One Part Woman: The Book On Trial For Acknowledging The Invisible

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Abstract: One Part Woman, a novel written by Perumal Murugan and translated into English by Aniruddhan Vasudevan in 2015 was banned for its controversial content. The purpose of this research paper is to analyze the text and to examine its significance in the debate for freedom of speech in current India. Indian society uses censorship as a tool to preserve its traditional and conventional ideologies specially to safeguard the patriarchal setup of the community. The concept of parenthood in a community is a central theme in the novel and a thematic analysis of this is done by the researcher. One Part Woman questions the notion of parenthood and woman in society by placing the character Ponna in an extramarital situation through the chariot festival of Maadhorubaagan. The social pressures and expectations forced on the couple leads to tensions in their relationship. This research is significant in understanding the reasons and trends of why certain books are banned or become controversial.

Index Terms: One Part Woman, parenthood, woman, censorship, collective identity, community

1. INTRODUCTION
“Freedom of Expression must include the license to offend” - Lisa Appignanesi debate over freedom of speech and censorship has been on-going for decades. In order to grasp the bigger picture we have to understand what factors define censorship. The justification for censoring has mostly been moral reasons, whether it is instigated by the government or by special interest groups like we have today. Artistic freedom, on the other hand includes not only the artist’s right to free expression but his right to publish, exhibit and produce his work free from governmental control and it also includes the public’s right to see and hear what he/she produces. In the Indian context freedom of expression though present in the Indian constitution for the last half century, it is hardly supported by the political culture of today. In order to understand this issue we have to take into account the complete ethos of the Indian society with its various castes and religions. “The problems of censorship are so complex that it cannot be neatly divided into problems of political censorship or that of obscenity. At any point in history censorship by society is used to silence women and is used to manipulate stereotypes” (Bhave 10) Indian society uses censorship as a tool to preserve its traditional and conventional ideologies. Writers like Perumal Murugan have tried to break from this by dealing with controversial topics like sex and caste responding to his responsibility as a writer. The release of his book Maadhorubaagan translated into One Part Woman by Aniruddhan Vasudevan in 2015 caused uproar among the Gounder community who claimed to be misrepresented. This was also supported largely by the BJP and RSS political parties and his book was burnt for its inflammatory content and mounted pressure on Murugan to change the names of people and places. It is apparent that there is more to India’s climate of intolerance than what meets the eye. The Madras High Court must be applauded for upholding the rights of writer Perumal Murugan, but for speech to be truly free, the judiciary must stop asking literature to justify its aesthetic or its intent. Today, Indian political parties use this strategy of seeking offense which often serves as a means for personal advancement or to influence policies. An alarming trend today is censorship by the mass it has ceased to be a measure controlled by the government the mob demands the suppression of material antithetical to its views. Censorship today has become a set of unwritten rules made by the people for the people. “Such is the climate of intolerance in India today that it is almost impossible to write a book or make a movie without having to cope with a mob of protesters who claim that you have offended their caste/community/religion/region/city/grandparents/favourite pets.” (Balashkekar 191) One Part Woman questions the notion of parenthood and woman in society by placing the character Ponna in an extramarital situation through the traditional chariot festival of Maadhorubaagan. The book explores the mentality of the entire community that they are part of; it is a social criticism on the rural community which runs by its traditional and out-dated practices that collectively by their interference causes the devastation of a loving couple. The existence of a collective identity in our society makes us defensive about our traditional and conventional practices rather than questioning it. The objective of this paper is to analyse the text One Part Woman and to examine how the writer criticises the social pressures of parenthood in society and how Ponna defies the notion of a woman in society. It also questions how important are a collective consciousness in society and its relation to censorship and how does censorship of any kind deteriorates the quality of any society? Through the analysis of the novel One Part Woman by placing it in its current social and political context we can interpret and find meanings to the above questions.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE
