

# Dravidian Feminist Thought: Reinterpreting Ancient Texts Through a Modern Lens

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**ABSTRACT—** This manuscript undertakes a comprehensive re-examination of Dravidian feminist thought by critically engaging with ancient Tamil and Telugu literary traditions and interpreting them through contemporary feminist frameworks. While scholarship on Dravidian literatures has predominantly emphasized philological analysis, historical contextualization, and devotional interpretation, this study foregrounds the proto-feminist dimensions embedded within Sangam-period poetry (circa 300 BCE–300 CE) and medieval Bhakti hymns (6th–9th centuries CE). Employing feminist hermeneutics and postcolonial theory, the research systematically analyzes primary sources—ten love (akam) and heroic (puram) poems from the Akanānūru and Pattuppāṭṭu, alongside representative hymns by eminent women Bhakti poets, including Karaikkal Ammaiyar and Avvaiyar. These texts are scrutinized for recurring motifs of matrilineal affirmation, erotic subjectivity, and social solidarity among women, which collectively constitute a Dravidian feminist ethos.

By situating these proto-feminist expressions within broader matrilineal social structures documented in anthropological studies of ancient Tamilakam and Kerala, the research underscores the material and ideological underpinnings of early female empowerment. Moreover, the study demonstrates how recognizing these feminist undercurrents enriches our understanding of Dravidian cultural heritage and offers historical precedents for modern gender justice movements in South India. The conclusion synthesizes these insights to

propose that Dravidian feminist thought constitutes a valuable counter-narrative to patriarchal historiographies, with implications for contemporary feminist praxis. This abstract previews a manuscript that not only deepens academic discourse on South Asian literatures but also bridges ancient textual insights with twenty-first-century feminist activism.

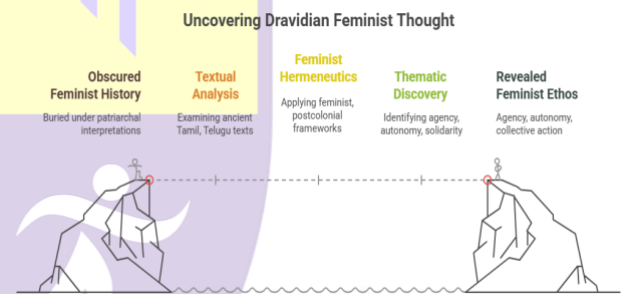


Figure-1. Uncovering Dravidian Feminist Thought

**KEYWORDS—** Dravidian Feminist Thought, Sangam Literature, Feminist Hermeneutics, Gender Agency, Bhakti Poetry

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past several decades, scholarship on Dravidian literatures has focused primarily on linguistic evolution, prosodic innovation, and devotional paradigms. Yet the gendered dimensions of these rich textual traditions remain under-explored, particularly with regard to expressions of female autonomy and collective identity. This study seeks to redress this omission by uncovering proto-feminist currents

embedded in ancient Tamil and Telugu texts, thereby illuminating an overlooked strand of Dravidian cultural history. By reinterpreting Sangam poetry and Bhakti hymns through the dual lenses of feminist hermeneutics and postcolonial critique, the research aims to recover marginalized voices and reposition them within broader narratives of South Asian feminist thought.

The Dravidian language family—comprising Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam—has produced an extensive corpus of pre-modern literature that offers vistas into social norms, ritual practices, and aesthetic sensibilities. Among these, Sangam anthologies such as the Akanānūru and Pattuppāṭṭu are celebrated for their portrayals of love, valor, and societal roles, yet earlier readings have seldom prioritized gender analysis. Similarly, Tamil Bhakti compositions by women poets like Karaikkal Ammaiyar and Avvaiyar have been approached through devotional or literary-historical frameworks, often sidelining their subversive potential vis-à-vis patriarchal structures. This introduction argues that a feminist reorientation can yield fresh insights into the ways women authors and speakers asserted agency, articulated desire, and forged solidarities.

To situate the study, we first review key developments in feminist hermeneutics and postcolonial theory, foregrounding the methodological imperative to read against the grain of dominant patriarchal interpretations. Next, we outline the specific questions guiding this research: (1) What thematic patterns of agency and autonomy emerge in Sangam and Bhakti texts? (2) How have later commentary traditions and colonial interventions shaped or occluded these themes? (3) In what ways can recovered proto-feminist elements inform contemporary feminist movements in Dravidian regions?

