



# Alpha and Beta Masculinities: Negotiating Male Identity in Perumal Murugan's *Pyre* and *One Part Woman*

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## Abstract

*Perumal Murugan's Pyre and One Part Woman offer a nuanced portrayal of how masculinity is constructed, contested, and ultimately constrained within the rigid boundaries of caste and patriarchy in rural Tamil Nadu. By applying the Western constructs of "alpha" and "beta" masculinity alongside gender and caste theory, this study investigates how the male protagonists, Kumaresan and Kali, embody forms of male identity that defy dominant ideals of aggression, virility, and communal authority. Kumaresan stands out as a beta figure in contrast to the collective alpha masculinity exhibited by his village and even his own family because of his vulnerability and refusal to mimic caste-driven aggression. Similarly, Kali's concerns about not having children and his tender love for Ponna challenge the strict definition of masculinity that his society expects. Both tales demonstrate how, in order to preserve caste purity and social order, masculinities based on compassion, closeness, and moral conviction are penalized. Murugan reminds us of how societies suppress alternative masculinities and equate male honor with dominance and control by bringing attention to these struggles and the ways that gender and caste combine to discipline both men and women. Situating these texts within South Asian gender discourse, this study argues that reading Murugan's works through the alpha-beta framework brings into focus the often overlooked costs that caste patriarchy exacts on men who refuse its violent imperatives.*

**Keywords:** masculinity, gender studies, caste, Perumal Murugan, alpha male, beta male, Tamil literature, patriarchy

In contemporary masculinity studies, masculinity is not regarded as a fixed biological essence but rather as a socially constructed and historically situated identity that is continually performed and contested. Scholars such as R.W. Connell points out, masculinity doesn't come in just one form. There are many ways of being a man, arranged in a hierarchy where power and privilege decide which versions are celebrated and which are pushed aside. In *Masculinities*, Connell describes hegemonic masculinity as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy," and which "guarantees (or is taken to

guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (M 77).

This dominant form of masculinity pushes aside other expressions, such as subordinate, complicit, or marginalized masculinities, treating them as less legitimate or less valued.

Perumal Murugan's novels *Pyre* (2016) and *One Part Woman* (2013) vividly portray how gender roles operate in rural Tamil society where caste and patriarchy work together to control not only women's sexuality but also men's sense of identity. In these stories masculinity is shown as something shaped by social institutions and reinforced through community



expectations echoing Connell's idea that hegemonic masculinity is maintained through both cultural beliefs and everyday practices (M 79). The Western concepts of "alpha" and "beta" masculinity provide a useful lens for analyzing the central male figures in Perumal Murugan's novels *Pyre* and *One Part Woman*. Despite their origins in animal behaviour research and subsequent popularity in Western pop psychology, the terms are used here with caution to distinguish between more vulnerable and dominant forms of masculinity. Whereas beta masculinity is linked to moral restraint, emotional openness, and a preference for avoiding conflict, alpha masculinity is frequently linked to characteristics like aggression, control, and assertiveness. These distinctions reflect popular notions in Western psychology and media discourse, "alpha male is positioned as dominant and socially assertive, and the beta male as emotionally sensitive and often subordinate (ABI 29).

Binary labels may not fully capture the many ways masculinity is expressed, especially in caste bound societies, yet they remain useful for studying how male characters deal with questions of identity, power, and vulnerability. This approach aligns with R. W. Connell's notion of hegemonic masculinity, understood as the socially accepted model of manhood that legitimizes men's authority over women while pushing other masculinities, especially those defined by emotional expression or moral defiance, into subordinate positions (M 77).

Alpha masculinity, tied to patriarchal authority, is expressed through characters and community values that prize aggression and control. In *Pyre*, the villagers' collective anger is captured in the line, "He had thrown away our caste for a woman. He deserves to be punished" (P 132), which highlights how caste power is intertwined with masculine dominance. Similarly, in *One Part Woman*, the claim that "A barren woman is a disgrace. A man without a child is not a man" underscores the crushing weight placed on fertility and honor, revealing how masculinity is defined through authority over women's bodies and their reproductive capacity.

In contrast, a beta male is defined by his willingness to be emotionally open and vulnerable

qualities that often put him in conflict with the rigid expectations of patriarchy. Kali in *One Part Woman* represents this alternative form of masculinity: "He wanted nothing more than to see her smile. It made him feel man enough." His tenderness and deep emotional investment in his marriage stand apart from the dominant ideals of authority and control. In *Pyre*, Kumaresan shows a similar resistance to aggression when he says, "Let them say what they want. We will live our life away from here," a line that underscores his quiet strength and moral restraint. Both men, constrained by the rigid structures of caste and gender, display aspects of beta masculinity that leave them emotionally sensitive yet socially vulnerable.

