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Negotiating Silence and Stigma: A Study of Gendered Suffering in Perumal Murugan's *Trial by Silence*

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Abstract:

Perumal Murugan's *Trial by Silence*, the sequel to his trailblazing novel, captivates readers with a cliffhanger about what will happen to Kali and Ponna next. Kali and Ponna suffer physically and mentally, and this suffering is instilled in their life by the patriarchal society that thinks that a marriage is successful only when the couple is blessed with a child. The concept of the child becomes the centre of the universe of marriage. A childless couple is viewed as a patient or person with a huge defect who must be excluded from all the good occasions. Kali employs the tool of silence to punish Ponna, whereas Ponna employs the tool of patience. Thus, suffering has no gender. Suffering is gender neutral. Thus, the suffering and silence are not just passive; they're active and complex, and they also have proper dynamics. This paper examines how masculine crisis, shame and honor, religious practices, and community surveillance shape the gendered suffering of Kali and Ponna.

Keywords: *Masculine identity crisis, shame and honour, religious practices, community, surveillance*

She expressed her envy to Seerayi, who happened to walk by her house that morning. 'Are we all lucky enough to sleep well past daybreak? We have given birth to little children, and so we have to run after them. But some people are still sleeping!' Saying this, she subtly pointed towards Poona's house. (*Trial by Silence* 96)

Perumal Murugan's *Trial by Silence* (TBS) published in 2018 captures the profound trauma imposed on a childless couple by a deeply patriarchal society. The novel also clarifies what patriarchy truly entails: a social system shaped by male-centred thinking, but not necessarily enforced by men alone. Patriarchy functions as an ideology in which even men are its earliest victims—judged by their ability to father a child—while women are measured by the reproductive capacity of their wombs. *Trial by*

Silence reveals how Kali and Ponna, once a joyful and loving couple, experience a devastating rupture in their marriage after Ponna undergoes the temple ritual described in *One Part Woman*.

Perumal Murugan's trilogy, beginning with *One Part Woman*, mainly follows the everyday life of Kali and Ponna. Most of the novel shows their small moments of happiness and the comfort they find in each other. It is only toward the end that the idea of having a child, and the pressure that comes with it, starts entering their life. Ponna goes to the temple and takes part in the ritual because she believes Kali is fine with it and has agreed to it. But in *Trial by Silence*, which starts the very next day, everything between them changes. The couple who once shared an easy and warm relationship suddenly stop talking, and though they stay under the same roof, they feel completely distant. This break happens mainly because of societal pressure, where people around them begin to decide when they should become parents, even though it is a deeply personal matter. Murugan's writing stands out in the way he connects the first novel to the sequel and shows how the characters slowly change under these circumstances.

Kali started sobbing. 'All of you have conspired to dishonour me!' Why do I need to live/ How can I claim to be a man in this world ever again? He walked away and sat down on the cot. She went closer, gently caressed his head, and said, 'My little god, please don't think of it that way. We did it for you own good. You are still a child, you don't know what is good and what is bad for you. It is my job to do the right thing, And that's what I did'. (TBS 6)

Ponna returns from the ritual carrying a deep sense of confusion. She feels as if she has come out of a trance, unable to separate what was real, imagined, needed, or forced upon her. Kali, being an ordinary man with ordinary limits, struggles to understand anything beyond what he sees. After watching him sit under the portia tree, staring at its branches in silence, she slowly realises that he has already judged her. He begins to call her a "bitch," convinced that whatever happened at the temple was her choice and desire. Ponna, however, sees clearly that Kali has chosen not to look at the truth, nor at her. Instead of pleading or running after him, she holds on to her self-respect and remains patient. She does not try to prove her innocence to anyone. This reflects Gayathri Chakravorty Spivak's idea of how a Subaltern woman's voice is muted:

Between patriarchy and imperialism, the figure of the woman disappears... into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'third-world woman' caught between tradition and modernization (Spivak 306)

Seeing this side of Ponna unsettles Kali completely. He begins to fall apart as a person. His work suffers, he drinks almost every day, and even eating becomes difficult for him. One night, in a drunken and disoriented state, he returns home. Ponna herself is emotionally exhausted, and in that moment of weakness, the two of them slip into intimacy. By the next morning, Kali leaves without speaking a word. There is no evidence of what happened between them, but Ponna senses something different within herself—her womb feels heavy for the first time.

