



Censorship and Translation in India: Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman*

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Abstract: When censorship acts as a means to restrict information in India, translation plays a significant role in bringing the knowledge of texts and updating readers despite linguistic and cultural diversities. In this situation, censorship and translation have become exciting aspects of studying in a developing and changing India. From the second half of the 20th century, Indian writing in all languages has been influenced by political ideologies such as communist, free, non-aligned, and gradually right-wing. Another factor that made everyone understand the aspects of translation and censorship in India is the emergence of predominant access to the internet and the invincible flow of information through media and social media. At this point, studying the concept of censorship and translation is highly significant, mainly to understand the nuances of changing scenarios in the writings of the Indian subcontinent. The hypothesis of the present paper is to study the notion of translation and censorship with reference to *Maadhurobaagan* (2010), written by Perumal Murugan, and its translation in English as *One Part Woman*, which won the Sahitya Akademi award for translation by Aniruddhan Vasudevan. This paper explores the authors' recollections and depictions of various situations in the texts. It examines the notion of censorship and translation under the impact of media and social media from different perspectives. The study also analyses cases before and after translation, evaluating many questions around marginalized literature, their translations, and readership.

Keywords: Translation, Censorship, Media, Social media, Marginalized literature in India

Perumal Murugan declared his literary death in 2015 after the translation of his book *One Part Woman* created controversy. Murugan asked his publishers to withdraw his books and the

readers to burn his books. Threats from the local Hindu and caste groups in Tamil Nadu forced him and his family to leave their hometown. In 2016, he ended his self-proclaimed literary exile by publishing the poetry collection *Kozhaiyin Paadalgal*, translated as the *Songs of a Coward*, in which the reader is taken through the dark, unforgettable days of his exile.

Regional texts are translated into other languages to find a wider audience and share one culture's history or belongings with another. A writer always looks for a medium where he can write and express himself without any hindrances or confines. Hence, translation paves the way for a regional writer to express his concepts and ideas quickly, despite linguistic and cultural diversities. Regional literature of India, when translated into English, finds much more power and sensational than Indian writing in English.

Translation has a significant role in the acceptance of books, particularly when it comes to controversial books. Some texts include *Malapalli* (1922), a Telugu novel by Unnavu Lakshiminarayana, and *Angaaray* (1932), a short story collection in Urdu written by Sajjad Zaheer, Ahmed Ali, Rashid Jahan, and Mahmud-uz-Zafar, were banned by the British Raj. They were translated into English later, showing these texts' importance.¹ *Aavarana* (2007), a Kannada novel by S.L. Bhyrappa, created considerable controversy. The book was a commercial success in the Kannada publishing industry, with ten reprints in three months and over thirty-five reprints in seven years. Before its translation into English in 2014, it was translated into seven other Indian languages, mainly Hindi, Sanskrit, Malayalam, Marathi, Tamil, and Gujarati, which shows the immense reception among Indian readers.

¹ *Malapalli* (1922) was translated with the title '*Malapalli: Triumph of Sangha*' by V.V.B. Rama Rao in 2008, and *Angaaray* (1932) was translated by Snehal Shingavi in 2014.

Presently, the translation of books finds quick recognition, as it is promoted through social media, online articles, and news. In 2010, *Madhurobaagan* was not controversial at all. The Tamil readers widely accepted it, and when translated after four years, it also made great reviews on the internet. But unfortunately, the protests began by some groups who have not even read the novel. The author and the text go through different phases of banning – the writer leaving his hometown, post-ban, burning his book, and artistic suicide. At this juncture, translation and censorship have become an intriguing aspect of studying the state of affairs in translation in a heterogeneous and changing India. This paper intends to learn why the text's translation created controversies nonetheless the original.

Perumal Murugan announced his literary death on Facebook on January 13th, 2015 (Lal 2015).

“Author Perumal Murugan has died. He is no god, so he is not going to resurrect himself. Nor does he believe in reincarnation. From now on, Perumal Murugan will survive merely as a teacher, as he has been” (Murugan, 2015)

Murugan got warning phone calls and violent abuses on social media for many days. His declaration was made when he was not able to accept the unexpected changes in his life. Social media is where one can express their thoughts and bring attention to certain issues. However, its other side is terrifying—people could form clusters, attack with words, and cross limits.

Hailed as the star of contemporary Tamil literature, Perumal Murugan and his writings often represent the idea of marginality in a modern form and talk for the lower castes and the have-nots. Murugan has written marvelous novels in Tamil, which got translated into English, such as *Seasons of Palm* (2000), *Current Show* (2004), *Pyre* (2016), and

Poonachi: or the Story of a Black Goat (2017). Murugan writes about the region of Kongunadu, a part of Tamil Nadu. As he lived in Kongunadu, he felt in a better position to write about the people there and their life, which he did all his life. Initially published in Tamil as *Madhorubhagan*, the story is about a loving and childless Gounder couple, Kali and Ponna, in the temple town of Tiruchengode. In 2010, when this novel was published, it was well-received by the readers. The positive feedback made Penguin publish its English translation. The translation achieved its goal of reaching more extensive readers but, at the same time, infuriated the 'cultural fundamentalists.' Murugan was shocked to see the venomous discourses on social media pouring at him and his wife.

