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## THE GREAT LITERARY TRADITION OF THE ANCIENT GREEKS AND TAMILS

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### ABSTRACT

*This article will trace the literary tradition of two ancient civilizations. When most of the parts of the West and the East were at an infant stage of civilization, the Greek and Tamils were living in their developed civilizations. In the West, Greeks had developed their alphabets and subsequently they became front runners in Art, Literature and Architecture. Iliad and Odyssey had been written which paved the way for the development of new genres. Great historian Herodotus and philosophers Plato, Socrates and Aristotle had contributed immensely for the development Greek ethos.*

**KEYWORDS:** ancient civilizations , Great historian Herodotus and philosophers Plato.

### INTRODUCTION

The Greek tragedians Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides were the great tragedians. Aristotle's theory of literary criticism became the corner stone for literary evaluation. The Greek Philosophers Plato and Socrates gave importance to the social morality and political integrity. Similarly in the South the Tamil kingdoms Cera Chola Pantiyas have encouraged Art and architecture. Their good governance and heroic deeds are recorded in the Cangam poetry Akananuru and Purananuru. Tamil language and literature flourished. The five great epics and Thirukkural stand as a symbol of Tamil tradition and culture.

The Greeks had a great tradition of poets behind their talents such as Hesiod of 700 B.C., whose poetry was one of Hellenism's most notable early achievements. Tracing the literary development during Hellenic Civilization, Arnold Toynbee states, "Ionia was the region in which the Greek epic culminated in the production of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*." (171) Only after great epics had been written and recorded, Greek authors began to invent series of new genres like elegiac and lyric poetry, narrative prose and dialogue and then literary activities began to blossom and flourish. Even for Homer, in composing such monumental works of art, there had been a tradition of poets and minstrels whose folksongs in oral-forms had been the basis for those great epics. By the fifth century B.C., Athens became the centre for not only cultural activity but it also gained superiority in the sphere of art and architecture. The city enjoyed intellectual superiority and the society provided enormous opportunities for literary pursuits. Athens lit the glowing flame of the fifth century enlightenment and it attracted the travelling rhapsodes, sophists and teachers and it became the centre for philosophical discussion, dissemination of knowledge and economic development. Pericles in Thucydides declared that Athens is an education itself to Greece, and he was also proud of his city-state Athens for its intellectual originality and precociousness. The great sculptor Pheidias was employed to make two magnificent statues; one at acropolis of Athens the statue of Athene for her new temple and another statue of Zeus at Olympia. The creative activity reached its peak and the dramatists exploiting the primitive religious materials, myths, and rituals created magnificent dramas.



The Greek and Tamil languages have great literary tradition and they are spoken in countries globally located in continents apart, one from the East and the other from the West. These two most ancient languages have deeply rooted in literary traditions. When most of the other parts of the world were still at an infant stage of civilization, the Greeks in the West and the Tamils in the East had advanced civilizations; and their contributions to art and architecture in general and literature in particular were magnificent. There has been a continuous progression in the development of literature from oral to written form and from ancient to classical and classical to modern literature.

The Greek tragedians Aeschylus (525-456 B.C.), Sophocles (495-406 B.C.), and Euripides (480-406 B.C.) and the comedy writer Aristophanes (449-480 B.C.) were the products of this Great Hellenic Civilizations which culminated during the fifth century BCE. Their tragedies and comedies faithfully depicted the contemporary moral, political, social and spiritual concepts. In many aspects they differed from Homeric and post-Homeric poetry and epics. However, they had retained the religious rituals and developed the myths originated in the ancient past and also continued in the immediate past. They bridged the ancient past with their present works and paved way for future enlightenment in the field of literature. These great dramatists used their dramatic art especially the tragedies as an instrument for interpreting the prevailing political and social issues for exploring the spiritual depth in human nature. The influence of Homeric epics and the fifth century tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides spread over in some of the European countries such as England, France, Italy and Germany which have a great impact on the literary horizon of these countries.

The *Ramāyana* and the *Mahābhāratha*, the two great ancient Indian epics probably could have originated in the heroic age of the ancient Indian society. In the beginning they might have been composed and sung in the form of traditional oral literatures in folklore genres in 17<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Most probably the Greek epics *Odyssey* and *Iliad* might have been composed in the same period and in the same genres. The heroes and heroines in these two Indian epics were from the royal families of the Kings and Emperors.

The ancient Greek society in the heroic age as well as during the classical period had been a male dominated society which treated women as second rate citizens. Writing about the women's status in the ancient Greeks and Romans in his *Literary Criticism* Gary Gray states that women were treated as second rate citizens. It is also evident from the epic *Odyssey*. In the Trojan War almost all the kings and chieftains of the Greek city states joined the naval forces in the siege of Troy to rescue Helen under the leadership of Achilles leaving their young queen wives back at home. One such king was the adventurous and heroic Odysseus of Ithaca who led the Greek forces in the Trojan War after the death of Achilles.....The court poet of Ithaca, named Phemeus sang a song to entertain the wife of Odysseus, Penelope, her son Telemachus and their guests. "Phemeus sings of 'The Achaens [Greeks] Journey Home from Troy'. It is too much for Penelope to bear with and she asked him to stop:

Phemeus!

So many other songs you know to hold us spell bound,

works of the gods and men that singers celebrate.

Sing one of those [and] break off this song . . . that always rends the heart inside . . . me

the unforgettable grief, it wounds me most of all. (Homer 2003: 88)

The reason for which Penelope asked the poet to stop singing that song was that he was describing the return of the Greek fleet without bringing her husband, Odysseus. Telemachus could not tolerate his mother's outburst demanding the poet to stop singing. He firmly reminds her of her position as a woman and commands:

TELEMACHUS: Go back to your quarters.

