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Precarious Manhood Theory: An Analysis of Male Characters in Perumal Murugan's *Resolve* (2021)

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Abstract

In Tamil society, masculinity is often treated as a status that men must earn. Biological sex is assigned at birth, but social expectations shape ideas about gender. This article asks whether men benefit equally from these expectations and challenges the view that only women experience gender-based pressure. Using Perumal Murugan's novel Resolve (originally published as Kanganam), it examines the humiliation and rejection male characters face when they do not meet social expectations of manhood. Precarious manhood theory helps explain their efforts to prove themselves. The analysis further explores how marriage, fertility, family honour, and community judgement become measures of masculine identity. It highlights how the pressure to conform to these expectations produces emotional distress, social isolation, and a crisis of self-worth among men. The study argues that masculinity is not an inherent biological condition but a socially constructed identity shaped and controlled by patriarchal norms.

Keywords: manhood, filial piety, gender roles, oppression, masculinity, body image

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Perumal Murugan is a contemporary Tamil poet, novelist, and scholar whose writing often portrays the life and culture of the Kongunadu region. He was born in 1966 in Namakkal to a farming family. Several of his works have been translated into English. The English translation of his novel *One Part Woman* won the Sahitya Akademi Translation Prize in 2017.

Aniruddhan Vasudevan translated Kanganam, a Tamil novel published in 2008, into English as *Resolve*. It follows Marimuthu, a thirty-five-year-old unmarried farmer who struggles to find a bride. In the preface, Murugan connects his bachelorhood to decades of female infanticide in rural Tamil Nadu.

This article examines Marimuthu's struggles, and those of other male characters in the novel *Resolve*, to establish themselves as men through the lens of Precarious Manhood theory. The term Precarious Manhood theory was popularised by Joseph A. Vandello and Jennifer K. Bosson. According to Vandello and Bosson, "Manhood is seen as a precarious social status that is both difficult to achieve and tenaciously held" (101). Men often rank higher in social hierarchies, particularly in Tamil culture: "Men are superior to women; men are valued as breadwinners working in the public sphere" (Allendorf et al. 3). These beliefs pressure men to prove their manhood and fit prescribed gender roles. "The attributes and actions, including those dictated by gender role, that an individual brings to an intimate relationship undoubtedly have an impact on the tenor of that relationship" (Redlick 5).

This research article examines how Perumal Murugan's *Resolve* portrays the pressure men face to prove their manhood within the family and the village. Using precarious manhood theory, it explores why Marimuthu's unmarried status becomes a source of humiliation even though he manages the family land and cares for his relatives. It also examines how remarks about his age, clothing, and appearance affect his confidence as he searches for a bride. By comparing Marimuthu's position as a landowner with Kuppan's experience as a Dalit farm worker, the study considers how caste and economic dependence influence the respect each man receives. Finally, it examines Marimuthu's care for his grandmother and his father's response to his distress to show how acts of affection and responsibility can go unrecognised when a man's worth is judged mainly through marriage, property, and public reputation.

The novel opens with Kuppan, a farm worker on Marimuthu's land. Kuppan belongs to the Dalit community and has worked for Marimuthu's family since childhood. As a boy, he was expected to help support his family. Now elderly, he still receives little respect from Marimuthu, who is younger but holds power as a landowner. Kuppan owns little beyond his ability to work for wages. Although he has fulfilled the expected role of a male provider since childhood, he has not gained the status or independence associated with manhood. He and his son Ramesh wait for an advance to pay for Ramesh's wedding. The request humiliates Kuppan, but he cannot arrange the marriage without Marimuthu's support. Having already borrowed ten thousand rupees, he fears being disgraced before his son. Marimuthu says:

> Kuppa, you are getting on in age. If something happens to you, how would I get my money back? Will your son come and work here and pay off the loan? I can tell just by looking at the way he stands that he can't do any work (Murugan 15).

Kuppan feels humiliated by this remark because he has been working on the land for several years, yet he cannot make enough money for his son's wedding and cannot gain the respect he expects for his work. His distress is also connected to his need for recognition "A man's reputation is judged by his male peers and depends on his masculine activities" (Fleming et al. 3).

