

A Post-Secular Feminist Reading of Sacred Desire in *One Part Woman*

Dr. M. Nagalakshmi^{1*}, Dr. P. Sitharthan²

^{*1} Professor & Research Supervisor, Department of English, Vels Institute of Science, Technology and Advanced Studies, Pallavaram, Chennai

² Associate Professor & Research Supervisor, PG and Research Department of English, Presidency College, Chennai

Received: 16/03/2026

Accepted: 18/04/2026

Published: 30/04/2026

Abstract: This article explores the intersections of postcolonial secular governance and sacred eroticism in Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman*, drawing on Partha Chatterjee's critique of Indian secularism and Wendy Doniger's readings of fertility rituals. Moving away from the dominant post-secular paradigm, the study focuses on how reproductive agency, religious syncretism, and embodied rituals function as sites of contestation in the protagonist's lives. It argues that the state's secular apparatus disciplines sexuality and fertility, while regional religious practices offer a subversive counter-narrative that privileges the body and desire. The sanctioned eroticism at the heart of the Ardhanareswarar festival stands in tension with dominant discourses of morality, gender, and caste. By centring sacred eroticism and indigenous belief systems, the novel destabilises normative binaries of the sacred and profane, public and private, modern and traditional. This article suggests that *One Part Woman* critiques both the violence of secular modernity and the rigidity of patriarchy, presenting a layered vision of gendered existence in postcolonial India.

Keywords: *secularism, patriarchy, syncretism, eroticism, feminist reading.*

Cite this article: Nagalakshmi, M. & Sitharthan, P. (2026). A Post-Secular Feminist Reading of Sacred Desire in *One Part Woman*. *MRS Journal of Arts, Humanities and Literature*, 3(4), 55-58.

Introduction

Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* (Madhorubhagan, 2010) stands as a poignant literary intervention into the complex entanglements of tradition, gender, and modernity in contemporary Tamil Nadu. The novel tells the story of Kali and Ponna, a childless couple ostracised by their village community, and culminates in a climactic act of religiously sanctioned transgression during a temple festival. Through its layered narrative, *One Part Woman* reveals the intense pressures placed on female fertility, the boundaries of sexual agency, and the enduring power of religious customs that simultaneously subvert and uphold patriarchal structures. The text sparked immense controversy upon publication, resulting in death threats to the author and a temporary withdrawal from public life. This backlash testifies not only to the sensitivities surrounding female sexuality and sacred traditions in India but also to the novel's capacity to expose fissures within India's postcolonial secular consensus.

Fertility, in the Indian context, is more than a biological imperative; it is a culturally and politically charged signifier of womanhood, familial honour, and caste continuity. Infertility, conversely, is framed not as a medical issue but as a moral and social deficiency, particularly when embodied by women. As Partha Chatterjee (1993) has famously argued in *The Nation and Its Fragments*, the colonial and postcolonial state distinguished the spiritual and cultural "inner domain" of the nation and the material and public "outer domain" of the state. Within this framework, women were made symbolic bearers of national identity through the regulation of their bodies and reproductive capacities. Fertility, therefore, becomes a disciplinary mechanism through which

female agency is contained, sexual norms are enforced, and social cohesion is maintained.

This paper brings together Partha Chatterjee's theory of postcolonial secular governance with Wendy Doniger's work on sacred eroticism and myth to interrogate how *One Part Woman* negotiates the intersection of religious tradition, sexuality, and gendered discipline. Doniger, in works such as *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (2009), uncovers the subversive and often liberatory aspects of eroticism in Hindu mythology. These mythic traditions complicate the presumed binary between the sacred and the profane, and challenge modern regulatory systems that seek to sanitise or suppress embodied religious practices. The Ardhanareswarar festival in the novel, a real event in Tiruchengode, where men are permitted to engage in anonymous sexual encounters with women seeking fertility, functions as a narrative and symbolic site for exploring the tensions between religious transgression and communal discipline.

The following research questions guide this investigation:

1. How is fertility used to discipline female agency?
2. What is the role of sacred eroticism in negotiating social norms?
3. How does the postcolonial state manage religious traditions without fully secularising them?

