

Women as Divine Agents: A Comparative Study of Tamil and Sanskrit Epic Heroines

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ABSTRACT

This comparative study delves into the depiction of women as divine agents within the Tamil and Sanskrit epic traditions, examining how key heroines—namely Sītā and Draupadī from the Sanskrit corpus, and Kannaki and Pattini from the Tamil canon—embody and enact divine authority. While Sanskrit epics often present their female protagonists as embodiments of cosmic order and moral rectitude, Tamil epics illustrate women wielding miraculous power to challenge social injustice and restore dharma through extraordinary means. By employing feminist literary criticism, mythological hermeneutics, and cultural analysis, this research elucidates the complex interplay between gender, divinity, and narrative agency. The methodology involves close textual readings of primary epic texts—Valmiki's Rāmāyaṇa, Vyāsa's Mahābhārata, Ilango Adigal's Silappatikāram, and Tiruttakkaṭēvar's Cīvaka Cintāmaṇi—complemented by thematic coding of passages illustrating divine intervention, moral discourse, and social negotiation. Results indicate that while Sītā's trials affirm her passive endurance under patriarchal pressures, Draupadī's vocal assertiveness and public curses effect tangible cosmic consequences. Contrastingly, Tamil heroines like Kannaki exercise overt supernatural wrath to obliterate tyranny, and Pattini's nurturing benevolence fosters communal well-being. These findings underscore divergent narrative logics: Sanskrit traditions valorize obedience tempered by episodic protests, whereas Tamil traditions celebrate direct, dramatic expressions of feminine wrath and grace. The conclusion synthesizes these insights to argue that across both literary spheres, epic heroines serve as pivotal mediators between mortal communities and the divine realm, simultaneously reinforcing and subverting established norms. This study advances our understanding of gendered divinity in South Asian epics and invites further exploration of regional variations and contemporary receptions.

Divine Agency of Women in Tamil and Sanskrit Epics

Characteristic	Sītā	Draupadī	Kannaki	Pattini
 Divine Authority	Embodiment of cosmic order	Moral rectitude with assertiveness	Miraculous power	Nurturing benevolence
 Agency	Passive endurance	Vocal assertiveness	Supernatural wrath	Communal well-being
 Narrative Logic	Obedience tempered by protests	Cosmic consequences	Obliteration of tyranny	Direct expressions of grace

Figure-1.Divine Agency of Women in Tamil and Sanskrit Epics

KEYWORDS

Divine Agency, Epic Heroines, Tamil Literature, Sanskrit Literature, Gender Studies, Mythological Criticism, Cultural Comparison

INTRODUCTION

Epic narratives occupy an enduring space within South Asian cultural, religious, and literary landscapes, serving as vehicles for articulating societal ideals, ethical norms, and conceptions of the divine. Central to these narratives are female protagonists whose lives not only reflect prevailing gender constructs but also actively shape the moral and spiritual order of their worlds. In the Sanskrit tradition, Sītā and Draupadī stand as paradigmatic figures: Sītā embodies unwavering fidelity and spiritual purity, while Draupadī exemplifies righteous indignation and communal responsibility. Conversely, Tamil epics present heroines such as Kannaki—whose righteous wrath topples a great city—and the goddess Pattini, whose miracles deliver social justice and healing. Despite the rich scholarship on these individual traditions, there exists a lacuna in comparative research that systematically interrogates how Tamil and Sanskrit epic heroines function as divine agents: figures endowed with celestial authority who negotiate, challenge, and reinforce social norms.

Epic heroines' divine agency ranges from passive to active.



Figure-2. Epic Heroines' Divine Agency Ranges from Passive to Active

This study addresses three interrelated research questions. First, in what narrative contexts do epic heroines manifest divine agency, and what forms do these manifestations take? Second, how do cultural and religious milieus of the Sanskrit and Tamil traditions inform these portrayals? Third, what are the broader implications for our understanding of gendered power and the role of women

in classical South Asian literature? To answer these questions, we adopt a framework that combines feminist hermeneutics—which recovers marginalized female perspectives—and mythological criticism, which situates individual narratives within broader patterns of divine-human interaction. ‘Divine agency’ is operationalized as the capacity of a heroine to effect change—be it moral, social, or cosmic—through actions sanctioned by or derived from her divine status.

