

The Image of Women in Tamil Literary Works

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Abstract

The portrayal of women in Tamil literature has evolved in accordance with the shifting societal perception of women in Tamil Nadu. Tamil literature serves as a reflection of the inherent inconsistencies within current culture about the societal role of women, encompassing both their exaltation and exploitation. Tamil classical literature may be characterized as an old body of literary works. The subject matter under consideration possesses a lengthy chronology and serves as a valuable repository of knowledge pertaining to the existence, practices, convictions, societal roles, and historical events of the ancient Tamilian civilization.

Keywords: *Depiction, Tamil, Glorification, Exploitation*

In the post-independence age, a significant number of women authors have emerged within the sphere of literary writing, directing their attention towards the internal struggles faced by contemporary women. The list of distinguished authors includes Sivasundari, C.S. Laxmi, Anuradha Ramanan, Indira Soundarajan, Vaasanthi, and Thilagavathy. Therefore, throughout the period after independence, a distinct group of female writers has arisen in the realms of Indian English literature as well as Tamil literature. The aforementioned books portray the current tensions, moral dilemmas, interpersonal dynamics, aspirations, and disillusionments experienced by women in Indian society. The portrayal of women in Tamil literature has undergone changes in accordance with the changing societal perception of women in the state of Tamil Nadu. Tamil fiction serves as a reflection of the prevailing contradictions within contemporary society pertaining to the social standing of women, encompassing both their elevation and exploitation.

Tamil classical literature is a venerable body of old literary works. The subject matter possesses a lengthy historical background and serves as a valuable repository of knowledge pertaining to the lives, traditions, beliefs, roles, and historical events of the ancient Tamilian civilization. The poetry were classified into two categories: akam (internal) and puram (external). The akam poems mostly encompass themes of love and the associated emotions, whereas the puram poems focus on subjects like as warfare, everyday existence, balladry, and cultural

ideas. The anthology 'Ettuthokai' presents many depictions of women, encompassing their roles as young girls, ladies in love, wives, and mothers, as well as exploring their views and experiences.

The literary work known as 'Silappathikaram', often referred to as the 'Tale of the Anklet', portrays the societal customs and practices prevalent during the time period in which it is set. It focuses on the lives of Kannagi, a virtuous young woman, and Kovalan, her partner, who resided in Puhar, the capital city of the Chola dynasty. The trajectory of her lifestyle deviated when Kovalan became involved with Madhavi, a woman of questionable moral character. The pair initiated the process of reviving their ways of life in Madurai, the principal city of the Pandyas. Kovalan embarked on a venture to market the anklet of Kannagi, however found himself implicated and subsequently executed for the alleged act of theft from the queen. Kannagi is reputed to have demonstrated the innocence of her spouse and is supposed to have caused the conflagration of the entire city of Madurai as a result of her unwavering virtue. This composition is believed to have originated during the Sangam era, which spanned from 300 BCE to 200 CE.

The portrayal of violence against women in Tamil literature has been a prominent and nuanced component. Since the turn of the century, several patriotic publications have focused on the challenges faced by women, particularly in relation to issues like as child marriage and widowhood. In reality, many male writers, such as

Ramasami, in their pre-independence literary works, have demonstrated a compassionate depiction of women within society. Following the 1950s, there emerged a group of writers who focused on many social concerns in their literary works. Thunba Keni by Pudumai Pithan explored the theme of indentured labor, Rajam Krishnan's Lamps in a Whirlpool delved into the subject of domestic abuse, Jayakanthan's Sila Nerangalil Sila Manithargal addressed the topic of rape, and Poomani's Piragu examined caste-based violence.

The writings of Thi. Janakiraman have been a significant source for examining the complex and contentious nature of girlhood and its association with sexuality throughout history. Women writers have also made significant contributions to the literary landscape by offering their unique perspectives and insights into the world. The literary components in Tamil were not given due consideration by the feminist movement in the 1980s. Rajam Krishnan's writings have emerged as a prominent framework for addressing issues pertaining to women. Ambai introduced the concept of girl subjectivity within the realm of Tamil literature. In the realm of contemporary Tamil writing, female authors have produced a substantial body of work comprising concise testimonials and novels that delve into the internal struggles experienced by women, particularly in relation to the cultural and traditional aspects of Tamilnadu. The literary works produced by female authors also depict the various concerns pertaining to family dynamics, maternal love, and other mundane aspects of existence. The focus of books authored by female writers in Tamil literature often revolves around delicate themes such as the transformation of mundane lives, societal inequalities, and their resulting consequences. Their writing and works generally fail to encompass or address significant societal issues or contemporary concerns. These topics and concerns are depicted with remarkable precision and presented in a compelling manner.