In weaving together these theoretical strands, this study argues that *One Part Woman* should not be read merely as a critique of religious orthodoxy but as a complex commentary on how postcolonial governance, cultural tradition, and mythic erotics

converge to shape women's lives. It is precisely through the lens of postcolonial secularism and sacred eroticism that we can discern the novel's nuanced interrogation of modernity, tradition, and the gendered body. The narrative does not offer easy resolutions but instead invites us to consider how the sacred and the sexual, the communal and the individual, the past and the present, remain inextricably linked in the lived experiences of its characters.

Critical Reception of *One Part Woman* and the Debates It Incited

Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* (2010), originally written in Tamil as *Madhorubhagan*, sparked intense socio-political debate upon publication. The novel faced protests primarily from caste-based religious groups who were agitated by the portrayal of a sacred temple festival that, in their view, sullied traditional norms. The central controversy revolved around the depiction of a fertility ritual during the Ardhanareeswarar festival, wherein childless women were allowed to have sexual encounters with strangers in hopes of conceiving. This ritual, framed by Murugan as a locally accepted, sacred erotic tradition, was condemned as an insult to Tamil culture and Hinduism. As a result, the author was forced to issue a public apology and temporarily announced his literary "death" in a now-famous Facebook post (Murugan, 2015).

The backlash against *One Part Woman* reveals the fragile boundaries of secularism, caste hierarchy, and gender norms in Indian society. Scholars such as Nivedita Menon (2015) and A. Mangai (2016) have explored how literature that disrupts dominant narratives on gender and religion is often targeted by political groups that weaponise tradition to control. Mangai, in particular, emphasises how Ponna's sexual agency, though couched in religiosity, threatens patriarchal authority by reclaiming female desire within a sanctioned space.

Fertility and Sexuality in Indian Literature

Fertility has long been a recurrent theme in Indian mythology and literature. From Sita's trial by fire in the *Ramayana* to Draupadi's polyandrous marriage in the *Mahabharata*, narratives of female sexuality and reproductive potential are often bound to societal norms and religious ideals. Scholars such as Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai (2001) in *Same-Sex Love in India* have shown how pre-colonial texts depicted a wide spectrum of sexual practices, including sacred eroticism, that defy modern binaries of moral and immoral.

The motif of fertility often intersects with caste and purity. For example, in Dalit literature, reproductive control becomes a form of caste discipline. Baby Kamble and Bama have written extensively on how Dalit women's bodies are policed both by upper-caste men and religious ideology. In *One Part Woman*, this tension is evident in how Ponna is judged not merely for being childless but for daring to seek fertility through means not sanctioned by modern bourgeois morality. Ponna's childlessness is not simply a personal misfortune but a public spectacle; her identity is reduced to her inability to reproduce, making her fertility a social concern rather than a private matter. As Susie Tharu and K. Lalita (1993) have argued, the regulation of female bodies in Indian society is a function of both patriarchy and religious nationalism.

Postcolonial Secularism – Partha Chatterjee

In *The Nation and Its Fragments* (1993), Partha Chatterjee challenges the idea of secularism as a neutral force in postcolonial India. He argues that the Indian nation-state emerged by bifurcating its domain into the 'outer' realm of the state and the 'inner' realm of cultural identity. While the outer domain engages with the West and modernity, the inner domain, home, religion, and family, remains untouched, a repository of tradition.

This division allowed the Indian state to claim secularity while preserving patriarchy in private life. Chatterjee states, "The crucial need was to retain the spiritual and cultural distinctiveness of the national identity in the inner domain" (Chatterjee 120). Thus, women's bodies, particularly in their reproductive roles, became the symbolic site where cultural purity was maintained.

In *One Part Woman*, the state is largely absent, yet its disciplining gaze is reflected through the community's moral policing. The fertility ritual at the temple, which once may have symbolised a syncretic acceptance of sacred sexuality, is now reinterpreted by society as an affront to religious purity. This moral panic is symptomatic of what Chatterjee terms "postcolonial modernity," in which traditional elites adapt religious practices to maintain their dominance in modern society. Chatterjee's critique reveals how secular governance in India often coexists with religious majoritarianism. The novel's conflict between Ponna's sacred desire and society's profane judgment embodies this uneasy cohabitation.

