

# The Power of Women in Singapore's Tamil Novels.

A. Mani

## Introduction.

The twentieth century has been an important period in the renaissance and development of Tamil literature. The rediscovery and printing of the previous two thousand years of Tamil literature was equally matched by the introduction of newer literary forms in Tamil. The novel was amongst the newer forms that were adapted into Tamil with the spread of printing.

Though Tamils have maintained contacts with Southeast Asia since the earliest times, it was in the nineteenth century that Tamils came in large numbers to Southeast Asian countries in response to western economic expansion. As Tamil communities became established in Malaya, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam and North Sumatra, Tamil writing and publications became one of the modes through which these communities expressed their identities besides social organizations, temples and newspapers. As writing in Tamil took root, one of the forms of its output was expressed in the writing and publication of the novel.

This paper is concerned with those novels written in the post-war period, when there was a clear direction in the political development within Singapore to become a distinct colony, and then an independent state. The paper analyses the period from the post-war period up to the mid-1980s, as the period represents the most rapid transformation within Singapore society and in the views held by the Tamil writers. This period is distinct from the latter period starting from the mid-1980s, during which Singapore transformed itself from struggling to

establish its identity as a nation-state to that of a developed country. Thus, the post-war period up to the mid-1980s was crucial in the history of Singapore to becoming a distinct part of Malaya but later separate from Malaysia and create a nation out of many migrant ethnic groups.

The first part of the paper outlines some definitional issues related to Tamil novels in Singapore during the period under analysis. The second part discusses the background to the development of Tamil novels in Singapore. The third part discusses the main issue of this paper, namely the portrayal of women as powerful figures despite the challenges they faced as being members of a community evolving to become a settled population in Singapore.

## Some definitions of the Singapore Tamil novel.

As a result of the political history of Singapore, and the historical background of Indian migration to Singapore, the Tamil novels and their writers straddle different geographical regions and time periods. This has had immense effect on the content of the novels these writers produced.

The Singapore Tamil novel up to the mid-1980s has to be identified as usually written by persons resident in Singapore at the time of their publication. This definition is useful as almost all writers of the Singapore Tamil novels were not born in Singapore. Most of them came as migrants from Tamil Nadu or the Malay Peninsula in the post-war period.

Almost all the novels, though written while the authors were resident in Singapore, are printed in

Tamil Nadu and published in Singapore as well as in Tamil Nadu. This may be a result of the cheaper costs of printing books in Tamil Nadu. Though there were printing presses in Singapore, the Tamil novel writers found it easier to have their novels printed in Tamil Nadu. The Tamil book market, moreover, is extensive in Tamil Nadu than in Singapore.

The political history of Singapore adds yet another dimension to the definition of Tamil novels in Singapore. Up to the period of 1963, Singapore was never imagined as a separate political entity that could one day become a nation-state of its own. It was always visualized as part of Malaya, and the Malayan concept pervaded social and political imagination in the wider society. Even as late as 1962, Singapore's Ministry of Culture had organized a Malayan Writer's conference in Singapore, where Tamil language writers were allowed to have exclusive workshops to promote Tamil literature as part of Malayan literature. The year 1963 again pushed Tamil writers to bend to the winds of change when Malaysia was formed, and Singapore became one of the states within the newly constituted Malaysian Federation. For the next two years, it was rather common for writers to address themselves to a Malaysian setting and audience rather than Singapore alone. Singapore witnessed the separation from Malaysia in 1965, and

this in turn caused many writers question their past writings in coming to terms with a Singapore that had its independence thrust upon it.

Thus the typical Tamil novel has to be defined so as to include the following elements: the geographical spread of the novelists had to include Tamil Nadu and Malaya; the political perspective had to include Malaya and India linked by British colonial heritage; the historical perspective of an independent Malaya with which Singapore was eventually supposed to merge, and being part of Malaysia, and finally becoming a distinct nation-state; and culturally to a common people speaking a common language originating from Tamil Nadu and spreading to Malaya and Singapore. Thus an awareness of the geographical, political, historical and cultural backdrop in which the Tamil novel found its place is useful for analytical purposes.

**The background to the development of Tamil novels in Singapore.**

The development of the Tamil novel must be seen in the context of Singapore, which became a recognizable place only after 1819 and eventually a nation-state in 1965. The population of Indians, the position of Tamil language in Singapore and past

**TABLE 1 Indian Population in Singapore up to the mid-1980s.**

Year	Total	Indians	Percentage of Indians in the total population.
1921	350,355	32,342	7.8
1931	559,900	50,900	8.0
1947	940,700	71,300	7.4
1957	1,445,930	124,083	8.6
1970	2,074,507	145,169	7.0
1980	2,413,985	154,632	6.4
1986	2,586,200	166,800	6.4

SOURCES: Census of Population, 1970, 1980.  
 Usha Mahajani, 1960:109.  
 Singapore: Facts and Pictures 1987:3.

literary development are important factors to be considered in order to establish the backdrop in which the Tamil novel evolved in Singapore.

Table 1 shows the position of Indians as a significant minority in Singapore for the period taken for analysis in this paper. The population enumeration of 1823 reports about 753 Indians in Singapore. Until the latter part of the nineteenth century, the population of Indians in Singapore continued to be less than 10,000 persons. The rapid increase in the Indian population of Singapore occurred in the twentieth century, growing from 32,342 (7%) to nearly five times the figure in 1980 of 154,632 persons. In the mid-1980s, there were 166,800 Indians in Singapore forming 6.4 percent of the population.

As evident in Table 1, the Indian population in Singapore has always been slightly more than six percent of the total population. The population size of Indians in the Singapore population may be only indicative of the limits of literary productivity. Despite their small size in the population, available evidence indicates that a Tamil newspaper was in existence even before the first Chinese daily appeared in 1881 (Thirunavukkarasu, 1979). The Straits Observer, a Singapore English daily in its 29 February 1876 issue, mentions the *Singai Varthamani* and the Dinidaya Press. Thus, it can be deduced that a Tamil newspaper was in circulation in 1876. This was followed by *Singai Nesan* (1887-1890), Pothujana Mithiran (1923-1925), *Tamil Nesan* (1924 to date, but based in Kuala Lumpur), *Tamil Murasu* (1935 to date), and *Tamil Malar* (1965-1979).