Although Kuppan was a good family man and father who worked as hard as he could to meet his family's needs, he feels that his son does not appreciate his efforts "Kuppan looked at his son he was sleeping curled up,. . . Kuppan thought about how, at his age, he was not lucky enough to sleep so peacefully" (Murugan 5). Kuppan, hailing from a Dalit family, struggled to provide for his children, causing him deep distress; meanwhile, Marimuthu's father also faced humiliation. Although Marimuthu inherited all the family assets from his father, his father did not command the respect expected of a man: "Marimuthu's father was not exactly world-wise. All he knew was the work in the fields" (3). As soon as Marimuthu's father realized his son had matured enough to handle the responsibilities of the family home and lands, he handed them over to him; yet, Marimuthu harbored resentment toward his father. Being an only child, Marimuthu had worked the fields since childhood and was deeply accustomed to the rhythms of farm and home life. He had no friends and possessed an exceptionally quiet nature, a manner that earned him the reputation of being a simple, guileless soul. "His father had never expressed his opinion on anything. Everyone in town called him 'vegulan', the naive one" (Murugan 155).

The first conversation about a wedding in Resolve concerns Ramesh, even though it is Marimuthu's search for a wife that occupies much of the novel. This choice matters because the two men approach marriage from very different positions. Ramesh has the prospect of a wedding but needs money. Marimuthu has money and land, yet his family has been unable to arrange a wedding for him. For a moment, each household has something the other lacks. Only one man, however, has the power to turn his discomfort into a test of somebody else. Marimuthu can ask whether Ramesh has worked hard enough to deserve a wife. Kuppan cannot ask his employer what he has done to deserve one. The difference between the questions that may be spoken and the questions that must remain unspoken reveals how caste and property shape this encounter.

Kuppan has a particular reason to dread this conversation taking place in front of his son. Ramesh hears his father addressed as an ageing worker whose death might leave a debt unpaid. A lifetime spent working on the land enters the discussion only as a question about how much more work the family can provide (Murugan 15). Kuppan has brought his son because he is trying to do something for him. In the landowner's account, the son becomes someone who might have to repay what the

father owes. The remark changes the meaning of a father's gift before he can even give it. It also casts doubt on Ramesh's ability to work merely from the way he stands. Murugan lets the reader see how little evidence a man in authority needs to embarrass two generations of another family.

Marimuthu's father was physically strong and capable of farm work. Yet, Marimuthu harbored anger toward him, stemming from the fact that, unlike other men, his father never ventured out into the wider world, remaining instead tethered to the farm work. In Tamil society, there is a certain pride associated with having a son; perhaps that is why Marimuthu's grandmother had kept her only son close, engaging him in agriculture to ensure he never left her side. Since the farm's produce and income sufficed for their needs, he never felt the urge to step out or seek anything beyond the fields. However, others described him as guileless. Marimuthu's father is reserved, yet society compares his nature to the simplicity that others wrongly associate with weakness. Consider Kuppan's son, who travelled far and wide and was branded a wastrel. Marimuthu, however, believed that "if his father had been a better man, his life would have been more fulfilling" (154). Marimuthu dismissed his father as "a man who never thought beyond the immediate needs of his father" (153). Such labels show how narrowly the community defines manhood.