Wendy Doniger's Interpretations of Fertility and Sacred Eroticism

Wendy Doniger, in *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (2009), reinterprets Hinduism by highlighting its pluralistic and erotic traditions, often suppressed by orthodoxy. She points out that myths about gods and goddesses frequently include sexual transgressions that are seen not as immoral but as sacred and generative. Doniger discusses rituals and tales where female sexuality is celebrated, such as Parvati's seduction of Shiva or the yoni-linga symbolism, which directly ties eroticism to fertility and divinity. "Sexuality in Hinduism is not merely tolerated; it is often seen as sacred, even redemptive" (Doniger, *The Hindus*, p. 88).

Doniger asserts, "In Hindu thought, sex and religion are often allies, not enemies. The sacred and the erotic are not binaries in Hindu thought, but complementary forces" (Doniger, *The Hindus*, p. 111). Sacred sex is a vehicle for transformation and even salvation" (Doniger 147). In this framework, the fertility festival in *One Part Woman* becomes a legitimate religious practice rather than a form of deviance. The act of sanctioned transgression, where Ponna is allowed to sleep with a stranger during the festival, draws from these alternate histories of sacred sexuality.

Her emphasis on play and ambiguity within Hindu narratives allows space for practices that challenge rigid moral codes. Doniger's work disrupts the homogenised vision of Hinduism propagated by nationalist ideologues and opens up interpretive possibilities for figures like Ponna, who can be seen as participating in a divine order rather than subverting it.

Intersections with Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*

While not a central focus, Michel Foucault's ideas on biopower and discipline help illuminate how fertility becomes a mechanism of control. "Bio-power deals with the population as a political problem, as a problem that is at once scientific and political" (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 25). In *Discipline and Punish* (1975), Foucault discusses how modern institutions regulate bodies through surveillance and norms. Fertility, in this sense, is not just a biological function but a socio-political obligation enforced through cultural discourse.

Ponna's experience exemplifies this: her body becomes a site of communal anxiety, and her desire is pathologised. She is constantly reminded of her failure to reproduce, not through legal instruments but through gossip, ritual exclusion, and emotional abuse. As Foucault writes, "Power has its principle not so much in a person as in a certain concerted distribution of bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes" (Foucault 202). The community's response to Ponna's childlessness reflects such decentralised but potent control mechanisms. "The problem of Ponna's womb is less about her marriage and more about her utility as a vessel for community continuation" (Murugan, *One Part Woman*, p. 131). Thus, while the festival allows for sexual transgression, the purpose is not emancipation but reintegration into the normative social fabric. It reinforces both Chatterjee's and Doniger's frameworks: fertility is simultaneously a site of religious play and a locus of social control.

Fertility as Caste Discipline

In *One Part Woman*, Perumal Murugan constructs the concept of fertility not merely as a biological or familial matter but as a caste-centric social imperative. Ponna's infertility is not her private burden—it is a public spectacle that threatens the very identity of her community. The statement, "Her womb is the family's honour," is not metaphorical within this society—it is a literal articulation of how a woman's reproductive capacity is subsumed by the community's anxieties over lineage and caste purity.

The novel's setting in a Kongu Vellala Gounder community highlights how patriarchy and caste coalesce to discipline female bodies. Ponna is constantly reminded that her inability to conceive threatens the "honour" of her household, a sentiment captured in the line: "A child born from your womb will bring honour back to our clan" (Murugan 68). Fertility is here constructed as a recuperative mechanism for the loss of social status. Thus, childlessness does not signal a mere biological failure but a potential break in the ritual purity and continuity of caste.

Further, this caste-based valorisation of fertility reveals the way biopolitics functions in this society. Drawing on Michel Foucault's theory of biopower in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), we can read the community's obsession with reproduction as a mechanism for controlling both the individual and the population. Fertility becomes a regulatory instrument: the body of the woman, especially the womb, is not hers to control; it is a site of caste preservation. Foucault notes, "Biopower deals with the population, with the body as a machine: its disciplining, the optimisation of its capabilities" (Foucault 139). This is evident in the communal interventions in Ponna's personal life: rituals, prayers, herbal remedies, and eventually the push toward sexual transgression. The surveillance of Ponna's body is constant. Relatives visit uninvited, neighbours whisper behind closed doors, and even her husband Kali's manhood is questioned due to her infertility. Caste surveillance does not merely punish deviation; it compels

normalisation. In this climate, reproduction is not a choice; it is an enforced duty.