This shows that society recognises a man and a woman as complete human beings only when they bear a child. A boy is expected to study well, secure a job, get married, become a father, buy a car, build a house, and finally establish himself as a "gentleman." In the same way, a girl is expected to receive a basic education, attain puberty at what society calls the "right" age, marry a suitable and good-looking

husband, and give birth to a good-looking child. When these boxes are ticked, she is labelled a “successful woman.” In all this, the rule-makers rarely pause to consider the personal choice, desire, or ambition of an individual. Because everyone is forced to fit into these expectations, many end up losing their identity and the meaning of their own life. Patriarchy, therefore, is not simply a society run by men, but a society shaped by male-centred ideas in which both men and women become victims. Anne McClintock described how women are pressured or made to embody the upcoming generation. Women are typically constructed as the symbolic bearers of the nation but are denied any direct agency in the formation of national identity. They carry the burden of cultural reproduction and are made to embody tradition, purity, and continuity, even as their actual voices and choices are disregarded. Their bodies become the terrain on which national, racial, and communal anxieties are mapped, and it is through controlling their sexuality and fertility that patriarchal nationalisms imagine securing the future (McClintock 354)

Perumal Murugan’s *Trial by Silence* brings out three ideas that seem to work the same way for everyone, no matter the gender: silence, stigma, and suffering. The novel keeps showing how the condition of Kali and Ponna’s lives matches the condition of their field. In *One Part Woman*, the field is green, birds are heard often, and the whole place feels lively. Their marriage during that time also carries the same kind of warmth and ease. But in *Trial by Silence*, this atmosphere disappears. The fields turn brown, the crops dry up, and the land looks neglected. This is almost the same as what has happened between Kali and Ponna—their bond becomes dry, quiet, and without any real connection.

What patriarchy does here is not only spoil the life of a couple but also to disturb everything around them. The pressure to “prove” manliness, to “prove” fertility, to “prove” that marriage is normal in a sexual sense—all these demands push people to justify their private life to society. Because of this, it is not just one gender that suffers; everyone does, and even the land they live on seems affected. Patriarchy becomes an ideology that weighs on human beings and the environment at the same time. This alludes to what Grewal and Kaplan call Scattered Hegemonies.

Patriarchy and colonialism do not operate through a single unified structure but through scattered hegemonies that intersect with class, caste, religion, and nationalism (Grewal and Kaplan 17).

Perumal Murugan, through the novel, brings up a set of issues that still exist in a country that we call “civilised” and “developing.” On one side, we speak about education, technology, and even AI reaching new levels and making everyday life easier and full of new possibilities. But at the same time, society continues to hold on to old ideas that favour only one group and cause pain for everyone else. These ideas do not stop with one generation; they keep turning into trauma for the next. Even today, a woman without a child is quietly pushed out of social spaces, sometimes asked to wear a white saree, or restricted to housework as if her life has no other purpose. There are still cases of women ending their lives because of the pressure of childlessness, or conceiving only because society insists on it. These practices are still around, and people often treat them as normal.

Murugan also shows what this pressure does to men. The mental space of a man who repeatedly hears that he has no child is rarely discussed. In the beginning, Kali strongly believed that having or not having a child would not affect his marriage. But once his manliness is questioned again and again, his thinking begins to change. People even compare him to a bull that is not fit for the arena and not good

enough to keep at home. He faces mockery everywhere he goes. In literature, this side of the issue—the emotional and psychological impact on men—is still a new area and can grow into a separate field of study. Murugan’s trilogy, in that sense, opens a space to look at both men and women from a different angle:

Hegemonic masculinity is always constructed in relation to subordinated masculinities. It is not simply an empirical description of the most common form of masculinity. Rather, it is the culturally exalted form of masculinity that guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women. Its dominance is achieved through a mix of cultural consent, institutional power, and interpersonal persuasion”. (Connell 77–78)

Thinkers like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, and Anne McClintock have already discussed similar concerns through a postcolonial lens. Their ideas on the *subaltern*, *scattered hegemonies*, and *family metaphors* point to how certain groups are pushed into positions where their voices do not fully come through. Similarly, Perumal Murugan’s characters also occupy a space where their struggles and trauma cannot be clearly expressed. Whatever they feel gets either softened, dismissed, or normalised by society. This happens because the hold of patriarchal structures is so deep that it cannot be untangled or challenged easily, and anyone who tries remains unheard or partially spoken for.

