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**PSYCHOLOGICAL SCRIPTS AND GENDER ROLES IN  
PERUMAL MURUGAN’S NARRATIVES**

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**ABSTRACT:**

This study examines the influence of society’s gender roles and the deep-seated cultural norms followed by communities in India, and how these factors affect the psyche of individuals living in closely knit communities. The study will closely analyse the chosen texts, One Part Woman, A Lonely Harvest and Trial by Silence, using Transactional Analysis Theory. Drawing on Dr. Eric Berne’s Transactional Analysis theory, the paper will explore the Adult, Parent and Child ego states of the characters and how they affect their behaviours, to show that these behaviours are a result of deeply rooted belief systems followed by cultures and also study the influence that they have in shaping Adult, Child and Parent ego states. The life scripts of the characters are analysed using sex-role scripting introduced by Hogie Wycoff. The paper focuses on understanding Perumal Murugan’s selected texts as representations of psychological conditioning that normalise their endurance.

**KEYWORDS:**

Transactional Analysis, Perumal Murugan, Gender, Ego States,  
Power, Control.



## Introduction

Perumal Murugan's works reveal the restricting effects of caste and gender norms in society. The characters that he portrays in his works are ordinary people living their lives in society that is steeped in caste and gender norms. Transactional Analysis helps understand the psychological impact that these culturally created norms have through analysis of Perumal Murugan's characters. Dr. Eric Berne developed Transactional Analysis, intended to help the patients suffering from psychological issues escape guilt and find a safe space to discuss and understand the reasons behind their discomfort. It is analysed using three major ego states, Adult, Parent and Child ego states. In Perumal Murugan's narrative we see characters whose Parent egos are controlled by caste traditions and patriarchy; it is external and authoritarian. The Adult ego states are contaminated by belief systems and norms practiced by closely knit communities. Those who survive in the society are the ones whose dominant ego state is the Adapted Child ego state, silently enduring through suppression of their emotions.

Across *One Part Woman*, *Trial by Silence*, and *Lonely Harvest*, Murugan presents characters trapped within rigid life scripts that promise social survival at the cost of psychological freedom. These scripts are enforced through negative strokes such as humiliation, gossip, exclusion, and moral policing. Gender and caste determine the nature and intensity of these strokes, ensuring that women and lower-status individuals bear disproportionate emotional and moral burdens.

In the novel *One Part Woman*, Perumal Murugan creates the characters Kali and Ponna, whose entire identity revolves around the fact that they are unable to procreate. This becomes a site for gender and caste regulation. Both the characters are victims of the community morality, caste honour and patriarchal expectations. Their Critical Parent ego state is prominent.

Strokes, according to Dr. Eric Berne is what teaches a child

what is accepted and what is not in society; it is used by society to tame the individuals to comply with its needs without questioning. Strokes can be both positive as well as negative. For a child, strokes can come in the form of a pat on the shoulder or a handshake. When this child becomes an adult, any kind of recognition can be considered as a stroke. The negative strokes often curb healthy development of an individual's character. Kali's character in the novel is an example of how masculinity is socially scripted. Mr. Hogie Wycoff has spoken about sex role scripting, where he is talking about how there are certain scripts which are followed by men and women while living in a society and how these scripts cripple and restrict the free growth of individuals. In the novel what affects a perfectly healthy and happy relationship is their obsession with fertility. Everybody in their lives including close friends and family are constantly reminding them of their childless state and this is what ultimately leads to Ponna being sent to the temple festival, hoping to conceive a child from a man in whose body God has entered for that night. Such customs are an example of how society psychologically manipulates its people to measure their worth based on what it believes to be the norm. This young couple is deceived into participating in this ritual. Ponna is under the impression that Kali is aware of this situation but sadly he never complied. His sense of self is eroded by the humiliation that he has had to face due to his infertility. It has contaminated his Adult ego making him unable to see reality. It is his Adapted Child ego state that is reacting in the novel, angry and frustrated.