Sacred Eroticism and the Festival

Murugan's deployment of the Ardhanareeswarar festival as a narrative and thematic device serves as a radical site for exploring sacred eroticism. The temple, dedicated to the androgynous deity who is half Shiva and half Parvati, becomes the stage upon which the intersection of transgression and the sacred plays out. The festival creates a liminal space where strict social norms are temporarily suspended. Women without children are permitted, indeed encouraged, to engage in ritual sex with strangers in the hopes of conception. This sanctioned sexual transgression is rooted in a syncretic tradition that combines fertility rites with mythological precedent. The idea that Ponna might conceive through this festival is not seen as adultery by the ritual logic, but as divine intervention. However, once removed from the sacred context of the temple and returned to the everyday world of the village, this transgression is immediately re-coded as shameful and criminal. The act, though sanctified by the ritual, is condemned in retrospect, revealing the fragility of religious tolerance in the face of caste orthodoxy.

Wendy Doniger, in *The Hindus: An Alternative History*, writes: "Eroticism was not always outside the realm of the sacred; it often belonged at its very centre" (224). This assertion resonates deeply in *One Part Woman*. The festival is a residue of traditions where fertility rituals incorporated bodily pleasure and divine desire. These rituals were never about moral judgment; they were pragmatic and symbolic acts intended to realign the individual with cosmic fertility.

Murugan's novel reanimates these traditions to critique the contemporary moral panic surrounding sexuality. By positioning sacred eroticism as a legitimate, even revered, cultural tradition, the text contests both colonial modernity's prudish secularism and patriarchy's rigid moralism. However, this sacred eroticism is ultimately overwritten by dominant caste ideologies that enforce silence and shame around female agency and pleasure.

Secularism and Social Surveillance

The novel also critiques the postcolonial Indian state's complicity in caste oppression under the guise of secular neutrality. Ponna's sexuality is not merely a concern for her family or caste; it is a matter of "national" morality. The very idea that a woman can choose how to use her body, whether to have children or engage in ritual sexuality, is rendered illegible by both the secular state and religious orthodoxy. As Chatterjee states, "The spiritual domain of women was never outside politics; it was where the nation asserted its morality" (130).

Kali's masculinity, too, is under scrutiny. His failure to "father" a child becomes a public matter. His peers insult him, questioning his virility and, by extension, his social worth. The inability to reproduce is not treated as a medical issue but as a moral and spiritual deficiency. In this sense, both male and female bodies are drawn into a system of reproductive surveillance, though women bear the brunt of social punishment.

The postcolonial secularism that Chatterjee critiques allows for caste and religious hierarchies to remain operational under a supposedly neutral state apparatus. The festival, though historically permitted, exists on the margins and is constantly threatened with erasure by reformists. Murugan's novel captures this

precariousness, highlighting how the state often acts as an implicit enforcer of caste morality under the banner of social order and respectability.

Conclusion

One Part Woman reveals how fertility operates not just as a biological function but as a disciplinary mechanism deeply embedded in both religious and secular frameworks. Ponna's body becomes a site through which the family, community, and ultimately the state assert authority, morality, and social order. The pressure she faces, social, emotional, and psychological, is a reflection of how fertility is not an individual matter but a collective obsession rooted in caste continuity and social propriety. As Partha Chatterjee explains in *The Nation and Its Fragments*, the postcolonial state draws a boundary between the spiritual and material, assigning women's reproductive roles to the former while policing their actions through secular rationality.

