



Depiction of Women in Tamil Literature

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Abstract:

Depiction of woman in Tamil literature has kept pace with the changing social image of the woman in Tamilnadu. Tamil fiction reflects the prevalent contradictions in contemporary society about a woman's position that is her glorification and exploitation. Tamil classical literature is an ancient literature. It has a long history and a great source of information to know about ancient Tamilian's life, customs, beliefs, roles and history.

Key words: Depiction, Tamil, Glorification, Exploitation

In the post-independence era many women writers have entered the arena of literary writing and they have focused their attention on the inner conflicts of modern women. Notable among such writers are Sivasundari, C.S. Laxmi, Anuradha Ramanan, Indira Soundarajan, Vaasanthi, Thilagavathy. Thus in the post-independence era, a new class of women writers in Indian English literature as well as in the Tamil literature have arisen. These writings are the reflection of newer conflicts, morality, human relations, aspirations and frustrations of the Indian women in society. Depiction of woman in Tamil literature has kept pace with the changing social image of the woman in Tamilnadu. Tamil fiction reflects the prevalent contradictions in contemporary society about a woman's position that is her glorification and exploitation. Tamil classical literature is an ancient literature. It has a long history and a great source of information to know about ancient Tamilian's life, customs, beliefs, roles and history. It was divided as *akam*(internal) and *puram*(external) poems. The *akam* poems dealt with love and feelings related to it, while the *puram* poems are about war, daily life, ballad and beliefs. The anthology 'Ettuthokai' portrayed women as a young girl, as a lady in love, as a wife, as a mother and their beliefs and experiences.

'Silappathikaram'(story of anklet) depicts the life of Kannagi, a chaste woman who lead a peaceful life with Kovalan in Puhar, the capital of Cholas. Her life later went astray by the association of Kovalan with an unchaste woman Madhavi. The duo started resurrecting their life in Madurai, the capital of Pandyas. Kovalan went to sell the anklet of Kannagi to start a business but was held guilty and beheaded of stealing it from the queen. Kannagi went onto prove the innocence of her husband and believed to have burnt the entire city of Madurai by

her chastity. This was composed in the post *Sangam* period (300BCE to 200 CE). Depiction of violence against women in Tamil literature has been quite an articulate aspect. Right from the turn of century most nationalistic texts dealt with the plight of women especially child marriage and widowhood. In fact, most male writers like Ramasami –Kootha Theevu – (a feminist Utopia) of pre-independence era have evinced a sympathetic portrayal of women in society. After the fifties we have writers focusing on diverse themes like indentured labour (Thunba Keni of Pudumai Pithan), domestic abuse (Rajam Krishnan's Lamps in a Whirlpool), rape (Jayakanthan's Sila Nerangalil Sila Manithargal) and caste based violence (Poomani's Piragu). Attempts at exploring woman as subject with a sexuality that is forever contested have been the source of Thi. Janakiraman's writing. Women writers have also existed with their understanding of the world. The eighties women's movement did not really take the literary aspects in Tamil seriously. Rajam Krishnan's works were the primary inspiration to address women's issues. Ambai ushered in female subjectivity into the Tamil literary world. Women writers in modern Tamil literature have written several short stories and novels that depict the internal conflicts of women, particularly related to the culture and traditions of Tamilnadu. The various works of women writers also portray the problems related to family, affection for children and other minor aspects of life. The subject matter or the theme of the novels written by women writers in Tamil literature primarily deal with delicate issues like the alteration in dull and routine life, the social discriminations and the consequential problems. Their writing and works usually do not represent or discuss major social issues or revolutionary themes. Such themes and subject matters are portrayed with remarkable ease and in a fascinating manner.

Kotainayaki Ammaiyar is perhaps the most well-known female Tamil author who wrote numerous novels and also edited a Tamil magazine. Later a number of other women writers emerged in the scene and have proved their skills in the art of creative writing. Tiripurasundari wrote many Tamil novels like Kancanaiyin Kanvu, Mitila Vilas and other novels under the pen name Lakshmi. Another popular women writer, Rajam Krishnan has contributed more to the development of modern era in Tamil literature. Her novels Valaikkaram, Kurincitten, Amutamaki Varuka, Malarkal, Penkural and other novels have gained much popularity among Tamil readers. 'Kuricitten' is one of the Rajam Krishnan's famous novels. It is based on the several experiences of her personal life. Eminent authors like Vasumathi Ramasamy (Basumathy Ramasamy) and 'Cutamani' have also created some notable short stories and novels. Cutamani illustrates the oscillations of the mind through the psychological short stories. Saroja Ramamurthy is especially skilled in portraying the tales of the housewives and family woman in her short stories. The manner of depicting children in her stories has enthralled the readers. Her smooth and lucid style is appropriate for narrating the fundamental culture of the region. Other women writers in modern Tamil literature like Anuttama, K. Savithri and K. Saraswathi have written several Tamil short stories that replicated the basic culture of family life in the Tamil country. K. Jeyalakshmi, a woman author depicts the changes in the circumstances in the life of a particular family. Maturam also composed many Tamil novels that belonged to some category. Her writings shine in portraying the working of the inner mind.

