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## Exploring Maternal Narratives: A Comparative Analysis of Indian and American Contexts through *One Part Woman* and *The Bean Trees*

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### Abstract

Motherhood in literature is a richly layered theme that transcends cultures, historical eras, and genres, offering insights into the social, emotional, and psychological dimensions of this universal experience. Beyond biological interpretations, literary portrayals of motherhood illuminate themes of human connection, identity, unconditional love, idealized selflessness, and the struggles and conflicts faced by women. This study undertakes a comparative analysis of two celebrated authors: Tamil writer Perumal Murugan and American author Barbara Kingsolver. It examines Murugan's *One Part Woman* (2013) (*Madhorubhagan* in Tamil) and Kingsolver's *The Bean Trees* (1988), exploring the theme of motherhood through Tamil and American perspectives. By juxtaposing these works, the study reveals how motherhood and gender roles profoundly shape the characters' lives, mirroring the broader cultural and personal contexts that define their journeys.

**Keywords:** *Motherhood, Selflessness, identity, Challenges, Conflicts*

Why does the universe celebrate motherhood more than fatherhood? The world often celebrates motherhood predominantly than fatherhood because motherhood symbolizes the deep connection with the cycle of human lives. Mothers are revered as life givers across cultures. Moreover, traditional roles have placed mothers as the centre of child-rearing, allowing them to witness the mother's influence on a child's development and growth. Although both the mother's and father's roles are important in rearing a child, motherhood receives more noticeable celebration due to the unique emotional, biological, and social roles that all mothers can fulfil. But fatherhood also is as highly significant as motherhood.

Motherhood is a profound and multifaceted experience, intertwined deeply into literature across cultures as a way of exploring human connection, identity, and the sacrifices associated with parenthood. Yet, the portrayal of motherhood is often influenced by gender expectations that assign unique roles, responsibilities, and pressures to women. This article examines the theme of motherhood through a gendered lens, focusing on how social norms shape maternal identity, selfhood, and the conflicts women face as mothers. In the comparative study of Tamil writer Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* (2013) and American author Barbara Kingsolver's *The Bean Trees* (1988), motherhood is revealed not only as a biological role but as a socially constructed experience, profoundly shaped by the cultural expectations of Tamil and American societies. Through this examination, the study reveals how gendered expectations interconnect

with motherhood, defining women's roles and identities in distinct yet universal ways.

H. Sujatha and G. Kumaresan in their article titled, A Critical Study of Realism in Bean Trees Novel (2020) say, "Life as a single mother in an unfamiliar and strange metropolitan becomes disappointing." (1) Seeds of Change: Critical Essays on Barbara Kingsolver is a book edited by Priscilla Leder and has its chapter by Catherine Himmelright titled "Garden of Auto Parts: American Western Myth and Native American Myth in The Bean Trees"(2010) highlights,

*Kingsolver challenges Taylor by confronting her directly with the challenges of motherhood as well as her growing comprehension of the difficulties in the world around her. Although these difficulties surround Taylor, she is strengthened by the group that encompasses her due to Turtle's presence. When Taylor has questions about mothering or needs a babysitter, her community provides support. (40,41)*

Ahmad Jasim's "Cultural Ecofeminism in Barbara Kingsolver's Novel The Bean Trees" addresses the connections women have with Mother Earth. The researcher says, "...Taylor has depicted a true picture of Mother Earth where a woman in spite of her all duties and hard labour, she is still aware of keeping the nature safe environment." (892)

"Women and Nature as Nurturer in Barbara Kingsolver's The Bean Trees" (2018) is a PG dissertation done by Ritu Akchai Magar. In this thesis, Magar highlights "... how women and nature possess the quality of mother and how nature and women are dominated by patriarchal society simultaneously." (5) It also projects the highly important relationship between women and nature from the following lines.

*Like a mother, land gives life to any creatures on her lap irrespective of who, what and where they belong. In just the same way Taylor. Likewise, Taylor adopts Turtle the baby who was in heedless stage and by taking her responsibility she gives her life similarly on the other hand land provides the proper environment for Wisteria vines and they bloom out*

*there. The soil of Tucson and the protagonist equally provide proper love and care to their babies. (11)*

Niveda Gokuldas's "Patriarchy in Perumal Murugan's One Part Woman" article affirms that Ponna is entrapped in the concept of motherhood by society. It is said, "In a patriarchal society, the sole essence of a woman lies in motherhood, and Ponna is also entrapped in this idea and she is constantly being questioned and asked to prove her role." (3) In "The Human and the Non-Human in Perumal Murugan's One Part Woman" Nazir Ali states when the whole society pinpoints the fertile nature of trees and animals, "Ponna alone remains an island of infertility in the middle of all this productivity."(3)