This article explores how Marimuthu, the protagonist of the novel, tries to meet the community's idea of a successful man. The narrative centers on his quest to find a bride, a search shaped by the effects of female infanticide, while he simultaneously faces the pressure to uphold the image of a man hailing from a prosperous and respectable family. In the first chapter, when Kuppan asks Marimuthu for money for his son's wedding, it might appear that Marimuthu is merely exercising his authority as an employer; however, his reaction also reflects resentment that a younger man is about to marry. According to Kurt Smith, "The term "male ego" connotes a judgemental type of superiority with a need to show constant striving to impress (women) and outdo others (especially other men)" (Smith). Marimuthu's attitude suggests that, despite hailing from a wealthy and respectable family, he could not accept the idea of marrying a young boy from a poor family with a social standing far below his own. His anger exposes the gap between his wealth and his inability to marry. He tells Kuppan: "Let your son go do some work and earn some money. Let him save up a little. Don't they need a place to live? You don't seem to worry about any of these things! All that matters to you is that the mortar and the pestle get together" (Murugan 14). Family wealth alone does not secure social approval. A man's physique, facial features, strength, and complexion also shape how society judges him. Marimuthu consoles himself by comparing his situation with that of others society views as less fortunate or inferior. He points to a truck driver in his village, younger than him but considered of lower status, who is rumoured to have AIDS, and reassures himself that his own position is better. "Marimuthu recollected how much he struggled to accept the fact that the young lad was going to get married. In that moment, he had seen that boy as his enemy" (Murugan 23).

Then there is a bald man whose family is currently looking for a bride for his younger brother because they "decided that no one was going to marry him" (Murugan 57). He also considers another man: "He looked like a skeleton as he rode on his bicycle carrying an incredible number of soda bottles. You would marvel at his strength" (57). The son of the village's first person to drive a four-wheeled vehicle: "His cheeks had become so chubby, they made his eyes look tiny" (58). Cultural expectations also attach importance to a man's appearance, as Louis and Chithra explain:

Perfectionism is particularly significant in this regard, as it involves striving for unattainable physical standards. Men who internalize such ideals often experience dissatisfaction, anxiety, and negative self perception when they fail to meet these expectation (2).

Marimuthu therefore pays close attention to his appearance and begins using skin-care products: "for some reason, these days Marimuthu's mind seemed to be very concerned about his looks" (Murugan 46). At thirty-five, he has started noticing grey hairs and pays close attention to concealing them. "He had more products now. Sometimes he wondered if the time he spent grooming himself was inversely related to the confidence he felt in himself" (47). Marimuthu projects himself as a proper man solely for society's perception, yet remains unsure of himself. Although his efforts to maintain this image yield no real benefit, he continues trying; meanwhile, he looks on with bewilderment at his father, who lives exactly as he pleases without conforming to such expectations. When his family began searching for a bride, he did not yet sport a moustache unlike Kuppan's son. it was out of frustration that his own efforts had yielded no results that he scolded Kuppan's son. Frustrated that his own efforts had yielded no results, he scolded Kuppan's son. "In addition to sociocultural influences psychological factors plays a crucial role in shaping male body image" (Louis and Chithra 2). While Marimuthu was getting ready for his wedding, his wife-to-be bought him a pair of trousers. He was doubtful about whether they would fit him properly: "if he suddenly started wearing pants at thirty five, people in the village would make fun of him. But how could he say no to his wife?" (Murugan 353). Marimuthu has two pairs of shoes: one Kuppan made and one bought from a store. He wears the store-bought pair when he goes out.

A young man may take on responsibility before his family recognises his independence; even if he conducts himself responsibly, his parents hesitate to acknowledge his manhood. This is because he is their cherished son—someone who grew up under their close care—and they find it difficult to accept that he is no longer the child they once held in their hands. Marimuthu's case is more complicated because he did not see his father as a worthy man, and, once he reached a certain age, he began to step into the role of the family's patriarch himself. Marimuthu regards his father as inadequate: "He didn't even go to the markets. He didn't do bookkeeping. All he needed was some gruel and some kambu meal with thick milk curd" (Murugan 64). Marimuthu's father was not idle in his younger days; he, too, worked in the fields. Yet, Marimuthu harboured anger toward him. This resentment

stemmed from the feeling that his father had never helped him with his endeavours and had done nothing to address the fact that his son remained unmarried despite reaching the age of thirty-five. Furthermore, he was tormented by the thought that his father had made no effort to restore the family's red-soil plot of land, which had fallen into disrepair. As boys enter adulthood, they often seek guidance:

> Raewyn Connell in her seminal work The Men and the Boys (2000) highlights how perceptions of boyhood are shaped through various relationships and interactions. She emphasizes the role of these relationships in the transition from childhood to manhood, the Societal expectations and teachings regarding masculinity, the dynamics between adults and children in imparting norms, and the everyday interactions between boys and girls within school, home, and peer settings. (Raj and Suresh 8)

Marimuthu resents his father for offering little guidance. When Marimuthu asks for advice about the red-soil land, his father replies, "You pick whichever side you prefer" (Murugan 150). "Initially, Marimuthu was just amazed that a man could be so contented and confined. But later on, the same thing became a cause for annoyance" (150). Marimuthu yearned for the counsel and stabilizing presence of a responsible father; since he lacked this from his own father, he turned to other advisers. Without his father's guidance, support, and advice, he became more sensitive to others' judgments. Yet, he never humiliated his parents in public; he believed that if a son honoured his father, the community would respect that father too. With this conviction, he took his father to the red soil land negotiation. When the argument between the two parties intensified, Marimuthu's father stood still while his mother shouted at the other party. As the women began to fight, the broker made a remark that reflected these gender expectations: "Well, we men don't have any business where women rule the roost" (220). Although Marimuthu's father was usually quiet, he expressed his anger when Marimuthu considered marrying a widow Veeduthi, a marriage broker, introduced. His father threatened: "Dey! If you think you can bring a whore as my daughter -in-law, I will hang myself, I swear. You will have to perform my funeral before you tie the thali around her neck" (159). When Veeduthi brought that alliance, Marimuthu hesitated, but Veeduthi's mentorship helped Marimuthu to "develop the concept to redefine what it means to be a man" (Mshweshwe). He also recognised that "women remarrying had become quite a common practice" (Murugan 158). Because the guidance Marimuthu received from his father led to failure, he also sought advice from his grandmother, the broker Thaatha, and Selvarasu; as a result, he sometimes faced humiliation.

According to David Plummer, "In traditional setting, it was usual for boys to be initiated into manhood under the mentorship of older" (Plummer). When negotiations for the red soil land were underway, Marimuthu sought advice from his grandmother. She offered sound counsel, and no complications arose on Marimuthu's side; however, her advice and constant involvement ultimately caused a rift in their relationship. As his grandmother had grown old, Marimuthu would ask her to stay at home and rest; angered by this, she made remarks that hurt him: "if you were married

and had children of your own, you would understand what I am trying to say. You are an unmarried fellow scratching about the land; what would you know?" (Murugan 107). Although he spoke out of affection for her, she failed to realise it and wounded his heart. The matchmaking broker suggested of negotiating the red soil land so that the land could be cultivated as soon as possible. He advised, "The moment that land becomes yours, your wedding too will be fixed. I keep feeling that land unused is the curse that is ruining your chances for marriage" (62). Although the broker was a good advisor to Marimuthu, he later mocked Marimuthu's unmarried status in public. He hurt Marimuthu by saying, "Marimuthu, I don't think a young woman would be suited for you. We need to find an old woman, someone toothless and loose-jawed" (38). Marimuthu was distressed by the broker's public remark.

When Marimuthu began to manage the family land, his mother did not readily accept his independence. He borrowed money from her to cultivate and usually gave her the profits. One year, however, he kept the money from the groundnut harvest. She felt hurt because she had expected him to support the household. Her response shows that taking on the work of an adult man did not automatically give him authority within the family:

> Things have crossed a line. If he acts like this even before marriage, imagine what he will do after! He will give me an almost bowl and send me begging.' And: 'He thinks he has become a big man now? What do I do with the money? I only spend it on this family. (109)

His mother's words question whether he is ready to act as an adult. Filial duty also contributes to the pressure he faces. Quang Ngo and Xuan Bui describe this duty as follows:

> Confucius taught that filial piety also means obeying, complying with arrangements, inheriting the family's aspirations, and carrying on the work of the ancestors. He believed that by doing so, children would fulfil their forebears' unfinished wishes, allowing them to rest in peace. (553)

