

A SEQUEL TO  
*ONE PART WOMAN*



# a lonely harvest



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# PERUMAL MURUGAN

# A Lonely Harvest

by Perumal Murugan



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An exclusive extract from  
the JCB Prize for Literature

CELEBRATING DISTINGUISHED FICTION BY INDIAN WRITERS

## CHAPTER 1

Ponnayi looked up at the portia tree. The day had dawned, gently caressing the leaves before scattering its light everywhere. In that early-morning glow, the tree showed itself in full splendour.

After Kali's death, the tree was the first thing that Ponna's eyes would fall upon as soon as she stepped out of the hut. And, as always, her gaze leapt towards that particular branch. It looked like a blunt stump—the stub of a severed arm poking out of a shoulder—with a round scar made by the saw that sliced it. That branch looked just like a limb that was growing and extending to a side. Earlier, when little boys climbed this tree, they always hung from this branch and moved along its length using both their hands alternately to hold on to it—first making their way to one end, and then back again. After that they would let go and jump down.

Like a lance held up, Kali would stand and stretch himself and, in just one leap, he'd get hold of that branch and dangle from it. Then he'd jump down. She used to make fun of him for that: 'It is just like they say. In a childless house, it is the old hag who does all the playing.' That branch was Kali's favourite. 'Look how it stretches like a huge snake,' he'd say.

'Watch out, it might come slithering to bite you,' she'd reply.

But he remained steadfast in his affection for the tree. 'No matter how

much you bother it, the tree will endure it all patiently. It is only humans who are unable to withstand even the smallest of troubles, my dear.'

True to his words, the tree had indeed withstood everything. It was he who couldn't. Somehow, she found it hard to see Kali and the tree as separate entities. That was why she was very clear the tree should not be felled.

Various people tried to persuade her to get rid of the tree. Even her mother-in-law said, 'The man himself is gone. What do you need the tree for when you have lost your husband!' Her father, standing by her and gently massaging her head, told her, 'When someone has died hanging from a tree, we shouldn't let that tree stand. It keeps asking for more and more sacrifices.' People also said, 'His spirit won't find peace in heaven. It will come and sit on this tree and just hover around here.' But Ponna remained firm in her resolve. No one knew that her mind was suffused with memories of Kali climbing that portia. The cot that lay under that tree was a mere pile of ropes as far as everyone else was concerned—but for her it was the happy weave of all her times with him. In fact, she had not even wanted anyone to chop off that offending branch. But in the end she had to yield at least that much. Otherwise, she would have lost the entire tree.

Since this branch had a twin that had sprouted alongside it from the trunk before diverging and shooting up higher, they could not sever it too close to its base. They left a little bit of it intact. She took a stalk from the felled branch and planted it in a corner of the field. At dusk one day, she walked to the cremation grounds, her mother shouting and

trailing behind, and fetched ashes from the burnt remains of Kali's pyre, and carried them back in the loose end of her sari. She put a handful of those ashes in the little pit in which she had planted the stalk; the rest she sprinkled all over the field. Her mother-in-law, Seerayi, who happened to see this, said, 'If you plant a tree in the memory of the dead man, is it going to bring him back? She has become insane! Isn't it enough that we have one portia tree tormenting us? Do we need to fill up the field with them?'

Then Seerayi pulled out the planted stalk and flung it aside. She sang . . .

*If she plants a tree, if she plants a tree*

*Will the one who has died wake up and return in haste?*

*Will he say, 'I am Seerayi's son,' and bring warmth to my heart?*

*If she plants a stalk, if she plants a stalk*

*Will the one who died get up and rush to us?*

*Will he say, 'I am Ponnayi's husband,' and bring us delight?*

Seerayi broke into a dirge whenever she wanted. Even in the middle of the night, her voice rose in a cry that reached the entire village. Someone or other from the village paid her a visit the next day and comforted her. 'You can dissolve your sorrow only by singing it. It is not easy to cast out his image from your heart, is it?' Though Ponna was sometimes irritated by all this, she did not say anything. Hers was the sorrow of a wife who had lost her husband. Seerayi, on the other hand, was going through the twin sorrow of having first lost her husband and now the son she had raised so protectively.