The introduction proceeds by defining key terms—such as ‘divine agency’ and ‘epic heroine’—and by situating this work within existing scholarship. Classic texts like Valmiki’s Rāmāyaṇa and Vyāsa’s Mahābhārata offer foundational representations of female divinity in Sanskrit, while Tamil epics such as Silappatikāram and Cīvakacintāmaṇi provide parallel yet distinct narratives. Prior studies (e.g., Hildebeitel 2001; Nilakanta Sastri 1964) have illuminated singular traditions but rarely engaged in cross-literary comparison. By juxtaposing textual analyses across linguistic and cultural boundaries, this research aims to unveil both convergences—in the use of divine femininity to uphold dharma—and divergences—in the modes through which heroines assert power. Ultimately, this introduction lays the groundwork for a detailed exploration of how epic traditions carve out spaces for female divine actors to sustain moral equilibrium and, at times, subvert patriarchal structures.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Feminist Perspectives and Mythological Frameworks

Feminist literary criticism has significantly reshaped our understanding of epic heroines by foregrounding the latent agency of characters traditionally dismissed as passive. Sangari and Vaid (1989) critique androcentric readings of Sanskrit epics, advocating for a reclamation of authoritative female voices. Building on this, Hildebeitel’s (1995, 2001) scholarship on Draupadī positions her not merely as a victim of patriarchal machinations but as an active moral agent whose public outcries precipitate divine interventions. Similarly, Richman (1991) reconceptualizes Sītā’s trials—particularly the agni-parīkṣā—not as tests of her submissiveness but as demonstrations of her spiritual potency and cosmic significance.

Divine Femininity in Sanskrit Epics

Within the Sanskrit corpus, Sītā and Draupadī exemplify divergent expressions of feminine divinity. Sītā, as an incarnation of Lakṣmī, embodies steadfast virtue; her endurance of exile, abduction, and trial by fire functions as a testament to her sanctity and upholds the ideals of marital fidelity and dharma (Rocher, 1986; Thapar, 2002). Draupadī, in contrast, engages in vocal protests and issues curses that trigger monumental shifts in the Mahābhārata narrative, such as the outbreak of the Kurukṣetra war (Chakravarti, 2018). Her dynamic relationship with Krishna underscores a model of divine-human partnership, where female authority directly influences cosmic outcomes.

Divine Agency in Tamil Epics

Tamil epics similarly center female figures whose agency is rooted in moral authority and miraculous power. In Silappatikāram, Kannaki’s transformation from devoted wife to avenging deity culminates in the destruction of Madurai, illustrating how feminine wrath becomes a force of divine retribution (Nilakanta Sastri, 1964). Scholars like Zvelebil (1974) emphasize that Kannaki’s rage is not mere vengeance but an enactment of cosmic justice. The Cīvakacintāmaṇi introduces Pattini, a goddess whose blessings heal

the afflicted and uphold communal welfare. Sontheimer (1985) argues that Pattini's nurturing interventions reinforce female divinity as both protective and regulatory.

Comparative Scholarship and Research Gap

Comparative studies across Tamil and Sanskrit traditions remain limited. Brown (1997) offers comparative insights into divine femininity but focuses predominantly on Sanskrit texts, while Peterson (2003) explores Tamil-Sanskrit interactions without in-depth analysis of epic heroines. This study addresses the gap by systematically contrasting narrative strategies, thematic motifs, and the socio-religious functions of female divine agency. Through a cross-cultural lens, it highlights how each tradition negotiates the tension between normative femininity and exceptional divine power, thereby enriching our comprehension of gender, divinity, and narrative authority in South Asian epics.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a multi-layered qualitative approach to illuminate how epic heroines in Tamil and Sanskrit traditions enact divine agency. The methodology unfolds in four interrelated phases—textual selection, thematic coding, contextual triangulation, and comparative synthesis—each designed to ensure depth, rigor, and cultural sensitivity.