In *One Part Woman* by Perumal Murugan, Ponna represents the intense societal pressures and stigma faced by women in traditional Indian society when unable to have children. Despite the strong bond between Ponna and her husband Kali, their childlessness after years of marriage causes significant stress, especially for Ponna. While Kali faces no criticism, Ponna is labelled as "barren," and her value is reduced to her ability to bear children. This gender imbalance highlights how patriarchal norms place an unfair burden on women, leaving Ponna struggling with feelings of inadequacy, shame, and a loss of self-worth. The novel sensitively portrays the emotional strain and social isolation experienced by childless women in a culture shaped by gender inequality. This type of attitude of the society is highlighted by Maithreyi Krishnaraj in his edited book *Motherhood in India: Glorification without Empowerment?* In his preface he says,

*In the Indian context, she is stigmatised as 'barren' or 'childless' and excluded from participating in certain family rituals and ceremonies; it could also threaten her social existence as her husband may feel justified in taking another wife. Men who cannot father children are never stigmatised the way women are; nor do they pay a price for being unable to father children. (VIII)*

As Ponna's desire grows, she is more open to

trying out non-traditional methods of conception, even if they go against her own morals and beliefs. The novel's primary narrative element is a controversial ritual that results from this desperation. The novel raises issues about the rigidity of society's standards and cultural traditions through the perspective of Ponna's character. Her ambition to become a mother pushes her to question the customs and ideas that govern her life, showing the conflict between individual goals and social expectations.

Perumal Murugan draws a clear picture of the Indian women who long for a baby in such a way that can be understood by anyone across the world to identify how painful it is for a woman without children after marriage. He says, "A shadow fell on her face. She must have been thinking about 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." (Murugan 18) Ponna even compares her barren womb with the cow that she fought and took from her father soon after her marriage to her husband's house. At present it gives birth to more than seven calves but she is unable to bear a single child. When she looks at the cow, she cries out loud, "I don't have the boon that even this mute creature has been blessed with." (Murugan 19)

This novel explores the cultural and familial pressures on people, especially women to have children. Kali's mother is very important in this situation. She is portrayed as a conventional woman who rigidly follows cultural conventions and values having children highly. Ponna, who already feels inadequate and frightened about her inability to conceive, is put under even more strain as a result of this.

On the other hand, in Barbara Kingsolver's *The Bean Trees*, Taylor, the protagonist of *The Bean Trees* and *Animal Dreams* also undergoes struggles like Ponna to have her adopted daughter be with her. Though it is illegal to adopt an Indian child without a proper law, Taylor's concern is all about saving Turtle from her past bitter experiences. In *The Bean Trees*, Taylor's transformation into a

mother begins in a single unexpected moment: she finds an abandoned baby, Turtle, left in her car. Taylor, initially unsure of her capacity or desire to raise a child, feels an immediate and deep connection. She describes Turtle's grip on her as "like roots sucking on dry dirt," (Kingsolver 35) symbolizing Turtle's desperate need for stability and care. This natural imagery underscores how, like a plant in search of water, Turtle clings to Taylor out of an instinct for survival and connection. Taylor's instinct to protect and nurture this vulnerable child reveals the emotional foundation of her new role as a mother. Through Taylor's journey, Kingsolver suggests that motherhood can be forged through choice and compassion rather than biology, emphasizing that Taylor's dedication and love for Turtle ultimately define her as a mother. This connection, unexpected yet profound, illustrates the resilience and transformative power of motherhood, rooted in the bonds that people choose to create and sustain. Taylor accepts Turtle for she doesn't have anyone to claim her as their own. Turtle's aunt says to Taylor when she surrenders Turtle to her, "This baby got no papers. There isn't nobody knows it's alive or cares. Nobody that matters, like the police or nothing like that. This baby was born in a Plymouth." (Kingsolver 30) Taylor is more concerned about the little Turtle for the girl is abused. When she finds her in a car, "There was a bruise twice the size of my thumb on its inner arm. I threw the soggy shirt in the sink soak. The child's hands constantly caught my fingers and wouldn't let go." (Kingsolver 36) Taylor names the child Turtle as the child's tendency to grab things tight. "I called her Turtle, on account of her grip." (Kingsolver 54) Turtle finds comfort in the arms of Taylor. Taylor becomes a guardian of the abandoned girl, who is a Native American child. Initially, Taylor is unsure of her capabilities of being a mother as escapes from marriage and pregnancy. Later, Turtle's interference in her life makes a big change and she plays the role of a real mother in Turtle's life. Taylor's journey of learning to care for Turtle is a central theme of both novels. To safeguard Turtle, Taylor is even ready to lose her identity. She changes

her name from Marietta (Missy) Greer to Taylor. For her, changing a name, changing her own identity, and changing her place can bring freedom from the trackers, who are in search of both the mother and adopted daughter.