On that fateful day, before the news reached Ponna and she rushed home, they had already cut off the rope from the tree, laid Kali's body on the cot and draped a white dhoti over it. Tearing herself away from so many people who tried to hold her back, she ran to the body, pulled away the dhoti and looked at the face of the man she loved. It was not Kali. Someone else. Someone she did not know. The eyes bulged out and looked at her menacingly. The teeth had closed hard on the tongue, which now protruded, bitten and stained with dried blood. The lips were chapped and swollen. The muscles on his face seemed to have slipped and slid from their places, giving his visage a misshapen appearance. Even his topknot had come undone. Never before had she seen anything as gory as that. She could not believe this was the face she had once desired and relished. 'Ayyo!' she screamed and fell in a faint.

A midwife was summoned to revive Ponna. By the time Ponna regained consciousness, it was time to take the body to the cremation ground. She screamed, asking the others to dig a pit in the field and bury Kali right there. But her brother, Muthu, said, 'Let us not do that, my dear. You'd keep thinking of him every time you go near the field.' She grabbed hold of both ends of the piece of cloth that was draped around his neck and punched him on this face and chest, wailing, 'You lost him! He was my everything . . . You won't live well . . . You won't live well!' Various people rushed to pull her away and free Muthu from her clutches. But her lament, 'You lost him, my everything!', kept rising up and thrashing against his chest. He stood rooted to the spot, like a tree, sobbing uncontrollably.

But no one respected her wishes, and the body was eventually taken to

be cremated. Many people consoled her later, saying, 'He didn't live a full life and die in peace, did he? He won't be at peace in the ground. He has died young and strong. The good thing to do is to burn him.' But none of that gave her peace. Ponna recalled the portia stalk she had planted in the pit with Kali's ashes. Seerayi had already flung away the stalk, so Ponna then picked out a stone and planted it on top of the ashes in the pit. So what if they had cremated Kali? Did that mean they could cremate the memories of him as well? So what if Seerayi had pulled out and thrown away that stalk? It did not stop Ponna from constantly seeing his face in the rocks lying scattered all over the field.

Every time she went to the field, she looked at the stone. She addressed it and said, 'You have left me to suffer here. Is it fair? If you had as much as hinted at it, I would have ended my life. Why should you have died? What have you done? Why should you die? What did you do? It was I who ruined myself, all because I wanted to bear you a child. I talked to you about everything, but I failed to ask you about this. I allowed myself to be fooled by the words of others. I let them convince me that it was your wish too. My saami, my lord! You could have pushed me away. You used to tease me, saying that you would marry another woman. You could have done even that! Why did you have to die? Take me with you! Even if they chopped off the branch from which you hung, does the tree not have other branches? I will grab hold of your feet and go with you wherever you go.'

In those early days, someone or other was always shadowing her, knowing well that she would pursue such morbid thoughts in her grief. As a result, Ponna's own family members and Seerayi never left her

alone even for a minute. Even when she went to the outfield to relieve herself, one of them came by and stood at a distance. At night, there was always somebody sleeping not far from Ponna. Her mother, Vallayi, said, 'It is all right to feel shame. But what was so terrible that he had to kill himself? There are women in this world who go after a different man every single day. And their husbands roam around, chests puffed out in great self-confidence. But I have not seen anyone like him.' All this talk was intended to comfort Ponna. But in her view, they had all planned it out and killed Kali and were now placing the blame on him. Once the final rites were over, her father wanted to take her back to her parental home. Seerayi just cried quietly. Everyone else stayed silent. When Seerayi composed herself, she said, 'It is my fate that I should live and die alone. If she goes there with you, she can at least find some comfort looking at her brother's child. Please feel free to take her home with you.'