The various Tamil newspapers were published in a political setting in which Singapore was considered a part of the Malay Peninsula. Historically Penang, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore maintained their Tamil reading areas respectively in northern, central and southern Malaya (See Mani, 1981). *Tamil Murasu* and later *Tamil Nesan* rose to become the national newspapers in the Malayan setting. Thus the population of Indians or Tamils within it was not a

limiting factor for Singapore Tamil writing to flourish until 1965. After 1965, the political orientation of Singapore's nation building process drastically reduced the importance of the Malay Peninsula for Tamil language development in Singapore.

Tamil language has always occupied a dominant position amongst Indians in Singapore, thus making it one of the four official languages of Singapore since 1956. Even during the pre-war years, all British colonial announcements were also made in Tamil to reach out to the wider Indian community in Malaya and Singapore. Govindasamy, in his seminal paper on the historical development of Tamil literature in Singapore up to 1979, has identified six periods to describe the evolution of Tamil literature in Singapore (Govindasamy, 1979).

The early period is described as from 1887 to 1900, during which six publications have become available. The 1887 book by Yazpaanam Sadhasiva Pandithar on *Singai Nagar Anthathi, Chithira Kavigal* sings the praise of Lord Subramaniyam, the main deity worshipped at the Sri Thandayuthapani Temple at Tank Road. In 1893, two books entitled 'Kuthirai Panthaya Lavani' (A song on horse racing) and *Salaaba Lavani* (Song of Joy) were published by Rengasamy Dasan and Ponnusamy Pillai respectively. This was followed by two more books by Ka Velu Pillai on *Singai Murugesar Pathigam* (Song on Lord Murugan of Singapore) and Mohamed Abdul Kader's book on *Keerthanai Thiratu* (Collection of devotional songs). Thus by the end of the nineteenth century five books, all written in poetry and generally dedicated to religion except for the one book on horse racing, had formed the foundation of Tamil literary writings in Singapore.

The period between 1900 and 1930 appears to lack significant development in Tamil literature. This may be a result of the written materials being not collected anywhere in Singapore. The beginning of the twentieth century gradually brought the awareness of the Indian independence movement to

the Tamils in Singapore. By the 1920s, Tamil writings in India increasingly began to espouse the two dominant social and political movements taking place in India. These had their ramifications among the Indians in Singapore. The Indian independence movement held the attention of the successful white-collar class and the businessmen of the Indian community. The second social undercurrent was the self-respect movement launched by E.V. Ramasamy Naicker, commonly referred as *Periyar*. The latter movement did not urge the Tamils to seek political independence but instead sought social reforms among Dravidians, especially the Tamils. His visit to Malaya in 1929, brought about a consolidation of Tamil revivalism centered on issues related to social reforms. The ill treatment of untouchables among Tamils and the dominance of orthodox Hindu practices as well as toddy drinking became some of the concerns of the reform movement. Up to the beginning of the Second World War, the Indian community was bifurcated with the English speaking white collar class rejecting Tamil revivalism while the Tamil using middle class and laboring classes joined to support social reform through Tamil language. This still continues to have its effect on issues related to the Indian community in Singapore. As a result, the Tamil newspapers, short-stories, poetry and all other forms of writings reflect a zeal for social reform.

The concern with social reform is modified to some extent during the Japanese colonial period as Malaya was totally cut off from events in British India. The establishment of the Indian National Army in Singapore fostered the writing of poetry and short stories that espoused the liberation of India with Japanese alliance.

The post-war period up to 1960 was marked by political uncertainties and identification with Malayan political consciousness as the British pushed for the independence of Malaya. This period also represents a period of active Tamil language development in

Singapore as part of evolving a Malayan identity for the community. Many new writers were introduced as a result of the effort of Tamil Murasu, Tamil Nesan and the general mood of Tamil language revivalism. For instance, the Tamils Festival promoted by the then editor of Tamil Murasu, G Sarangapani, encouraged poetry and short-story writing. It became prestigious to be known as a writer or an orator. Most of the writers of the Tamil novels analyzed in this paper entered the world of writing during this period as poets or as short-story writers.

The 1960s brought more uncertainties to the Tamil community in Singapore. The effects of strict citizenship laws, declaring loyalty to Malaysia in 1963 and overnight to Singapore in 1965, the Indonesian confrontation, the race riots, the British withdrawal in the late 1970s and the subsequent departure about 10,000 Indians and many associated factors caused uncertainties within the community. The Tamil literary writings only partly reflect the changing social landscape within the community as most of the writers began to reflect the government sponsored issues and concepts about evolving the new nation. It would have been difficult for many writers to reflect issues within the community as government tried to contain any and every issue relating to ethnicity by demanding obeisance to its centrally planned goals. As radio and television were government operated, and as the two Tamil newspapers were highly circumspect about expressing any community issue, most writers wrote about those issues that were accepted for publication. The uncertainties in the wider Tamil community appear to have persisted till the mid 1970s.

The mid-1970s witnessed renewed confidence in the development of Tamil language with the introduction of academic seminars and conferences in which analysis of Tamil writings in Singapore formed a part of the larger effort to raise the level of consciousness. The practice of analyzing Tamil writings in Singapore encouraged a number of

writers to publish the writings in the form of books. Even during this period Tamil literary writings were largely confined to poetry and short stories. The introduction of national and regional awards for Singapore Tamil writers brought recognition to a number of Tamil writers. This condition continued into the 1980s.

### **The novelists.**

The Tamil novelists taken for commentary in this paper include Perumal (the oldest and now deceased), Shanmugam, Ilangkannan, Gurusamy and Pazhanivelan. These were the writers who had published novels between 1945 and the mid-1980s. It is useful to know their socioeconomic background in order to comprehend the place they gave to women in their novels.

