

Portrayal of Women in Tamil Fiction

The author has traced in this book the transformation of Tamil women into individuals with independent thinking and identity in a very interesting way. Works of gifted writers — both men and women — have been discussed. The stories given as illustrations denounce social evils and show how reformers and even rulers took a stand against the prevalent evils at a time when it was difficult to even imagine that these could be abolished. The Tamil women have been depicted as bold, courageous decision-makers and achievers. Women who have problems in the families have been shown struggling and fighting against odds. Indian women have clearly emerged today as a force to reckon with. They are more inquisitive, searching, independent, tender and compassionate — in short, a vital source for the betterment of the society.



राष्ट्रीय शैक्षिक अनुसंधान और प्रशिक्षण परिषद्
NATIONAL COUNCIL OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH AND TRAINING

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Foreword

THIS BOOK traces the changes that have come in Tamil creative writing from pre-independence period to post-independence period. These changes influenced the thinking of the people.

The author Aruna Srinivasan has discussed the transformation of women into individuals with independent thinking and identity in a very interesting way. She has rightly avoided being exhaustive keeping in mind the formative age-group of the children. Works of gifted writers—both men and women—have been discussed. Also sufficient focus has been given on the perceptions of male authors on women. The stories given as illustrations denounce social evils and show how reformers and even rulers took a stand against the prevalent evils at a time when it was difficult to even imagine that these could be abolished. Women have been depicted as bold, courageous decision-makers and achievers. The role of education in bringing about change in women's thinking has been discussed. Education did help in bringing about a positive change. Women who have problems in the families have been shown struggling and fighting against odds.

Literature plays a very important role in the growth and development of children. A book like this will surely influence children's attitudes in a positive way. I congratulate Aruna Srinivasan for writing the book and Dr Indira Kulshreshtha for planning the project.

DR K. GOPALAN
Director

New Delhi
August 1993

National Council of Educational
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Preface

YOUNG READERS, join me in a voyage of discovery of how Tamil fiction has portrayed the tremendous changes in the conditions of women in the society during the last 150 years. Literature, the mirror of society, reflects the way people think and behave at any point of time. During the last 150 years, thanks to the impact of national movement and social reforms, many of the traditional views of the society on the status of women have undergone a sea change. The spread of education has enhanced the enlightenment of women.

The purpose of this book is to trace these changes as reflected in the creative writing over the period and how these works have in turn influenced the popular opinion. Let us travel back briefly into the past—the pre-independence era—and then move forward to the modern period. The voyage is going to be a delightful experience for both of us—the writer as the guide and the readers as the explorers.

The chapters that follow will show you how gradually women have emerged from shadows of the men and have been transformed into strong individuals with distinct identities. Interestingly Tamil fiction doesn't restrict itself to depicting only Tamil women. In many of the works you will find characters from other parts of the world as well, as backdrops to illustrate a particular Indian character. Therefore, this work is not merely about the portrayal of Tamil women but of women in general as perceived by gifted Tamil writers.

More than 50 works of fiction have been analysed. In the following pages I have presented excerpts to illustrate the theme of a positive vision of the role of women in Indian society. In Tamil, every year thousands of short

stories and hundreds of novels are either published in periodicals or as books. The canvas is mind-bogglingly vast. My attempt to discover the image of women in Tamil fiction is like trying to scoope out a few pearls from the depths of the ocean. The handful of examples I have managed to gather give but a glimpse of both the changes in society and the developments in contemporary Tamil literature in which changing woman is an increasing thematic preoccupation.

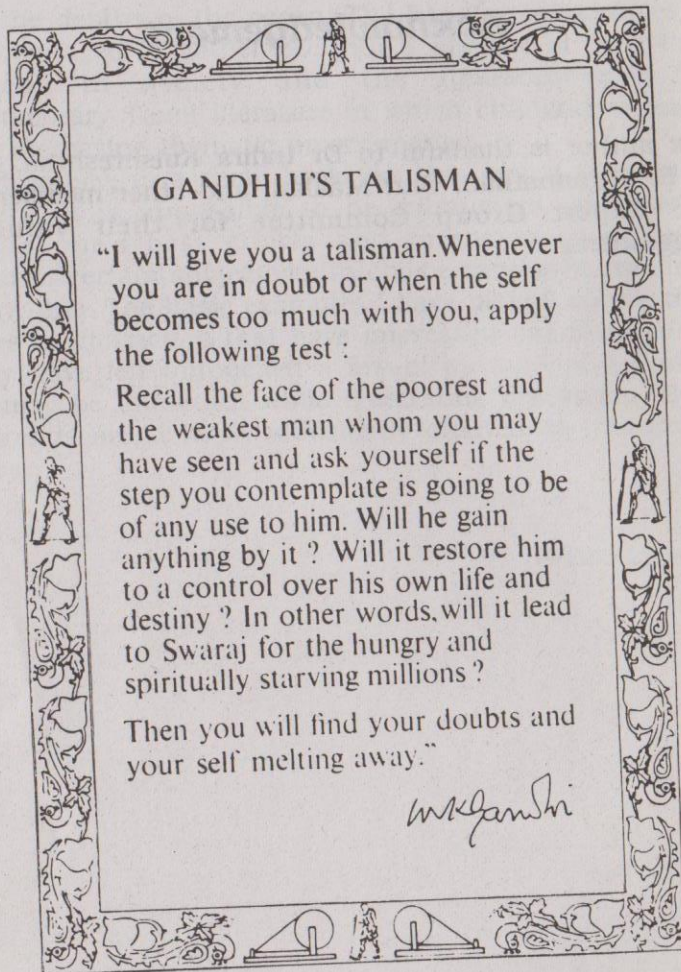
Obviously, in a small book like this meant for young readers, it is impossible to be exhaustive. Moreover, despite one's best efforts and intention to remain objective, certain subjectivity in choice cannot be avoided for any one. The basic examples I have picked up are the stories or characters that have impressed me personally.

may have left untouched a few of authors and works that may be important while illustrating my theme. But the trends are, I hope, sufficiently charted in this brief survey.

—THE AUTHOR

Acknowledgement

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GANDHIJI'S TALISMAN

"I will give you a talisman. Whenever you are in doubt or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test :

Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man whom you may have seen and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he gain anything by it ? Will it restore him to a control over his own life and destiny ? In other words, will it lead to Swaraj for the hungry and spiritually starving millions ?

Then you will find your doubts and your self melting away."

M.K. Gandhi

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Pioneers' Voices and Visions

WHEN India woke up from the deep slumber of political servitude and economic stagnation, Indian society began to experience the stirrings of a new social transformation. Among the many exciting social changes that leaders like Mahatma Gandhi initiated, was the recognition of the role of women in the struggle for political and social emancipation. Evils like child marriage, cruelties heaped on widowhood, caste prejudices and untouchability held unchallenged sway till then. Kindled with the new inspiration from the reformers, the writers deployed their mighty pen to discuss these themes. Subramanya Bharathi, Vedanayagam Pillai, Madhavaiah were the pioneers to lead the crusade in the first two decades of this century. During the thirties and later, writers like Va. Ramaswamy, B. Rajam Iyer, Ku. Pa. Rajagopalan, and Pudumaipitthan carried forward the impulses of the pioneers through their works.

Bharathi's Tulsi Bai, a Rajput woman, is the first worded short story in Tamil and hence a

hallmark in Tamil fiction. This very first short story of Tamil advocates intercaste marriage, abolition of child marriage and abolition of *sati*. Tulsi Bai, a Rajput girl, is to be married to a young Rajput man. While she was going to her groom's place, she was ambushed by robbers. Abbas Khan, a young Muslim in Akbar's court, saves her life and honour. The girl proceeds on her journey. Later, Abbas Khan meets her again, but in a different situation. By now Tulsi's husband has died and as per Rajput custom, she is about to be 'glorified' in *sati* wherein Rajput women consign themselves to flames in their husbands' pyres. Akbar had banned this cruel custom in his regime and Abbas Khan considers it his duty to prevent the ghastly deed. He saves Tulsi Bai once again after a fight with the other Rajput soldiers. Meanwhile he realises that he is in love with the lady and they both get married later. The story strongly denounces all the three major evils, particularly in a period when no one can imagine that these laws were breakable.

Madhavaiah's novel *Muthu Meenakshi* is set in a period when the social and religious reformist movements like Arya Samaj, the Prarthana Samaj and the Ramakrishna Mission were ushering in. These had a great impact on the literature of the times, particularly on issues like women's education, widow marriage, etc. Muthu Meenakshi, the heroine of the novel is married when she is hardly nine, to a 30-year old man as his second wife. In those days, girls were married off before attaining puberty and were ill-treated

like slaves. Muthu Meenakshi not only slogs in the house but also faces physical harassment from her husband. This nurtures in her a hatred towards him and his mother who instigates him to have physical relationship with her much against her wishes, even when she was not physically ready for it. When the husband dies, her condition worsens and she suffers ill treatment at her own home as well as at her in-law's place. Madhavaiah describes vividly the terrible conditions uneducated and poor widows were pushed into. As they were uneducated they were to depend on their relatives for their living. Fortunately for her, a young man, Sundarasan comes forward to marry the widowed Muthu Meenakshi. Her own brother, who also espouses the cause of widow marriage encourages the move and gets her married to Sundarasan. The story emphatically stresses the need of education for women.

