of manhood—primarily those relating to virility, patrimony, and fertility—are used to construct and define the masculine identity. Kali's inability to have a baby marks him as socially defective and hence exposes him to constant criticism and ridicule. Placed within the broader social and religious context of rural Tamil Nadu, the novel shows that social conventions and rituals act as surveillance mechanisms under patriarchy. Kali's identity as a man is not an intrinsic characteristic but a socially constructed one that is constantly monitored by his family members, peers, and customs. The struggle to meet the societal expectation results in a feeling of alienation, as he finds himself emasculated due to the inability to conform to hegemonic standards. This leads to further distress in his marriage as he starts developing an emotional distance due to his perceived inadequacy as a husband. The proposed paper suggests that the agony of Kali violates the traditional patriarchy discourse which glorifies the idea of masculine superiority without considering its weaknesses. The text-based approach will help to identify the nature of a phenomenon known as 'silent masculinity' where an individual does not express their emotional experiences because of social pressures. In addition, the influence of religious justification on the development of oppressive behavior patterns will be considered in regard to the festival held at the temple as an alternative to infertility. The analysis of Kali's case will contribute to the recent masculinity discourse that has gained momentum in the context of Indian literary tradition. By examining the contradictory effects of patriarchy on the psychological wellbeing of men, this paper will demonstrate how social structures can cause severe anxiety disorders among individuals unable to cope with patriarchal norms and values.

Keywords: Hegemonic Masculinity, Surveillance, Male Trauma, Infertility, Shame Culture, Patriarchy

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Introduction

Perumal Murugan's *'One Part Woman'* has been extensively discussed in the context of gender, sexuality, and reproductive pressure in rural Tamil society. Yet, the focus has been on the suffering of Ponna, while the emotional distress experienced by Kali has remained in the background. As an infertile husband, Kali becomes the focus of social observation, in which his masculinity is constantly tested and proved inadequate. In patriarchal societies, masculinity is not an inherent quality but rather a social performance, which is governed and tested. According to Connell, hegemonic masculinity is the dominant form of masculinity, which sets the standard for all men to emulate, while those who do not are relegated to the fringes (76). Kali, as an infertile man, does not live up to the expectations of hegemonic masculinity.

The present paper proposes that Kali's trauma is mediated through what may be called patriarchal surveillance, whereby community observation and control enforce gender norms. The present study uses Michel Foucault's idea of a panopticon to illustrate how observation and visibility transform Kali's personal failure into a public trial (Foucault 201). Thus, his emotional distress is socially produced through control, shame, and expectations.

Patriarchal Surveillance and the Regulation of Masculinity

The surveillance in "One Part Woman" is through informal mechanisms such as gossip, rituals, and social interaction. Unlike other forms of surveillance, this one is highly ingrained in everyday life, making it inevitable. Kali's infertility is not seen as a personal issue but one that is of public concern and is constantly discussed and judged. Foucault's theory on surveillance is that people tend to internalize the gaze of authority and hence self-regulate (Foucault 202). This is evident in the character Kali, who seems to be highly conscious of the perceptions and opinions of people around him. His actions, feelings, and even his relationship with Ponna are all affected by his fear of judgment.

The village is a panoptic space, and everyone is both an observer and an observed. Gossip is a form of disciplinary action that reinforces societal values and punishes those who are different. Kali's masculinity is socially constructed and is influenced by the opinions and perceptions of people around him.

Infertility as Public Shame and Masculine Failure

In patriarchal societies, fertility is directly correlated with masculinity. Procreative ability is a symbol of virility, strength, and continuity. Kali's infertile condition thus challenges this association and makes him a failed male. Shame is a significant factor in the process of Kali's marginalization. According to Ahmed, shame is a social emotion experienced due to the perception of failure to comply with the expectations of the community (Ahmed 103). Kali's life is significantly affected by the emotion of shame due to the stigmatization of infertile people like him.

Unlike women who are openly blamed and stigmatized for being infertile, Kali's suffering is subtle yet equally debilitating. His masculinity is challenged in an indirect manner through humor and social boycotts. This indirect approach to humiliation causes greater suffering because there is no scope for a face-off or a resolution.

The Burden of Performance: Masculinity as a Social Script

Judith Butler's gender performativity can shed some light on Kali's situation. Masculinity is a repetition of acts that comply with the demands of the social world (Butler 25). Kali's problem is his inability to perform these acts successfully. As a husband, he is expected to display strength and potency, as well as the ability to produce offspring. His inability to do so creates a disconnect between the expected and actual performances. This disconnect is the source of his stress and anxiety as he tries to keep up the pretense of normalcy.