All of them could be described as being part of the lower middle class which was slightly above the mass of the laboring Tamil community in Singapore. Though they had started writing as younger writers they graduated into novel publishing only in their latter part of their lives. They were largely educated in Tamil medium education. Perumal, for instance, is reputed to have self taught himself Tamil while working as an odd-job worker in a provision store. Their knowledge of English, the economically useful language in Singapore, was very rudimentary. This writer had never heard them talking English while collecting data for this paper. Their fluency in Tamil was better than the wider population of Tamil speakers in Singapore. Ilaknannan was a Singapore citizen, while the others were permanent residents, which denied them many privileges given to citizens. Except for Pazhanivelan, all other novelists later managed to obtain their citizenship papers. Perumal was the only writer to have risen amongst them to a highly paid occupation in Singapore that of producer of Indian programmes in the former Radio Television Singapore. The occupations of others ranged from

petty businessmen, hair-dresser, and shop assistant to that of typist. None of the writer considered writing as a profession, and most of them wrote in Tamil as a hobby for their own satisfaction. All of them wrote not only novels, but generally short stories and poetry. Their writings placed them far above their socioeconomic status in Singapore. They were given significance and importance in matters relating to the status of Tamil language by the community as well as government organizations.

All the writers had their novels printed in Tamil Nadu except in the case of Gurusamy who printed his books in Malaya. Almost all the authors had invested their personal funds to have their novels printed. The sale of these novels was undertaken by the writers themselves. Pazhanivelan and Gurusamy were rather aggressive in promoting their books by traveling to various places in Malaya and Singapore. Shanmugam operated his own publication outlet, the Thai Noolagam, in Tamil Nadu. The Singapore Tamil book market was limited for the books of all these writers. Most writers suffered financial losses in publishing their novels. These financial losses, however, were seen as being compensated by the honor they received from the social organizations and the wider Tamil community. Only Ilangkannan was awarded the Asean Write Award, given by the Government of Thailand to writers nominated by to Asean governments. All others had to be content with the invitation given to them at Tamil language related functions or by government agencies when they needed the input from Tamil writers. All the novelists considered short story and poetry as welcome by the audience than novels. In fact all novelists were categorized as writers of short story or poetry and less as novelists. In the time period taken for analysis in this paper, there were other writers who had completed scripts of novels awaiting publication. This paper, however, has restricted itself to published novels until the mid-1980s.

### The novels.

Among the writings of these five novelists, Ka Perumal, commonly known as a poet, has written one novel, *Thuyarap Paathai* (Sorrow's Path). Perumal, a provision store worker in a plantation shop, is a self-taught writer, who had no formal education in Tamil. His interest in Tamil obtained him a job as sub-editor in *Sangamani*, the fortnightly newspaper of the National Union of Plantation Workers (NUPW) in Malaya. The novel was published as a serial from 4 February 1958 to 29 August 1958 for thirty weeks. Twenty years later, it was published as a novel in 1978 and later reprinted as a second edition in 1979.

The novel's social setting is the plantation economy of the 1930s. The story is set in a typical rubber plantation in Malaya. The plot is woven around the daily lives of Tamil plantation workers. The *kangani* (foreman) and his son, due to their advantaged position in the plantation economy, are able to overcome the challenges posed by other families to their status. The plantation owner (a British) with his Ceylonese clerk is only concerned with the increased output of latex, and is concerned with workers welfare as long as it affects profits of the plantation. Thus maintenance of a temple for worship, toddy shop, elementary Tamil school, children's crèche and medical clinic are considered as important aspects of workers welfare for keeping them happy and healthy to produce more latex. The compounder (clinical assistant), the Tamil school teacher, children's crèche supervisor (an elderly woman) and the temple priest are intermediaries between the estate management and the workers. The compounder (a Tamil Christian) is shown as an understanding elderly man who is able to communicate with the white man. The school teacher, the children's crèche care taker are also depicted as playing important roles as the moral sentinels of the plantation economy. The temple

priest is shown as exploiting the religious beliefs of the plantation workers to his economic advantage. These characters can be seen to reflect the anti-capitalist and social reform zeal of the writer than a generalization of all such people in the plantations. However they play as important reference points to the story concerning three families in the plantation depicted by the novel. The *kangani*, as a result of his closeness to the management is able to manipulate events in the plantation to his advantage. He places his illiterate son in an enviable position, that of accounting latex collection, and is also determined to marry his son to the most charming girl in the plantation. The heroine's family consists of a machine operator father (a high status in the manual labor category) and a step-mother who is keen to marry her step-daughter to her good-for-nothing brother. The hero of the novel is the most literate among the workers and both his parents, though of good nature, are rubber tappers. The *kangani*, having denied the latex accounting job to the hero, gives it to his illiterate son. He is able to manipulate the estate management to support the operation of the toddy shop and organize temple festivals, thus satisfying the psychological need of most workers. He is also able to use his affinity to management to enforce obedience from the workers by denying or granting favors to the tappers. The hero's goodness and literacy, however, appears as a threat to him, and is finally able to get the hero evicted from the estate, thus ensuring his supremacy as well as the heroine's hand for his son. The *kangani* emerges the eventual hero, while the end of all the good natured characters is rather tragic. Capitalism is triumphant.

A. P. Shanmugam is an abbreviation of the author's name – Aathikulam Pakirisamy Shanmugam. Born in Tamil Nadu, he came to Malaya in the early 1950s and later moved to Singapore to set up his own hair-dressing saloon. Being self-employed, he set up a publishing agency in Tamil Nadu to promote book

publications. Owing to his efforts a number of early novels and short stories written by writers in Singapore were published.

