

WOMANHOOD IN THE SELECT COUPLETS OF TIRUKKURAL

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Abstract

In India, a woman is an insignia of piety, nobility, love, devotion, sacrifice, selfless service, and submission. The women are respected and given a high place. The people of India have worshipped women deities since time immemorial. No function, ceremony, rite are considered 'complete' unless the 'wife' is there, present by the side of her husband. This elevated status of woman somehow dropped to a disreputable position in later times. One very important work from which the idea of subservience, or relegation of women, has taken root seems to be the *Manu Smriti*, a compendium of moral codes in society. She is taught to be shy, gentle and dignified, pure and faithful as a wife and selfless, loving and thoughtful as a mother. Situation forced her to be completely dependent on patriarchal society. This research article discusses how Tiruvalluvar had portrayed woman and womanhood in the Chapter 6- Companion/Life Partner/Wife of *Tirukkural*.

Through centuries the concept of ideal womanhood has been based on mythical personages like Sita, Nalayani. A Woman is expected to be a silent sufferer; or a slavish devotee, a toy in the hands of Krishna. The woman is expected to be passive and accept the dynamic role of man in her life. But in Vedic or pre-Vedic times Women seemed to have enjoyed status of equality with men, atleast to some degree. Women even participated in Yagnas(Holy offerings-Vedic sacrificial rites). There were great intellectuals, philosophers and grammarians like Gargi and Maitreyi. Even God was represented in the form of woman. Shakti was the primal force of all creations. Saraswathi was the goddess of knowledge; Lakshmi was the goddess of wealth; Parvathi, the consort of Lord Siva, fought for equal rights and claimed to have the half being of Siva himself; hence known as Ardhagini, or Ardhanareeswarar (a being half woman, half man).

This elevated status of woman somehow dropped to a disreputable position in later times. One very important work from which the idea of subservience, or relegation of women, has taken root seems to be the *Manu Smriti*, a compendium of moral codes in society. Even there the treatment of women is not consistent. In certain places we are told that women must be honoured and kept happy. In other places, it is said that a woman is expected to perform all household duties irrespective of her husband's treatment of her. There is a code forbidding a woman to leave her husband even if he is unfaithful or lecherous. But a man may leave his wife with impunity in such circumstances. Woman is

always expected to be under the care of a male throughout her life. One section that has made a great impact is that which disallows any freedom for women, is as follows:

Pitaa rakshati kaumaree, bhartha rakshati yauvane
Putroo rakshati vardhakyee, na stri
Swathantharyam arhati (ix,3) (*Woman and Her Family-2*)

Which means the father protects the woman during childhood, the husband during her youth and the son during her old age. A woman is always dependent in the patriarchal society.

Tirukkural obviously depicts a patriarchal society. In the patriarchal society a woman is therefore inculcated with the ideals of martyrdom, pride in patience, need to accept a lower status through the mythical models of Sita, Savithri, Gandhari etc. Following these models she is taught to be shy, gentle and dignified, pure and faithful as a wife and selfless, loving and thoughtful as a mother. The Chapter 6- Companion/Life Partner/Wife of *Tirukkural*, discusses elaborately the womanhood as similar to the mythical models.

The *Thirukkural* is classified among the didactic works of the Sangam age. It is variously dated from 3rd century B.C to 2nd century A.D. It is considered a work of ethics par excellence in Tamil Literature. If ethics is the Science of Living, then *Thirukkural* is the undying classic on the subject. The preoccupation of the work is with the fundamentals of life as follows:

Dharma or Aram (Ethics/ Values), describes the greatness of an Individual

Artha or Porul (Polity/Wealth),elaborates the essentials of Life to lead in the Society

Kama or Inbam (Love), expresses the victory of Inner Self.

Considered as Tamil Veda, the *Tirukkural* consists of 1330 aphorisms grouped into 133 chapters of ten couplets each. These naturally fall into 3 sections. The first on Virtue has 38 chapters including four introductory (In praise of God, Rain, Asceticism and Virtue), a very thought provoking. The second is the longest and has 70 chapters on Wealth, Polity and Economy. The Third part deals with Love in 25 chapters. Valluvar is concerned with the Three dimensional Model of Living. The author Thiru-Valluva Nayanar (means the sacred devotee, priest or soothsayer), a weaver lived in Mylapore, Chennai. Thiruvalluvar is responsible for a great revolution in the History of the Tamil Language. He has courageously, without fear or favour, come forward to point out to change certain defects found in the society of the period known as the Golden Era of Tamil Sangam. *Thirukkural*, complete in itself, the sole work of its author, it has come down the stream of ages absolutely uninjured.

