

**THE SILENT BURDEN: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF MALE VULNERABILITY IN HARUKI MURAKAMI'S *MEN WITHOUT WOMEN* AND PERUMAL MURUGAN'S *ONE PART WOMAN***

**G.S. Jai Thivya**, Ph.D. SCHOLAR – Full Time, Sri Meenakshi Government Arts For Woman (Autonomous) Madurai-2, EMAIL ID: [Profjaithivya@Gmail.Com](mailto:Profjaithivya@Gmail.Com)

**DR. G.Beulah**, Associate Professor, PG&Research Department Of English, Sri Meenakshi Government Arts College For Women (Autonomous) Madurai -2, EMAIL ID: [Beulahbeatrice11@Gmail.Com](mailto:Beulahbeatrice11@Gmail.Com)

**ABSTRACT:**

In a patriarchal society, the perception of male dominance often overshadows the vulnerabilities men face. Social constructs such as hegemony, patriarchy, and chivalry are frequently seen as privileges afforded to men, but they also impose strict emotional limitations on them. This paper examines how male characters in Haruki Murakami's *Men Without Women* and Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* navigate these societal expectations. Using John Bowlby's Attachment Theory and theories of masculinity, the paper explores how societal pressures confine men's emotional expression, forcing them into self-destructive paths when they fail to conform to traditional ideals of masculinity.

**Keywords:** Male vulnerability, Social constructs, Patriarchy, Attachment theory, Emotional repression, Masculinity studies.

**INTRODUCTION:**

The portrayal of men as emotionally invulnerable and stoic has been a long-standing theme across global literature and societal discourse. In both Haruki Murakami's *Men Without Women* and Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman*, male characters are depicted as victims of these rigid expectations. This paper seeks to analyze how societal norms surrounding masculinity contribute to the emotional repression and eventual downfall of these male protagonists, who are struggling with emotional pain and societal isolation. The works of Murakami and Murugan explore how patriarchal societies, while seemingly favoring men, impose emotional restrictions on them. Social constructs dictate that men must exhibit strength, resilience, and control over their emotions. Yet, both authors illustrate that such expectations lead to severe mental health crises for the male characters. These works allow for a reexamination of masculinity, questioning the ways in which society stifles men's emotional growth and vulnerability.

**OBJECTIVES:**

1. To analyse the impact of patriarchal societies on men emotional expression and wellbeing.
2. To critically evaluate the need for a revised understanding of masculinity.
3. To explore the intersectionality of culture and masculinity.

**THEORIES OF MASCULINITY AND EMOTIONAL REPRESSION:**

This paper draws upon R.W. Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity to explain how societal expectations push men into rigid roles of dominance and emotional detachment. Connell argues that hegemonic masculinity prioritizes the traditional male characteristics of authority, control, and stoicism while marginalizing other forms of male expression (Connell 77). For instance, Tokai in *Men Without Women* embodies these traits by adhering to a life devoid of deep emotional connections, suppressing his vulnerabilities until they ultimately consume him. Additionally, Michael Kimmel's *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* asserts that masculinity is a historically contingent construct that

men perform based on societal expectations (Kimmel 54). This concept of performative masculinity is evident in both Tokai and Nallayan, who suppress their vulnerabilities to align with societal definitions of manhood.

#### **ATTACHMENT THEORY AND MALE VULNERABILITY:**

John Bowlby's Attachment Theory offers a crucial lens through which to analyze male emotional repression. In both novels, men exhibit characteristics of avoidant attachment, which arises from a fear of rejection and intimacy. This theory suggests that when men's emotional needs are not acknowledged by society, they resort to emotional detachment as a defense mechanism (Bowlby 52). In Murakami's *\*Men Without Women\**, the character Tokai avoids deep emotional connections, engaging in surface-level relationships with women. His inability to express genuine vulnerability leads him to a life of isolation. His eventual demise, after falling in love with a woman who betrays him, underscores the destructive consequences of emotional repression. Similarly, in Murugan's *One Part Woman*, Nallayan resists societal pressure to marry and build a traditional family. His emotional independence isolates him from society, as he defies cultural expectations. Nallayan's story highlights the broader implications of male vulnerability in a culture that prizes strength and dominance over emotional openness.