Kodhai Theevu (The Island of Kothai) by another well-known writer, Va. Ramaswamy, is another interesting story written in pre-independent India. Written in 1945, the story is about an utopian island, ruled only by women. Va. Ramaswamy was passionately committed to women's emancipation and this story asserts this ideal forcefully. His other works which deal elaborately with women's issues are *Sundari* and *Vijayam*.

Kü. Pa. Rajagopalan is one of the authors nurtured by the magazine *Manikodi Verottam* is an unfinished work yet it is very modern in its approach and reveals a profound psychological insight into the ways women think and feel.

Rapid expansion of women's education in the decade since the thirties paved way for independent thinking among women. Greater awareness on the inequalities suffered by women in our society ushered in among the more enlightened sections of the community. This was fully reflected in the fiction of the subsequent decades. By the fifties and sixties the image of women in India and in Indian literature was radically altered. There is no turning back since then.

Kalki R. Krishna Murthy was among the most popular authors who portrayed women characters with great depth. He started his career as a journalist with the magazine *Navasakthi* and later moved on to become the editor of the famous weekly, *Ananda Vikatan*. In the later years he started his own weekly naming it after his pen name, *Kalki*. The new forum gave him greater freedom. Living through the era of the freedom struggle, the focus of his writing was naturally on the various facets of the struggle. With equal fervour he was writing about women displaying independent thinking. Though most women of his days were chained to domesticity, yet the women in his novels were independent and strong-willed persons. Tharini, one of the main characters in his novel *Alai Osai*, is introduced as a woman who volunteers to help the victims of an earthquake in Bihar. She is a North Indian whom Raghavan, a South Indian, loves. Because of the mischief of his mother, who did not like her son to marry a North Indian, he is led to believe that Tharini is dead and marries Sita, chosen by his

mother. Meanwhile, Tharini involves herself more deeply in the freedom struggle. She is portrayed in the novel as a unique woman with strong ideals. She was not after money and ostentations. The author depicts her as a thorough idealist. In contrast there are two characters, Lalitha and Sita, who expect nothing more from life than a good husband, home and children. This was a common attitude among women in those days. While the cousins Sita and Lalitha have no other interests to share and discuss except their families and husbands, Tharini is all the time discussing with Surya, another revolutionary like her, the details of the struggle.

Kalki's sharply etched portrayal of different kinds of women in this novel is an example of his sympathetic understanding of issues relating to women.

Other writers of this period also presented their heroines as courageous and idealistic like Tharini. Many of these characters were housewives confined to a domestic schedule. But they did show strains of rare mettle and noble qualities. In the days when women seldom stepped out of their houses, these heroines showed remarkable ability in decision-making in and outside their homes. Though confined mostly within four walls, they were capable of giving sound advice and guidance to their menfolk who were normally their 'lords' and 'masters'. Many of them took part in the freedom struggle as did the women in real life of their generation.

Education: A Blessing for Women

BY THE fifties and sixties, writers like Mu. Varadarajan, T. Janakiraman, Na. Parthasarathy, Indira Parthasarathy, Sundara Ramaswamy, Akilan, Jayakanthan, Thi. Sa. Raju, La. Sa. Ramamurtham, Asokamitran, P. V. Ramanathan, R. Choodamani, Rajarn Krishnan, Lakshmi and many others came on the scene in Tamil fiction. They depicted women with great insight and depth. By this time women in the society started realising that they are no longer handmaidens dancing to the tunes of men but are human beings with independent thinking, questioning many customs and traditions which were earlier taken for granted. Women characters of Tamil fiction, by and large, started reflecting them. In fact the novels and short stories encouraged such thinking in the society.

T. Janakiraman, the Sahitya Akademi awardee in 1979, was a writer with a powerful pen. *Mohomul* (The Thorn of Desire), his masterpiece, has many memorable women characters. Yamuna and her mother betrayed by

their own relatives in the partition of family properties, collect their courage and set out to face the challenges of life. Yamuna realises the importance of education. Janakiraman's description of situations and emotions are down to earth. The sheer depth of each story and the characterisation make you involve with them totally. These are characters with distinct identity. Another memorable character is Alangarathamma, the mother in *Amma Vandal* (Mother Arrived) who live her life unmindful of others' criticism about her.

Akilan is an expert in portraying women's feelings. *Chithirappavai*, his remarkable work which earned him the Gyanpeeth award, deals elaborately with the impacts of education on women. Anandhi, the heroine, is a modern woman, but strongly rooted in traditional values. She loves Annamalai, a young artist. But due to circumstances she is forced to marry his brother, Manickam. During a financial crisis, Manickam seeks the help of Annamalai and wants him to sign a document. Anandhi smells rat and is afraid that Annamalai will get into trouble. She feels she is being used by her husband as a bait to achieve his evil designs. She feels quite restless. Akilan describes her condition in one poignant sentence: "...Yet...Yet...Yet...he is her husband..." This reveals how women, however educated they might be, were conditioned to support their husbands in their immoral designs. Anandhi continues to tolerate the vile ways of her villainous husband but snaps her relationship finally when his cruel behaviour exceeds all limits. In a physical tussle her

Mangalsutra comes apart accidentally and with that her symbolic bondage too. She undergoes a radical transformation and becomes strong enough to leave her husband for good.

Anuthama was another novelist popular in the fifties and sixties. Her novel *Muthuchippi* (Oyster Shell), traces how educated friends by their associations transform Alamelu, an uneducated girl, into a sophisticated and enlightened girl.

P. V. Ramanathan, better known by his initials P. V. R., is a writer who started writing in early fifties and is still popular. Be it the locale of his subject or a character, his description and delineation is sharp and accurate to the minute details. They lend a reality to his theme. His women characters are usually the ones we meet in everyday life. His keen observation of personalities reflects in his works and no wonder even an ordinary next-door girl becomes extraordinary in his deft hands. Jana, in his novel *Manakolam* (Bridal Decor), is one such woman working in a post-office. Set in sixties, the story revolves around three sisters and their perceptions of life. Around that period, women education had become an accepted fact in Tamil society and working women were a common sight. Jana is a fun-loving and free-thinking person. She is also a conscientious human being, who can't stand injustice in any form. She fights tooth and nail to establish the truth. She puts in all her efforts to stop the alliance of her elder sister, Sita with an ugly wayward fellow who was already married but hides the truth. At the end of the story, in a different situation, she even

sacrifices her own happy married life for the sake of establishing the justice. She happens to fall in love with Raja who had swindled large amount of money illegally in his office. She learns the truth later. However, she goes ahead into marriage with him—only to hand him over to the police, in a tricky plot conceived in her own intelligent way. Jana's greatness is revealed in the words of Lakshmi Amma, the unhappy mother of Raja : "Nobody on earth could have done the noble deed you have done Jana ..." She says, "...You have wrenched your own eyes...Don't bother about the society... When there is a situation where you have to save a life, it is reasonable enough to wrench one's own eyes... Not one but even both, if need be."

During that period, Tamil fiction was mostly preoccupied with emotional conflicts. While noble qualities of compassion, tolerance and universal love were highlighted, the negative qualities like jealousy, greed and hatred were portrayed to proclaim the triumph of good over evil. The human relationships were discussed at great length, adding colour to the stories.

Lakshmi was a writer who dealt extensively with various facets of the human heart particularly of women. She was a doctor of medicine. Her real name was Dr Thirupara Sundari and she was a much sought after name among her patients as she was among her publishers. Most of her stories were about housewives who were idealistic, intelligent, and lovable. They were invariably great achievers, be it at home or in the world outside.

Lakshmi's *Penn Maram* (A Woman's Mind),

for instance, is a novel written in 1949. Chandra, the main character of the story, is portrayed as an uneducated woman with a broad outlook. She skilfully thwarts the attempts of her step-mother to get her married off as the second wife to a widower. Her dreams about an ideal husband are shattered when she marries Jagannathan, an arrogant man. But her basic instincts provide enough strength to fight for a dignified life.

The character of Chandra is also portrayed as an ideal wife, the basic strain of most of Lakshmi's works, particularly the earlier ones. Chandra in this story rescues her uncivilised husband from some criminal charges even much against the wishes of her in-laws. Lakshmi emphasises the point that life's various struggles and crises have to be faced with compassion and understanding rather than making them an occasion for asserting antagonism. In this story, the wife overcomes her crisis and tames her husband with her deft approach. On the other hand, in one of her last novels titled *Kazhuthil Vizhunda Malai* (The Garland round the Neck), Lakshmi portrays an enlightened mother-in-law who encourages her daughter-in-law to obtain divorce from her husband, although he is the old lady's own son. The author maintains in her later novels that injustices should not be put up with and a loveless marriage is not worth maintaining.