Kotainayaki Ammaiyyar is well recognized as a prominent Tamil author, renowned for her prolific contributions in the form of multiple books and her editorial work for a Tamil magazine. Subsequently, a multitude of female authors emerged who displayed comparable

aptitude in creative writing, following in her footsteps. Thiripurasundari authored several Tamil novels, including Kanchanain Kanvu, Mithila Vilas, and various other literary works, which were published under the pseudonym Lakshmi. Rajam Krishnan, a renowned author, made significant contributions to the advancement of contemporary Tamil literature. The books authored by her, including 'Valaikkalam', 'Krinshitten', 'Amtamaki Varka', 'Malarkal', 'Penkral', and others, have gained significant popularity among Tamil readers. Krishniten, authored by Rajam Krishnan, is widely recognized as one of the most renowned books.

The work draws from a range of personal life experiences. Noteworthy short tales and novels have been authored by prominent writers such as Vasumati Ramasamy (also known as Basmati Ramasamy) and 'Kuttamani'. Cutamani elucidates the oscillations of her cognitive faculties through her introspective narratives. Saroja Ramamurthy exhibits notable proficiency in portraying the narratives of housewives and women inside her short stories. The portrayal of youngsters in her narratives brought much joy to the readers. The calm and lucid writing style is well-suited for effectively portraying the underlying cultural essence of the place. Additional women writers in modern Tamil literature, such as Anuttama, K. Savithri, and K. Saraswati, have also contributed to the genre by producing several Tamil short tales that effectively portray the fundamental aspects of family life within the Tamil region. In her work, K. Jeyalakshmi provides a detailed account of the transformations that have occurred in the living situations of a specific household. Mathuram authored several Tamil books that fall into a specific genre. The quality of her writing is exceptional due to its ability to articulate the intricacies of her own cognitive processes.

The short tale titled "Wings Can Break" was published in 1972 by C.S. Lakshmi, a Tamil writer who is also known by the pseudonym Ambai. In the year 1984, the author produced a scholarly publication titled "The Face behind the Mask: Women in Tamil literature," which critically examines the portrayal of Tamil women in the fictional works of Tamil writers. The text demonstrates the writer's obsession with the portrayal of 'woman' in Tamil culture

and the influence of Tamil women authors on fiction. Ambai demonstrates the construction of these prevailing images during the colonial era. The author examines the historical trajectory of the reformist movement for women's concerns in Urban Tamilnadu, commencing from the late 19th century and extending into the 20th century.

Under the influential guidance of Annie Besant and Margaret Cousins, a group of Brahmin women endeavored to address some societal inequities, including the practice of marrying girls before they reach puberty and the ritualistic shaving of Brahmin widows' heads. Additionally, they aimed to advocate for the acceptance of widow remarriage within the Brahmin community. However, it may be argued that the depictions of the ideal woman promoted by the reformists were mostly exclusive to the elite and upper class, accompanied by fervent calls to revive the Vedic traditions. The Vedic era has been portrayed as an idealized period in Hinduism, often referred to as a golden age, during which women played a significant role as spiritual exemplars within society. Ambai asserts that the reformist agenda holds significance.

The consciousness of the urban-based middle class was limited by its roots. Their objective was only focused on obtaining concessions within a certain framework that they fully endorsed. There was a prevailing belief that the primary function of women was to fulfill domestic responsibilities, namely those of a homemaker, or alternatively, to provide assistance and support to others. According to the author, it is important to prioritize education and the elimination of specific societal problems in order to enhance overall performance.

According to Ambai, it can be observed that the women's movement in Tamilnadu had a progressive loss of direction by the conclusion of the 1940s. Furthermore, Ambai asserts that the movement has virtually been stagnant ever since. In conclusion, the author arrives at the following findings:

“..... by the end of the forties, the notion of helping women through clarity – through Homes, Orphanages and destitute homes – seemed to be the only alternative to even partially examining the social status of women”(p.25).