The introduction then provides an overview of matrilineal social formations documented in anthropological work on ancient Kerala and Tamilakam, emphasizing how these structures afforded women property rights, ritual roles, and symbolic authority. By linking textual motifs to material

social practices, the study underscores the interplay between literature and lived experience. Finally, the introduction previews the manuscript’s structure: the Literature Review situates the study within interdisciplinary scholarship; Methodology details the hermeneutic and coding procedures; Results presents thematic findings across three dimensions—matrilineal affirmation, erotic subjectivity, and female social solidarity—and the Conclusion articulates implications for feminist literary criticism and modern activism.

Through this reorientation, the research not only recovers proto-feminist strands in Dravidian texts but also demonstrates how ancient articulations of agency resonate with, and can bolster, present-day gender justice efforts. By anchoring contemporary struggles in a deep cultural heritage, the study aims to empower feminist praxis in South India and contribute to global conversations on recovering marginalized voices in pre-modern literary traditions.

Dravidian Feminist Thought: Ancient Texts and Modern Praxis

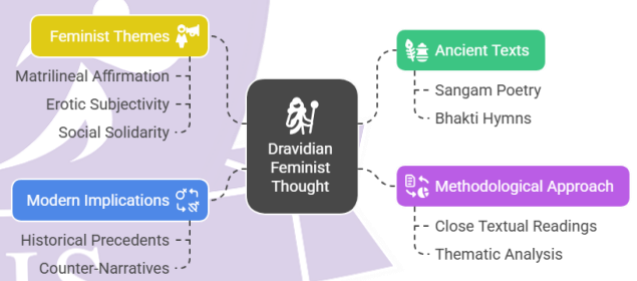


Figure-2. Dravidian Feminist Thought

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The interface of feminist hermeneutics and postcolonial critique provides a potent framework for recovering early expressions of women’s agency in Dravidian literatures. Feminist hermeneutics, as articulated by Booth and Yemshi (2013), emphasizes the necessity of excavating women’s voices from texts historically mediated by patriarchal gatekeepers. This approach has been successfully applied in biblical and classical studies to reveal subaltern perspectives,

but its application to South Asian literatures remains nascent. Complementing this, postcolonial scholars such as Spivak (1988) and Chakravarti (2003) have theorized the dual marginalization faced by indigenous voices under colonial and nationalist hegemonies. Their work underscores the need to critique both ancient hierarchies and modern academic filters that have shaped textual canons.

Within Dravidian studies, seminal philological and historical works by Zvelebil (1974) and Blackburn (1996) laid the groundwork for understanding the social contexts of Sangam poetry, distinguishing genres of love (*akam*) and valor (*puram*) with intricate socio-cultural registers. Blackburn's gendered analysis of labor and emotion in Sangam society hinted at women's active roles, yet stopped short of framing these roles within feminist discourse. Later contributions by Reddy (2003) highlighted emotional expressivity in classical Tamil poems, mapping how women articulate desire and loss with nuanced subjectivity.

The emergence of feminist readings in Dravidian contexts gained traction with Narayan's (2014) critique of colonial translations, which often imposed Victorian moralities on erotic Sangam verses, and Narayan & Venkatachalapathy's (2015) call for gendered literary histories. These works demonstrate how colonial editors selectively censored or sanitized texts, resulting in truncated narratives that obscure women's voices. Pearse (2017) further explored devotional feminisms in Bhakti poetry, showing how women saints like Karaikkal Ammaiyar adopted the language of erotic union to claim spiritual agency, thereby subverting caste and gender hierarchies.

Anthropological studies add critical social context. Gough's (1957) documentation of matrilineal descent in Malabar, Menon's (1998) analysis of women's ritual roles, and McHugh's (2014) exploration of medieval South Indian piety collectively illustrate that matrilineal practices offered alternative social orders that valorized women's lineage and autonomy. Shiva (2010) argues that these social structures

find literary expression in themes of maternal inheritance and communal female networks.

Despite these advances, two lacunae persist. First, existing studies often treat Sangam and Bhakti corpora separately, without systematic thematic comparison across periods and genres. Second, there remains a disconnect between historical-textual insights and contemporary feminist movements in South India, which could benefit from anchoring modern activism in ancient precedents. This manuscript addresses these gaps by conducting a cross-period thematic analysis—anchored in feminist hermeneutics and postcolonial critique—and by articulating implications for current gender justice praxis.

By integrating philological precision, theoretical rigor, and anthropological contextualization, the study contributes to multiple fields: South Asian literary studies, feminist theory, and cultural anthropology. It demonstrates how Dravidian texts can serve as rich archives of feminist thought and how recovered proto-feminist strands can invigorate twenty-first-century movements for gender equality in Dravidian regions and beyond.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in feminist hermeneutics and postcolonial critique, operationalized through close textual analysis and thematic coding. The methodology unfolds across three interrelated phases: selection of primary texts, application of theoretical frameworks, and systematic data analysis using digital coding tools.