Vanitha is a novel which Lakshmi wrote in 1984. The central character Vanitha is a middle class working wife. Family circumstances force her to work despite all the hardships at home and in the office. While describing Vanitha's problems the writer also speaks about the plight

of women in working class families too. The poor women carrying heavy load at the construction site can't run away from doing dangerous jobs. She must put up with her hardships for she needs the money. Even as Vanitha worries about the poor women at the construction site, her thoughts revolve around her own child left behind at home under the care of her in-laws. One day when she returns home she finds her child hurt and bleeding. Her in-laws resent her working and that is the main cause of all the daily squabbles. They think that Vanitha is having easy time at office while they slog at home managing the home and the child. Therefore, everyone insists Vanitha to quit the job and stay at home like the rest of them. The mother-in-law says : "If women step out for earning they become very independent". And the sister-in-law added: "They become too proud that they don't even care for their husbands." However, the husband supports Vanitha. He argues that even the sister-in-law who claims to be staying at home does go out and enjoy her shopping or visits to friends' places. He argues that they too enjoy freedom. "The concept of independence depends on the individual", he says.

Another dimension of the women's predicament presented in this novel is how a woman turns into the worst enemy of another woman. Vanitha's own sister refuses to help her even when the need arises. She too resents the working sister who, according to her, is too conceited because of her earning capacity. When her husband is down with an accident and is hospitalised, the family behaves indifferently. This

hurts Vanitha and her husband. She manages alone the entire traumatic period. Later, the couple along with their son shift to another place to live independently.

Destiny strikes Vanitha's parents-in-law and their economic conditions now force the sister-in-law to work under Vanitha. The girl realises how cruel she had been to her sister-in-law earlier. She begins to admire Vanitha now and says:

I have realised now that education is very important for a woman, particularly professional qualification and technical knowledge. Even if she is married into a wealthy family, if need arises, she can make a living in a decent way. Again, in these days of soaring prices only if both the husband and the wife earn, one can make both ends meet. It is a crime to waste one's education in idle gossip... When there is a need, the wife should be able to help the husband carry the burden...

By dint of her hard work and efficiency Vanitha is an officer now. But her basic good nature hasn't left her. She sympathises with her sister-in-law and tries hard to patch up with the parents-in-law. And all is well that ends well. This is the hallmark of most of Lakshmi's works. She invariably shows the triumph of good over evil in the end.

Kamala Satakopan is another writer who highlights the role of women in society. Her novel *Padigal* (Steps) won the first prize in 1978 from the Tamil Development Board of the Government of Tamil Nadu. In this story, parents die one after another leaving Harini their grown-up daughter

and a baby boy, their son, born in the evening of their lives. The person Harini wanted to marry refuses to take her along with her baby brother who, he thinks, is born with a curse, since his parents died soon after his birth. Harini is not willing to desert the baby or to leave him in an orphanage. She prefers to remain alone to bring up her brother. She is determined to marry only the man who is willing to accept her along with her brother. Even when her one-time fiance approaches her again, she says firmly:

Sorry. To bring up Hari is my sole ambition in life. He has not done anything wrong that he should be left alone in an orphanage. I may not be able to give him an excellent life; at least I want to make sure that he gets the complete affection which he would have got from our parents.

Harini accepts the invitation to reside with a friend of her father Eswaran who treats her like a daughter. But his son is a spoilt brat. The story is woven around Harini's endeavours to reform this wayward son, Prasad. Many a times she is put to test but she holds on to her only asset, courage. The author describes :

When her mother died she reiterated her faith in her daughter's courage and confidence, but never mentioned anything about her father supporting or carrying the burden for her. Therefore, Harini was determined never to give up her great asset, courage, till the end... she was going to manage somehow... positively ... under any circumstances... .

Harini is portrayed as a woman with matured mind. Unlike others in the household, she talks

to Prasad boldly and never hesitates to tell him what she feels as right. Her aim is to change his wayward ways and she measures her progress in this endeavour with the aid of a chart in her room. Through her intelligent strategies and novel methods she not only changes him but also wins his heart.

The author shows how Harini succeeds in her efforts to reform by employing indirect methods. When she teaches little Hari good manners, Prasad picks up the cue. Eventually he begins to behave himself to win her approval. Later, he rescues her from the clutches of his friend with evil intentions on her. He tells her, "You showed me the value of living, really ...Your composed dignity, calmness and humility made me revere you greatly..."

Education also brought pragmatism into women's thinking. Many of them began to see life from fresh angles and work in any form was considered a virtue. Latha, an interesting character in Lakshmi's *Mangalavin Kanavan* (Mangala's Husband), is a role-model of the 'new woman'. Depicted as a close friend of the heroine Mangala, Latha is a modern thinking woman in the true sense. As a typical emancipated woman, Latha earns her living by working in a firm and is a great friend of Mangala who works in another company located in the same area. Mangala remains unmarried because of the calamity that struck two of her earlier betrothed persons. Society has branded her as the 'ill-fated bride'. The story revolves around many vicissitudes that flow from this superstition. Her friend Latha remains a moral support to her. She ultimately

finds the husband of her choice and is happily married.

It is basically Latha's matured outlook that gives strength to Mangala in her distress. Latha is always cheerful despite her straightened circumstances and takes these problems in her stride. And when Mangala comes to her, breaking down after an incident in office, she consoles her saying :

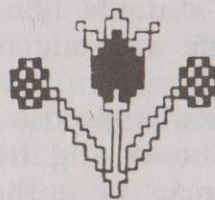
I have also suffered like this in three places before joining the present job. But I wouldn't say that all men are bad. I have no right to come to that conclusion. It is just that sometimes we happen to come across such mean characters. Just by accident, that is all...

On another occasion Mangala says: I consider any job is good and noble as long as we do it sincerely. We shouldn't really bother about our status or our educational qualifications. We shouldn't hesitate to sweat it out... Also women should remember that once a woman starts working outside her home, it is like walking on knife and she must have strong mind.

When Mangala was given a choice of choosing between her home and her jewels, she is literally in a dilemma. The author says: Why this trauma for her? Is it because she has no one to turn to? All her contribution to the family, by her physical as well as financial help, has become futile. Why can't a woman live alone on her own earnings?

And finally Mangala gathers enough courage to live alone in a hostel. The example of a woman

bank officer leads her to this decision. The lady lives all by herself and is a respected figure in the neighbourhood. Even in the hostel, Mangala faces a problem through a woman, who is jealous of her. She refuses to open the gates for her when she happened to be late one evening. Mangala, with no one else to turn to at that hour, seeks the help of Kasinathan, her colleague who lives closeby. On hearing her trouble he comments: "Many of women's problems are created by other women. It is not just men alone who cause them misery." The example cited here clearly proves that not all women are as fragile as conventional wisdom makes them out to be. They not only possess independent views on life, but are strong enough to lead a life on their own principle.



3

Women as Achievers

SO FAR, we have been looking at women, strong or frail as the case may be, in ordinary circumstances. Now let us turn to the depiction of women in Tamil fiction as high achievers, both in their career and life. Women may be frail as compared to men but they could be strong-willed too. In a crisp short story, R. Choodamani, a well-known writer sensitive to the many facets of women's behaviour, brings out a woman's ability to understand the subtleties of human relationships and at the same time, her determination to achieve what she wants.

Choodamani's story *Oru Malai Pozhuthil Iru Thozhier* (Two Friends on an Evening) is about the tender relationship between two friends, who happened to be sisters-in-law. Damodharan is very proud of his journalist wife. But the admiration soon turns into jealousy. He asks her to choose between him and her career. The wife Hema chooses the latter, and subsequently the couple divorce. One day Hema accidentally meets Tulasi, Damodharan's sister. They chat normally. Contrary to Hema's expectation that Tulasi will

be hostile, Tulasi talks to her warmly and reinforces her support to Hema's action, without actually mentioning it. She says that her relationship with Hema was always cordial and would remain so for ever. The story is an effective portrayal of strong values cherished by many women.

Balakumaran is one of the modern writers who has achieved great popularity in recent years. He writes about women, their problems and their potentiality as human beings with sensitivities. As one of his admirers puts it: "If ever there is a debate on the status of women, one can easily point out to all of Balakumaran's novels and be rest assured that the entire gamut is thoroughly traversed."

Eswari in Balakumaran's *Aaruyire Mannavare* (My Darling), is a simple woman who becomes a popular journalist. Besides showing the love between her and her husband the story also goes around her efforts to come up in life. And in his *Assi Enum Vedam* (The Scripture called Desire), is the story of a woman who is ill-treated by her husband and later becomes a widow. The story is woven around her struggle to make her living by working in a bank. Staying alone she also brings up her child. In this same novel the writer handles the issue of widow marriages also. Vasumati, the heroine, loves a client who visits the bank often. But because of her inferior social status remains cautious in her approach. This does not prevent tongues wagging about her. One fine morning she marries him. Even her own folks are against her move, but she ignores them and has a happy new life.

In one of her later novels, *Kazhuthil Vizhunda Maalai* (The Garland round the Neck), Lakshmi portrays a wonderful working mother-in-law in Kasturi. Kasturi is the symbol of good working mothers who later on go on to become good mothers-in-law. Her son loves a girl who deserts him after a while. Later, Kasturi gets her son married to another girl who is poor and uneducated. The son hates her and refuses to live with his wife. Undeterred, Kasturi sends her daughter-in-law to one of her friends at Bangalore who gives her a proper education and sees to it that she settles in a career of her own. Towards the end Kasturi also arranges for her daughter-in-law to obtain divorce from her son, who refuses to live with his wife. Now that Mathangi, the daughter-in-law, is capable of managing on her own, she wants to be relieved her of a marriage which in any case was only a marriage in name. On hearing about the divorce proceedings, the son has a change of heart and wants his wife back. The whole story is woven around the struggles of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law team, to assert against unthinking male oppressions.