Ponna, on the other hand, embodies the Adapted Child ego state where her worth is tied to motherhood and she internalises the fact that she is responsible for not bearing children. This is not a natural emotion that she has experienced but rather a result of the conditioning of patriarchal society. Living in that community her Adult ego has learned that women are supposed to be child bearers and they should provide the family with a child. Her participation in the Chariot festival is an attempt to be accepted in society, it is

not her Free Child that is participating. She is desperately trying to modify her life script while remaining within the socially accepted boundaries.

Caste operates here as a powerful Parent ego state that paradoxically permits ritualised sexual transgression while maintaining patriarchal control. Gender determines who bears the consequences of such rituals. Ponna risks moral condemnation and self-erasure, while Kali's masculinity collapses under public scrutiny. Their tragedy lies not in personal incompatibility but in the impossibility of authentic Adult agency within a caste-regulated moral economy.

Trial by Silence shifts the focus from fictional characters to the author himself, yet the psychological dynamics remain consistent. Murugan positions himself as a subject caught within caste-based moral surveillance, making the writer a character governed by the same transactional forces as his fictional creations. From a TA perspective, caste organisations, political groups, and self-appointed moral custodians function as an authoritarian Critical Parent ego state. Their transactions with Murugan are punitive, delivering negative strokes through threats, public humiliation, and demands for apology. These interactions deny the possibility of Adult-to-Adult dialogue, as reasoned explanation and literary intent are rejected in favour of moral absolutism.

Murugan's Adult ego state, rooted in historical understanding and literary reasoning, is repeatedly invalidated. The psychological consequence is a retreat into an Adapted Child position characterised by fear, anxiety, and withdrawal. His declaration of literary silence represents what TA terms a script withdrawal, a survival response rather than an admission of defeat. Silence becomes both protection and protest, highlighting the impossibility of creative freedom within a caste-dominated public sphere. Gender expectations intersect subtly in this narrative. Norms of masculine resistance and confrontation demand public defiance, yet Murugan's refusal to

perform aggressive masculinity further isolates him. His silence disrupts dominant scripts of male heroism, exposing how both caste and gender prescribe acceptable modes of response to oppression.

In the novel *Lonely Harvest*, Perumal Murugan talks about a community that is deeply connected to the land, caste and labour. Their Adapted Child egos bind them to generations of economic vulnerability and hierarchy. The Adult ego state in these characters is severely compromised by structural realities such as debt, climate unpredictability, and lack of mobility. Rational choice is rendered nearly impossible when survival itself is precarious. Caste functions as an implicit Parent ego state that governs access to land, dignity, and opportunity without requiring overt enforcement. Gendered divisions of labour further reinforce unequal transactions, with women absorbing emotional labour and invisibility while men bear public failure and frustration. Resistance in *Lonely Harvest* is muted and inward. Characters rarely articulate rebellion; instead, they express despair through silence, resignation, or emotional numbness. From a TA perspective, these responses are not signs of passivity but adaptive strategies within an environment that punishes autonomy.

When we look at all the three texts we see that silence is a dominant transactional pattern. They all reflect Adapted Child ego states which are always responding to Parent ego states. This is because if these characters question the systems then they can no longer survive. Hence, they all choose to remain silent and endure. Kali's withdrawal, Ponna's endurance and Murugan's muteness stand testimony to this. Through Transactional Analysis this silence is a learned behaviour imposed through the Adapted Child ego state, reinforced through negative strokes.

## **Conclusion**

Through the lens of Transactional Analysis, the characters in these novels are all living scripts which are imposed by caste and gender hierarchies. The sufferings endured by them comes as a

result of the contamination of the ego states through negative strokes that destabilise the Adult ego states. Murugan's work demonstrates that caste and patriarchy operate not only as social structures but as psychological regimes that discipline thought, emotion, and desire. His characters stand as quiet indictments of a society where survival often demands silence and where the cost of belonging is the fragmentation of the self.

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