Taylor Greer is a young woman who sets out on a voyage of self-discovery and unplanned motherhood. Although Taylor's desire to have children is not as prominent as it is in additional works, it is actually important to the growth of her character and a broader thematic examination of motherhood. She says, "If I wanted a baby I would have stayed in Kentucky, I informed her. I could have had babies coming out my ears by now." (Kingsolver 30) Taylor's primary objective at the start of the novel is to leave her small-town life behind and find independence. Taylor's maternal instincts eventually emerge as she grows closer to Turtle, even though she was initially not motivated by a desire to become a mother.

Taylor's connections with Turtle throughout the novel highlight her sense of motherhood. She starts to provide Turtle with the stability and love she requires while also taking care of her well-being. Taylor's commitment to Turtle, whatever the difficulties she experiences, reveals her developing desire to be an affectionate mother model. Taylor can watch and experience all facets of motherhood through her relationships with other women, especially Lou Ann and Esperanza. Taylor learns about the difficulties of single parenting from Lou Ann and Esperanza, and she also learns about Esperanza's grief through the story she shares about the loss of her daughter.

When comparing both novels in their respective contexts, Taylor Greer and Ponna both have unconventional motherhood experiences. While Ponna's story underlines the effect of cultural standards, societal pressure, and the emotional toll of infertility on her desire for motherhood, Taylor's journey emphasizes the idea of motherhood developing through chosen family and unexpected situations. Taylor's experience as a mother is characterized by adoption and progress, but Ponna's struggles are complicated by societal expectations and

despair.

In *One Part Woman*, Ponna's mother-in-law forces her to drink natural drinks to get her conceived. Women in the family attempt their best methods to make her pregnant. They even watch her menstrual cycle. Whenever it gets delayed, her mother-in-law ensures this to Ponna.

*She said forcefully, 'Don't eat anything else even by mistake. The juice will be bitter. You will have to close your eyes and swallow it.' After that, Ponna got used to eating different shoots and drinking different potions. Her tongue became numb to all the bitterness. The goal was to beget a child, and she was ready to do anything to attain that goal. The bitterness of the medication paled in comparison. But her mother-in-law's medication didn't go down all that easily. (Murugan 48)*

In *The Bean Trees*, the idea of pregnancy is seen differently from the Western perspective. Taylor escapes from her native town to avoid motherhood and pregnancy. When Estevan and Esperanza, the migrants share about the loss of their child, Taylor understands the pain of a mother without her child. She says to them, "Do you know, I spent the first half of my life avoiding motherhood and tires, and now I'm counting them as blessings." (Kingsolver 52) Motherhood is a prime role and a last destination for any woman. Kingsolver glorifies the idea of motherhood as well as contradicts the notion of motherhood. It is clearly stated by Beverly Birns and Dale Hay in their edited book, *The Different Faces of Motherhood* (2-013) "American culture claims to be a child-centered culture, one that highly values motherhood. At the same time, American culture is fiercely individualistic and places a high value on independence, privacy, and personal initiative." (5)

In *The Bean Trees* apart from Taylor, other minor characters like Alice Greer, Mattie, Lou Ann, and Esperanza also play a vital role in proving the nature of motherhood. Alice Greer has chosen her daughter Taylor when it comes to the choice of either her husband or her daughter. She chooses her daughter to leave her husband permanently and raises her

daughter alone. In the case of Mattie, she cares for the migrants with full love and motherly care. Esperanza also is a mother who lost her daughter and shows Turtle all her love. She even helps Taylor to adopt a child legally by signing the contract. In *One Part Woman*, some women understand the emotions and feelings of Ponna. Ponna's mother and mother-in-law support her in all the possible ways to get her pregnant. They have arranged many rituals, they prepare herbal juices, and they are the ones who motivate Ponna to take part in the car festival so that she can get conceived.

Taylor Greer from *The Bean Trees* and Ponna from *One Part Woman* showcase different aspects of motherhood shaped by culture, personal growth, and societal expectations. Taylor, a young woman from Kentucky, becomes a mother by taking in an abandoned child, Turtle. Her journey highlights an American view of motherhood, defined by love and choice rather than biology, as she balances independence with responsibility. In contrast, Ponna's experience in rural Tamil society shows how motherhood is tied to identity and honour. Her inability to conceive subjects her to societal scorn, forcing her into rituals that test her autonomy. Both women grow through their struggles—Taylor redefines independence through love, while Ponna finds strength amid cultural pressures. These stories reveal motherhood as a universal theme of love, sacrifice, and identity, shaped by both personal and cultural contexts.

Overall, Taylor Greer and Ponna's personalities show the multifaceted nature of motherhood, from unexpected responsibilities and selected families to the emotional and cultural differences that influence the intentions and challenges of motherhood. These novels emphasize that motherhood is defined by the emotional connections developed between a mother and a child, and the sacrifices made for becoming and being a mother. Amidst societal pressures and unexpected circumstances, these novels demonstrate the idea of motherhood in a varied exploration of love, identity, and personal growth.

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