A lot of research has been done in the field of censorship in the past and in the present especially focussing on it from the Indian context. Morawski’s essay talks about how the history of censorship is an old one but that of its resistance is comparatively new, censorship as a phenomenon was something quite unnoticed by the majority, and thus was seen as normal. These ideas give us an understanding on how to judge controversial texts. According to Satya Gautam in his essay Indian society not only faces problems in its autonomy from external pressures, both in political and cultural domains, it faces equally strong pressures from within its own structures, traditions and practices. Victor D’Souza also talks about this same issue regarding individual and collective identity groups such as castes and tribes, which are in breeding, and kinship circles have been effective units of social action in the Indian society and have shaped the collective identity of their members. This is an important feature to understand why
people support and blindly follow the mass in banning ideas and not questioning them. Rochy also talks about identity as both an individual and collective phenomena and the primacy of the group dimension become manifest in the imaginary space created by groups which Murugan criticises through his novel. James Moffett introduces the term 'agnosia' in which he says individuals censor parts of what they can't afford to know. Not wanting to know operates within the individual and throughout a culture as it may disrupt an existing stability. This theory can be applied as Murugan reintroduces a sexual tradition of the Gounder community through his book. Infertility and its significance in the Indian society is a major theme in the entire novel. Barbara Higgins talks about the socio conditions of infertile couples, the thoughtless and in accurate remarks by well-meaning friends and relatives to infertile couples. They emphasize the expectations that society places on families to have children. These pressures include religious, cultural, and social values which can promote guilt and feelings of failure for in fertile men and women. This is one of the major themes that run throughout the novel and is a driving force for the plot. The novel is based in the town of Tiruchengode, now in western Tamil Nadu, built around a temple to the deity Maadhorubaagan, the half female god. There are many idols on the Tiruchengodu hill, each one capable of giving a specific boon. One of them is the Maadhorubaagan also known as Ardhanareeswara, an idol of Shiva who has given the left part of his body to his consort, Parvathi. It is said that this is the only place where Shiva is worshipped in this mythical form. Murugan was intrigued on encountering several men in the region past the age of 50 who were called Ardhanari (Half-woman) or Sami Pillai (God-given child). On digging further he found out that till as recently as 50 years ago, on a particular evening of the annual chariot festival in the temple of Ardhanareeswara, childless women would come alone to the area alive with festivities. Each woman was free to couple with a male stranger of her choice, who was considered an incarnation of god. If the woman got pregnant, the child was considered a gift from god and accepted as such by the family, including her husband. As a farming community, the Gounders tend to be unsettled by childlessness especially by the lack of male heirs for the family property. In the Gounders' worldview, the hard work put in by a Gounder male in his adult life is meaningless if there is no son to inherit the fruit of his labours. As a result, childlessness is brutally stigmatised in this particular community. One Part Woman tells the story of Kali and Ponna, a married couple who are continuously taunted by their families and their neighbours for Ponna's failure to bear a child. After everything else fails, the only hope seems to be Ponna's participation in the chariot festival of the god Maadhorubaagan, which happens on the one night in a year when sexual taboos are relaxed, and consensual intercourse between strangers is permitted.