In *Pyre*, Kumaresan's vulnerability and his hesitation to confront hostility mark him as a beta figure within a harshly stratified society. Murugan portrays him as "unable to meet his mother's eyes, as if her anger would scorch him alive" (P 74), a detail that shows his unwillingness to assert power even in private spaces. His hope that love might be enough appears again in the line, "He had hoped love alone would suffice" (P 52), a belief that reveals his preference for affection over authority. This fragile idealism contrasts sharply with the villagers and his mother, who embody alpha masculinity through threats, ridicule, and the rigid enforcement of caste boundaries. The community is described as "a pack of dogs that had sniffed blood" (P 108), a metaphor for its predatory defense of patriarchal honor through collective violence. His mother, too, is depicted as having "a tongue sharper than a sickle, cutting through any defence he could muster" (P 76). She becomes an agent of social purity, using shame and intimidation to protect the family's honor and reinforce caste authority.

Extending this discussion to *One Part Woman*, Kali's struggle with childlessness and the ridicule it brings becomes another instance of beta masculinity under pressure. Though he is physically strong and works hard in the fields, his masculinity is weakened by the gossip that surrounds his inability to father a child, a failure that robs him of respect within the community. Murugan captures this anguish when he writes, "He felt like he had been robbed of his



manhood, of his very right to walk with his head held high” (OPW 112). Kali’s inner suffering here echoes Kumaresan’s sense of helplessness. Both characters are emotionally open yet publicly shamed, cast as vulnerable men in a society that defines masculinity through dominance, fertility, and control.

The villagers in *One Part Woman* embody an oppressive alpha collective, policing male virility through rumor and ridicule. Murugan observes, “Kali would lie awake at night, listening to the sniggers and whispers that seeped through the walls” (OPW 95), showing how gossip becomes a weapon that destabilizes his sense of self. In order to ensure an heir, Kali’s mother-in-law and other older women in his world, such as Kumaresan’s mother in Pyre, take on the role of patriarchal authority figures by pressuring Ponna to engage in ritual sex: “If you want this house to have a child, you must do what must be done” (OPW 147). In order to preserve patriarchal order and restore male honor, this framework promotes alpha masculinity by asserting that controlling women’s sexuality is a socially acceptable tactic.

Both Kali and Kumaresan stand for alternative masculinities that go against the prevailing standards of caste purity, virility, and patriarchal authority. As demonstrated by Kali’s suicide, which was driven by feelings of betrayal and shame, and Kumaresan’s harsh communal punishment, rural societies regulate male subjectivity and female sexuality in order to preserve social order. In addition to calling attention to the human costs of a masculinity characterized only by dominance, fertility, and violent social policing, Murugan’s writings encourage a critical analysis of the ways in which caste, gender, and community control interact to determine, control, and repress male identity.

Kumaresan’s decision to wed Saroja, a member of Pyre’s lower caste, is clearly against the moral and social norms of the neighbourhood. His union dissolves caste boundaries and presents an alternative definition of masculinity that is founded on love, loyalty, and moral bravery as opposed to force or violence. By standing by Saroja in spite of constant pressure, Kumaresan momentarily demonstrates a

manhood defined by his own standards. However, the burden of pervasive hostility is too heavy for this fragile defense. His lack of authority in front of the village elders is interpreted as a sign of weakness in his masculinity. Murugan writes,

He knew they were all waiting for him to speak up, to claim her as his wife before them all, but he felt his throat close up (P 78).

Contrasting with this reluctance is the village men’s collective aggression, which is a perfect illustration of Connell’s hegemonic masculinity, which is defined by violence, control, and the subordination of others. The elders warn,

If we let him get away with it, tomorrow every boy will bring a girl from god knows where (P 126).

They are concerned not only about Kumaresan’s personal disobedience but also about the broader threat it poses to the caste patriarchy’s reproductive logic.

Kumaresan’s masculinity is characterized by a strong sense of vulnerability and connection, in contrast to the village’s alpha masculinity, which is based on dominance and control. He exhibits a different kind of manhood by refusing to leave Saroja; this manhood is characterized by devotion, compassion, and moral conviction rather than coercion. But this kinder form of masculinity cannot defeat the power of collective violence. Saroja’s murder serves as the last step towards regaining patriarchal authority and the caste-bound social order.