Madhurobagan achieved positive feedback and literary responses, particularly from the women readers. In the novel, Kali resists the attempts to make his wife participate in the ritual, but in the end, he is devastated when he discovers her missing from home. No questions of hurt sentiments were aroused; moreover, the open end of the novel indeed created curiosity and wonder among the readers to know what happened later to Kali and Ponna. These responses encouraged him to write the sequels – *Aalavayan* and *Ardhanari*, which were translated as *A Lonely Harvest* and *Trial by Silence*.

The protests against the translated text and the original emerged out of nowhere. On December 26th, the copies of *Madhurobagan* were burnt at Tiruchengode in Namakkal district. Murugan was advised to leave his home by the police. As the whole town turned against him, dejected Murugan quit writing.

In India, where there are twenty-two significant languages and their literature, the translation of books have a considerable role in updating the reader about the happenings

in other languages of Indian literature. Of these significant languages in India, Tamil is one of the oldest surviving classical languages in the world. According to A.K Ramanujan, "Tamil, one of the two classical languages of India, is the only language of contemporary which is recognizably continuous with a classical past." (Zvelebil 1973). Translations give the readers a more comprehensive understanding of the Indian experience. The translations of Tamil literature into various Indian languages and foreign languages have been able to showcase their great classical traditions. Some of them have also contributed much to the Marginal literature of India. The main thrust of the Marginal writing is the objection against the established unfair social order and refutation of the whole hegemonic tradition and to assert the fundamental human values. In that way, the works and translations of the Tamil authors such as Bharathidasan, Indira Parthasarathy, Sivasankari, Jayakantha, C.S Lakshmi, Bama, and Perumal Murugan have occupied their own spaces in Indian literature by exploring the marginalized lives.

The Marginalized literature does the process of a gradual demolishing of canonical imperial discourse and its value system. The basis of marginalized literature is the fundamental human values, and they elevate through the translation of such literature. The people who are marginalized in their society face various issues in their daily lives. For them, the community is what matters, not individuality. Hence, translation is not just a change from one language to another. More than that, it is a way to communicate the issues of one community to a broader set of readers. Perumal Murugan's works mainly portray the experience of the marginalized people, and most of them have been translated into languages like Hindi, Malayalam, English, German, and so on.

Caste is running in our blood, says Murugan; many people consider it as identity. Being a non-Dalit, writer, and lecturer,

he firmly believes that people need better identities than caste. The characters in his works are ordinary village people, and the central focus is the difficult or impossible decisions made in small towns or villages. In his 2006 paper, “Kongu Nattavar Padaippil Dalit Cittarippu” (Portrayal of Dalits in Narratives of the Kongu Region), he criticized the Dalit’s portrayal in the short stories by non-Dalit writers. He says he is unable to imagine an existence without the Dalits, as they greatly help with manual labor and daily chores in various ways. He knows the agonies of the marginalized as he lives amid those communities. *Earuveil* (1991), meaning ‘Raising Heat,’ is his first novel, which conveys the issues of changing society, where agricultural lands are converted into colonies. V. Geetha —who translated *Nizal Muttram* (1993) and *Koola Madiri* (2000) into English as *Current Show* (2004) and *Seasons of Palm* (2004) — his books saying something significant about the responsibility of the dominant castes in fighting their inclination and interest in sustaining untouchability (Geetha, 2015) Hence, the translations of Murugan act as an agent to introduce the culture and lifestyle of Dalits to the mainstream literary world.

During conflicts, Murugan was transferred from a government college in Namakkal to Chennai. As a professor of Tamil for more than seventeen years, he has acquired considerable knowledge in the area of building a lexicon of words, idioms, and phrases unique to *Kongunadu*. He published authoritative versions of classical Tamil texts by researching Kongu folklore, especially the ballads on Annamar Sami, a pair of folk deities. Murugan encountered several men in the Thiruchengode hill past the age of fifty called *Ardhanari* or *Sami Pillai*. Further, he found that ages ago, on a certain evening of the yearly chariot festival in the temple of *Ardhanareeswara*, childless women would come to the place alive with festival gaieties. They are free to couple with male strangers, supposedly an incarnation of God. If they get

pregnant, the children are considered *samikoduthapillai*², accepted by their families and society. Rendering the chariot festival in his novel, Murugan invited the wrath of the Hindutva group. The writer has written about the tradition of the Kongu region after in-depth research on the Thirichengode hill and the deities. He portrayed the facts about Ardhnari and Sami-Pillai, linking those with his imagination.

Kali and Ponna learn Pavatha, the female deity of the jungle has cursed their family; they offer a sacrifice to please her. They also climb the *varadikkal*³, situated on the hills of Tiruchengode, to get a child (Murugan 2014). All these attempts fail, suggesting Kali send Ponna to the *Ardhnareeshwara* temple on the eighteenth day of the festival when consensual sex by any woman and man is allowed. Kali's mother says, "All men who set their foot in Karattur on the eighteenth day are gods. It is God who is giving this. Who knows which God comes with what face? It is the nature of gods not to reveal their faces." (Murugan 2013: 96).