**METODOLOGY**

The research methodology will focus on a thematic analysis of the novel One Part Woman. Thematic analysis is one of the most common forms of analysis in qualitative research. It emphasizes pinpointing, examining, and recording themes within a work. In this novel the theme of childlessness and parenthood are analysed in order to understand the collective consciousness of a community. The theme will be discussed and described in detail using instances from the novel. Thematic analysis also focuses on the subjective human experience. This approach emphasizes the character's perceptions, feelings and experiences regarding the specific theme as the paramount object of study. Other than this, underlying themes of sexuality, women and censorship surrounding the novel are also discussed. Theories and ideas from various scholarly articles and books regarding these themes are applied to get a better understanding of the text. A number of questions will also help to organize an outline for the research in order to establish intellectual accountability. The limitation of this research is the limited interpretive power as it lacks a concrete theoretical framework.

**ANALYSIS**

One Part Woman questions the notion of parenthood in society by placing the character Ponna in an extramarital situation through the traditional chariot festival of Maadhorubaagan. Perumal Murugan introduces us into the world of a childless couple Kali and Ponna who are continuously hounded by the taunts and insinuations of the community where societal expectations to bear a child take over their love for each other. From the beginning of the novel we see that they are in love with each other and happy being by themselves in their individual space even after twelve years of their marriage. "Although they had no children, Kali was very happy with Ponna. He would also ask her now and then to make sure she was happy with him." (13) The community on the one hand have certain roles and expectations that these characters fail to fulfil. These external pressures from within its own structures, traditions and practices reminded faithfully Kali and Ponna of what they lack. In the novel Murugan talks about how a man's worth is determined by his ability to cause 'morning sickness in his wife in the very second month' and a woman's worth is measured by her ability to reproduce. Their inability to fulfil this role in their community continues to remain in the back of the minds. "She was thinking 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." (8) There are three major instances from the novel that seem to highlight this aspect of infertility as viewed by the society. The social conditions and the thoughtless and inaccurate remarks by friends and relatives demonstrate the pressures placed on the couple. These pressures include religious, cultural and social values which promote feelings of guilt and failure among the two characters. One of the incidents in the novel is after seven or eight years of their marriage, there had been talks of a second marriage both openly and secretly for Kali as it seemed like a solution to the problem they faced. Chellappan is a character in the story who dealt with cattle. One day he came to the barnyard as one of Kali’s cows had failed to yield a calf despite two or three mating attempts, he wanted to get rid of the cow by selling it to Chellappan. “It is fate, maapillai” said Chellappan. “That is just how some cows are. No matter what you do, they never get pregnant. Just quietly change the cow. If you say yes, I can fetch you one right away.” (10) He is making an indirect reference to Ponna and hinting at a second marriage to Kali comparing her to an infertile cow. This was a defining characteristic of the couple which made them the butt of ridicule in their community for reasons that they had no control of. The taboo attached to infertility is also seen in the practices and customs that the community follows. An instance of this from the novel was when the couple were
invited for the puberty ceremony of Chellamma's daughter who was a close relation of theirs. There was a custom meant to ward off the evil eye wherein all the aunts were called to spin red balls of rice in a large circle around the girl's body and then toss it away. When Ponna came forward to do this Chellamma dragged her aside and told her to stay away. If the childless woman did the ritual would it make the girl barren? Was she that insidious? Even for death ceremonies in the village no one asked Kali to fetch water in the cremation ground. “If a child is so important to establish oneself as a human being in this world, why shouldn’t she dare to do what it takes to accomplish that, thought Ponna” (113) The above line shows how much of a defining factor is parenthood in society. A community that accords motherhood as the definition of success for a married woman and accumulating a sizable inheritance for one's own offspring as the greatest accomplishment of a man, the lack of a child, even after twelve years of marriage, is seen as their most visible failing. The most common practise of the community was farming. They ploughed in a specific order, working together in everyone's fields. While working on Vellivel's field, there had been no rain for five days but they went ahead and sowed the seeds. Since Vellivel's wife came down with a severe leg pain Ponna did all of the tasks of the day that her legs were exhausted from all the running. The following year the community did not include Kali and Ponna in their sowing team. They didn't know the reason at first but then they heard that Vellivel did not get a good yield the year before and whatever he got was of poor quality. “Someone had said, ‘That barren woman ran up and down carrying seeds. How do you expect them to grow once she has touched them.’” (115) The taboos and false notions the community attributes to the couple, forms a part of the collective consciousness which regards them as being unfit members. An inborn realization of the importance of bearing a child to establish one's worth as a human being in the world by the entire community places unbearable strain on their relationship. Murugan questions this collective identity of parenthood that exists in the society that leads individuals to partake in deeds that go against their will. “By virtue of membership in a group people know and follow some things and do not know other things. To diverge is to risk membership and identity” (Moffett 10) The only way out for Ponna from all the torture and pressure from society is to take part in the chariot festival of Maadhorubaagan, an age old tradition where a woman was free to couple with a male stranger of her choice who was considered an incarnation of God. The child conceived will be considered a gift from God and accepted as such by the family. Ponna's mother and mother in law constantly plead with the couple to attend this festival as it was their solution to the problem. Their constant pestering and finally tricking Ponna into accepting fulfilled the role they had to play in the community, products of an unquestioned collective identity. “What is there to think about? This is God's work. You are going to be with