In 1972, the Tamil writer C.S. Lakshmi who also calls herself Ambai, published the short story 'Wings can break'. In 1984, she wrote a critical work named 'The Face behind the Mask: Women in Tamil literature' on the images of Tamil women in the fiction of Tamil writers. It reflected the writer's preoccupation with the images of

'woman' in Tamil culture and the impact of Tamil fiction of women writers. Ambai shows how these dominant images to be constructed in the colonial period. She does so by tracing the origins and development of the reformist agenda relating to women's issues in Urban Tamilnadu starting from the late 19th century through the 20th century. Under the dynamic leadership of Annie Besant and Margaret Cousins several Brahmin women sought to rectify specific social injustices such as the pre-puberty marriage of girls and the tonsure of Brahmin widows and to introduce widow re-marriage. But the images of the ideal woman which the reformists propagated were essentially elitist and upper class coupled with "ardent cries of reviving the Vedic past"(p.8). This was projected as the Vedic past was a supposed ideal period of golden age of Hinduism in which women served as the spiritual exemplars for all the society. Ambai says of the reformist agenda:

"The urban-based middle-class awareness was circumscribed by its origin. They were only aiming at concessions within a particular set-up which they totally approved of. They had no doubt that the basic role of a woman was that of a home-maker and if not, one of rendering service to others. Education and eradication of certain evils were essential to function better (p.14)".

Ambai shows that the women's movement in Tamilnadu gradually lost direction by the end of the 1940s and has, according to her, essentially remained stagnant since then. She concludes:

"..... 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).

'The Face behind the mask' ends up with Ambai's appeal to Tamil women writers to "Step out of their traditional roles and write the truth" (p.244). A revival of Tamil Literature took place from the late 19th century when works of religious and philosophical nature were written in a simple style for the common people to enjoy. The modern literary movement has started with Subramania Bharathi, the Indian Nationalist poet and writer who has the power of influencing the masses. His works are stimulating in their progressive themes like freedom and feminism. With growth of literacy, Tamil prose began to blossom and mature. Short stories and novels began to appear.

During the 18th and 19th century, Tamilnadu witnessed some of the most profound changes in the political scene. The traditional Tamil ruling clans were superseded by European colonists and their sympathizers. The Tamil society underwent a deep cultural influence. Gopalakrishna Bharathi lived during the 19th century. He wrote numerous stories and lyrics. His most famous work is the Nandan Charitam on the life of Nandan who having been born in a sociologically lower caste, faces and overcomes the social obstacles in achieving his dream of visiting the Chidambaram temple. The novel as a genre of literature arrived in Tamil in the third quarter of the 19th century more than a century after it became popular with English writers. Its emergence was facilitated by the growing population of Tamils with a western education and exposure to popular English fiction. The first novel, 'Prathapa Mudaliyar Charitram' (1879) is written by Mayuram Vedanayagam Pillai. 'Kamalambal Charitram' (1893) and 'Padmavathi Charitram'(1898) portray the life of Brahmins in 19th century rural Tamilnadu by capturing their customs, habits, beliefs and rituals. Madhaviah tells the story in a more realistic way with a searching criticism of the upper caste society, particularly the sexual exploitation of girls by older men. In 1882,

G. Subramaniya Iyer started the newspaper 'Swadesamitran'. It became the first Tamil daily in 1889. This was the start of many journals to follow and many novelists began to serialize their stories in these journals. The humour magazine 'Ananda Vikatan' started by S.S. Vasan in 1929 was to help to create some of the greatest Tamil novelists. Kalki Krishnamoorthy (1899-1954) serialized his short stories and novels in 'Ananda Vikatan' and eventually started his own weekly 'Kalki', for which he wrote the enduringly popular novels 'Parthiban Kanavu', 'Sivagamiyin Sabatham' and 'Ponniyin Selvan'.

The women writer's work is analysed and is overwhelmingly from the urban middle class and tend to be Brahmin. Their fiction reflects the images of women in Tamil culture. The heroines are stereotypes. The portrait of the qualities of women are fear, ignorance, shyness, sobriety and chastity. Tamil culture is replete with images of women like *Kannagi* and *Sita* going through various ordeals to preserve their purity and chastity. Female sexuality in Tamil culture ridiculed as a weapon with which women tempt men. Tradition only continues to fetter women and making them to certain stereotypes. It impoverishes any fiction they write because the fiction reflects this conformity. The rejection of tradition is necessary for the emergence of the new fiction. Contemporary Tamil women's writing is enriched with its own merit having a foundation of more than two thousand years. It has its initiation with *sangam* poets such as Avvaiyar, Nachinarkiniyar and other such poets. Since then women writing has its own standing compared with men writing and the only difference is in the Middle Ages, when women could not contribute much as they were not given chance for education. In the 20th century, women have their equal position to that of men at their production level of creative writing; but towards the end of the century women writing have equal merit with that of men, both in the production and in-depth creativity.

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