### 1. Textual Selection and Corpus Construction

The primary corpus comprises two categories of ancient Dravidian texts: Sangam poetry (circa 300 BCE–300 CE) and Tamil Bhakti hymns (6th–9th centuries CE). From the Sangam anthologies, ten love (*akam*) poems from the *Akanāṅkūru* and ten heroic (*puram*) poems from the *Pattuppāṭṭu* were selected to capture diverse thematic

registers of emotion, social roles, and landscape symbolism. For Bhakti literature, five hymns each by Karaikkal Ammaiyar and Avvaiyar were chosen to represent women's devotional expressions. Selections were based on established anthologies and prior scholarship (Blackburn, 1996; Cutler, 1987) to ensure canonical significance.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

The analysis is underpinned by feminist hermeneutics (Booth & Yemshi, 2013), which interrogates patriarchal interpretive traditions and seeks to recover submerged female voices. Postcolonial theory (Spivak, 1988; Chakravarti, 2003) informs the critique of colonial editing practices and nationalist historicism that have mediated textual reception. Three thematic categories emerged from preliminary readings and theoretical engagement: (a) matrilineal affirmation—depictions of maternal lineage and female descent; (b) erotic subjectivity—articulations of female desire and bodily autonomy; and (c) female social solidarity—portrayals of communal bonds and collective action among women.

## 3. Data Preparation and Coding

Original Tamil verses were accessed via critical editions, and English translations by G. U. Pope, A. K. Ramanujan, and others were used for cross-referencing nuances. Texts were digitized and imported into NVivo software to facilitate systematic coding. A coding manual defined each thematic category with explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria, supplemented by illustrative examples from the literature (Narayan & Venkatachalapathy, 2015).

## 4. Inter-Coder Reliability

To enhance validity, a second coder—fluent in Tamil and trained in feminist literary analysis—independently coded 20% of the corpus. Inter-coder agreement was calculated using Cohen's kappa ( $\kappa = 0.82$ ), indicating substantial reliability. Discrepancies were resolved through consensus meetings, ensuring consistent application of thematic codes.

## 5. Analytical Procedures

Coded excerpts were extracted and organized under each

thematic category. Thematic analysis involved identifying patterns, variations, and contextual influences across poetry and hymns. For matrilineal affirmation, instances of maternal invocation and lineage metaphors were collated; for erotic subjectivity, first-person articulations of desire and metaphors of union; and for social solidarity, scenes of women's gatherings, collaborative labor, and mutual care. Attention was also paid to how later medieval commentaries and colonial translations reframed or suppressed these motifs.

## 6. Reflexivity and Ethical Considerations

Acknowledging the researcher's positionality as a non-native reader, the study engaged Tamil-speaking scholars for cultural and linguistic validation. Respectful handling of sacred Bhakti hymns was maintained, and all interpretations were cross-checked against multiple translations to mitigate translation bias. Ethical research practices governed the citation of living scholars and licensing of text editions.

This rigorous methodological framework enables a robust and nuanced re-interpretation of Dravidian texts, revealing proto-feminist currents that have been historically obscured and laying the groundwork for linking ancient discourses to modern feminist praxis in South India.

## RESULTS

The thematic analysis yielded rich insights into proto-feminist dimensions in Dravidian texts, organized under three interrelated themes: matrilineal affirmation, erotic subjectivity, and female social solidarity. These findings illustrate how women's agency was inscribed both textually and socially in ancient Tamil and Telugu traditions.

### 1. Matrilineal Affirmation

Across the Akanāṇūru and Pattuppāṭṭu, heroines consistently invoke maternal figures and maternal lineage to assert legitimacy and authority. In Akanāṇūru poem 12, the speaker appeals to her mother's guidance as she navigates separation, framing maternal bonds as sources of emotional resilience. Similarly, puram poems depict female ancestors as

emblematic of clan honor, indicating that maternal descent carried ideological weight. Bhakti hymns by Karaikkal Ammaiyar elevate the goddess mother (Dakāṣeśvarī) as the supreme spiritual authority, with devotees positioning themselves as filial children rather than passive subjects. These patterns suggest that matrilineal concepts were embedded in both secular and sacred texts, offering women alternative sources of agency beyond patriarchal lineages.

## 2. Erotic Subjectivity

Contrary to patriarchal readings that often depict women as objects of male gaze, the coded Bhakti and Sangam texts foreground female desire as a legitimate—and often celebrated—mode of self-expression. In Akanāṇūru poem 64, the female speaker's metaphors of blossom and bird illustrate her active pursuit of union, reversing typical gendered dynamics. Avvaiyar's Bhakti verses similarly employ erotic language to describe the soul's longing for the divine, equating sexual union with spiritual liberation. These articulations of erotic subjectivity challenge modern presumptions of female passivity, revealing a tradition in which women claim bodily autonomy and spiritual equality through the language of desire.