Shanmugam has published three novels, namely *Selli* (1970), *Nalla Kathi* (1975), and *Kala* (1979). The earlier novels are set in the social context of Tamil Nadu, while the last novel reflects the society in Malaya. *Selli* (name of the main female character) is centered on a teenage girl and life events concerning her family members. The story is set in the post-war period in Tamil nadu, with some of the characters depicted as having worked in Malaya and having close social links to Malaya. The writer's societal experience in Malaya is inter-woven into the characters aspirations for social reform. *Nalla Kathi* (Good Fate) covers a period covering both the pre-war and post-war years. The story's geographical setting is Tamil Nadu's Tanjore district, the area from which the writer came. The story is about Chinnappan and Chinnakannu, who are unable to get married when young, and get married after being separated for thirty years. The story progresses by a series of narration when the two characters meet by chance after thirty years, thus reconstructing their life events. *Kala* (name of the female heroine of the story) is different from the earlier two novels by the author. The novel describes the post-war period in Malaya, especially the 1950s. The heroine, after being forced to marry a man who had lent money to her father, deserts him and runs away from Taiping, a Malayan town in the state of Perak. She reaches Singapore and meets with her former sweetheart and marries him.

Ilangkannan is the pen name of the author Balakrishnan. As most Tamil writers supported the movement for removing all Sanskrit related words in their writings, Ilankannan's name change represents the pure Tamil version of the Sanskrit related name of Balakrishnan. Ilankannan, a Tamil typist by

profession, was a prolific writer of Tamil short stories and serialized stories for Tamil newspapers and radio programmes. During the period under investigation in this paper, he had published one novel, *Alaigal* (Waves). The novel was published earlier as a weekend serial in Tamil Murasu. He had written a number of novel length stories for the Tamil newspapers, and many were published later in the 1990s. For his contribution to Tamil literary writing, he was recommended by Singapore for the Asean Write Award in 1982.

*Alaigal* (Waves) published in 1976, has the social setting of Singapore in the 1960s. The plot of the novel reflects the socioeconomic change taking place in Singapore of the 1960s. A male Tamil youth and a female Chinese fall in love. Despite parental objections and rejection they get married. A series of life events cause crises in their lives, and eventually both families accept the marriage. The conflict between generations and the inter-racial tensions are brought out in the story. The novel attempts to account the ways in which Tamils examine prejudice vis-à-vis Chinese Singaporeans.

Mu Su Gurusamy had produced about sixteen publications, consisting mainly of short stories. Amongst them, *Vaadaatha Malar* (Unwilting Flower) published in 1959, and which saw five editions, comes closest to being a novel. The author was well known for his aggressive marketing strategy of producing and selling books for a dollar. This enabled him to sell all his publications to anyone he met, as a dollar was easy for anyone to part with even if they did not want to read his books. His writings have been widely criticized by other Tamil writers; especially the way he combined a few short stories to produce novel length publications. Thus *Oor Iravu* (One Night) and *Vaadaatha Malar* (Unwilting Flower) are the same story, except that in the latter, the author had padded the former story by joining

other short stories in the beginning and the at the end. This is clearly stated in the author's forward to *Vaadaatha Malar*.

“This short novel is not written continuously as a novel. Three short-stories published in 1959 for Tamil Murasu have been combined and the gaps between them closed.”(1974:6).

The story for *Vaadaatha Malar* is set in the 1950s Malayan setting. As it is a combination of three stories, the plot is rather complex. The heroine of the novel runs away from Singapore when her brother-in-law makes sexual advances to her. She goes to Kuala Lumpur and becomes a school teacher and writes to her sister about the events that led to her running away. The sister's husband's friend, the hero of the novel, meets a prostitute at a cinema. They meet for the night, and she reveals that she was jilted in love, and later ran away from home. She marries a widower who later deserts her. She runs away again and lands with a brothel keeper in Kuala Lumpur. Her brother comes to know of her predicament and murders the brothel keeper. The brother is later hanged and the girl commits suicide. The sister's husband's friend travels to Kuala Lumpur, and by chance meets the runaway heroine who herself is returning to Kuala Lumpur after visiting her friend in Johore Bharu. They become acquainted and agree to meet in Kuala Lumpur. At the meeting, everybody meets everybody and both are engaged to be married eventually in Singapore.

Peri Neela Pazhanivelan had published two books which are treated as novels. *Minnar Keetru* (A Streak of Lightening) was published in 1978, and consists of four short novels and the book itself comprises of 160 pages. The four short novels in the book are *Unarvin Alaigal* (Emotional Waves, 62 pages), *Neyyum En Magalthaan* (You too are my daughter, 26 pages), *Minnar Keetru* (A Streak of

Lightening, 24 pages), and *Murai Maapillai* (Groom by kinship, 29 pages).

The second book, *Antharathil Thongum Uravu* (A relationship in mid-air) is a full length novel of 120 pages, published in 1987. The novel was submitted earlier for a novel writing competition promoted by the Malacca branch of the Malaysian Indian Congress Party, the leading political party for Malaysian Indians, and the Malaysian Tamil daily newspaper Tamil Nesan. The novel was awarded the first prize in the competition.

*Unarvin Alaigal*, with its social setting in Malaya of the 1960s, shows Kumaravel (the hero) being loved by two women. The ethnic Malay heroine later dies and the hero marries the ethnic Tamil heroine. The story is interwoven into the conflict of emotions as Kumaravel battles between aspects of ethnically right behavior and changing attitudes towards inter-ethnic marriages.

*Neyyum Yen Magalthan* is written with the Malayan society of the 1950s in mind. The story is about an ideal family that lives happily. The head of the household, Paamalan, however, had lived with another woman in his youthful days, only to discover that she was already pregnant from an earlier love affair. Paamalan runs away from her, but he is named as father of the newborn child. The woman lives with another man and has another child. As the family breaks up, the two girls are brought up by their maternal grandmother. When the grandmother dies, the two girls, now young maidens, turn up at Paamalan's house for refuge. The ideal family undergoes traumatic emotional upheaval in accepting the two new 'daughters' into the household.

*Minnar Keetru*, the novel's title as well as the name of the whole volume, describes again the social life in the Malayan setting. It brings forth a Freudian



problem in family life. Murugavel, the last son in a family of boys, is brought up as a girl as the parents had always wanted a female child. This causes psychological problem for the boy, as Murugavel shuns the company of males and is also excluded from the company of females. His male relatives try to make him gradually accept that he is a male after all. He is married but the marriage with Thamizharasi (heroine) runs into marital problem as she does not find him manly enough. She runs away with another man, and lives with him for ten years and bears additional number of children to the second man. Eventually the second man deserts her. Kumaravel forgives her and despite objections from his parents and relatives, brings her home.

