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**Abstract:**

*The present paper aims at exploration of feminocentrism in the ancient Tamil Sangam epics: Cilappatikaram and Manimekalai. Further, it analyses how the feminocentric nature of both of the epics have brought in significant changes in the nature of elements of the epics. The deviations of both these epics from conventions of popular epic form have been analysed in detail. The uniqueness of the epics has been highlighted.*

**Keywords:**

*Sangam Literature, patriarchy, casteism, gender oppression, woman-centric, feminocentric etc.*

Literature written in various Indian languages are rich and ancient in their texture. Tamil is one of the Indian languages with the most ancient literary history. The oldest of all is Tamil Sangam literature that dates back to the 4th Century B.C. with its seminal text *Tolkappiyam*. A huge body of ancient Tamil literature comprises some magnificent epics. *Cilappatikaram*, *Manimekalai*, *Civaka Cintamani*, *Valaiyapati*, *Nilakeci* and *Kutalakeci* are few to name. Among them *Cilappatikaram*, and *Manimekalai* stand prominent. *Cilappatikaram* is written by Ilanko Atikal while *Manimekalai* is written by Kulavanikan Seethalai Satanar. Both of the epics are feminocentric epics as they portray a female personality as a protagonist around whom the action of the epic revolves. Generally, epics have a male personality as a protagonist of epic action. M.H. Abrams in his *A Glossary of Literary Terms* defines epic as:

A long verse narrative on a serious subject, told in formal and elevated style, and centred on a heroic and quasi-divine figure on whose action depends the fate of a tribe, a nation or the human race (Abrams 76).

Besides this, Abrams enumerates some salient elements of literary epic in the same book that include: the hero as a figure of a great national or cosmic importance, the worldwide or even larger setting, the action comprises of superhuman deeds in battle, involvement of the gods and other supernatural beings, and grand style of diction (Abrams).

*Cilappatikaram* and *Manimekalai* outstand most of the epic written in India and the world owing to their special features. A. A. Manavalan records a succinct observation:

*Cilappatikaram* apart from being the first epic in point of time, it is the first to portray a woman as the chief protagonist of epic action, also the first to depict female heroism ...the first epic whose action does not involve a war or represent antihero or a villain. Thus, it is without a hero and without a royal personage.... Like *Cilappatikaram*, *Manimekalai* also does not have a hero but a heroine (Sharma 66-67).

Kannaki is the heroine of the epic *Cilappatikaram* who was born in the family of a merchant and not that of a king or an emperor to which the heroes of epic normally belong. She is just like any other ordinary housewife fully dedicated to her husband, Kovalan. She remains so until her husband is executed by the guards of the Pantiya King Netunceliyan on his orders. She finds her husband is beheaded and in a pool of blood. She embraces her husband who gets up on his feet and wipes her tears. He ascends to heaven advising her to live her remaining life in peace and happiness. Kovalan's innocence and King's unjust decision to execute Kovalan bypassing law and conscience suddenly transforms her into a divine figure. She curses Maturai for the offense committed by the king. She wrenches her breast and hurls it over the city to burn it down. Due to her divine power, the city is engulfed in the flames of fire and gets destroyed.

Kannaki is not presented as a warrior belonging to a royal family or as a god or as a superhuman being who fights with forces of evil endowed with equally magical powers. Though Kannaki is the heroine of the epic, she does not fight any war on which depends the fate of a tribe, a nation or a planet. As per the conventions of epic form of poetry the protagonist is shown to fight a

crucial war. In *Cilappatikaram*, Atikal has deviated from this tradition in two ways. The first of it is by replacing the hero with heroine and the second by omitting a war. This makes the epic feminocentric.

The actions performed by Kannaki are just like that of gods or superhumans as are found in any epic. Though Kannaki is presented as an ordinary woman in the first half of the epic till the execution of her husband, in the second half of the epic her actions do not remain ordinary human actions. Her actions of wrenching of her breast off her body and hurling it over the city are elevated in a manner that it suddenly acquires grandeur of a heroic or a quasi-divine figure. Her actions are complemented by the destruction of the city she curses.

*Cilappatikaram* appears to be the critique of judicial and political systems which make women to suffer in unjust manners. Through Kannaki, Atikal seems to emphasize that women cannot always be the meek suffers of patriarchal tyranny. He transforms Kannaki into an agent of justice and change. In the latter half of the epic Atikal deifies Kannaki, people start to count on her as a goddess. Kannaki's stature is elevated by changing her role as a woman from mere domesticity to divinity.

Besides this, *Cilappatikaram* depicts Kannaki's suppression as a woman. Kovalan abandons her for Matavi, a courtesan dancer. Even when Kovalan is in a relationship with Matavi, it is Matavi who overshadows Kovalan. No male character overshadows any of the female characters at any point of action in the whole of the epic. Kannaki is shown to be a fighter for justice. After her husband is wrongly executed for the crime of theft of the queen's anklet, she goes straight to the court of the Pantiya king Netunceliyan. She condemns and denounces him for his unjust decision to execute her innocent husband, Kovalan.