This article studies the Womanhood in the Sixth Chapter- The Helpmate/ Companion / Wife / Life Partner/Soul Mate from Couplets 51-60 and highlights how Womanhood has been portrayed by Ayyan Valluvar

குறள் 51:

மனைத்தக்க மாண்புடையள் ஆகித்தற் கொண்டான்
வளத்தக்காள் வாழ்க்கைத் துணை

(இல்வாழ்க்கைக்கு ஏற்ற நற்பண்பு உடையவளாகித் தன்கணவனுடைய பொருள் வளத்துக்குத் தக்க வாழ்க்கை நடத்துகிறவளே வாழ்க்கைத்துணை ஆவாள்.).

A woman, who maintains her family status and manages her household,
Well within her husband's resources, is an ideal wife.

The ideal wife would be the one who would uphold the prestige of her family within the limits of her husband's resources. The partnership for life between man and wife will not work otherwise. To be blessed with such a wife is the greatest gift of providence; for what is asked of the wife is not easy. She has to wrench herself from her original moorings and orient her attitudes and even her life to the economic and cultural circumstances of her husband's home, in the family of her adoption.

குறள் 52:

மனைமாட்சி இல்லாள்கண் இல்லாயின் வாழ்க்கை
எனைமாட்சித் தாயினும் இல்

(இல்வாழ்க்கைக்கு தக்க நற்பண்பு மனைவியிடம் இல்லையானால், ஒருவனுடைய வாழ்க்கை வேறு எவ்வளவு சிறப்புடையதானாலும் பயன் இல்லை).

If the wife lacks nobility of character, family life will become bleak;
And then wealth, status and the rest, are of no avail.

There is no real family life, when the wife does not possess the qualities needed for assisting in full measure, the performance of the duties in a good household. Not even the husband's own virtues, of whatever degree, can make up for lack of the wifely graces. The world we see, is so full of the tragedies that have come about on account of this very reason.

குறள் 53:

இல்லதென் இல்லவள் மாண்பானால் உள்ளதென்
இல்லவள் மாணாக் கடை

(மனைவி நற்பண்பு உடையவளானால் வாழ்க்கையில் இல்லாதது என்ன?
அவள் நற்பண்பு இல்லாதவளானால் வாழ்க்கையில் இருப்பது என்ன?)

If the wife possesses a noble soul, what more does man want?
If she lacks this, what is there in life for him?

This is Valluvar's balanced and emphatic way of saying that wife alone can make a happy home. If the wife is virtuous the family has everything; otherwise its nothing.

குறள் 54:

பெண்ணின் பெருந்தக்க யாவுள கற்பென்னும்
திண்மைஉண் டாகப் பெறின்

(இல்வாழ்க்கையில் கற்பு என்னும் உறுதிநிலை இருக்கப் பெற்றால்,
பெண்ணைவிட பெருமையுடையவை வேறு என்ன இருக்கின்றன?)

What greater treasure can there be, than a woman
Who has the abiding strength of chastity?

When a woman has chastity she owns all; along with her husband and family also holds everything. Rajaji would say that chastity is much more than a physical chastity and implies unqualified loyalty to the husband or 'an abiding moral tenacity', as it were. The Silapathigaram too justifies the same aspect when Kannagi marches into the court of the King Pandian Nedunchelian to render justice for her husband, the King once realizes his mistake, the King was defeated.

குறள் 55:

தெய்வம் தொழாஅள் கொழுநற் றொழுதெழுவாள்
பெய்யெனப் பெய்யும் மழை

(வேறு தெய்வம் தொழாதவளாய்த் தன் கணவனையே தெய்வமாகக்
கொண்டு தொழுது துயிலெழுகின்றவள் பெய் என்றால் மழை பெய்யும்).

Even the clouds will obey and pour out rain at the bidding of a wife,
Who prefers to worship her husband rather than any other God.

A virtuous woman who knows no other God but her husband may command the very clouds to pour forth rain and they will do so.

It is in accordance with the teachings of Lord Buddha and in fact, of most religious teachers, that if there be one righteous person on earth, rain falls for his sake. This Kural, therefore, does not involve any neglect of God. In fact according to Rajaji, the Vedanta philosophy as well as the Hindu practice, recognize forms of worship which enable the devotee to see the supreme Deity in every object of love and adoration.

குறள் 56:

தற்காத்துத் தற்கொண்டாற் பேணித் தகைசான்ற
சொற்காத்துச் சோர்விலாள் பெண்

(கற்பு நெறியில் தன்னையும் காத்துக்கொண்டு, தன்கணவனையும் காப்பாற்றி, தகுதியமைந்த புகழையும் காத்து உறுதி தளராமல் வாழ்கின்றவளே பெண்).