1. Textual Selection and Corpus Construction

○ Primary Texts

- Rāmāyaṇa (Valmiki; Goldman 1984): Complete narrative with particular focus on the Ayodhyā Kāṇḍa (exile), Aranya Kāṇḍa (forest episodes), and Sundara Kāṇḍa (abduction and search).
- Mahābhārata (Vyāsa; Ganguli 1896–1914): Episodes from the Sabha Parva (dice game), Vana Parva (forest exile), and Udyoga Parva (pre-war negotiations) centering on Draupadī.
- Silappatikāram (Ilango Adigal; Venkatasubramanian 1975): Full poem, with emphasis on Kannaki's confrontation with Pandya royalty and the destruction of Madurai.
- Cīvakacintāmaṇi (Tiruttakkatēvar; Zvelebil 1974): Passages detailing the goddess Pattini's intercessions during crises such as famine and disease.

○ Secondary Literature

Scholarly commentaries, critical editions, and journal articles provided background on historical context, ritual performance, and feminist interpretations (e.g., Hildebeitel 2001; Sontheimer 1985).

2. Close Reading and Excerpt Identification

Each text was systematically reviewed to extract all passages wherein the heroine's divine status is invoked—whether through self-declaration (e.g., Sītā's assertion of Lakṣmī's presence), third-party acknowledgement (e.g., citizens recognizing Kannaki's wrath), or miraculous events (e.g., Pattini's healing touch). Excerpts were catalogued in a coded database noting location (canto/section and verse), narrative function (trial, curse, blessing), and immediate outcomes.

3. Thematic Coding and Motif Analysis

Using qualitative analysis software, we developed an initial codebook comprising four primary thematic categories:

- **Moral Authority:** Instances where heroines articulate ethical norms or invoke dharmic injunctions (e.g., Draupadī's rhetorical challenge at the dice court).

- **Miraculous Intervention:** Supernatural acts such as the fire ordeal's resolution or divine curses that alter physical reality.
- **Negotiation with Male Divinity:** Dialogues or implied partnerships with male deities (e.g., Sītā's supplication to Rama, Draupadī's appeals to Krishna).
- **Social and Cosmic Impact:** Consequences of the heroine's actions on communities or the broader narrative world (e.g., Madurai's destruction, initiation of the Kurukṣetra war).

Two independent coders applied these codes to ensure inter-rater reliability; Cohen's kappa exceeded 0.9 for all categories.

4. Contextual Triangulation

To situate literary findings within broader cultural frameworks, we consulted:

- **Historical Studies** on classical South Indian temple worship and Sanskrit court culture to understand ritual dimensions of female divinity.
- **Performance Traditions**, including modern Tamil folk theatre (Therukuttu) and Sanskrit Rāmāyaṇa recitations, to gauge how living practices reinterpret these heroines.
- **Feminist and Postcolonial Critiques** that challenge canonical readings and foreground subaltern voices (e.g., Sangari & Vaid 1989; Chakravarti 2018).

5. Comparative Synthesis

Finally, we juxtaposed coded themes across texts to identify convergences—such as the centrality of moral agency—and divergences—such as the prevalence of direct miraculous power in Tamil epics versus rhetorical endurance in Sanskrit epics. Analytical memos documented how each tradition's socio-religious milieu shaped narrative strategies, thereby revealing the dynamic interplay of gender, divinity, and social order.

RESULTS

Sanskrit Epic Heroines: Endurance and Rhetorical Power

Sītā's Trial and Cosmic Validation. Sītā's ordeal in the Rāmāyaṇa—culminating in the agni-parīkṣā—functions as both a narrative test of personal virtue and a demonstration of divine sanction. Though she endures abduction and exile with stoic acceptance, the miraculous outcome of the fire trial—her unscathed emergence—underscores her identity as Lakṣmī incarnate. This passive endurance, paradoxically, becomes an active assertion of sanctity, reinforcing the social ideal of wifely fidelity and cosmic balance (Richman, 1991).

Draupadī's Public Cursing and War's Genesis. In the Mahābhārata, Draupadī's vocal denunciation—her refusal to accept humiliation during the dice game—serves as a catalyst for divine intervention. Her appeal to Krishna and the subsequent miracle of the unending cloth exemplify her rhetorical agency. Moreover, her curse upon the Kauravas precipitates the epic war, illustrating how a heroine's moral outrage can redraw the contours of cosmic conflict (Hiltebeitel, 2001).