In his article, Venkatachalapathy says that in ancient times, childless couples followed such practices - "Such practices are by no means unique. Any anthropologist would attest to similar practices in many pre-modern societies with no access to assisted conception. Classical Hindu traditions refer to this practice as *niyoga* – it's even termed *niyoga dharma*, an indication of its religious sanction. Noted scholars such as A. Sivasubramaniam, A.K. Perumal, and S. Theodore Baskaran have vouched for the existence of such practices in other parts of Tamil Nadu." (Venkatachalapathy 2016: 107)

² God given children

³ barren woman's rock

The societal pressure to bear a child leaves Ponna with no options but to have sex with a stranger. The portrayal of a woman consenting to have sex with a stranger, in other words, sexual permissiveness, is the main reason for the angry protests. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) campaigned against the author, saying the book insulted the whole Gounder women in particular and the Hindu religion. The religious fanatics overtook the right to avert others from reading, thus violating the fundamental rights and freedom of speech and expression. Writing about a community or caste made Murugan open to attacks. Murugan's works discuss the affairs of caste identity. Thus, the right-wing makes an issue part of their attempts to highlight the upper-caste Hindutva image.

“The printing press, the advent of mass publications and publicity, the intrusive effects of propaganda, technological innovations including radio, television and the internet, and various other changes, have resulted in an information revolution which is controlled by the influential-simultaneously encouraging both information monopolies as well as restricted plurality of voices in a marketplace of information and ideas.” (Dhavan. 2008, p. 48) The television channels owned by different political groups, particularly the enterprise of Hindutva, less conspicuously knit Hindutva through images, vocabularies, and icons into the daily lives of people; for instance, how a girl or woman should behave, to be patriotic, and so on. Discourse between Hindutva supporters and self-taught 'liberals' on social media like Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp has even spread to the countryside. Efforts to spread ideologies and nationalism online are made possible by affordable smartphones through which people can manage anonymous social media accounts and go after social activists and writers. With the advent of social media, stranglehold censorship trends have taken various paths; mass attacks, and vitriol comments are effortless in online.

Movements are happening to decide what is 'appropriate'; a person who writes against this or expresses his liberal attitude is targeted.

Another reason for the attempts to ban *One Part Woman* is Perumal Murugan's recollection of the past and description set around a hundred years ago at the time of a yearly festival in Tiruchengode, a central town in Namakkal district in Western Tamil Nadu. The sexual permissiveness described is a threat to patriarchy and infuriates the group. Aniruddhan Vasudevan asked about his translation of the title as "One Part Woman" and not a masculine classifier as the original title. Ponna has a vital role in the story as a barren woman who is suffering, and in the end, she has a solution for that, says Vasudevan. Presently, a meticulously constructed social media campaign is working on rewriting Indian history in a Hindutva way. Children's history textbooks are being edited to create a society where the cultural and political space of minorities will gradually shrink. Hence, the injustices and social intolerance against minorities can be justified. So, these kinds of portrayals by the writers like Perumal Murugan have been targeted, and cruel methods are employed to ban them. His stand on caste and his works so far that mock the identity of caste or caste honor are measured to defuse and humiliate him.

Many intellectuals and liberals, through online publications, supported Murugan during the situation and resisted the ban. We can say that intellectual life is configured according to what can be obtained online. They support freedom of expression, but putting this freedom into practice is risky because they would be tormented if their voice is different or unique from the majority. Or the law would be charging them with the cruel intention to promote enmity between people of other religions, languages, and castes.

Murugan's books gained a much wider readership after their translations into different languages and brought him under the national spotlight⁴. After he returns to writing he says, "A censor is seated inside me now. He is testing every word that is born within me. His constant caution that a word may be misunderstood so, or it may be interpreted thus, is a real bother. But I'm unable to shake him off. If this is wrong, let the Indian intellectual world forgive me," (Srilatha, 2019). As there is a censor within him, he is afraid to write about humans and gods. *Songs of a Coward* (2017), a poetry collection published after his resurrection, explains his dark days of literary exile (Prakash 2020). A coward's struggles in an aggressive society are least considered. Murugan declares that not only the brave ones but also the coward has a place in our community.

Our society has set standards for good and evil, poor and rich, lower-caste and upper-caste; one gets acceptance, not the other. The attempts to create homogeneity through violence, denying the heterogeneity of our country that happens day after day, are undeniably described in the works of Perumal Murugan and his translations. From the soda-seller, the shepherd, the inter-caste couple, the coward, and the black goat to the goat thief, every different species and creature from the real world are given eminence in Murugan's works. The translation of *One Part Woman* and the outbreak of protests led to his 'artistic suicide,' and the role of media and social media is predictable, as the spontaneous and fast flow of information leads to many kinds of thinking and ideologies, healthy as well as abusive. However, the progressive nature of social media and the 'online' development of intellectual life

⁴ See *Murugan's Tamil poems translated into English* available at <https://www.sundayguardianlive.com/culture/6201-murugan-s-tamil-poems-translated-english>

has not aided the writer in escaping from the clutches of censorship.

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