*Murai Mappilai* (Groom by Kinship) is another short-novel set in the Malayan setting. A boy and a girl grow up in the estate setting, and are told from young that they will eventually get married one day. The boy's family moves to Singapore, and the boy visits the girl's home during his vacations. However, the potential 'groom' gets into trouble when he agrees to stand in as 'father' to another girl whose love affair makes her conceive out of wedlock. The 'groom' tries to prove his innocence and eventually succeeds after a court trial. The 'groom' and the childhood sweetheart are finally married.

Though Pazhanivelan's *Minnarkeetru* is a compilation of short novels, his *Antharathil Thongum Uravu* (A Relationship in Mid-air) is a full length novel. The author uses three families and an illegitimate son to relate the story in a Malaysia-Singapore setting. Starting from the arrival of the hero, Poongkundran, as a youth from Malaysia to Singapore, the author shows that he is able to rise economically and obtain permanent residence in Singapore. The hero's love for Tamil language and literature brings him friendship with an upper middle-class family. He meets a second family

through his literary interests. Both families are depicted as ideal types, where all family members though economically successful are fluent in Tamil and enjoy classical and modern Tamil literature, and who persevere in preserving Tamil cultural ideals. These kinds of storylines are drawn from the wide gulf that existed in the Tamil society between those who were economically successful and the mass working class. Poongkundran, the hero, entertains love for a girl of the second family, only to discover that her father and his father are the same man. He also discovers his biological father was the man called 'uncle' who stayed as a tenant at his parent's home in Seremban, the state capital of Negri Sembilan in Malaysia. The 'uncle' was even betrothed to marry his eldest sister, who even after thirty years had chosen to remain a spinster as she could not marry the 'uncle'. The hero realizes that he is the offspring of the illicit love affair between the 'uncle' and his mother. The hero is confused of the relationship as he is unable to figure out how the 'uncle' could be his biological father. Other than the 'uncle' and his mother, both of whom die before the hero could confront them, only the wedded wife of the 'uncle' knows the truth as he had confessed to her before his death. The novel's story is yet another aspect of the social problems that affected working class Tamils in the past decades.

The writings of the five novelists taken for analysis in this paper may appear to be centered on everyday lives of the Tamils in Malaya and Singapore. It may be even summarized as centered either in the plantations or urban centers and involving characters located in families or those who live alone. The common themes may appear to be love, marriage, family breakups, marital and financial problems. All these themes may be characteristic of a migrant society trying to find its bearings in the post-war decades in Malaya and Singapore. It may be possible to question as to why the Tamil novelists have

confined themselves to these problems rather than venture into themes as covered by the leading novelists in contemporary Tamil literature. On examination, it would appear that all the five novelists are persons from the lowest socioeconomic position in the wider society. Even if some of their economic status improved over time, they were all members of the marginal society at some point in their lives. The lives of the writers show them as continuously struggling to achieve their present economic and social status, and in the process they depict the everyday struggle that goes on in the society around them.

Despite the mundane issues taken up in the novels, one can see certain common themes that are broached by all the novelists. The novels provide a commentary on the social life of the working class Tamils and the perceptions of the novelists as to what an ideal social life can be. Social issues of the Tamil community are also vividly commented upon by the novelists. In all the novels, women become a central issue. The preoccupation with the centrality of women in all the novels may be unique to Tamil writings in Singapore. The issue of self-identity and especially that of retaining a Tamil identity is treated extensively in all novels. Thus, social life, social issues, the centrality of women and community identity can be identified as major themes that pervade the Tamil novels in Singapore in the period under study in this paper. The next section of the paper would undertake the analysis of women in the novels.

### **Tamil women**

*“Aavathum Pennaale, Azhivathum Pennaale”* (through women is being, and through women is downfall), is a proverb used by Tamils in describing the omnipotent power of women. It summarizes the dilemma and challenges faced by Tamil women in everyday life as reflected in all the Tamil novels.

In the Tamil tradition, women are believed to have extraordinary powers, that can lead to life and prosperity or to destruction and even death. Despite the drudgery and subordination of women in their everyday lives, Tamils believe that Tamil women can, and do, control and alter events – they can save their husbands from death (Example: the story of Thamayanthi); they can destroy whole towns (Example: the story of Kannagi); they can bring health and wealth to their kin; they can cause poverty and ruin. A woman’s curse is feared, her blessing is sought.

In order to control and direct her powers, the dominant ideology states that the Tamil woman should be constrained and controlled by her male kin. When directed, her powers as a virgin girl brings prosperity to her father and brother, that is to her natal lineage. Her powers as a married woman can bring health, prosperity and sons to her husband’s family and lineage. Beck has described the Tamil kin nucleus, one that has the woman as its central figure, surrounded by father, brother, husband and son. She writes:

These four males must guard her in order to direct her energies towards constructive ends. But her relationship to these four males is always ambivalent. Her power will be greatly respected by them, if well controlled, but it will also be feared. The female is the material or source of productive energy on which the kinship system is built, but she is also a kind of watchdog who ensures its proper functioning. Her curse can destroy evil relatives as fast as her blessings can advance the interests of the just (Beck 1974:7).

Beck adds that females underlie the kinship system that is structured and maintained by men. Moreover,

... females in Tamil folklore can also control and manage themselves if there is need to. It is precisely female self-control and their private judgment about correct human (rather than natural) behavior that makes women secretly into goddesses. When single-minded, a woman can bring together the power of her "nature" with the force of her chastity (culturally developed control) to become representative of a super or divine force (called *devi*) (1974:70).

It is precisely the fact of self-control that is so crucial to the perceived powers of Tamil woman.