There are a number of novels and short stories in which women successfully overcome obstacles in a male-dominated world and find for themselves a place under the sun by sheer force of character.

Lakshmi in Vasanthi's *Indre Nasiyungal* (Love Today Itself) who is a union leader in a factory, Vanita in Lakshmi's *Vanita*, Amudha in Amudha Ganesan's *Vazhande Katuven*, Poorani in Na. Parthasarathy's *Kurinji Malar* who is portrayed as

a great writer-cum-politician are a few more examples of women as achievers.

Talking of women portrayed as independent of spirit capable of thinking for themselves and becoming great achievers, one cannot but recall the works of Ambai. She is a committed feminist writer, exposing the hypocrisies and cruelties of male chauvinism. In one of her stories *Veetin Moolayil Oru Samayalarai* (A Kitchen in the Corner of the House), she explains with extraordinary subtlety, the double standard that condemns women to an inferior status. It is a family in Rajasthan, and the whole household revolves around eating and entertaining. The menfolk keep giving order into the kitchen which in fact is no more than a dark messy place. It is the most important yet the most neglected area of the otherwise spacious house. The men of the house couldn't care about what goes on in the kitchen. And the women of the family are always at work there. Strangely, even the educated daughters-in-law of the family get caught in this male chauvinist web. When this is pointed out by a character in the story, Gopal, the husband, replies quite nonchalantly, "So what? Women are used to that..." The family goes for a picnic. Even there the women are constantly busy, either serving the men or looking after the needs of the kids. No help comes from the menfolk. In one situation the author describes an ideal daughter-in-law according to these male chauvinists: "She could be well-educated but quiet. Fair looking...., obedient....," The list of male-oriented attributes in a woman is endless.

In another story Ambai describes a pregnant

woman working in the fields. She works even when she is in labour pains and her relatives take her to a doctor only after her work is over. In yet another story she dwells on the conditioning of boys and girls even as they grow. The discriminations start early when the girl is not allowed to play boys' games such as flying kites, etc. The girl is restricted in so many ways while the boy is left free. Girls are forced to learn cooking and are discouraged to choose science subjects at school or college level. The author also has stories showing how women are exploited in male-dominated advertising world, where she is basically shown as someone who attracts men in some way. The image of women rarely goes beyond these traditional moulds, and even working women are cast in docile professions, or junior positions.

Thilakavathi, a senior official in police service, based her stories on her own experiences. She introduces women who tell you to come out of the shackles imposed ages ago, as she herself has done. Her women are refreshingly different from the conventional ones whose world is limited to domesticity and obedience, accepting gracefully strings of flowers her husband buys for her, and week-end outings. Her women are able to see the world beyond the four walls of the house, and are courageous enough to face the hazards of the world outside.

Selvi in Thilakavathi's story *Coodaagi Vandhadhoru* (Within the Cocoon), is portrayed as

a talented student who loves a fellow student and marries him. But things turn topsy-turvy some time after the marriage. A friend of hers discovers that she has lost all of her old sparkle and enthusiasm. In her own deft way the author describes how a woman loses her identity when she marries a male chauvinist. Selvi's husband welcomes her pay-packet but all the same resents her economic independence. Says Thilakavathi: "Selvi, who should have made her mark as a Gargi or a Mytherei or an Amrita Pritam, simply shrank into a child-bearing and cooking machine. Yet she didn't collapse just because of that." What actually infuriated her was her husband's attitude that her life as a woman was meant for that alone. "A woman should concentrate on her domestic work alone. If she starts reading the morning newspaper like a man, the family is finished." Her husband used to chide her often. Selvi understands his psyche only gradually. He is afraid that she is going to prove herself superior to him in every respect. And he can't tolerate that, nor recognise her separate identity as an individual. Her involvement with her work further irritates him. But Selvi tackles this problem with self-assurance. She ignores his rebukes and goes about her work. As she was more involved in her work and the children, the chasm between them widens further. And in the end the author compares the husband to that of a snake deprived of its venom.

T. Janakiraman is another great writer who

has drawn many women characters with sensibility and strength. Rukku in his short story *Sivappu Rikshaw* (Red Rikshaw), is a brave and intelligent girl. When she is travelling by bus to her college, an eve-teaser troubles her. Rukku, in her own courageous way pinches him sharply, till blood drips through her fingers. The author describes, "Rukku can manage any situation. She is capable of dealing with men who try to misbehave with her. She exudes confidence. She is a combination of both beauty and courage."



Fighting against Barriers

ONE of the important changes after independence was the gradual realisation by women that many of the established norms of society were designed to curb or restrict their growth as individuals. They began to question the discrimination between men and women. They raised their voices against the old traditions which denied them their identity. Naturally, this change in attitude is reflected in contemporary literature and such writings inspired women to initiate the role-models portrayed therein.

The seventies saw a deluge of writers, who despite their differences, were passionately committed to the assertion of women as individual human beings and not mere appendages to men. Rajam Krishnan, Ambai, Lakshmi Kannan, Jyothilatha Girija, Thilakavathi are some of the writers who did not write continuously but when they did write, made a stunning impact. Vasanthi, Sivasankari, Indumati, Balakumaran, and Anuradha Ramanan were more prolific and their stories were strongly

motivated by a deep hostility to traditional norms that stifled individuality in women.

Aakasa Veedugal (Castles in the Sky) is one of Vasanthi's famous novels. Meenu, one of the main characters in the story, revolts against meaningless social traditions. As a young college student living with her aunt and uncle, she discovers to her horror what a loveless marriage their elders have had. At the time they were married, her uncle Sabesan was considered the best match for Lalitha, her aunt. Wasn't Sabesan well qualified, rich and with no bad habits? What more could she want in a husband? That was how people thought in those days. But Meenu, whose perception of marriage is different finds out the emptiness of their lives and their incompatibility. They should never have married, she thinks. Lalitha was a fine person, married to a boorish Sabesan, who has no appreciation for the finer qualities of his wife.

The story takes place in a village where traditional customs are strictly adhered to. Meenu fumes against her uncle's rude behaviour and also against the society that discriminates against women. The men in the village are free to do whatever they like. But women are restricted within the four walls. The suicide of a woman, unable to tolerate her husband's wayward ways, comes as a rude shock to the other women of the village. But here was this woman who dared to do so, even if it meant her own death. And Meenu observes approvingly: "Only now women of this village have learnt to rise against injustice. Even this death is a revolt." But she is clear-sighted enough to see that it is also an act of

cowardice. She urges her aunt, Lalitha, who silently tolerates all the ill-treatment from her husband, to raise her voice. When her uncle admonishes her for talking to a boy and prevents her from going to the college, she retorts sharply: "Why should I stop going to the college? I haven't done anything wrong. I am not at all guilty of any misdeed." Her outspokenness shocks Sabesan, who was hitherto used only to submissiveness from his wife and the young son with whom he is unreasonably strict and who is literally scared of him.

Meenu is also impatient with women who don't take their studies seriously. She hates women going to school or college just to become eligible in the marriage market. She is irritated when she sees some of her classmates treating their studies as a mere diversion. She fumes: "This today's younger generation! They are too lazy even to think. And what kind of a society are they going to create? How long are they going to remain second class citizens in this country." In all these reflections the author is speaking through Meenu.

Lalitha, the aunt, is portrayed as totally different from Meenu. In fact, she is out of the world, too generous, all-loving, forgiving every wrong done to her. She even understands her husband's rudeness. Instead of complaining, she explains his psyche. This perhaps is the reason why she never tries to change her husband, despite being a well-educated and intelligent woman. When the couple lose their son tragically, she remains solidly with him sympathising with him from the depth of her heart.

There is another shining example of women who swim against the tide of social taboos and traditional bondage in Sita in P. V Ramanathan's *Manakolangal* (Bridal Decor). Sita is the eldest of the three sisters. Her engagement is broken because of the sudden demise of her father. The weddings are always a lavish affair in Indian families involving huge expenditure and Tamil families are no exception. Many marriages have broken down and many girls have remained spinsters because their parents lack the wherewithal for dowry and ostentatious weddings. When Sita's father died, the family lost the breadwinner. Consequently, with no money, Sita had to give up the idea of marriage. The author says: "Sita, getting ready for the marriage altar, woke up to realities. Had she been born a boy, what would she have done? Mother was sunk in her sorrow. Her thirteen-year old sister Jana had just entered her teens. The ten-year old Kamala was too young to feel the depth of the tragedy. She consoled herself saying that her husband-to-be was already dead for her, since he never came to her. But her mother's position was different. It was only natural that she forgot about her daughters in her sorrow. But Sita? Who would look after the family if she also lost herself in the storm? Who will support the sisters? And thus convincing herself, Sita stops thinking about her marriage and starts on a vigorous career with only the determination of supporting her family.

By 1970s and 1980s, Indian society had undergone a sea change in its attitude towards women. The media reflected this change. The Tamil fiction too played its part in espousing the

cause of women. 'Liberated women' were no longer considered shocking. PVR has, for example, shown such women as heroines in his novels. An example is 'Thaila' in 'My Lord'.