Some of Kali's kinsmen too supported the idea of Ponna going with her parents. 'She has no children to care for,' they said. 'From now on, all she has is her family of birth. In any case, that is the custom too.' But there were some others who said, 'What would she do for a living? Let her stay here doing what she can with the field and taking care of this old woman. This old woman too needs someone to care for her, doesn't she?'

By this time, some of Kali's kinsmen had begun to spread all sorts of rumours. There were whispers that she had had a long-standing affair with Sevathaana who owned the palm grove, that Kali had finally seen it for himself and that was why he decided to end his life. It was even said



that it was Muthu who beat up Kali and hung him on the tree when Kali had confronted him. Some insinuated that Muthu had decided to usurp the property of the childless couple. Apparently, when Sevathaana himself was asked about all this, he neither agreed nor protested, but smiled meaningfully.

Learning of all this, Ponna felt no dilemma about where she ought to be. She felt that she would rather be nowhere at all. The right thing to do was to join Kali. What was the point of going on living in a world that did not have him any more? He was everything to her, but he was gone—he had not stopped to think about her for a second.

And so she just sat in one spot, crying. Her mother, Vallayi, had a difficult time coaxing Ponna to get up and eat even a morsel of food. Vallayi's constant entreaties seemed to make no difference to Ponna. The family was still debating where she should live thereafter, and so they decided to consult an astrologer. The family could only resume its worldly activities after the final rites had been carried out and they had paid a visit to the temple on the Karattur hill and prayed to the god and the goddess there. But during the intervening period of mourning, when it was believed that the departed soul had still not found peace, custom decreed that they could not go to the hill temple or even attend any auspicious events.

The big-moustached, elderly astrologer from Odakkadu cast his tamarind seeds and read the charts, before saying clearly, 'I have confirmed this four times. The blockage is for three months. He was such a robust man. It is not possible for his spirit to calm down any sooner than that. Calculate three months from the day of death. After that, go

and pray at the hill temple. Then make offerings at our Mariyayi temple, and then do whatever you need to do.'

No one in the village ever went against that moustached old man's advice. But Ponna's father decided to also consult the shaman priest in Koonappalayam who was known for dancing in a trance. This priest did his divining work using erukkum flowers. He would pick up a handful of these flowers and cast them on the ground. He'd then make his predictions based on the flowers that stood upright and the ones that had toppled on their sides. He too declared that the period of obstacle would last three months. He also added, 'It was a life cut short. So it will keep returning with fury. Such entities calm down only after claiming another sacrifice. Please take good care of your daughter.'

So it turned out that Ponna had to stay put until this stipulated period was over. But she did not want to stay in the house. She preferred to stay in the farmstead. In a way, it turned out to be a good idea. All of them could stay right there and take care of the cattle and sheep. For those three months, her mother too stayed back with her. At first, Vallayi went into the village every day, to the house Seerayi had there, where she cooked food and brought it back to the barnyard. But gradually she started bringing the stuff one by one to the farmstead and did her cooking right there. As for Seerayi, she was always restless, and she had to be engaged in some activity or another. Ponna did nothing. She could not find her bearings. Her mother and mother-in-law did not let her out of their sight even for a minute.

She spent her time just sitting in some part of the hut. Being there felt to her like she was lying down with her head on Kali's lap or reclining

on his chest. Now and then her gaze was drawn to that branch of the tree. It appeared to her in its earlier form, fully grown. At such moments, she saw a noose dangling from it. The very next moment, she would see Kali's body hanging there. She saw that gory image of him, the way she had seen him laid out on the cot, only now upright. His open tuft of hair would waft in the breeze. She could not bear to look at this for too long. It filled her with fear and rage, and she always started crying. More than the tragedy of Kali's death, Ponna felt that it was an even greater punishment to be left with that gruesome image of him. But seeing that frightful image day after day, she slowly got used to it, and even started talking to it.

Now, resolving not to look towards the tree any more, she took a pitcher of water and splashed it on her face. Then she brushed her teeth with some ash. And she felt a sharp acidic reflux rising up to her mouth. It was this reflux that kept Ponna somewhat grounded.

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