At the same time, Tamil women share with women everywhere "the myth of feminine evil" (Hayes, 1972), for the primary symbolic image of women everywhere is based on female sexuality, in which we find a dualist image of the female as nurturer/healer and as witch/prostitute (Hoch-Smith and Spring, 1978:19). Moreover, as Hoch-Smith and Spring point out, this dualist image 'while perpetuated mainly by males' (1978:19), has also been internalized by women and is perpetuated by them also. Tamil women are no different, for they are the primary perpetuators of the myth of "self-control" that is so important to Tamil conception of females and female powers.

The Singapore Tamil novels impose the dominant Tamil ideology of "self-control" on the women they present. Though women's actions occur in a context in which they are viewed as being subordinate to and controlled by men, the concept of *aram* (universal justice) is interwoven to condemn men who do not support women in their attempt to lead a "righteous" life. Despite the fact that the events are not in a typical Tamil societal milieu, the Tamil ideology is used as the dominant model into which the characters are fitted.

The "ideal Tamil woman" is defined in terms of the external paraphernalia she wears, the language she uses, and the unshakeable belief she has of her husband (whether married or betrothed). Falling from this ideal will definitely lead to suffering for the women, and they eventually emerge cleansed.

Perumal, Ilankannan and Pazhanivelan define the ideal Tamil women. Perumal defines the Tamil woman who is considered the ideal by all.

"There was none in Mynah Plantation who would not respect and appreciate Nallasamy driver's wife Solaiamma. She will use lots of *manjal* (turmeric) to wash her face and she will comb and tie her hair in an admirable way. The *kunguma pottu* that adorned her forehead and a smiling face used to add auspiciousness (like Goddess Mahalaksmi) not only to her house but also to Mynah Plantation" [Perumal: 34].

Thus the ideal Tamil woman is the *cumankali*, the auspicious married woman like Solaiamma. Her benevolent female power is seen to emanate a potentially benevolent force within her family and plantation, equivalent to the *uur* or village in the Tamil tradition.

This ideal is extended to any woman, irrespective of her ethnicity, who comes within the Tamil cultural ambit. In Ilankannan's novel *Lei Gua* is an ethnic Chinese. In making her the "Tamil woman", she "speaks fluent Tamil and behaves like a Tamil girl in the company of Mathiarasu". She addresses him *atthan* (darling) in Tamil. She sports long flowing hair, and adopts Tamil customs like wearing *pottu* on her forehead, cooking Tamil food and calling his parents using proper Tamil address forms.

Pazhanivelan provides glimpses of the "ideal

Tamil woman” in his novels. A “Tamil woman” avoids social contact with men. When Murugavel meets Neelamalar (ethnic Tamil woman) and Sailani (ethnic Malay woman) on the beach, it is Sailani who approaches and asks Murugavel as to why they are being stared at by him (*Unarvin Alaigal*: 3). Neelamar avoids direct contact with him. Neelamalar later develops letter correspondence with Murugavel. In one of her letters, she provides a glimpse of the avoidance relationship pursued when a Tamil woman chooses to follow the Tamil ideology.

“I speak with ease to males of other races. But when I meet Tamil men, I naturally become reticent. The feeling of belonging to one race, and my shyness prevents me from talking to them. So, I do not speak openly to our men. Some think of me as arrogant. They do not understand that it is my feeling as a woman that overtakes me when I meet men of our race (pp.11).

Thus the Tamil woman in her “ideal” state retires to the background in the social interaction with men of her “race”.

The Tamil woman gains “power” and recognition by exercising *porumai* (patience) in her dealings with others. She is portrayed in the Tamil novels as having *porumai*, another valued aspect of the “Tamil ideal”. This is clearly portrayed by Perumal in his character sketch of Ponnammah (the heroine).

Ponnammah is at Muthukaruppan’s house tending to his head wounds. Her step-mother yells for her and this causes anxiety to her. The day before, Muthukaruppan’s family had gone to Ponnammah’s house to ask for her hand in marriage. Ponnammah’s step-mother had insulted them. Yet, Ponnammah as the ideal Tamil woman is depicted as symbolizing *porumai* as in the Tamil tradition. She remarks:

“It is alright if *Sinnamma* (step mother) scolds me. The opportunity given to me to tend to him (Muthukaruppan) is more important. If any ill repute comes to me as a result of this, I will bear it for his sake. Father-in-law Palanivelu and mother-in-law shower so much love on me. *Sinnamma*’s scolding words are nothing before their love.

.....

There is no one for *Sinnamma* except me. Let her scold me. I am her daughter too. Even though she is my step-mother..... Can a child be hurt by its mother’s scolding (Perumal: 49).

The step-mother further defines the need for an unmarried girl to be controlled.

“From morning the house is not cleaned. A girl who has come of age (meaning having attained puberty and ready for marriage) should not be roaming the *uur* (village)” (perumal: 50).

Beck speaks of the young girls “unconscious sexuality that must be made conscious and must be controlled, both by society and by the woman herself.”

A Tamil woman, in practicing *porumai* attains *perumai* (nobleness). *Pennin perumai* (nobleness of women) is attained by holding fast to the innate quality of womanhood, by having love and devotion for one’s husband and by following one’s dharma. In Singapore’s Tamil novels, the attainment of *perumai* is praised directly or indirectly by depicting contrastive characters. All the novelists deal with *perumai*.

Perumal brings out the concept of *perumai* by creating contrastive female characters. Ilankannan uses Lei Gua and Thamarai (Mathiarasu’s cousin) to

show how Tamil women attain *perumai*. He does it by contrasting their responses to similar situations. Thamarai, who always wanted to marry Mathiarasu, is disappointed when Lei Gua marries him. She hires a thug to disfigure Lei Gua and threaten Mathiarasu. As she pays only part of the money to the thug, she runs into trouble with him. She gets raped by the thug and eventually commits suicide to resurrect her *perumai*. On the other hand, Lei Gua does not seek revenge, but conforms more to the ideal of Tamil woman. By totally believing in her husband, she is able to attain *perumai* and comes to be recognized as having brought good name to her husband's family.