Marimuthu regularly cared for his family. He visited the weekly market regularly; he would take the produce grown on his own land, sell it for a good price, and buy all the household necessities. Whenever he headed to the market, he never forgot his grandmother. "He also bought some adhirasam for paatti. She rarely got to indulge her taste buds" (Murugan 81). He always asked her what she needed and brought those items back for her. It always pained him that she lived in a thatched-roof hut, but since she was unwilling to move, he respected her wishes. Nevertheless, he ensured her hut had an electric light connection. Even when she fell ill and was reluctant to see a doctor, he did not fail to fulfil his duty toward her. He did not seek praise for his responsible behaviour; he simply acted out of deep devotion. Whenever he bought things for his grandmother, his mother would say, "There he goes running errands for that widowed old hag. He is her husband. He buys her things from the market. He also buys her the rags she wears" (95).

Marriage brings another conflict between Marimuthu's wishes and his family's expectations. Perumal Murugan suggests that Marimuthu remains unmarried as a consequence of female infanticide, but the actions of his relatives and neighbours also obstruct several possible matches. Marimuthu's grandmother even identified a potential bride for him, but his grandaunt's daughter-in-law intervened to prevent the union: "That girl looks so Manly. Look at her face! Wide as a winnowing pan. If Marimuthu stood next her, he'd look like her son" (8). Once, Marimuthu went to see a young woman as a prospective bride. Although she had a dusky complexion, he liked her very much; however, his mother opposed the match by saying, "So what if you cannot marry that darkie? There are many other girls" (52). Marimuthu feels "he had been too young and shy to voice his opinion then" (52). When the grandmother suggested arranging a marriage between Marimuthu and her younger brother's granddaughter, his mother dismissed the idea simply because the girl looked just like a mother-in-law. When they suggested marrying Marimuthu to the daughter of a textile mill owner, the villagers said, "He is a drunkard. All he does is drink from morning to night" (141). Once, when he fell in love with a woman from a lower caste, the villagers informed his parents; following this, the woman and her family disappeared, and no one knew where they had gone. "A couple of years later, he came to have a mild suspicion that his parents had been involved in the overnight disappearance of Saroja and her family" (251). When he began to suspect this, he even contemplated disappearing somewhere together with her. In the final episode of the 'bride-viewing' sequence, Marimuthu arranged the alliance himself without consulting his parents, bringing along only his grandfather, who acted as his advisor. According to Mshweshwe, "Some men in the traditional rural community contest dominant construction of masculinity through negotiating more equal relations" (Mshweshwe). The wedding was set to take place within fifteen days; for this, the prospective bride's mother spoke to him harshly. Mshweshwe describes the response to men who challenge traditional expectations: "these men are often ridiculed in their communities as they are perceived as defying the norms of Manhood" (Mshweshwe). The crisis ends when his father embraces him and asks him not to die. Their response shows the family's concern, though it does not erase the pressures that brought him to this point. Marimuthu's distress then reaches a crisis:

> He seemed determined and unstoppable. He fashioned a noose then dragged the cot under the noose and stood up on it. His father, who stayed silent until then, came running to him, calling out, Dey! Dey! And embraced him. Don't die! This family will be ruined! He cried. Stunned, his mother too came and stood by him. (308)

Although Marimuthu is, by all accounts, a responsible man, moments of happiness in his life are rare. While he lives in a way that commands respect from society, he does not feel happy within himself; he often experiences deep anxiety. He often keeps these humiliations to himself, choosing to endure them in solitude. At times he considers ending his life. "So why shouldn't he jump? His jumping off the rooftop now would put an end to soany problems. Jump. . . Jump. . ." (Murugan 28).

Marimuthu's experience shows why manhood can feel precarious. He works, supports his family, and seeks marriage, yet he remains anxious about how others judge him. His unmarried status becomes a reason for public humiliation, and he often keeps his distress to himself. Expectations concerning income, property, appearance, and marriage leave little room for his own wishes. Kuppan and Marimuthu's father face different pressures shaped by caste, age, and family roles. These differences show that men do not experience social power in the same way. In *Resolve*, masculine status must be repeatedly earned and defended, and that demand can cause lasting emotional harm.

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