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### Embodied Ideals: A Critical Study of Women in Tamil Literary Tradition

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#### Abstract

Tamil classical and post-classical literature stands as one of the oldest and most vibrant literary traditions of the world. Within its poetic, religious, and philosophical framework, women have emerged not merely as secondary figures but as the **moral, intellectual, and emotional centers** of narrative and poetic expression. From the righteous fury of Kannagi to the ascetic transcendence of KaraikkalAmmaiyar, these women illustrate a continuum of evolving ideals—virtue, wisdom, love, devotion, and renunciation.

This article presents a **critical analysis of ten iconic women characters** from Tamil literature, exploring their representation as agents of moral justice, intellectual vigor, and spiritual power. By examining works such as *Silappadikaram*, *Manimekalai*, *Periyapuram*, and *DivyaPrabandham*, the study underscores the transformative potential of female characters who embody the ethical and cultural essence of Tamil civilization.

#### Keywords

Tamil Literature, Women Characters, Bhakti Movement, Sangam Poetry, Feminine Virtue, Kannagi, Andal, KaraikkalAmmaiyar, Spiritual Liberation, Moral Strength.

#### Introduction

Tamil literature, spanning over two millennia, has been shaped by a deep reverence for virtue, knowledge, and spirituality. Among its most enduring features is the **celebration of women not as passive muses, but as moral and intellectual forces**. The literary corpus—from the Sangam anthologies to Bhakti devotional hymns—reflects an evolving portrayal of womanhood grounded in social duty, chastity, artistic creativity, and divine devotion.

In the **epic and post-epic periods**, figures like Kannagi, Madhavi, and Manimekalai revolutionized the image of the Tamil woman. Kannagi's righteous wrath challenged patriarchal injustice, while Madhavi and Manimekalai questioned the limitations imposed on women by class, karma, and fate. The poetesses of the Sangam era, such as Avvaiyar and Vellivithiyār, gave voice to women's intellect and emotional consciousness, making their poetry a site of wisdom and inner reflection.

The **Bhakti movement** later expanded this horizon by introducing spiritually empowered women like Andal, KaraikkalAmmaiyar, and ParavaiNachiyaar. These women redefined devotion as an act of divine self-realization. Collectively, their presence across literary epochs reveals a **dynamic vision of womanhood—earthly yet divine, emotional yet philosophical, personal yet universal**.

#### Kannagi – The Flame of Justice

Kannagi, the protagonist of *Silappadikaram*, stands as the **epitome of chastity (karpu) and moral fortitude**. Her transformation from a patient wife into a divine avenger symbolizes the moral consciousness of the Tamil ethos. When Kovalan is wrongfully executed, Kannagi's fiery indignation becomes an instrument of cosmic justice. Her act of burning Madurai is not mere revenge—it is a **restoration of dharma**, asserting that truth and virtue transcend royal authority.

Critically, Kannagi represents the **intersection of personal virtue and political ethics**. She is both victim and victor, mortal and divine. Her unwavering adherence to truth challenges gender norms by granting her agency and authority denied to women in patriarchal society. Kannagi's narrative thus becomes a **proto-feminist assertion of moral sovereignty**, one that continues to resonate as a symbol of justice in Tamil cultural memory.

#### Madhavi – The Paradox of Freedom

Madhavi of *Silappadikaram* embodies the **paradox of liberty and constraint**. As a courtesan, she is artistically and economically independent, yet bound by the moral limitations of her profession. Her relationship with Kovalan reveals her as a woman of intellect and emotion, who struggles between worldly desire and moral conscience. Madhavi's renunciation of worldly life marks her spiritual evolution beyond sensuality and fame.

Critically, Madhavi destabilizes the conventional binaries of virtue and sin. She stands as an **introspective, self-aware woman**, one who reclaims her dignity through choice rather than circumstance. Her character underscores the **early Tamil recognition of women's autonomy** and their right to moral self-definition—an idea revolutionary for its time.

#### Manimekalai – The Voice of Compassion

In Sathanar's *Manimekalai*, the daughter of Kovalan and Madhavi becomes a **symbol of spiritual emancipation**. Manimekalai renounces royal luxury to embrace Buddhism, dedicating herself to alleviating human suffering. Her journey reflects the philosophical shift from materialism to spiritual compassion. She represents the ideal of **karuṇā (compassion)**—a moral awakening that transcends gender and class.

From a critical standpoint, Manimekalai is a **philosophical heroine** who challenges the social constructs of femininity. Unlike Kannagi's fiery assertion, her rebellion is **intellectual and ethical**, grounded in non-violence and wisdom. She reflects an advanced ethical consciousness, embodying the move from retributive justice to **universal love and liberation**.

#### Avvaiyar – The Sage of Wisdom

Avvaiyar stands apart as a **poet, philosopher, and moral teacher**, revered across centuries of Tamil literature.