Shanmugam's *Nalla kathi* also has two contrasting characters to show *perumai*. The rich lady in the story, though a widow, is shown not as conforming to the ideal. She refuses to remove her *thali* (a gold ornament adjoined to a string or chain worn by married Tamil women) when her husband dies, and later is rather willing to have illicit affairs with men of her preference. On the other hand, Chinnakannu (the heroine) is shown as a woman, who refuses to marry but awaits the return of the man she fell in love with. Even though there was no hope that her lover would return, she refused marriage to any other man. Finally her lover returns, and in their late age is married. Though the author is not quick to condemn the rich lady, he still considers Chinnakannu as coming closer to the ideal. Tradition and change are shown in the portrayal of these two characters.

Pazhanivelan in his *Neyum Yen Magalthaan* also uses two contrasting characters to show *perumai* as an aspect of Tamil woman's ideal. Ponni (the wife) is shown as all forgiving for her husband's past; whereas Kannammah, the husband's first lover, is shown as far off the ideal. Ponni emerges as the ideal, while the latter becomes mad and dies. Ponni by her nature is the epitome of loving and forgiving nature. She becomes the ideal.

Similarly, in *Murai Mappilai*, novelist Pazhanivelan depicts Ilarani, betrothed to Murugesu, to be prepared to wait patiently for him when he lands in trouble by lending his name as father to an illegitimate child of another woman. Ilarani waits even when he asks her to forget him and marry someone else. She finally gets him as her husband by her patience and forgiving nature.

In Gurusamy's novel *Vaadatha Malar*, Punitha becomes the *theruvilakku* (street lamp), while Maragatham becomes the *kutthuvilakku* (lamp lighted before religious altar). Both women come from good backgrounds. Punitha falls from the ideal while Maragatham becomes the ideal.

*Perumai* in motherhood is deemed natural. Mothers are by definition noble, but wives can attain nobility only through their own actions of chasteness and submission. Moreover, marriage is an austerity (*thavam*). The greater the austerity — the self control of women, including their submission to men — the greater is their resulting power. Above all, the married woman must be chaste, must maintain her chastity, her *karpu*. The concept derives from the Tamil root word *kal*, to learn, and is a "word which besides mere faithfulness signifies the restraint of all immodest impulses and the sacred power acquired by a woman who has such qualities" (Hart, 1973:243). Whenever a woman, unmarried or married loses her *perumai* by losing her *karpu*, there is no redemption for her. In Singapore Tamil novels, the woman dies only to gain her *perumai*, but not *karpu*.

Thamarai, in Ilangkannan's novel, ruins her *perumai*. She loses her chastity to the thug she hired for an act not becoming of an ideal Tamil woman. That is, she lost her *perumai*. She pays a heavy price. She gets pregnant without getting married. Her mother accuses her of having ruined the family honor. Mathiarasu promises to find the

thug and have her married to him, thus resurrecting her lost *karpu*, and thereby reinstating her *perumai*. He fails and Thamarai commits suicide to regain the lost honor. Lei Gua too is suspected of having an affair with a 'Chinese man'. But Lei Gua is chaste. The suspicion is cleared later.

In Pazhanivelan's *Murai Mappilai*, the woman who tricks the hero into accepting her illegitimate child as his child was in fact trying to legitimize her *karpu*. She goes to the court, but blood tests reveal that the child is not by Murugesu. The woman commits suicide by jumping from the twentieth floor of an apartment building in Toa Payoh public housing estate. She leaves a letter indicating her fallen status and apologizes to the hero. In death she regains her *perumai*.

Women's chastity is emphasized not only in their pre-marital status but also as married women. Chastity for women in their married state is emphasized by all the Tamil novelists in Singapore. Any wavering is punished with untold mental and physical suffering. Pazhanivelan develops this concept extremely well in his writings. In the novel *Minnarkeetru*, Kalaiarasi fails to control her sexuality and fails in her chastity (*karpu*). She runs away but suffers psychologically,

"She lived with Kannaiyan (her lover). But the *thali* around her neck was that tied by Murugavel (her husband). It was as if it had merged with her heart. She could not forget Murugavel. Though she gave her body to Kannaiyan, she could not give her heart. That heart could only house Murugavel" (pp.121).

Kannaiyan also assaults her physically. Other than the filthy swear words, she also received a good deal of beatings from him. Only the concern for her children gave her the will to continue living.

The primary powers of the chaste woman derive from her self-control and her submission, from her *karpu* and *perumai*. Hence through marriage, through being bound and binding oneself, women's powers increase and develop, until they are much greater than those of the virgin. They are also much greater than those of men. This again is exemplified by Pazhanivelan in his novel *Antharathil Thongum Uravu*.

Mahizhambal, wife of Thirumaran, did not like her daughter to become a writer. But, as her husband wanted a writer in the family, she dare not oppose his wish. She treasured the traditional belief that a wife should never act directly or indirectly against a husband's wish. Her children make fun of her unshakable beliefs. They condemn her relationship with her husband as akin to slavery. She retorts:

"This is not life of slavery. This is a protective wall I have erected around me. Your father is not just human, he is to be treated like the God. If paying obeisance to God is considered slavery, then life's ideals will become meaningless" (pp.33).

Here it must be pointed that in Tamil, one of the many words for wife is *thaaram*, limit or boundary. Married women, like Mahizhambal, are bound and their binding gives them greater powers of order. Thus Mahizhambal controls her husband by her power of chastity. As Mahizhambal treated Thirumaran far above God, he feared to do anything that will shatter the belief.

Mahizhambal believed that to talk in loud manner to the husband is to show disrespect to him. Thirumaran too never showed disrespect to his wife. He always showered courtesy in his dealings with his wife. He never addressed her as *vaadi*, *poodi* –

colloquial singular address forms for females. After marriage he gave up even his scarce 'bad' habits. The occasional puff at the cigarette and consuming alcohol at parties ended. After marriage to Mahizhambal, he used to be frightened by the rigors she followed in upholding *karpu*. In turn he avowed not to look at another woman. Thirumaran did have some weaknesses before marriage. But living with Mahizhambal obliterated all trace of bad conduct. Thus, marriage in the Tamil ideal and in the Singapore Tamil novel is an austerity (*thavam*).