Kali's relationship with Ponna makes his situation more complicated. While he loves her and wants the best for her, he cannot express his emotions due to his sense of failure and inadequacy. To do so would betray the masculine ideals he has internalized.

Love, Control, and Masculine Anxiety

The dynamic between Kali and Ponna is one of love and domination. While Kali tries to protect her from social ridicule, at the same time, he is afraid of losing her because of his own inadequacy. This is clearly seen in his attitude towards the temple festival where social norms allow for sexual transgression. The festival is a test of Kali's dominance over his wife. It makes him feel insecure about his masculinity, for it implies that his position can be replaced or circumvented. His opposition to the ritual is not just based on his morals; it is a personal issue for him, for it makes him feel like an irrelevant person.

This reflects the "fear of emasculation" that Michael Kimmel talks about, where men are filled with fear and anxiety about losing their power and dominance (Kimmel 59). Thus, Kali's emotional conflict is also a reflection of the fear that she may lose power and dominance.

Silence, Isolation, and Emotional Fragmentation

One of the most interesting aspects of Kali's personality is his silence. Kali does not express his pain; rather, he internalizes his suffering. This silence is not a manifestation of his strength, but rather a reflection of societal demands that discourage men from expressing emotions. Trauma theorists posit that unresolved trauma may cause a fragmentation of the self (Caruth 6). Kali's inability to express his emotions leads to a fragmentation of his self. Kali is becoming increasingly withdrawn, and he is unable to reconcile his self-image with societal demands.

Kali is also lonely, and this loneliness reflects his isolation. Kali is surrounded by people, but he is feeling a sense of loneliness. His suffering is invisible, unresolved, and unacknowledged.

Patriarchy and the Production of Male Suffering

However, while patriarchy is generally seen as a force with negative consequences for women, Kali's situation shows the negative effects of patriarchy on men as well. Patriarchy demands a certain level of masculinity and provides little scope for deviation from it. Those who are unable to live up to the demands of masculinity are shunned and ridiculed.

In this context, the idea of symbolic violence by Pierre Bourdieu can be brought into play, which explains the manner in which norms are accepted and internalized as a part of nature (Bourdieu 2). Kali's acceptance of his own inadequacy is a part of this symbolic violence.

While he does accept the system and the manner in which he has failed to live up to its demands, he does so at the expense of his own mental health and sense of self-worth.

This internal conflict thus goes on to emphasize the need to rethink the idea of masculinity as a flexible construct. While Kali's misfortune is his inability to bear a child, it is also his inability to get out of the constraints of patriarchal ideology.

Conclusion

In *One Part Woman*, the issue of emotional trauma suffered by Kali due to his inability to produce children has been analyzed as a significant critique of hegemonic masculinity. In this sense, through the notion of hegemonic masculinity put forward by R. W. Connell, the character of Kali does not represent masculinity as a dominant identity but instead presents an extremely vulnerable individual whose identity is subject to constant questioning by society. The analysis shows that surveillance carried out under patriarchy does not only consist of external factors such as family expectations, gossip, rituals, etc., but it can be carried out also in terms of internal pressures that lead individuals like Kali to compare themselves to impossible standards of masculinity. This makes their condition even more psychologically stressful since the sufferings of such individuals cannot be openly discussed because, according to the dominant culture, men should maintain their stoic attitudes regardless of circumstances.

Also, it should be noted that the novel illustrates the contradiction of the patriarchal system since, despite the idea that the system supports men, there are still some aspects that oppress men who do not live up to the stereotypical ideals set by patriarchy – namely, concerning virility and reproductive capabilities. As seen from Kali's life journey, the consequences of such constructions may have detrimental impacts on family relations and lead to existential crises. The analysis of Kali's experiences sheds light on the problem of masculinity in Indian literature since it reveals the contradictions of patriarchy that, instead of supporting men, cause emotional pain. Therefore, in order to better understand masculine experience and identity, it is necessary to rethink existing cultural concepts, allowing men to express their emotions and recognizing their vulnerabilities. Instead of focusing on reproductive capacities, other criteria need to be considered while evaluating masculinity. To conclude, the discussed novel reflects the human price paid for oppressive patriarchal standards in terms of emotional pain and existential suffering caused by them. Hence, it is necessary to rethink prevailing ideas about masculinity in order to recognize it as a complicated phenomenon.

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