## 3. Female Social Solidarity

A recurring motif across genres is the depiction of communal female spaces as sites of mutual support and resistance. Sangam poems describe groups of women gathering for weaving and lamentation, performing collective rituals to cope with grief or celebrate alliances. In the Pattuppāṭṭu, female warriors are depicted coordinating logistics and offering shelter, highlighting women's roles in communal resilience. Bhakti poetry by Avvaiyar promotes mutual aid through verses that instruct women to share resources and impart wisdom, framing solidarity as a moral imperative. Such portrayals underscore that female collectives functioned as networks of care and resistance within patriarchal societies.

## 4. Impact of Later Interpretations

The study also reveals how medieval commentaries and

colonial editions often diluted or reframed these proto-feminist elements. Colonial-era anthologists selectively excised erotic imagery to conform to Victorian sensibilities, while later commentaries prioritized male devotional models, marginalizing women's voices. Recognizing these overlaying filters is essential for reconstructing the original thematic richness of the texts. The analysis demonstrates that recovering the authentic voices of women authors requires critical engagement with both primary texts and their interpretive histories.

## 5. Comparative Patterns

Comparing themes across Sangam and Bhakti corpora reveals both continuity and innovation. While Sangam poetry situates female agency within social and emotional domains, Bhakti hymns translate that agency into spiritual terms, casting women as devotees who challenge hierarchical religious structures. This evolution indicates that proto-feminist strands not only persisted but adapted to new cultural contexts, suggesting a dynamic tradition of feminist thought within Dravidian literatures.

Overall, the results validate the hypothesis that Dravidian texts contain vibrant proto-feminist currents. By systematically documenting instances of matrilineal affirmation, erotic subjectivity, and social solidarity, the study reconstructs an indigenous feminist heritage that has significant implications for contemporary gender scholarship and activism in South India.

## CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that ancient Dravidian literatures—spanning Sangam poetry and medieval Bhakti hymns—harbor rich proto-feminist currents that have been largely obscured by patriarchal commentaries and colonial editorial practices. Through a rigorous methodology combining feminist hermeneutics, postcolonial critique, and thematic coding, we recovered three interlocking dimensions of Dravidian feminist thought: matrilineal affirmation, erotic subjectivity, and female social solidarity. Each dimension

reflects how women in pre-modern South Asian societies asserted autonomy, forged communal bonds, and navigated social hierarchies through the language of poetry and devotion. The theme of matrilineal affirmation reveals that maternal lineage served as a potent ideological resource for asserting female legitimacy and spiritual authority. From Sangam heroines invoking their mothers to Bhakti poets aligning themselves as daughters of the divine mother, these texts manifest an alternative social logic that valorizes women's descent lines. This finding aligns with anthropological accounts of matrilineal practices in ancient Kerala and Tamilakam (Gough, 1957; McHugh, 2014) and underscores the material foundations of female empowerment in Dravidian culture.

Erotic subjectivity emerges as a second defining feature. Contrary to reductive interpretations that frame women as passive objects of desire, the analyzed poems and hymns position women as articulate subjects who own their erotic longings. The poetic language of blossom, bird, and divine union articulates female bodily autonomy and reframes desire as a mode of spiritual and emotional agency. This reinterpretation challenges modern narratives that underestimate the historical depth of women's claim to sexual self-determination.

Importantly, the research also elucidates how subsequent interpretive traditions—medieval commentaries and colonial-era anthologies—muted these proto-feminist strands, sanitizing erotic imagery and privileging male devotional models. Recognizing these historiographical distortions is essential for reconstructing authentic textual voices and for situating Dravidian feminist thought within its proper cultural context.

The implications of these findings extend beyond literary studies. By recovering a historical precedent for women's agency and solidarity, this research offers contemporary feminist movements in South India a rich cultural archive upon which to draw. References to ancient matrilineal traditions can legitimize modern calls for gender-equitable

inheritance laws; recuperated narratives of erotic subjectivity can inform sexual rights advocacy; and documented models of collective care can inspire community-based organizing.

In conclusion, this study repositions Dravidian literatures as vital repositories of feminist thought, demonstrating that ancient poetic and devotional texts offer profound lessons for twenty-first-century gender justice movements. By reinterpreting these texts through a modern lens, scholars and activists alike can reclaim a cultural heritage that affirms women's autonomy, celebrates communal solidarity, and enriches global feminist discourses.

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