Tend to your own tasks, the distaff and the loom . . . As for giving orders, men will see to that, but I most of all:

I hold the reins of power in this house. (Homer 2003: 89)

Referring to this episode from Homer, in his *Literary Criticism*, Gary Day brings in multi-purpose criticism, such as the function of poetry, Oedipus complex in Telemachus, Odysseus' son "as the representative of patriarchal society. Here, the focus is to illustrate how even the royal women did not have equal rights with men."(15-17) In contrast to the status of women in Greek society, women in the Tamil society had displayed courage and confidence whenever it was demanded of them.

It was recorded in the Puram literature of the Cangam period in a Tamil poem *Purapporul Venpaa Maalai* in the book of grammar written by Aiyanariththanaar, the Cera king of thirteenth Century A.D., composed a poem in which he states that even before Paleolithic and Neolithic age, the fully developed Tamil race of the Dravidian stock existed in the southern part of the Indian Sub Continent. The Tamils also have the glory of belonging to one of the ancient civilizations. So, as in any other World Literature, Tamil language and literature has its origin from ancient period. In the heroic age, Tamil literature originated in the form of folklore songs and in the subsequent Cangam Age poetry began to flourish in the form of '*Tinai poetry*'. The age of epics actually begins with the first ever epic in Tamil Literature *Cilappathikāram*. Ilangovadigal follows the ancient tradition of the poets, saints and philosophers in writing his monumental epic. The Cera Prince turned Jain Monk, Ilangovadigal follows the great tradition of poets Agathiyar and Tholkappiyar of the first and second Cangam period grammatically and structurally and Thiruvalluvar thematically in writing his epic *Cilappathikāram*.

In Cangam period women enjoyed respectable status in the society. In *Cilappathikāram*, on hearing the news of the killing of her husband Kovalan, Kannaki rushed to the King's palace to seek justice from the king. Her ferocious argument against the King, Pantiyan Nedunchezhiyan became a model for feminine courage and heroism. From this it may be traced out how Kannaki, an innocent and docile woman faced the king bravely and forced him to accept his guilt and subsequently established justice in the case of her husband Kovalan.

During the second century AD Ilangovadigal composed a great work of art which became the First Tamil epic, *Cilappathikāram*. This epic was first published by U. Ve. Saminatha Aiyar, its original script was in the form of palm leaf manuscript and the manuscripts of this epic were in the possession of people living in various parts of Tamil Nadu. With a great passion for Tamil language and literature, Aiyar travelled far and wide collected the manuscript and compiled them in proper order and finally brought out its first edition in 1822, second in 1920 and the third in 1927. His greater service in this regard was that he retrieved the scripts of the commentaries and descriptive meaning written by Arumpatha Vurai Aasiriyar who is popularly known even today as Perāciriyaar and the commentaries by Adiyarkku Nallār. Its fourth and fifth editions were published by his son Kalyanasundaram Aiyar. Subsequently devoted Tamil scholars and patrons joined in publishing the epic reaching its twelfth edition. They were also very diligent in making each edition better than the previous editions. Ilangovadigal also belongs to the great literary tradition of Tamil poets.

The eminent Tamil scholar Thamizhannal Periakaruppan stresses the importance of convention and tradition for the poets' for writing great works of art. In his thesis on *Tradition and Talent in Cankam Poetry: Tolkappiyam and Tinai Poetical Conventions* traces the sources of *Tolkappiyam*. He states that *Tolkappiyam* is the most ancient work in Tamil Literature which deals with hundreds of literary conventions but he emphasizes that '*Literary conventions*', however great and important they may be, do not become conventions just at the time of their origin itself; they become and deserve that name, only when they are strictly adhered to by posterity." (25) In support of his conviction Thamizhannal quotes John Livingston Lowes for correlation:

"In one sense, conventions are not born at all. For whatever their ancestry, they never come into being as conventions. It is only when they are taken up through acceptance into usage they acquire conventionality.....the heroic couplets did not thereby spring into existence as a convention. It became that later, when other poets, following Chaucer, looked upon it and saw that it was good and wore it threadbare." (26)

Tolkappiyar also affirms that he had a great literary tradition behind him and it enabled him to codify the literary conventions for the posterity to follow. Even before the time of first *Tamil Cankam*, the Tamils had a great tradition of literary conventions and the very fact that the creation of *Cankam* itself was to consolidate the rich Tamil literature existed before and to grant recognition and also to glorify the poets who created them.

Ilangovadigal reveals the greatness in Kannaki through her continued loyalty and unwavering faith in her love towards her husband. In this aspect both Thiruvalluvar and Ilangovadigal find greatness in feminine power in their continued loyalty to their husband, always keeping in their mind the honour, prestige and good name of their family. According to Thiruvalluvar: “a good wife is one who protects herself from evil, takes care of her husband, never falters in her promises that she made in marriage and preserves the fair name of the family.” (Kural 56. On Feminine Virtue). We find these great qualities and attributes in the character of Kannaki, as she displayed exemplary stoical courage during the separation from her husband. In spite of Kovalan’s transgression in his married life, she preserves herself, upholds her chastity and neither does she talk ill of him nor does she allow anybody else to find fault in him in this respect.

In the tradition of Tamil culture, the greatness of a woman is identified with her marvelous virtue and chastity. To a virtuous married woman, her husband is a god unto her.

Thiruvalluvar gives this maxim in Kural, 55:  
 “No god adoring, low she bends before her lord;  
 Then rising, serves: the rain falls instant at her word!”  
 (Trans. Rev. G.U.Pope)

The greatness of virtue in Kannaki in Tamil tradition, the heroic and courageous deed of Antigone in Sophocles’ tragedy and Penelope’s continued loyalty to her husband Odysseus in Homer’s *Odyssey* are the example of the great Greek tradition.

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