The idea of having control over one’s own reproduction is almost lost in a society where culture, tradition, and everyday norms push people in only one direction. These expectations are so deeply tied into regular life that anyone who tries to step out of it ends up facing comments, criticism, or simply being seen as strange. It becomes hard for a person to say what they want because the surroundings don’t give them that kind of space. In this situation, Kali in Perumal Murugan’s work deserves attention. He does not trouble Ponna about having a child and never brings it up as a complaint. Instead, he talks to her about adoption and how they could give care to children who do not have anyone to look after them. This side of Kali shows that he is more open-minded than the society around him, even if he is also affected by the same pressures later. As Daniel rightly points out, Is it a privilege that we neglect ailments like male infertility in the interest of maintaining illusions of male virility? ... Although men may enjoy the economic and social advantages of assumptions of reproductive difference, they pay a high price for such advantage as well.” (Daniels 5)

Perumal Murugan’s way of writing Kali brings out a different angle on masculine vulnerability. We often speak about women being affected by male domination, which is true and common, but the novel also asks what happens when a man is pushed into the same corner by the very system that is supposed to favour him. Kali is not shown as a failure or as a simple victim. Instead, he appears as someone whose mind slowly breaks because everything around him ties his worth to reproduction. This helps us see how patriarchy works differently on men and women, but in both cases, it slowly damages their sense of self:

Every era has to reinvent the project of ‘spirituality’ for itself. Today, the most active means for doing this is ‘silence’. Silence becomes a metaphor for a purified, non-interfering, non-coercive consciousness. It is a zone of meditation and heightened receptivity. Yet silence is also a zone of terror and alienation.” (Sontag 11)

Kali's version of masculinity shows up in the form of silence and stepping away from Ponna. His silence becomes a kind of reaction he has learnt from the society he lives in—a way of distancing himself without confronting the real issue. While Ponna's suffering becomes visible in her body and in how the community treats her, Kali's suffering goes inward. It turns into confusion about who he is and what value he has, leading to an identity crisis that keeps growing inside him. Another point that becomes clear in the novel is that the pressure on Kali and Ponna to produce an heir is not only a matter of patriarchy. It also carries a kind of postcolonial anxiety that still runs through society—an anxiety about keeping the community alive, preserving culture, and continuing the "line." Their personal choice about reproduction slowly gets taken over by these larger ideas. It is almost like their autonomy is colonised again, not by an outside ruler this time, but by the belief that having a child is somehow connected to national or cultural duty.

In the South Asian context, shame and honor do not stay as simple ideas. They sit in everyday life, and people keep an eye on each other all the time. What counts as shame, and what counts as honor, changes depending on how the patriarchal mindset looks at things. For Kali, people attach his honor to whether he can have a child. They judge him because he thinks marriage should not be reduced to having a baby. For Ponna, her value in the family and even her basic acceptance in the community depend on becoming a mother. When she cannot conceive, she is pushed into feeling ashamed, and this same situation is used to question Kali's masculinity as well:

'My husband tried to hang himself!' Ponna cried. 'You wretched people! You all have led me to this place. You have betrayed me! Couldn't you have told me that he did not consent to this idea? For long have you been scheming to ruin my life. I knew my husband well, but I believed you. How was I such a fool! Ayyo! How he must have suffered! What all must have gone through his mind!' Ponna wept, beating her chest. (*TBS* 50)

Both Kali and Ponna are treated as failures by the society that keeps watching them all the time. People keep pointing fingers at their bodies, as if the problem lies in them physically. Everyone knows they are a loving couple, even after years of marriage. They spend most of their time together, and it is obvious to others that they share intimacy almost every day. But even this becomes a reason for gossip, because they still do not have a child. So society begins to talk about karma, curses, and many other superstitions to explain their childlessness. They even warn the couple that, without a child, there will be no heir to continue the family line and nothing to uphold the pride of the community. Here, respect and shame do not stay limited to the individual. Patriarchal thinking stretches it across the entire line of ancestors and future generations, making the couple feel responsible for something much larger than themselves.

The silence of Kali and the patience of Ponna are not soft or weak qualities. They work in their own ways of fighting against what society expects from them. In a way, both silence and patience act like the "fight or flight" instinct, but here it comes from what they have learnt from life. This education is not the sort we get from books; it comes from lived experience. Kali understands this better and tries to guide Ponna many times. But sadly, in trying to protect Kali's honor, Ponna ends up falling into the very pressure they were trying to avoid. Only after facing the heavy impact of Kali's long silence does she realise how her lack of awareness affected her. She slowly begins to work in the fields with the

same involvement as Kali. In this sense, the story shows that both men and women can break the hold of patriarchy only when they gain this kind of life-based understanding.

Abbreviation:

TBS- *Trial by Silence*

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