whoever appears as god for you. Ponna this is a tradition that has been going on for ages.” (136) Ponna's unresistant acceptance to go to the chariot festival in the temple on the eighteenth day changes the entire being of the couple's relationship. Placing Ponna out of the setup of marriage Murugan shows the extremes society drives its members in order to gain acceptance and conform to its notions. The chariot festival which is the answer to Ponna's problems also demonstrates the hypocrisy of society. The Chariot Festival, is almost based on the philosophy of a carnival, when societal rules are relaxed, where for one night the consensual union between any man and woman is permitted this gives an opportunity to Ponna to end their suffering and humiliation but also puts their marriage to ultimate test. The clown in the play is an interesting character in the novel as he mocks the philosophy behind the festival through his comments. The clown undermines the sanctity behind the festival through his play he challenges and ridicules the customs and conventions venerated by many."This man says the god and goddess roamed around the villages. But are they jobless like you? Wherever they roam about they have to come back here eventually. That's why we have this eighteenth day of the festival. Those without husbands will be blessed with husbands and those do not have wives will be blessed with wives. Isn't that so?” (213) Through these instances in the novel Murugan tries to highlight the concept of a collective identity prevalent in every community and various means taken by society in order to maintain this line of thought. Chitra Sinha in her essay talks about how in an Indian society the idea of motherhood revolves around the idea of bearing and rearing the male child played an important role in the socialisation process of Indian women. "An identity of motherhood completely overshadows all other identities of Indian women and as a result Indian woman was raised in a culture that trained her to be an ideal mother from early childhood” (Sinha 51) The concept of motherhood is also seen as something central to the social configuration of a community and is characterized by a glaring dichotomy regarding patriarchal dominance, glorification without empowerment. Charu Gupta in her book discusses about how the construction of a homogenous community operated within and through a reworked and updated patriarchy whereby it became crucial to control women. By placing the character Ponna out of this patriarchal setup and into the chariot festival partially due to her will she is in way empowered. This is a clear breakaway form the collective, traditional and conventional notion of women in that community and a reason for the uproar behind the book. One of the main targets of the Hindu groups has been the representation of women in arts and culture wherein notions of obscenity or chastity and traditional or modernity have come to be contested. "Women’s sexuality and ethnicity intersect with the reproductive functions of women where they as bearers of children of an ethnic group are guardians of the race keeping ethnic boundaries intact" (Gupta 38) James Moffett introduces the term ‘agnosis' in which he says individuals censor parts of what they can’t afford to know. Not wanting to know operates within the individual and throughout a culture as it may disrupt an existing stability. This sort of self-censorship gives us reason to restrain our knowledge in as much we are willing to know less in order to belong to the collective identity; to diverge is to risk membership. Existing notions of parenthood and sexuality embedded in the minds of every individual in the community is called to question when writers like Murugan critique it through their works. If the writer transgresses the limits of the acceptable, there is always a vigilant mob to alert the government on the issue and demand suppression of the questioning voice. Murugan's novel almost shared the same fate of being banned at the hands of the mob like many books in the past but the judicial system did not fail him in this case. According to Metal Pinto in his essay he talks about how the current line of thought in censorship is that there should be no legal protection from mere insults to feelings and sensibilities.
related to sacred, religious and cultural values. He argues against this saying that some claims of offence to feelings boils down to a struggle for equality in the public sphere between competing cultural identities. These claims are important to protect people’s right in the integrity of their cultural identity. In this particular context the objections to Murugan’s book canvassed a wide range of grievances. Some said the novel’s handling of extramarital sex was obscene. Others claimed it had offended the sentiments of the caste group of Tamil Nadu where the novel is set; some even claimed the novel damaged Hinduism itself. These grievances were far-fetched and lacked validity when you take the novel into consideration. The public are so occupied with finding faults and preserving their conventional ideologies that they fail to see the bigger picture that the author tries to convey. The verification of this argument is how the Court arrives at the conclusion that One Part Woman did not break any laws. For speech to be truly free, the judiciary must stop asking works of art to justify its aesthetic or its politics before the court to please the ignorant mob.

CONCLUSION
One Part Woman is a rooted and passionate novel, as the blurb reads “lays bare with unsparing clarity a relationship caught between the dictates of social convention and the tug of personal anxieties” explains precisely the plight of the two central characters Kali and Ponna. Perumal Murugan questions the entire collective identity of a community when he criticises the notion of parenthood and woman in the community. Through various instances in the novel he condemns the social pressures and offenses that the society thrusts on the couple for not fitting in with their perception of a family. It explores the individual and the collective with great detail and point out the power held by the collective over the individual. Using a simple and distressing narrative technique the author explores highlighting features of the village life with all its archaic traditions and notions without romanticizing the past he criticizes the engraved ideologies that wreck the relationship of a childless couple. The lack of knowledge and ignorance by the mob, condemned the novel as their traditional views on marriage and women did not match with Murugan’s characters. Topics like sex and caste which still remain taboo in the Indian society served as triggers to go against the novel. The real solution to social progression is to develop the individual, to continue the evolution of freedom inward until mental liberation will lead to political and religious liberation. This requires breaking social boundaries that restrict knowledge and thinking and expanding consciousness beyond the limitations of any culture. Only ‘a culture that transcends itself can transmit itself’ which is exactly what our Indian

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