The insistence that Ponna must bear a child to preserve the family's honour illustrates how fertility is not merely symbolic; it is the tangible method by which caste purity is regulated and maintained. This regulation is enforced through kinship surveillance, ritual coercion, and a broader cultural script that interprets motherhood as a form of moral redemption. As Foucault suggests in *Discipline and Punish*, power is exercised not only through law but through subtle forms of social conditioning, and in Ponna's case, the silent gaze of her society and the internalised shame serve as panoptic instruments of control.

Contribution to Feminist and Post-Secular Readings of Regional Indian Literature

Murugan's *One Part Woman* offers fertile ground for post-secular feminist analysis by intertwining caste, religion, gender, and sexuality. It adds to a growing body of literature that reimagines Indian modernity not as a rupture from tradition but as a reconfiguration of older hierarchies in new vocabularies. The novel critiques both orthodoxy and postcolonial rationality, positioning itself within a tradition of subaltern resistance and regional literature that challenges pan-Indian narratives of progress.

This dual critique, of tradition and modernity, enriches feminist interpretations by showing how women's bodies are never truly autonomous in either domain. The sacredness of the erotic, as Doniger points out, exists in myth but is erased in practice. Murugan restores this sacredness through narrative, only to show how it is violently disavowed in lived reality. His work reveals how regional literature can serve as a site of resistance and commentary, enabling the subaltern not only to speak but also to narrate, transgress, and reclaim.

The novel's focus on rural Tamil Nadu further situates it within a tradition of non-metropolitan feminist writing. It does not universalise its concerns but remains acutely local, thereby resisting the elitism of English-language feminism. It aligns with Chatterjee's notion of fragmented nationalism, where regional identities resist homogenising narratives of modernity. The Tamil context, with its own histories of caste struggle and Dravidian assertion, sharpens and makes the critique more specific.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *One Part Woman* complicates the binary between religion and secularism by showing how both domains converge to discipline female sexuality. Through the lens of postcolonial secularism and sacred eroticism, the novel offers a searing critique of caste-patriarchal control mechanisms. Ponna's story, though rooted in a particular cultural and geographic context, resonates with broader feminist concerns about bodily autonomy, social conformity, and narrative agency. Murugan's work encourages scholars to explore regional literature not merely as local colour but as a profound site of political and philosophical engagement. Future studies could continue this line of inquiry by examining how sacred sexuality, caste politics, and feminist resistance manifest across diverse Indian narratives and traditions.

References

Primary Source

1. Murugan, Perumal. *One Part Woman*. Translated by Aniruddhan Vasudevan, Penguin Books, 2015.

Secondary Sources

2. Chatterjee, Partha. *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton University Press, 1993.
3. Doniger, Wendy. *The Hindus: An Alternative History*. Penguin Books, 2009.
4. Dugaje, Manohar. Representation of Women in V. S. Naipaul's Early Novels: A Feminist Reading. *Our Heritage*. Vol-67-Issue-7. Nov. 2019.
5. Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1: An Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley, Vintage Books, 1990.
6. Lukács, Georg. *The Historical Novel*. Translated by Hannah and Stanley Mitchell, University of Nebraska Press, 1983.
7. Menon, Nivedita. *Seeing Like a Feminist*. Zubaan-Penguin Books, 2012.
8. Nussbaum, Martha C. *Sex and Social Justice*. Oxford University Press, 1999.
9. Ramaswamy, Sumathi. "Body Language: The Somatics of Nationalism in Tamil India." *Gender and History*, vol. 11, no. 1, 1999, pp. 70–100.
10. Raj, Rajeswari Sunder. *The Scandal of the State: Women, Law, and Citizenship in Postcolonial India*. Duke University Press, 2003.
11. Sunder Rajan, Rajeswari. "Is the Hindu Goddess a Feminist?" *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 33, no. 44, 1998, pp. WS34–WS38.
12. Tharu, Susie, and K. Lalita, editors. *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present*. Vol. 2, The Feminist Press at CUNY, 1993.
13. Vasudevan, Aniruddhan. "Translation and Its Discontents: Reading Perumal Murugan in English." *Indian literature*, vol. 60, no. 1, 2016, pp. 203–211.
14. Vijayan, Mini. "Fertility, Femininity, and the Sacred: A Reading of *One Part Woman*." *Journal of South Asian Literature and Culture*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2019, pp. 45–67.