#### **THE WEIGHT OF SOCIETAL EXPECTATIONS ON MALE IDENTITY:**

Societal expectations surrounding masculinity are deeply rooted in cultural and historical norms that have persisted for centuries. In both *Men Without Women* and *One Part Woman*, these expectations take different forms, yet they exert a similarly powerful influence on the male characters. Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity can be applied here to explain how patriarchal structures place men in positions of authority while simultaneously binding them to rigid emotional norms (Connell 70). These expectations create a paradox in which men are celebrated for their outward strength and independence, but are not permitted to show emotional vulnerability. In Murugan's *One Part Woman*, Nallayan is portrayed as a man who resists these expectations, choosing instead to follow a path of emotional autonomy. However, his refusal to participate in traditional gender roles such as marriage and procreation alienates him from his family and society. His struggle highlights the invisible emotional labor men must perform to conform to cultural ideals of masculinity, where failure to meet these expectations results in exclusion and social stigma. Nallayan's emotional detachment is not an indication of his lack of feeling, but rather a protective measure in response to a culture that offers little space for men to express vulnerability. Likewise, in Murakami's *Men Without Women*, Tokai's choice to remain emotionally distant from his romantic partners demonstrates the toll that societal pressures exert on his ability to form meaningful relationships. Tokai's adherence to a lifestyle that avoids emotional depth is symptomatic of a larger cultural expectation that men must maintain emotional control to retain power and dominance. Tokai's eventual emotional collapse reveals the unsustainable nature of this masculine ideal, as the pressure to conform leads to his self-destruction. This dynamic illustrates that the emotional repression men endure under societal expectations is not only detrimental to their mental health but also harmful to their interpersonal relationships.

#### **THE INTERSECTIONALITY OF CULTURE AND MASCULINITY:**

Although *Men Without Women* and *One Part Woman* originate from different cultural contexts—urban Japan and rural Tamil Nadu—the experiences of male vulnerability are strikingly similar. This suggests that the emotional repression imposed on men transcends cultural boundaries, influenced instead by universal societal constructs of masculinity. Cultural theorist Raewyn Connell argues that masculinity is not a monolithic concept but is shaped by local cultural values (Connell 45). However, the themes in both novels show that, despite cultural differences, the core tenets of hegemonic masculinity—strength,

stoicism, and dominance—are present across societies. In both novels, the protagonists struggle with cultural expectations that demand they suppress their emotional needs in favor of adhering to traditional masculine roles. Nallayan's refusal to marry reflects a challenge to the deeply ingrained cultural values of his rural Tamil society, where family and social continuity through marriage are seen as non-negotiable. His defiance places him in direct conflict with societal norms, isolating him emotionally and physically from his community. This isolation demonstrates the broader societal message that men who do not conform to traditional roles are ostracized. Murugan's depiction of Nallayan underscores how cultural context amplifies the emotional pressure placed on men, illustrating the intersection of cultural identity and masculinity. In contrast, Tokai's struggles with emotional isolation are embedded within the highly urbanized and individualistic culture of Japan. Murakami's portrayal of Tokai suggests that, while urban settings may provide men with more autonomy and freedom in their romantic and social lives, the expectation of emotional control remains constant. Tokai's avoidance of intimacy and his subsequent breakdown are emblematic of the ways in which modern societies, though outwardly progressive, still impose restrictive emotional norms on men. The depiction of Tokai reflects the broader issue of how emotional repression is disguised as independence in contemporary urban cultures, yet leads to the same psychological consequences as in more traditional societies.

#### **THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES OF EMOTIONAL REPRESSION:**

Both *One Part Woman* and *Men Without Women* explore the psychological ramifications of emotional repression through their male protagonists. In each case, the pressure to conform to societal expectations leads to a profound internal crisis. The works align with Bowlby's Attachment Theory, which suggests that emotional repression can lead to significant psychological distress, particularly when individuals are unable to form secure emotional bonds (Bowlby 61). This distress is compounded in both works by the societal norms that restrict men's ability to express vulnerability. For Nallayan, the pressure to marry and continue his family's legacy causes a deep internal conflict. On one hand, he values his emotional independence and resists societal expectations; on the other hand, the cultural and familial pressures that surround him make it impossible to avoid the psychological toll of his choices. Nallayan's decision to remain emotionally detached from his societal obligations leads to a sense of alienation and despair, reflecting the broader issue of how cultural pressures can push men toward psychological crises when they refuse to conform. Tokai's story in *Men Without Women* echoes a similar internal struggle. While Tokai initially believes that his emotionally distant lifestyle protects him from vulnerability, his love for a married woman shatters this belief. Tokai's breakdown illustrates the unsustainability of emotional repression, as his avoidance of deep emotional connections ultimately leaves him isolated and unable to cope with the emotional fallout of his romantic relationships. The psychological toll of this repression is evident in his tragic end, demonstrating the profound emotional and mental consequences men face when forced to suppress their feelings. The psychological impact of these emotional struggles is also evident in other characters, such as Kali in *\*One Part Woman\** and Kino in *\*Men Without Women\**. Both men experience betrayal, yet their responses are characterized by emotional silence. Kali's muteness following his wife's participation in a fertility ritual is a direct reflection of societal expectations that prevent him from vocalizing his pain. Similarly, Kino's silence after discovering his wife's infidelity demonstrates how societal norms around male stoicism prevent men from expressing vulnerability, further exacerbating their emotional distress.