Thulsi, the heroine in his novel *Aadatha Oonjal* (The Swing that didn't Swing), published in the eighties is another example but with an odd twist. She prefers to leave her husband, not because of any hatred towards him but because of a childish obstinacy to obtain freedom from the bondage of house-work. She finds working in a joint family an intolerable burden forced on her. So she leaves her house to start living alone, though she is still dependent on her husband for money. She adamantly ignores her friend's advice to go back to her husband. However, while serving a charity organisation to give a meaning to her life, she realises the absurdity of her decision. If serving others can bring such immense satisfaction, why not serve her own family members? What was she achieving by depriving some people of her love and care, and giving the same elsewhere? She muses. Written on the simple theme that 'Charity begins at home' the author brings home the point that liberation without maturity of mind is meaningless.

Jayakanthan is among the most important of Tamil writers and has written some of the finest novels imbued with deep humanism. In his formative years he was deeply influenced by communism. But his basic quality is profound compassion and undying faith in the unconquerable human spirit. *Kathirukke Orutthi* (A Woman in Waiting) is one of his well-known

novels. Alagammal, the heroine, marries a cousin, a great violinist. After a few years of married life, he deserts her and starts living alone. But she is not devastated by his leaving her in the lurch. When a neighbour enquires about this, she replies without the slightest tinge of resentment: "He is a free bird. Our tastes were not complementary. He had no option but to leave me..." She has penetrating perception of the mysteries of life and takes her misfortunes in her stride. She neither suffers silently, as any conservative woman would do nor does she have any grudge against the man who deserted her. Her magnanimity stuns the reader throughout the novel. Both she and her husband Ramadurai are profound intellectuals. "It's better to part with the loved ones, if you want to avoid love turning into hatred." Ramadurai quotes Alagammal to their son explaining the practicability behind their separation. Elsewhere Alagammal further reiterates; "A woman has no right to suffer her husband's misdeeds meekly. If she does, she would only be a wretched wife and a suffering mother..."

In another novel *Oru Nadifgal Natakam Parkral* (An Actress Witnesses a Play), published in 1971, Jayakanthan portrays Kalyani as an extraordinary woman who, by her uninhibited love for Ranga, shows that selfless love is indeed benign. As portrayed by Jayakanthan, Kalyani is a complex individual with a mind of her own, whose thought processes are crystal clear. She is a stage actress but does not think of herself as belonging to a 'lowly profession' as was the general attitude in those days. She describes

herself as an admirer of life and proves it throughout the novel.

Jayakanthan's *Sila Neraangalil Sila Manidhargal* (Some People on Some Occasions), published in 1970, won Sahitya Akademi award. The story is about an ordinary simple-minded girl, who evolves into an highly independent individual by responding as a thinking woman to a series of adverse circumstances. Ganga, the heroine, loses her virginity accidentally, seduced by a rich man, and faces the wrath of her family, including her mother, who raises a storm over the incident. She is literally thrown out of the house on a rainy day. This is the turning point and she is thereafter determined to stand aloof from society and yet prove herself. Remaining unmarried after the traumatic event but concentrating on her career, she many years later accidentally meets Prabhu, the man who changed the even tenor of her girlhood. She finds him a middle-aged parent of a teenaged daughter. She is now too mature to show any resentment against him or to take revenge on him. On the other hand, she sympathises with him for his unhappy life despite his wealth. So she decided to extend the warmth of compassion and consideration to him. She meets him often and develops a friendly relationship without, however, seeking man-woman intimacy with him. As time passes, she develops a deep love for him and wants to marry him. But Prabhu declines and advises her to marry a suitable young man and put her life in order, as proposed by her family. Now that she has made good in life, with enviable professional advancement, she should not spoil her life by

marrying a man like him. Prabhu's obstinate refusal to marry her — though with the best of intentions, having her own welfare in mind — drives her to turn astray, taking to alcohol, etc. The story ends showing the mess of life she leads thereafter. It is a deeply moving story.

Let us turn to Lakshmi once again. I have already mentioned how in her earlier novels she took care to see that her women characters, subtle and sensitive as they were, did not stray beyond the traditional moulds. However, herself married outside her caste, she always encouraged breaking traditions, whenever necessary. Having stayed in South Africa along with her husband, she started writing stories with a South African background also. Her Sahitya Akademi award-winning novel *Oru Cauvereya Pola* (Like One Cauvery) is one such story. The heroine Cauvery is a South African citizen of Tamil origin who sets out to India, the land of her origin, to trace her roots with great dreams. But the reality she faces in India shatters her dreams and she realises that her roots really lay in South Africa, the land she was born in and brought up. She returns to Durban and marries Damodaran, a revolutionary, whom she always held in high esteem. Though her efforts became futile in one way, she makes a success as the brave wife of a revolutionary, involving herself wholeheartedly in the South African freedom struggle.

Ooravugal Pirivadhilai (Kinship Never Part) is another novel in which Lakshmi portrays a courageous woman Bargavi. Bargavi, a spinster throughout her life, boosts the morale of Sardha, a mother hurt by and estranged with all her

three sons. Bargavi's matchless courage in facing life's struggle all alone gives mental strength to Sardha. She philosophises to Sardha: "We came into the world alone and we must depart alone too. Life is a university in which we learn till the end..."

Thus, there is no dearth of novels and stories in which we meet women who raise their voices against injustice, meaningless and cruel traditions, and face life courageously. In recent times, periodicals have taken to encourage stories on the working class. Many of such stories are based on real life. *Paunamma*, written by Anuradha Ramanan, is one such.

Paunamma's husband leaves her after four days of marriage, in a dowry dispute, and marries another woman. After 25 years of living alone in poverty, she comes to know the death of her husband. Since he had not divorced her legally, her relatives advise her that she is entitled to the entire property her husband has left behind. The court's verdict is also in her favour. But on seeing the sorry plight of the illegal second wife and the children, she decides to support them. The magnanimity of this simple woman astounds the reader.

Rajam Krishnan, as mentioned earlier, has dealt extensively with women themes. Published in 1987, *Suzhalil Midhakum Deepangal* (Lamps Floating in a Whirlpool) is a novel revolving around the traumas of an educated woman forced to remain domesticated inside the four walls of the family. The author discusses through her main characters how freedom for women has been wrongly interpreted and how confused are

the perceptions about culture in our society. Different from the run-of-the-mill fiction that churn out fantasies, this novel instils a profound social consciousness in the readers.

Girija is an educated woman. She has a Master's and a B.Ed. degree. But she is married into a conservative family living in Delhi. Her orthodox mother-in-law forces her to follow the rigorous traditional daily routines that she herself practises. Her rituals demand extreme purity with many do's and don't's. Girija adheres to them all silently, even if it requires bathing several times a day or not allowing the untouchable maid to do the household chores. Unlike Girija, Rathna, the sister of Girija's friend, is a rebel. She chides Girija: "This is pure male chauvinism. They exploit your quiet nature. You are simply a coward. Why are you so unthinking by obeying these stupid rules? Why should you eat on the dirty kitchen floor, eating the left-overs? Are you a cattle to be treated like this? What for you did your postgraduation? And what for were you working all those eight years after studies but, before marriage? What happened to that Girija? Why have you lost your thinking power so completely?" Rathna is aghast at the conditions prevailing in that house. And Girija's husband is too busy in the office work to care about what is happening in the house. "He is always in a hurry at home, whereas he is calm and relaxed outside," says the author.

The discrimination between boys and girls in such orthodox families is also pictured vividly. The rigid mother-in-law, a stickler for observing tradition, is strict only with her grand-daughter.

The grandson is exempt from many of these rules. Bharat, the little boy, is allowed to touch his mother or granny without a bath because he is a boy. The granny is always ready with an old proverb on such occasions: "There is no impurity in pure silk with golden thread and the boys of the family."

Girija explains her silence as a way of maintaining harmony in the family. But Rathna retorts:

There is no harmony in a 'single-note Girija. It is high time you raise your voice. You are not just an individual. You are a symbol of the entire society. You are educated and an intellectual. Should all your brain-power waste like this in these orthodox traditions? This is certainly not fair. There is no justice in any society where there is no mutual regard among fellow human beings. It is merely an obnoxious practice in which only a false pride remains to win over the already suppressed. It is sheer stupidity that women themselves turn enemies of other women.

Rathna's friend Abhu activates her thinking further. She realises how numb she has become in her restricted surroundings, only after she points it out. All these days she had not even noticed the huge picture in her own drawing room, which had scenes from the Ramayana. She begins to think.

The author says, "It is really not a burden to remain in a cage without even realising it. But the moment you are made aware of your confinement, few days are enough to break your

shackles. You are bound to have that inherent urge to feel the sense of freedom."

Later Girija feels so suffocated that she decides to go to Rishikesh to spend a few days alone. She meets a frail old lady there, who is a liberated human being, living all alone in the hills after the death of her husband. Girija confides into her, talking freely about her confusions. Talking of her family and children, she says :

On the one hand there is the younger generation that wants to explore life without any sort of restraint. On the other, there is the horrible orthodox mother-in-law who expects even the wick of the stove to be purified with water. I was given proper education to nurture my mental growth. Today, why should I live in shackles in the name of marriage? Why should I be suppressed like this in the name of marriage? Could I still continue living like this? How can I solve this problem ?