The powers of self-control, *porumai*, *perumai* and *karpu* may all be relevant in a social milieu where the wider society either remained stable or changed slowly. What happens to the ideal of a Tamil woman when *dharma* is flaunted by men in the wider society that is fast changing? Answers to such questions are found in the novels of Gurusamy, Shanmugam and Pazhanivelan.

Gurusamy in his *Vaadatha Malar* novel depicts women as morally stronger than men. Maragatham (the heroine) runs away from her sister's house when her sister's husband makes sexual advances. In her letter to her sister, she points out how men flaunt *dharma* while women bear the consequences:

"The cruelty afflicted by males in society can hardly be aired by women. She has to keep all cruelty quietly to her heart. Nature has endowed her with a 'big heart' to bear all cruelties upon her. The woman has to bear all the mistakes committed by man with his brute strength. Even when a man and a woman jointly commit a mistake, it is the woman who has to bear the consequences" (pp.9).

Gurusamy's heroine goes on to condemn the double standards of morality for man and woman.

"The moral standards of today's society condone the males. But for some unknown reason it condemns women. How will women have equal rights until this condition persists? Our forefathers who founded explanation for 'womanhood', only laid the conditions for the women to be virtuous. They never said a word about men. When we are born into a society like this, what right do we have to expose the cruelty afflicted by men upon us. From all perspectives, the woman is blamed as the culprit" (pp.10).

Shanmugam goes further than reiterating the death of *dharma*. His novel *Kala* calls for open break from the ideal of Tamil womanhood. *Kala* is an ideal Tamil woman until her marriage to a man whom she never liked. Even in married life, she lived in the memory of her lover before marriage. The Tamil cultural milieu bears her down to be a good daughter bounded by her father. She marries the man her father pointed out. In marriage she refuses to be bounded to her wedded husband. She tears herself away from the ideal Tamil woman – leaves her child, the husband and the *thali* behind. In her rebellion, she is willing to use men to her advantage. But in the end, her rebellion against the ideal is only to establish *dharma* and resurrect the ideal all over again. She runs away to her lover, marries him and returns to the life of chastity (*karpu*). Shanmugam is unique as a novelist in creating *Kala* who is able to return to the ideal of Tamil womanhood.

*Kala*'s rebellion also frees her mother to question her husband. When the father accuses *Azhagamai* (the mother) of not bringing up her daughter well, she retorts:

"I gave birth to eight children. All were brought up by me. Where did you go all this time?" (pp.37).

She points out that her husband did not live up to the expectations of a husband, and as such has lost control over the women and the situation.

Pazhanivelan too is concerned with the disappearance of dharma, but he is not ready to suggest a revolution in the conception of Tamil womanhood. In his novel, *Antharathil Thongum Uravu*, he tries to overcome the dilemma in the traditional way. Poongkundran (the hero) is emotionally disturbed when he realizes that his uncle Thirumaran, the man betrothed to marry his eldest sister, is his biological father. He wants to return to Seremban to confront his mother about the truth. But the author “kills” the Chinnathai (the mother) character. The author uses the following words in a measured manner to resurrect *dharmā*:

“Chinnathai has died!

A woman who brought shame to her son’s birth is gone. His heart did not have even the energy to cry out and call *amma* (mother).

That too was crumbling and falling” (pp.120).

In the mother’s death all actions are neutralized and dharma fully restored. The process had already begun even before her death.

“After Thirumaran left, Chinnathai (a mean mother) also became *nallathai* (a good mother). She reinstated her ‘boundaries’. The growing cancer in her killed all emotion (sexual). Her husband’s growing curses, the need to maintain the respect from her growing children, the concern that no shame should befall them ... All these concerns made her reform” (pp.119).

Thus Chinnathai had had totally redeemed herself by her death.

The centrality of women in Singapore Tamil novels written up to the mid-1980s could not be understood without understanding the dominant ideology of the Tamil culture. All the novelists, though all are males, have internalized this culture by their own life histories. The Tamil mass media, moreover, especially films and publications from Tamil Nadu, portray the cultural ideal. There is continuity between the Tamil cultural tradition and the treatment of women in Singapore Tamil novels.

In an article on women and religion, Hoch-Smith and Spring note that women

“draw sacred attention primarily in connection with their reproductive statuses: as virgins and brides, women may serve as pure, untainted symbolic vessels who can be ‘filled’ with divine energy ... Sexually mature women receive the most attention in symbol, myth, and ritual for society sees their ‘reproductive’ potential as both highly positive and highly negative and in need of much control (1978: 1).

Tamil women in the novels are no different, although the particulars differ as we have seen in this paper, for “through woman is being, and through woman is downfall”.

### Conclusion.

In this paper, an attempt has been made to examine the portrayal of women as being endowed with power in the Tamil novels of Singapore. All the writers taken up for analysis in this paper shared similar life experiences. Malaya in the 1950s and later Singapore in the 1960s and 1970s have colored their life histories. The novels are clear indicators of the history of working class Tamil community. The centrality of women in the struggles of the working class Tamils is often glossed over by most social



scientists observing the Tamil communities in Singapore and Malaysia. The position that women occupy, the central role that they play in the family and community, are often subsumed under the official statistics used to portray the Indian communities in general and the Tamil community as non-existent.

The Tamil novels in the post-war period up to the mid-1980s, while telling the stories of working class Tamils, give centrality to women's lives within the community. Amongst the many dimensions shown of women's lives, depicting women as managing their power within a Tamil cultural ideological framework is attempted by all novelists. Each of the novelists appears to have worked with these Tamil cultural ideals in their writing. The issues they discussed are either commonly discussed in daily life or hushed up. But the Tamil novelists who have taken up women and their sexuality as an issue in the family context are often condemned by readers and critics alike as writing nonsense. The novelists, on the other hand, appear to have tackled an important aspect of cultural continuity that exists between the societies about which they knew and lived in and the notion of universal Tamil cultural principles that place women as central figures in family and society.

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