#### **EMOTIONAL MUTING AND THE CRISIS OF MASCULINITY:**

The emotional muteness exhibited by the characters in both *One Part Woman* and *Men Without Women* highlights a crisis of masculinity—an inability to reconcile societal expectations with individual emotional needs. Kali's silence is not merely a personal failing but a symptom of the broader societal

issue of male emotional repression. Sociologist Michael S. Kimmel, in Guyland, suggests that men are often socialized into a culture of emotional stoicism, where expressing vulnerability is seen as incompatible with masculinity (Kimmel 89). This culture of stoicism creates an internal conflict for men, who, like Kali, are unable to communicate their emotional pain and, therefore, remain isolated in their suffering. Similarly, Kino's emotional muteness after his wife's infidelity in \*Men Without Women\* represents the societal conditioning that equates silence with strength. Kino's retreat from emotional expression is not a reflection of his lack of feeling but an indication of the societal pressure to conform to an idealized version of manhood. His silence, like Kali's, is not an acceptance of his circumstances but a reflection of his inability to express his emotional reality within the confines of societal norms.

This muting of emotions in both characters aligns with William Pollack's theory of the "boy code," which argues that men are conditioned from a young age to suppress their emotions and project strength, often leading to feelings of isolation and depression in adulthood (Pollack 124). Both Kali and Kino suffer from the internalized pressure to adhere to this code, resulting in their emotional detachment from those around them and, ultimately, from themselves.

#### **CONCLUSION: REASSESSING MASCULINITY AND EMOTIONAL VULNERABILITY:**

The exploration of male vulnerability in Haruki Murakami's *Men Without Women* and Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* reveals a universal struggle for men to navigate societal expectations of masculinity. Both works demonstrate that, while the cultural contexts may differ, the societal pressures on men to suppress their emotions and conform to traditional gender roles remain consistent. Through the lens of theories of masculinity, attachment, and emotional labor, this paper has shown that these societal expectations lead to profound emotional isolation and psychological distress for the male characters. The crisis of masculinity in both novels underscores the need for a reassessment of societal norms surrounding male emotional expression. The emotional repression depicted in these works serves as a critique of the ways in which patriarchal societies continue to place unrealistic and harmful expectations on men. As Kali, Nallayan, Kino, and Tokai illustrate, the burden of conforming to these norms leads to emotional collapse, suggesting that a more inclusive understanding of masculinity—one that allows for emotional vulnerability—is essential for men's emotional well-being.

#### **WORKSCITED:**

- Bowlby, John. *Attachment and Loss*. Basic Books, 1976.
- Connell, R. W. *Masculinities*. University of California Press, 2005.
- Horney, Karen. *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time*. W.W. Norton & Company, 1994.
- Kaufman, Michael. *Theorizing Masculinities*. Edited by Harry Brod and Michael Kaufman, Sage Publications, 1994.
- Kimmel, Michael S. *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*. 4th ed., Oxford University Press, 2018.
- Murakami, Haruki. *Men Without Women*. Penguin Random House UK, 2017.
- Murugan, Perumal. *One Part Woman*. Penguin Random House India, 2013.
- Pollack, William S. *Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood*. Henry Holt and Company, 1999.
- Schippers, Mimi. *Beyond Monogamy: Polyamory and the Future of Polyqueer Sexualities*. New York University Press, 2016.
- Stearns, Peter N. *Be a Man!: Males in Modern Society*. Holmes & Meier, 1990.