The old lady replies:

If you think it is a problem, it becomes one and you will have to keep wallowing in that. If you think you can't tolerate, raise your voice. Fight and get to a final decision. And then don't keep worrying about that decision. Think and decide, but never regret later. Don't ever lose your self-confidence.

In the same novel the author touches briefly how in marriages the importance is given only on the earning capacity of the boy. But even then, when it comes to choosing a girl, besides wealth, so many other criteria like beauty, submissiveness, etc. are looked for. In one of her stories,

Aakasa Veedugal, Vasanthi also mentions how parents look nothing more than the financial status and reputation for sober behaviour and absence of bad habits in a prospective groom. Parents rarely bother to match the two individuals, taking the environment in which they grow into consideration. The result is discord, leading to emotional upheavals.

In one of her well-researched non-fictional work, Rajam Krishnan has traced the historic inequities heaped on women. Women in the vedic period were free and equal but in later centuries women were progressively reduced to the level of oppressed slaves by a variety of male strategems and man-made rules.

In the earliest periods of history, the woman was respected for her complementary role as procreator of men. She was, therefore, meant to be protected always by men as father, brother, husband. Later, the concept of protection gave way to the concept of suppression whereby women were considered as chattel to be owned and kept under control.

Nearer our times, the dowry menace was growing, though it assumed the horrible proportions only in recent times. A few of the earlier authors have dealt with this theme. But torturing the daughter-in-law for not bringing in enough money, leaving often to suicides and even homicides to facilitate marrying a second wife and women, unable to meet dowry demands, remaining unmarried are only later day phenomena.

Historically, again women were assigned harsher work and treated as inferior and paid less for the same work. In construction work, it was mostly women who did all the actual work with men supervising them. Even among professional cooks — a field where women were supposed to excel — women cooks were considered inferior and did not get commissioned for large occasions as head-cooks and in offices women were treated as second class citizens, given less important work that did not involve decision-making. Many writers have dealt with these aberrations in their works.



5

Women as Conciliators

ONE of the most important qualities of women is their inherent compassion and tenderness of heart. This enables them to handle any situation with tact and diplomacy. Therefore, they remain as major conciliators, not only within the family, but outside also.

Over the generations, women in Tamil Nadu have changed in their outlook, perceptions, ideas and attitudes. Their position in society has also undergone changes. Sivasankari depicts these transformations in a remarkable way in one single novel *Bridges*. She has portrayed women as connecting bridges between different personalities in a family. She has adopted a unique technique to bring out the generational changes. Her story spans three generations in identical situations and the differing reactions of her characters brilliantly sum up the history of women's emancipation.

Set between 1910 and 1940, the stories record the various rituals in a woman's life, and the changing attitudes towards them. Sivasankari also describes how some women are instrumental

in important family decisions, though literally from behind the kitchen doors, even in those days when women's emancipation was unheard of. The writer shows how woman was mainly dominated by her husband and in-laws. Nonetheless, she also accepted her submissive role without a murmur like Rajam in this story. Rajam's mother-in-law's was the last word in the household. She was never consulted—leave alone letting her decide—on any matter. But despite being so totally submissive, Rajam had to face the wrath of the old lady quite often. Once Rajam's cousin drops in unexpectedly to see her. Her mother-in-law happens to be away for a while. The decision of cooking normally lay with the old lady only, but since there was an unexpected guest at an unexpected hour, Rajam decided to entertain her cousin herself. But when the old lady learns of it on her return, she was so annoyed with her daughter-in-law that she quits the house immediately to stay with her daughter in a different town. It was such an unpardonable crime on the part of the younger woman to have entertained a guest in the old lady's absence! That was 1940.

In the generation between 1940 and 1965, Charu, a bank officer is tortured by her sadist and perverted husband. Determined to stop this agony, Charu files a suit for divorce within six months of her marriage. This shows the growth of courage in women to take decisions on vital issues. The contrast between the previous incident and this one is obviously striking. In the same story, the author theorises that women normally change in temperaments and attitudes

over the years. Women who are turbulent and rebellious in their teens become mellow and mature as the wisdom of the middle age dawns on them almost imperceptibly. Later, however, they again fall into negative trap of grumbling and dissatisfaction, as they near the fag-end of their lives. This is the mystery, the author contends, behind the phenomenon of the 'generation gap', where the old and the young never seem to converge on any issue. The author illustrates her theory through Mangalam, Mythili and Padmini, in one generation covered under the period of 1940 and 1965 and through Charu, Aparna, Bulbul, during the period from 1965 to 1985. The three women in each set represent three subsequent generations, respectively. Mythili who was once at loggerheads with her grandmother, later finds herself caught between her daughter Padmini and her mother-in-law Mangalam—just as her mother did between her and her grand-mother. And Aparna in the 1990s finds herself in a similar situation and wonders how Charu, her once very understanding and progressive mother, has changed into a bickering grandma criticising every action of Bulbul, her teenaged grand-daughter.

To emphasise how far the sense of independence takes root at a very early stage among present-day generation, the author shows how Aparna feels her attaining puberty as a totally personal and insignificant affair. She resents sharing the information with even her own mother. To further illustrate the process of early maturity among modern girls, Sivasankari jocularly narrates an incident: A small girl of nine

asks a mother how a new-born has arrived in the next-door house. The mother replies, "God had left it in their balcony..." The girl further asks about various other new-borns in the neighbourhood. The mother keeps replying, "Doctor gave...", "They bought it in the shop...", and so on, hesitating to unravel the natural process of child birth to the small girl whom she thinks may not understand. But at the end the girl asks in wonder, "But Mom...Didn't any of these mothers get their babes in the normal way...?". This shocks the mother, of course. The story ends in an optimistic note. There is no danger of edifice of the Indian family collapsing as long as the women remain the cementing factor.

Vasanti's *Aakasa Veedugal* is another novel preoccupied with the generational changes. Lalitha, the heroine, is an unusual character. She stands as a buffer between her rude husband and timid son. Vanitha in Lakshmi's novel under the same title (discussed earlier), is not only tolerant towards her erring in-laws, but she even has a high regard for them. She supports her sister-in-law Meena even when her husband admonishes his own sister, for having behaved badly earlier. In this story, Vanitha becomes an executive after hard-earned experience. Meena, her sister-in-law, who once hated her working status and even talked ill of her along with her other sisters-in-law, now is poor, looking for a job. Vanitha arranges to secure a decent job for her. When her husband hears this he is annoyed. Vanitha justifies her action:

Meena was very young then. She was

inexperienced in life and didn't know to differentiate good from bad. If she had committed a mistake then, it doesn't mean that I should also make another now to avenge the earlier mistake. Two wrongs don't make one right.

Many of the mothers in fictions have been conciliators like their counterparts in real life, acting as buffer to father and son, brothers, father and daughter, and so on. Amma (mother) in Sivasankari's *Athu Sari... Appuram* (All right...and then...) is a typical Indian mother full of maternal instincts. The story has an opening scene where the mother gives coffee to her daughter. The author writes :

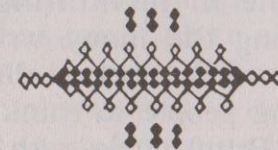
The mother asks Nandini if the sugar is all right and the coffee hot enough....And this is very typical of mother. Although she is a competent housewife and a good cook, she is satisfied only when the members of the family nod their head in approval, meaning that everything is all right.

"Amma gets up at five in the morning at least half an hour earlier than her husband. And as she prepares for the morning coffee session, she also finishes her bath and looks trim and smart, waking others with a smile...." The author describes Nandini's parents as ideal ones.

When Nandini gets married to an upcoming lawyer, her mother advises her to run the family efficiently. "Even if the husband gets inadequate salary at the beginning, don't grumble or show any superiority over him..." The mother thus teaches the daughter the values of proper understanding and care between husband and

wife. Nandini's husband Mohan has no taste for Carnatic music in which Nandini is an expert. She longs to sing for him but he shows no interest. When she complains about this to her mother, the mother pacifies her :

Don't make a fuss over small things, Nandini. You are not a small girl now. When you were young we wanted to nurture your talent in music. You learnt quickly and did well in music. But you are married now. Your life is already busy with office, house and family. Where do you have time to sit and enjoy singing? They have their own taste. Why should you insist that your tastes should agree with theirs? If you want, you sing... But don't make a fuss that he should also enjoy it along with you.... You have no right to force your tastes on others.....



6

Attitude towards Women

SO FAR we have been discussing mainly how women think and feel and their particular predicaments. How does the society as a whole, particularly of men, respond toward the growing independence and self-assertions of women. Have they accepted it? This is the theme of this chapter.