After her husband ascends to heaven advising her to lead the life of peace and happiness, Kannaki decides to take revenge upon the cruel king. In many epics, generally male heroes are shown to seek revenge upon the tyrannical anti-heroes or villains. What makes *Cilappatikaram* a feminocentric epic is Kannaki taking upon the role of a revenger. In addition to this, she fearlessly confronts the all-powerful Pantiya king. She cleverly proves her husband Kovalan's innocence. *Cilappatikaram* shows the sudden acquisition of divinity through Kannaki, whose curse brings the ultimate destruction to the fate of the city of Maturai. It is her powerful curse that also becomes the reason for making the epic a woman-centric epic. Kannaki's status as a divine woman is also evidence of feminocentrism.

*Manimekalai* is one of the two world famous epics written in Tamil in the Sangam period. Its author was a friend of Ilano Atikal, author of *Cilappatikaram*. It preaches Buddhist philosophy. In his regard Meyilai Seeni Venkataswamy makes an apt remark:

*Manimekalai* has several unique points. This epic, which has lovely word-embroidery and depth of thought, is not mere literary work. It is of a great use to understand the history, arts and culture of ancient Tamils as well as the religions and traditions of that time in fact, *Manimekalai* is a jewel that adorns Mother Tamil with its incandescent loveliness (Satanar xiv).

Likewise *Cilappatikaram*, *Manimekalai* is also a feminocentric epic. The story of *Manimekalai* begins where the story of *Cilappatikaram* ends. *Manimekalai* is the daughter of Kovalan from Matavi, the courtesan dancer. She has been named after *Manimekalai Devi*. The epic places a woman at the centre of the narrative. It explores themes of female agency, spirituality and social justice. The whole of the story of the epic revolves around the heroine *Manimekalai*. Like Kannaki of *Cilappatikaram*, she is not a divine or a quasi-divine figure in the beginning of the epic that is an essential requirement of an epic.

*Manimekalai* differs from other traditional epics which instead of focusing on a male warrior or a king portrays a woman as the protagonist. *Manimekalai* is made the heroine of the epic who does not fight any war against anyone. Her heroism is highlighted in her acts of rejecting marriage and romantic relationships. She is deeply loved by the Chola prince Udayakumaran as he is mesmerized by her physical beauty and artistic achievements. He does his best to persuade her

mind. She wants to become a Buddhist nun instead of imprisoning her in human ties. Manimekalai is presented as a rebel who rejects patriarchal societal norms. She refuses to marry or to carry out a romantic relationship with the Chola prince Udayakumaran but finds herself drawn to him. To overcome her attraction towards Udayakumaran, she hides, prays to God and takes help of her mother, Matavi and her Buddhist teacher Arnava Adikal. She does not fight any war with external forces like an enemy king or a demon or supernatural elements but fights with psychological forces.

Manimekalai is presented as a pursuer on the paths of knowledge and enlightenment that is usually denied to a woman in patriarchal structure. She is shown taking part in philosophical discussions and strongly challenging religious orthodoxy. She asserts her intellectual independence through the acts of acceptance and rejections. Her choices make her outshine other characters involved in the epic and make her protagonist around whose actions the narrative of the epic revolves.

What prominently makes *Manimekalai* a feminocentric epic is the struggles of a woman in patriarchal society by presenting her opting an alternative path of spiritual freedom rather than to marry someone as per the societal norms led down by patriarchy. The choices made by Manimekalai make her different from ordinary women who succumb to the pressures of patriarchy. Her advocacy of equality and liberation in patriarchal setup makes her a warrior in a significantly different way. All this endows her personality with some characteristic features by which she rules over the minds of many who come into contact with her. She even persuades the queen whose son, the prince Udayakumaran is accidentally killed by Kanchanan taking Manimekalai for his beloved Vidyadhara Kayasandikai. At the beginning she is tortured by the queen but eventually Manimekalai becomes successful in converting the queen to Buddhism.

### Conclusion:

In conclusion, it can be stated that both *Cilappatikaram* and *Manimekalai* are feminocentric epics as their narratives revolve around the heroines and not the heroes. Kannaki and Manimekalai are the heroines of *Cilappatikaram* and *Manimekalai* respectively. Both the heroines dominate the course of action of the epics. Kannaki acts against the injustice done by the Pantiya king to her husband Kovalan, she curses him and destroys the city of Maturai which is his seat. She is transformed into the Goddess Kannaki afterwards. While Manimekalai fights with the patriarchal structure of society by refusing to marry. She is transformed into a Buddhist nun. Both Kannaki and Manimekalai have become successful in their feminocentric ventures.

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