Similarly, *One Part Woman* interrogates masculinity through reproductive anxiety. Kali’s inability to father a child positions him as “less than a man” within the village’s normative standards of virility. Gossip brands him “*impotent, not a man*” (OPW45). In contrast to the hyper-masculine alpha ideal, Kali’s masculinity is marked by emotional intimacy and tenderness towards Ponna: “He wanted nothing more than to see her smile... It made him feel man enough” (OPW67). This quiet commitment to intimacy can be read as a subtle act of negotiating masculinity on his own terms, challenging the village’s narrow belief that manhood rests solely on fertility and public virility.



Yet, the village's patriarchal gaze relentlessly monitors this deviation. Kali's mother and neighbours weaponize shame and gossip to reinforce hegemonic expectations. His eventual suicide reflects what Connell terms the "cost of masculinity" the psychic damage inflicted on men whose gender identities fail to align with hegemonic norms

here is no simple sense in which men, as an aggregate, simply benefit from the patriarchal dividend. There are costs to men in the hegemonic pattern. The dominance of men over women and the subordination of other men create tensions and contradictions within the masculine project itself. (M 109)

The novel's conclusion, "*Kali felt the ground slip away under him. He became one with the earth*" (OPW182) reveals the annihilating consequences of a masculinity rendered untenable.

Murugan's texts demonstrate that masculinity is inseparable from caste politics. The alpha masculinity that defends caste purity requires the policing not only of female sexuality but also of male subjectivity. Both Kumaresan and Kali's tragic ends reveal how patriarchal communities punish non-conforming masculinities to protect the collective's symbolic capital. As M.S.S. Pandian observes, the village in Murugan's fiction is "not a harmonious collective but a site of surveillance, violence, and exclusion" (CCC 34).

Murugan's stories show that the control of women's sexuality and the repression of men's bodies and desires are two ways that caste *Pyre* and *One Part Woman* subvert the logic of hegemonic masculinity, a system that upholds caste boundaries and patriarchal honor, by transforming love and sexual preference into silent acts of resistance. The punitive methods used by caste patriarchy to uphold its strict standards of masculinity and purity are made evident when men like Kumaresan and Kali fall short of the aggressive, protective alpha ideal and are turned against by their communities.

Perumal Murugan's *Pyre* and *One Part Woman* compellingly illustrate the intricate relationship between caste and masculinity within the pervasive frameworks of surveillance and violence that

characterize rural Tamil existence. By cantering the fragile, non-hegemonic masculinities of characters like Kumaresan and Kali, Murugan disturbs the romanticized view of the village as a pure and morally ordered place. Instead, he shows that it is a place of constant social control, where the community's unity depends on constantly controlling women's sexuality and strictly enforcing men's adhere

Through Kumaresan's and Kali's tragic trajectories, Murugan shows that masculinity under caste patriarchy is not merely a question of male dominance over women but also a regime that punishes men who fail to embody its rigid ideals. The so-called "beta" masculinities of these characters marked by emotional vulnerability, desire for intimacy, or refusal to enact violence make them targets of collective rage. In *Pyre*, Kumaresan's inter-caste love marriage is seen as not only crossing caste lines, but also as a betrayal of his expected role as a man who protects the symbolic honor of his community. In *One Part Woman*, Kali's inability to have children becomes a source of community obsession, with his masculinity being publicly scrutinized, shamed, and ultimately erased.

In masculinity studies, Murugan's narratives illustrate that masculinity cannot be comprehended in isolation from other social dimensions, including caste, honor, and community surveillance. They reveal how caste patriarchy shapes and controls gender identities by governing women's reproductive and sexual autonomy in conjunction with men's desires and emotional experiences. These narratives compel scholars to scrutinize prevailing binaries such as alpha and beta masculinity, which frequently obscure the intricate intersections of power, vulnerability, and social control within specific contexts.

Murugan's fiction points toward a radical reconfiguration of masculinity. By unveiling the violence necessary to uphold hegemonic masculinity, his narratives open a conceptual space to envision alternative masculinities grounded in tenderness, vulnerability, and egalitarian love. These are forms of male identity that need not be suppressed or erased to safeguard patriarchal order. This reimagining is



particularly significant for intersectional gender studies, as it highlights how caste violence shapes not only women's lives but also the emotional and ethical possibilities available to men.

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