In “The Face behind the Mask”, Ambai urges Tamil women authors to transcend their conventional societal positions and embrace a candid approach in their literary endeavors. The late 19th century witnessed a resurgence in Tamil Literature, characterized by the creation of religious and philosophical works that were crafted in a straightforward manner, intended to be accessible and enjoyable for the general populace. The birth of the contemporary literary movement may be attributed to Subramania Bharathi, an influential Indian Nationalist poet and writer known for his ability to sway the public. The author's literary pieces are intellectually invigorating due to their exploration of progressive concepts such as freedom and feminism. The development of literacy facilitated the flourishing and maturation of Tamil writing. The emergence of short tales and novels became evident.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, the region of Tamilnadu experienced significant transformations in its political landscape. The traditional governing clans of Tamil society underwent a transition when they were supplanted by European conquerors and individuals who aligned themselves with them. The Tamil society had a profound cultural impact. Gopala Krishna Bharati is a notable individual in the field of Indian classical music. The individual resided throughout the 19th century. The author produced a substantial body of literary works, encompassing a variety of narratives and poetic compositions. The renowned literary piece attributed to him is Nandan Charitham, a narrative that portrays the life of Nandan, an individual belonging to a socioeconomically disadvantaged caste. Throughout the story, Nandan encounters several societal challenges but ultimately triumphs over them in order to fulfill his aspiration of visiting the revered Chidambaram temple. The introduction of the novel as a literary form in the Tamil language occurred around the third quarter of the 19th century, which was notably more than a century after its rise in popularity among British writers. The growth of this phenomenon was assisted by the increasing number of Tamils who had received a Western education and were thus exposed to popular British literature. The inaugural literary work, titled "Prathapa Mudaliyar Charithram" (1879), was authored by Mayuram Vedanayagam Pillai.

The literary works titled 'Kamalambal Charitram' (1893) and 'Padmavathi Charitram' (1898) provide a portrayal of the lives of Brahmins residing in rural Tamilnadu throughout the 19th century.

These works effectively encapsulate the many customs, beliefs, and rituals practiced by this particular social group. Madhavya presents the narrative in a manner that reflects a heightened sense of realism, offering pointed critique towards the sexual exploitation of young girls within the upper caste community, particularly at the hands of older males. The journal 'Swadesamitran' was established by G. Subramaniya Iyer in the year 1882. In 1889, it achieved the distinction of being the inaugural Tamil daily newspaper. This marked the inception of several subsequent periodicals, prompting numerous authors to commence disseminating their narratives within these publications. Ananda Vikatan, a satirical publication established by S.S. Vasan in the year 1929, would afterwards foster the emergence of a highly esteemed Tamil author. Kalki Krishnamoorthy (1899-1954) was a renowned author who contributed short tales and novels to the publication Ananda Vikatan. Later, he established his own weekly newspaper named Kalki, through which he gained significant recognition. Notably, one of his well acclaimed books, "Parthiban Kanav", "Sivagamiin Sabatham", and "Ponniin Selvan", were published inside this periodical.

The literary works examined in this analysis predominantly originate from the urban middle class, with a notable emphasis on authors belonging to the Brahmin caste. The books authored by her serve as a reflection of the portrayal of women within the context of Tamil culture. The portrayal of the female protagonist has characteristics that align with a commonly recognized archetype. These entities embody feminine attributes such as apprehension, lack of knowledge, timidity, self-restraint, and sexual purity. The Tamil culture encompasses several depictions of female figures such as Kannagi and Sita, who undergo a series of tribulations in order to preserve their virtue and virginity. In the context of Tamil culture, the expression of female sexuality is often stigmatized, portraying it as a

means for women to manipulate and entice men. This cultural practice only restricts women, compelling them to adhere to specific societal expectations. The quality of their written fiction diminishes due to its tendency to mirror societal uniformity. The advent of contemporary fiction necessitates a departure from conventional literary practices. The field of contemporary Tamil women's literature is characterized by a multitude of distinctive advantages that have been cultivated over a span of over two millennia. The beginnings of this may be traced back to Sangam poets like Avvaiyar, Nachinarkiniyar, and other notable figures. Subsequent to that period, women's literary output has emerged as a distinct entity in comparison to that of males, with the exception of the Middle Ages as women were deprived of educational opportunities, thereby limiting their contributions. During the 20th century, women achieved parity with males in terms of creative output. However, as the century draws to a close, female authors have achieved comparable advantages to their male counterparts in terms of productivity and profound originality.

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