Transformations don't happen in one day. It takes ages and generations for what begins as a *rebellious* idea to gain general acceptance and the necessary reform becomes a reality. Literature plays a vital role in facilitating the process. Vasanthi is among the many writers who have played a major role in crystallising women's issues and setting people to think. Her *Ellaigalin Vilimbil* (On the Brim) deals with dowry menace and unemployment. Malu is a strong-willed girl who turns down a marriage offer, infuriated by the shameless demands made by the groom's parents. On the other hand, her mother is a typical traditional woman, anxious to get her daughter married off, at any cost, to an eligible young man. The author's reference to her 'Amma'

throughout the story under-levels her representative character as the average middle class mother in Tamil society. There might be exceptions, but many mothers' worries are still pinned on their daughter's marriages. Malu chides her: "Only because there are women like you who care only about their family without bothering to look beyond, so many injustices are happening in our society." To that 'Amma' retorts characteristically: "We are not able to tackle our own problems and you want me to interfere in others' troubles...." This is the stock reply that most mothers give when accused of remaining passive to social injustice. They are content with "... the way they live". They live in a small cocoon of their family abiding by its own laws and rituals. How do you define them? Ignorant or innocent? They lead a simple life, their aspirations never reach beyond a traditional marriage for the daughter and a handsome salaried job for the son. Elsewhere the author refers humorously to the tribe of such women who follow their husbands blindly, as "yours faithfully mothers."

Even as women crossed the threshold of their kitchen, there has taken place a broad outlook in them as well as in men. A Tamil male stopped viewing the female as just a decorative piece or possession and started treating her as equal. This welcome change-over to an attitude of comradeship among men and women, is seen in the writings of Pattukottai Prabhakar. He is an upcoming author with a progressive outlook. Portraying a harmonious, healthy relationship between the sexes is his speciality. His novel *Thottal Thodarum*

(It Continues at a Touch) proves this. The friendship of Vasanti, the heroine with Shri Ram, an artist, and Venkatesh, a writer, is presented with delicacy. Seasoned writers like P.V.R., Vasanthi, Sivasankari and many others have also handled this theme.

Many writers have shown how the attitudes of men have a great impact on women who live with them. Many of Balakumaran's novels show how women flower into the fullest of their potentiality where they have good husbands. In one of his works, he explains that most women decay only because of their menfolk. Their inherent maternal instinct and compassion get crushed when thrown into sordid male company. Many of his novels also have the love triangle. But his characters always remain within the bounds of morality. As mentioned earlier, he is an expert in depicting the various dimensions of women. Through two main women characters in his well-acclaimed work *Irumbu Kudhiraigal* (Steel Horses), he shows how women were viewed by themselves and by others.

Gayathri resents women who fuss too much over themselves. She feels that women decorate themselves too much and are happy to be born women—just because they can deck themselves beautifully. Some women, according to Gayathri, even feign innocence, while in fact they are not. She says, "Most women don't even want to be mature. They don't want any wisdom. They feel they can continue to live like adolescents, throughout their life, simply because it is convenient. They crave for the protective arm in the male. 'What do I know, except my husband

and children?' They say, finding in this no need for taking change of their level. They just feign innocence... because it is convenient..."

Tharini is a typical housewife, with her world limited to her immediate family. The writer describes her attitude, through a monologue, "What else I need? A husband with a good income, two healthy children, a house at the corner of the city, and no disturbing relatives. I am perfectly happy....even proud....." and she says in another place, "We have two girls. In no time they'll be of marriageable age. I have already saved enough for their marriage...." This is how an average Indian mother thinks.

Maalan is another committed writer who writes occasionally but poignantly. In his short story, *Yengal Vashavum* (Our Lives too), he exposes the hypocritical attitude of some men towards women. Murugesan is a student leader who says all the right things about women's equality. He and his girl friend Pali involve themselves actively in various student agitations against injustices. However, when they marry later, Murugesan's male chauvinist attitude surfaces. He doesn't allow Pali to study law. "Who'll take care of the house then?" is his response. He conveniently quotes a popular world leader, "A society can do without women lawyers, telephone operators, etc. But it cannot survive without good housewives." When she wants to study literature, he advises her to read books at home.

The story ends with the author's conclusion that many women—though educated—are still confined to their homes and are no more than bonded slaves.

K. Rajanarayan is a Sahitya Akademi award winner for his contribution to Tamil literature for 1991. Almost all his stories are set in a rural background. His depiction of rural women is authentic. What he says about Nachiyaramma in his short story *Kannimai* (Virginitiy), is applicable to all women.

Nachiyaramma is an important figure in the village and is a good Samaritan lending her helping hand to everyone. But marriage transforms her totally. "She has become a selfish individual who attends only to her husband and children. Something has gone wrong somewhere. Even now she works throughout the day. But what a difference! Is she the same woman who served others? Today, when she gets up to give alms, she grumbles...is irritated at servants...." Women thus tend to shrink into the cocoon of their own family, after their marriage, forgetting the earlier manifestations of their own potential.

Nandini in Sivasankari's *Athu Sari Appuram*, is unable to raise her voice against the unjustified demands of her husband and in-laws. Even for her marriage her parents spend a lot on dowry and other gifts as demanded by the boy's parents. When her friends accuse her for putting up with all this she asks them helplessly: "What can I do? They demand so much and if we don't agree, mother is afraid that I will have to remain unmarried". This was before marriage. Later, her husband takes away all her salary, controls her spending, and loads her with house-work without employing a servant. He also demands back many of the things Nandini had bought for her parents before marriage, and pesters for expensive

traditional gifts from her parents after the delivery of her child. She puts up with everything without protest. She also bears the double burden of office and home, with no cooperation from her husband. Nandini tolerates all this on the philosophy of 'life is like that' and it is the duty of a wife to tolerate her husband's behaviour, however obnoxious.

In contrast, Jana, her friend, and her husband live an altogether different life. When Jana falls ill, Raghu, her husband, looks after her with great care and has no inhibitions about cooking or assisting in all possible ways around the house. He comes home from office during lunch, helps her with her lunch and goes back to work again. Nandini is astonished that people can be so cooperative and understanding. Jana talks of making one's own life and living with an awareness. Interestingly, she faces two kinds of advice for all her troubles. While her mother continues to advise her to adjust, her friend Jana tells her to revolt. When she did react sharply on a few occasions, she got worse treatment and became submissive once again. Her humiliations from her husband reflect on her daughter. But later she is struck with remorse for having been cruel to the child.

Nandini gets the shock of her life when Mohan begins to attack their little daughter too. In a fit, he puts burnt cigarette butt-end on the child who becomes ill. It is at this juncture that Jana chides her strongly accusing her of spoiling her own children's life in order to adjust with a sadist husband. All these years she was afraid of what society will talk about her if she leaves her

husband. But today her children's future weighs more than anything else. She decides to leave her husband to give proper life to her child. That one motive gives her all the strength to face the future—even the anticipated trouble from her husband.

The story not only talks extensively of the dowry menace but also exposes the cruelties flowing from male chauvinist husband. It also shows how even educated women put up with a life totally devoid of even minimal joy and individuality.

Anuradha Raman deals with another kind of exploitation of women. Her novel *Mythila Nagarathu Sithaigal* (The Sitas of Mythila), describes the sordid fate of unmarried daughters whose lives end up as big question marks because of an irresponsible and selfish father sponging on his daughter's earnings. He declines every marriage offer for his daughters with some trivial excuse because he doesn't want to lose their handsome salaries. He keeps spiking every alliance saying that "They will get a better 'catch' because of their beauty and efficiency...." He would conduct even a *swayamvara* for his Sita-like daughters, he boasts. Even while he is procrastinating the marriages, the third daughter, a school-going girl, loses her sanity in an eve-teasing calamity. This hits the family badly. By the time the father realises his mistake, things have gone too far. The young girl's mental state obstructs the marriage of the elder ones. The girls are getting on in years without getting married. The story exposes a section of the society where young working girls are taken for a ride even by

their own parents. The plight of women who have taken on the dual role of earning and house-keeping is depicted also by writers like Sivasankari. Her *Athu Sari Appuram* is an example.

Jyothirlatha Girija is another writer who has written many stories based on women's issues particularly about the dowry menace. Her *Alaigal Oya Kathirundhal* (If You Wait for the Waves to Subside), published in 1983, discusses this evil extensively. Two daughters are worried over the huge dowry about to be given for one of them. Bharathi, the younger sister who is also earning, assures to manage to get the amount. She plans to obtain a loan from one of her friends.

The menacing proportions of the dowry problem is seen in the way in which the otherwise orthodox mother advises her daughter seriously to "fall in love" with someone in her office and get married to him! In her opinion, love marriages don't call for dowries! Meanwhile, her friend, Ravi, is unable to help as she had hoped. So they decide to cancel her sister's engagement and retrieve the earlier thousands given to the prospecting groom. Both of them go to the boy's house and explain their inability to mobilise the needed amount and, therefore, are obliged to break the engagement and get back the advance amount. But the boy's family tries to evade repayment. But Ravi and Bharathi manage the situation intelligently by feigning as sub-inspectors of police and get back the money. The story also shows Bharathi and Ravi finally taking the bold step of entering into a registered marriage to avoid traditional rituals and dowry.

Amudha Ganeshan, another writer on

women's subjects, has dealt with another aspect of the dowry problem in her novel *Vazhndu Kaatuvan* (I can Survive and Prove it So), published in 1985. It is about a newly married girl deserted by her husband and in-laws, because of a small shortfall in the dowry gifts. The story begins with the scene how Amudha is sent back to her parents on the same day of her marriage, after appropriating all her jewels and cash. The in-laws insist that Amudha can come back only if the balance amount is given. Amudha tells her father that she will continue her studies and get herself employed somewhere, instead of going back. But her orthodox father does not agree. Her sister helps her with the money and she leaves for her in-laws' house again. But the harassment does not stop here. On the birth of her first child, fresh demands are made, particularly because she has delivered a female child. As the demands continue in various forms, Amudha decides to leave and live alone with her child. Her husband and in-laws make arrangements for his second marriage. But Amudha not only thwarts it successfully, but also manages to get her husband back by her sheer courage and intelligence, by taking them to the court. When their case for divorce comes to the court, her arguments in the court show a courageous woman's wit and wisdom.