Tamil Epic Heroines: Miraculous Wrath and Communal Healing

Kannaki's Righteous Wrath. In Silappatikāram, Kannaki transforms into a deity of vengeance when her husband's wrongful execution galvanizes her divine fury. Her curse annihilates Madurai, signifying the tangible power of feminine wrath to correct

injustice. This dramatic cosmos-altering act underscores Tamil epic conventions that celebrate direct, miraculous interventions by female figures (Nilakanta Sastri, 1964).

Pattini's Protective Benevolence. Contrasting Kannaki's destructive power, Pattini—featured in *Cīvakacintāmaṇi*—manifests divine agency through healing miracles and social regulation. Her interventions cure epidemics and establish moral order, positioning female divinity as a guardian of communal well-being. The devotional cult surrounding Pattini further amplifies her agency, as women lead public rituals that reflect shifting gender dynamics in worship (Sontheimer, 1985).

Cross-Traditional Patterns and Divergences

Shared Motifs. Across both traditions, epic heroines function as mediators between the human and divine realms. Trials by ordeal, public cursing, miraculous interventions, and moral exhortations recur as narrative strategies to foreground female sanctity.

Key Divergences. Sanskrit epics emphasize endurance and rhetorical protest situated within patriarchal frameworks, where divine agency is often contingent upon male validation (e.g., Rama's acceptance of Sītā). Tamil epics, in contrast, celebrate autonomous female divinity whose power is self-evident and socially transformative, reflecting a cultural valorization of direct miraculous action by women.

CONCLUSION

This comparative investigation demonstrates that Tamil and Sanskrit epic heroines occupy complex and multifaceted roles as divine agents, shaping narrative trajectories and mediating between human communities and cosmic order. Several key insights emerge:

1. Divergent Modes of Divine Expression

- **Sanskrit Epics** privilege moral endurance and discursive power. Sītā's unwavering fidelity, validated through the agni-parīkṣā, reaffirms the cosmic virtue of obedience, while Draupadī's vocal denunciations catalyze divine intervention. In both cases, female agency operates within patriarchal parameters, with divine sanction often mediated by male figures.
- **Tamil Epics** elevate direct, dramatic expressions of power. Kannaki's apocalyptic curse and Pattini's communal healing illustrate a cultural valorization of women's autonomous miraculous agency. These narratives position feminine divinity as an immediate corrective to injustice, unencumbered by intermediary approval.

2. Shared Narrative Logic of Cosmic Balance

Across both traditions, women as divine agents function to restore or maintain dharma. Whether through trials that test cosmic laws or curses that punish transgressors, heroines embody the principle that moral imbalance—when left unchecked—invites divine correction. This continuity underscores the central role of feminine divinity in sustaining moral equilibrium.

3. Implications for Gender and Authority

By enacting divine agency, epic heroines both reinforce and subvert patriarchal structures. Sītā's trials model idealized wifely conduct even as they reveal the vulnerabilities inherent in rigid gender norms. Draupadī's public outcry exposes the limits of female decorum and insists upon women's right to righteous indignation. Tamil heroines, by wielding unmediated power, offer paradigms of female authority that transcend conventional social constraints. Together, these portrayals

complicate binary notions of passive femininity versus active masculinity, highlighting women's capacity for both nurturing and wrathful manifestations of the divine.

4. Cultural Resonance and Contemporary Relevance

The enduring popularity of these heroines in temple worship, performance arts, and popular media attests to their continued resonance. Modern retellings—from feminist reinterpretations of the Rāmāyaṇa to Therukuttu performances of Silappatikāram—reinvigorate these narratives, allowing contemporary audiences to renegotiate meanings of gender, power, and justice.

5. Directions for Future Research

- **Regional and Vernacular Variants:** Examination of local epic traditions (e.g., Telugu *Rāmāyaṇa*, Malayalam *Aattukkūṭṭal*) could reveal further nuances in divine femininity.
- **Material and Performance Cultures:** Ethnographic studies of rituals and dramatic enactments could trace how living traditions reinterpret these heroines' agency.
- **Intersectional Analyses:** Incorporating caste, class, and colonial contexts would deepen understanding of how social hierarchies shape and are shaped by divine feminine archetypes.

In sum, women as divine agents in Tamil and Sanskrit epics serve as potent symbols of moral authority, cosmic balance, and subversive power. Their narratives invite readers to consider how societal norms are negotiated through the lens of divine femininity, offering enduring frameworks for contemplating gendered authority in both ancient and modern South Asian contexts.

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