Her works like *Aathichoodi* and *KondraiVendhandistill* ethical and educational ideals into simple aphorisms. She embodies the **rational and didactic voice** of Tamil moral philosophy, promoting virtues like humility, truth, and compassion.

From a critical perspective, Avvaiyar symbolizes the **intellectual matriarch of Tamil civilization**. Her influence bridges oral wisdom and literary art, making her both educator and philosopher. Unlike Kannagi or Manimekalai, Avvaiyar's authority is not derived from divine intervention but from **intellect, logic, and lived experience**, positioning her as an enduring feminist icon of intellect.

#### Nallaiyar – The Silent Strength of Grief

Nallaiyar of *Purananuru* captures the **poetic dignity of love and loss**. Mourning her husband Killi, she expresses sorrow without surrendering to despair. Her lamentation becomes a meditation on loyalty, valor, and impermanence. Nallaiyar's poetry reveals that **grief, when dignified, becomes moral beauty**.

Critically, Nallaiyar's portrayal dismantles the image of women as emotionally fragile. Her controlled grief shows moral endurance—a valorization of **inner strength over external resistance**. In doing so, she embodies a subtle yet profound heroism within the domestic and emotional sphere.

#### Vellivithiyār – The Poet of Inner Worlds

Vellivithiyār, a Sangam poetess, explores the **psychological landscapes of love and longing**. Through her lyrical verses in *Akananuru* and *Kurunthogai*, she articulates the nuanced emotions of Tamil women—yearning, doubt, devotion, and joy. Her imagery blends nature and emotion, making the inner world of women an integral part of poetic aesthetics.

Critically, Vellivithiyār represents the **emergence of feminine consciousness** in early Tamil poetics. Her verses legitimize women's emotional experiences as worthy of philosophical reflection, challenging the male-dominated tradition of love poetry.

#### Pey Adi – The Guide of Enlightenment

Pey Adi in *Manimekalai* acts as the **mentor and spiritual compass** for the young nun. As a Buddhist teacher, she represents the maternal wisdom that guides Manimekalai's journey toward enlightenment. Her presence elevates the role of women as **custodians of knowledge and moral guidance**.

From a critical perspective, Pey Adi functions as an archetype of **female mentorship in religious literature**. She bridges the gap between philosophy and practice, showing that women's wisdom in Tamil literature is both pedagogical and compassionate.

#### ParavaiNachiyar – The Devotee of Love

ParavaiNachiyar, the wife of the saint Sundarar, embodies **devotion balanced with worldly affection**. Her character demonstrates that love and faith need not be opposites. Through her loyalty and piety, she sanctifies conjugal love, transforming domestic devotion into a form of spiritual service.

Critically, ParavaiNachiyar is a **Bhakti-era reinterpretation of womanly virtue**. Her devotion humanizes the divine relationship, showing that faith thrives through emotion and fidelity rather than ascetic denial.

#### Andal – The Divine Bride

Andal, the only female Alvar, redefines Bhakti through the language of **divine romance**. In *Tiruppavai* and *NachiyarTirumozhi*, she expresses her yearning for Vishnu as both a lover and a devotee. Her union with the divine symbolizes the merging of human love and spiritual longing.

Critically, Andal's voice is both **mystical and revolutionary**. She asserts her right to choose divine love over worldly marriage, marking a spiritual form of female autonomy. Andal transforms devotion into a **poetic assertion of selfhood**, merging piety with passion.

#### KaraikkalAmmaiyar – The Ascetic of Fire

KaraikkalAmmaiyar's journey from a devoted wife to a skeletal ascetic reflects **the transcendence of physical identity in pursuit of divine truth**. Her renunciation of beauty and comfort is not self-denial but self-realization. She is among the first in Indian literature to reject societal definitions of femininity for spiritual liberation.

Critically, KaraikkalAmmaiyar stands as a **radical reimagining of womanhood**. Her transformation from wife to saint challenges patriarchal norms by sanctifying the grotesque as divine. She

epitomizes **female ascetic power**, redefining the aesthetics of devotion and the boundaries of self.

#### Conclusion

The women of Tamil literature collectively represent a **spectrum of human and divine ideals**. From Kannagi's moral fire to KaraikkalAmmaiyar's ascetic flame, each woman embodies a facet of strength, justice, and devotion. Their narratives reveal that Tamil culture viewed womanhood not as passive but as **dynamic and transformative**, capable of shaping moral and spiritual destinies.

Critically, these characters trace the **evolution of Tamil feminist consciousness**—from emotional assertion to philosophical liberation. They remain timeless because they capture the essence of moral integrity, intellectual depth, and spiritual courage. Their legacy endures as a testament to the **enduring power of women in literature, life, and the collective moral imagination** of Tamil civilization.

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