The image of women in literature acquired new dimensions even as changes were taking place in the society. In the olden days, any strange woman was always addressed as a 'sister' or 'mother'. This custom gradually gave way as women began to work with men on equal basis. A

lot of new relationships evolved in work places. Women were not just women any more, but colleagues with whom you talked business. The environment made possible newer kinds of interactions between the sexes. And thus began the phenomenon of friendship with the opposite sex. Friendships began earlier too in schools and colleges.

Many such relationships were within conventional bounds of friendship, but some others led to marriages. A lot depends upon the individuals and the circumstances. There was always the danger of getting trapped into wrong notions and predicaments. Often, mere infatuations got mistaken for genuine love. Rushing into wedlock in such situations led to unhappiness. The problems of morality of indeterminate relationships of this kind were sometimes difficult to resolve satisfactorily. Often marriage vows were endangered by new attractions at the work-place induced by propinquity.

By and large, there is no disposition in the works by famous writers to justify extra-marital entanglements even when they have dealt with the theme. Liberal thinking in women does not, in the eye of their authors, justify such ideas which are seen as offensive to the Indian way of life.

Chitra in Vasanthi's *Ellaiyalin Vilimbil* loves a man and has even physical relationship with him. But later, she ditches him to marry another for material reasons. Considering herself 'modern', she doesn't even perceive her action as something wrong. Many writers have dwelt on such wrong notions held by certain sections of women.

Another novel of Vasanthi also deals with similar misconceptions about man-woman relationships. *Meendum Nalai Varum* (Tomorrow will Come Again) revolves around a beautiful teenage girl Usha, who is revolting against her mother's rigid traditional ways. Her mother worries about her all the time. Usha attends college just for fun. Usha is portrayed as intelligent, inquisitive, and is capable of discerning between right and wrong. The father always supports her daughter, saying that she is very modern in her outlook. To her mother's dismay, the father doesn't object to Usha having friends of the opposite sex. Usha doesn't really care for the boys she goes about with. She does it to spite her mother. But despite all her modern aims, she is really naive at heart with no real knowledge of life. She thinks that her mother lays down too many rules because of her orthodox ways. Her friendship with Deepak blossoms into an interesting relationship. "It was a new experience for her. She liked everything about him. The fragrance of the lotion he uses, the intimacy of his company, and even the touch..." She falls in love with him. She realises that the friendship with Deepak is different from the ones she enjoys with her girl-friends. She starts roaming about the city with him. She is too innocent to comprehend the complexity of the situation, or what she is getting herself into. When her mother reprimands her for her behaviour, she retorts: "What is wrong if I go places with my boy friend? These days there is no difference between girl and boy friends. Everyone has boy friends. Everyone keeps going places with

them. And there are ways to avoid pregnancy too." On hearing the last sentence the mother is aghast. She never expected this sort of nonchalant answer from her daughter. But the mother doesn't realise that Usha herself didn't know the real meaning of the words she just spoke. She had heard her friends use these words and thought that it sounded sophisticated. She realises that her last sentence has hurt her mother deeply but wonders why? This shows how naive she was.

Usha had not thought of marriage till then. But when her parents put before her the option of marrying Deepak or stop seeing him, she naturally prefers to marry him. Hardly eighteen, she is forced by circumstances to enter into wedlock. But even before the marriage she developed a difference of opinion with Deepak and her indomitable spirit refused to obey him. As a result they part without marrying. And to spite him, she marries Prabhakar who was considered a good match by her parents—well-qualified, earning well and good-looking. But Prabhakar is totally different from her. She hardly has anything to share with him. He is a workaholic who works even on Sundays and rarely takes her out. He is paranoid about her beauty too, and very possessive about her. She realises her mistake. She shouldn't have married him at all. But she also realises that life is not just a college where you can make mischief and escape from the stern principal. She is aware that even her parents wouldn't support her if she walks out of the marriage. But things go beyond control when Prabhakar suspects her fidelity; he refuses

to believe that she didn't have any sexual relationship with Deepak. And he treats her very badly, locking her in a room and beating her like a mad man. Somehow she manages to escape to the folds of her parents. Her mother is shocked. She is more afraid of, "what will people say". This attitude of her mother irritates Usha more. So she decides to live alone and bring up the baby she got through Prabhakar. After forwarding the divorce papers she concentrates on her studies. She has seen enough of life within a year and learnt a good deal. She is able to think independently and arrive at logical conclusions. Her mental maturity later helps her to keep Deepak at bay when he tries to renew their relationship. She makes it clear that they can be nothing more than just good friends. She points out the way society treats woman:

You and I went about the city, being just friends, and having fun. When we got married to different persons your wife didn't misunderstand you in any way. This being man's world everything is permissible to men. Whereas my husband harboured all kinds of suspicions about our relationship. Even now, if you have an affair with me, your wife might not raise a word against you, because she has been conditioned to think that a woman has to put up with her husband, however badly he behaves. She might choose to suffer silently. This has been our culture. On the other hand my husband is not willing to believe in my chastity. The same issue made my husband mad and broke our marriage. Why? Why, only me? You are ready to have an affair with me,

regardless of hurting your wife. And you want me to join you ... No ... this is not the kind of independence we woman seek. We do need basic liberation. But not this way. Let us be good friends.

Deepak understands her. And so does her mother towards the end.

In her novel *Thirisanku Sorgam* (titled after a Tamil idiom meaning 'Neither Here Nor There') Sivasankari portrays the adverse effects that education and cinema could create in a woman's mind. Born in a poor family, but blessed with brain and beauty, Kamali, the heroine, dreams of a 'hero' for a husband and hopes to have a 'princely' life too. But reality is different. She is unhappy with her marriage and leaves her husband in search of illusions. She makes a mess of her life and by the time she returns to her husband as a prodigal wife, she finds that she has lost him too.

It is not that women are always presented perfectly by these writers. Women have been shown as greedy, immature, over-dominating, demanding. Some write about them humorously, others more seriously.

In his *Helicopter gal Kizhe Iranguginrana* (Helicopters are Landing), Indira Parthasarathi talks humorously of a man who is caught between a demanding wife and his own weakness for articulate women. He describes Thilagam, the wife, in the sequence where she forces her husband to take her to play, which loathes to see. "She wouldn't leave you even if you say you don't like it. It is bound to be a sub-standard play. What a sacrifice it is to be the husband of a

woman who is devoid of taste". Banu is the girl who is his relief from his nagging wife. But finally when he tries to return to his wife, he finds her missing too.

Anuradha Ramanan discusses a different category of women in the story entitled *Vilakillatha Nathchthrangal* (The Stars without Shine). She portrays her main character Sumathi as a woman who picks up a quarrel with her husband for frivolous reasons. Her notion of women's liberation is bizarre. Like any average Indian male, her husband expects small gestures from his wife — like entertaining his friends or assisting him at home. But Sumathi deliberately misinterprets these harmless expectations, as exploitation of women. She says she is not a bonded slave. Despite sound education, some women refuse to understand certain values like harmonious relationship, and thereby bring chaos not only in their lives but also in the lives of those around.

Kannu Simitum Minminigal (Twinkling Stars) is a novel by Indumathi, another popular writer. In this story she is critical of many spoilt youngsters. "Destiny will be hard on those who have no proper direction or discipline in life and go about it as they please, without caring about our cultural roots and traditions", she says in this story. Radhika is the young girl who is extremely proud of her beauty. She has her counterparts in Shankar and Vikram, two rich youngmen, spoilt by wealth and uncaring parents. The three make company. Meanwhile Raghu, a distant relative of Radhika, loves her and hopes to marry her one day. But Radhika considers him

beneath her. In his anxiety to save Radhika from going astray, he pleads with Gowrishankar to leave her alone, and not corrupt her further. Raghu's sensible talks and his deep attachment to Radhika move Gowrishankar and he decides to atone for his wrong deeds. In a deliberate car crash, he kills himself and Vikram. The story ends with Radhika realising her wrong perceptions of life.



Conclusion

YOUNG friends, I hope this journey through Tamil fiction was interesting. Cited are only a few samples which should have given you an inkling of what to look for. In a fast-changing world, it is not easy to be certain about what is good and what is bad. Values are changing at a dizzy pace. There is much that is precious in our traditions and culture.

Women have been held in high esteem, at least in theory! There has also been, for historical reasons in India and elsewhere, a good deal of oppression of women. They were not given their due place. Gradually things are changing with greater awareness of the need to give women their due place in society. All this is reflected in the stories I have summarised briefly for you.

If some of the stories discussed here influence you even a little bit to achieve something in life and to mould your life on good values it would give me immense happiness. Even as we traverse through these multifaceted images of women we are aware of one important thing : Indian women have clearly emerged today as a force to reckon with. They are no more doormats to be stamped under feet. They are more inquisitive, searching, independent, tender and compassionate—in short, a vital source for the betterment of the society.

—THE AUTHOR