A woman is one who vigilantly guards herself,
Cares for her husband and protects their unblemished reputation.

A good wife will not spare herself in her triple duties of protecting herself, her husband and the fair name of her family. Legend has it that Valluvar himself had such a wife, Vasuki Ammaiyaar

குறள் 57:

சிறைகாக்கும் காப்பெவன் செய்யும் மகளிர்
நிறைகாக்கும் காப்பே தலை

(மகளிரைக் காவல் வைத்துக் காக்கும் காப்பு முறை என்ன பயனை உண்டாக்கும்? அவர்கள் நிறை என்னும் பண்பால் தம்மைத் தான் காக்கும் கற்பே சிறிந்தது).

Of what avail is watch and ward? A woman's will
Is the best safeguard of her honour.

Prison walls, pad-locks and chastity belts are absolutely of no use to ensure a woman's chastity. Her own conscience and inner strength will alone keep her really pure. Shakespeare's in his play *All's Well That Ends Well* states:

“ My chastity is the jewel of our house bequeathed
Down from many ancestors’.

குறள் 58:

பெற்றாற் பெறின்பெறுவர் பெண்டிர் பெருஞ்சிறப்புப்
புத்தேளிர் வாழும் உலகு

(கணவனைப் போற்றிக் கடமையைச் செய்யப்பெற்றால் மகளிர் பெரிய
சிறப்பை உடைய மேலுலகவாழ்வைப் பெறுவர்)

A wife who helps her husband to win name and fame, will not only share the honour
With her husband, but will gain glory in heaven.

A wife shall be a sharer in all the honour and glory of her husband , which she has helped
him to attain, not only in this world but also in the God's delight.

குறள் 59:

புகழ்புரிந் தில்லிலோர்க் கில்லை இகழ்வார்முன்
ஏறுபோல் பீடு நடை

(புகழைக் காக்க விரும்பும் மனைவி இல்லாதவர்க்கு, இகழ்ந்து பேசும்
பகைவர் முன் காளை போல் நடக்கும் பெருமித நடை இல்லை).

Who have not spouses that in virtue's praise delight,
They lion-like can never walk in scorner's sight.

A man , who is not fortunate to have good wife that assists him along the path to honor and
glory , dare not walk like a lion in the midst of his enemies

Shakespeare's sarcastic remarks in *Measure for Measure* expresses ‘A Light wife doth
make a heavy husband’ .

குறள் 60:

மங்கலம் என்ப மனைமாட்சி மற்றதன்
நன்கலம் நன்மக்கட் பேறு

(மனைவியின் நற்பண்பே இல்வாழ்க்கைக்கு மங்கலம் என்று கூறுவர்: நல்ல மக்களைப் பெறுதலே அதற்கு நல்லணிகலம் என்று கூறுவர்).

A worthy wife is the blessing of a home,
And good children are its precious ornament.

The greatness of a family is determined by a good wife; and good children are the ornaments thereof.

The systematic and sincere analysis of Womanhood in Tirukkural excels the chastity, morality, virtues, virtuous of woman. It cautions and threatens woman indirectly with regard to chastity and morality and imposes strong sanctions against even minor discretions on the part of woman which will lead to the destroy of entire family. She is taught to be shy, gentle and dignified, pure and faithful wife, selfless, loving and thoughtful mother. Based on these qualities Acharya quotes :

Karyeshu mantra , karaneshu daasi
Rupeshu Lakshmi, kshamaya Dharithri
Bhojyeshu mata , shayanethu Rambha,
Shat karma yukta , kula dharma patni(*Woman and Her Family-2*)

Which means woman is like a slave while working /serving –a minister when counseling/advising-Goddess Lakshmi in her looks/personality- the earth in forbearance – a mother while feeding-Rambha, the celestial prostitute in bed –these are the true characteristics of an ideal wife. Tirukkural also views woman in the same aspect and glorifies woman. The woman was defined in terms of utility value, as a commodity or goods. She always had to be under protection or authority of one or the other. The portrayal of womanhood in Tirukkural is thus a self denying and self sacrificing being.

Comparing such self denying, self sacrificing, acquiescent, subdued, silent and submissive characteristic features of the womanhood to the current scenario , today's women are strivers and aspirers toward freedom, toward goodness, toward a compassionate world. The emancipated, independent, educated womanhood wants to be active; a taker and refuses the passivity man means to impose on her. The modern woman accepts masculine values; she prides herself in thinking, taking action , working, creating same terms as men , instead of seeking to disparage them, she declares herself their equal.

To conclude, men and women are equals and peaceful survival depends on mutual respect and understanding. Women have moral courage to claim the rights, they are born to lead, educate, sometimes to triumph.

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