

Inclusivity in Cultural Dialogue: A Study of Ecofeminist Symbolism in Ilanko Atikal's *Cilappatikaram* and Terry Tempest Williams' *When Women Were Birds*

OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 12

Special Issue: 1

Month: February

Year: 2024

P-ISSN: 2320-2645

E-ISSN: 2582-3531

Received: 28.12.2023

Accepted: 30.01.2024

Published: 12.02.2024

Citation:

Nissi Karunya, ER, and K. Shanthi. "Inclusivity in Cultural Dialogue: A Study of Ecofeminist Symbolism in Ilanko Atikal's *Cilappatikaram* and Terry Tempest Williams' *When Women Were Birds*." *Shanlax International Journal of English*, vol. 12, no. S1, 2024, pp. 32–35.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.34293/english.v12iS1-Feb.7411>

E. R. Nissi Karunya

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Bishop Heber College (Autonomous), Trichy (Affiliated to Bharathidasan University)

&

Assistant Professor of English, Lady Doak College, Madurai

Dr. K. Shanthi

Assistant Professor of English and Research Supervisor Bishop Heber College (Autonomous), Trichy (Affiliated to Bharathidasan University), Trichy

Abstract

*This paper aims to study the ecological ethos of interconnectedness present in Ilanko Atikal's *Cilappatikaram* and Terry Tempest Williams' *When Women Were Birds* by closely examining the ecofeminist symbolism within these works. Additionally, it seeks to compare and contrast the ecological consciousness portrayed in both texts. The paper endeavors to demonstrate the importance of women's participation in revitalizing the voice of the planet and underscores the significance of women's voices in cultural discourse to facilitate transformative change.*

Cilappatikaram, translated as *The Tale of an Anklet* made its way into the arena of world's most renowned epics with its remarkable translation by R. Parthasarathy. His unassailably accurate style of translation captures the enigma, tone and Zeitgeist of the Tamil kingdom of 5th century C.E. and asserts the timelessness of *Cilappatikaram* as one of the finest epics ever written. R. Parthasarathy should be credited for bringing to fore the intellectual significance of Tamil poetics and philosophy, which was formerly subverted by the predomination of Sanskrit epics like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, with regard to the study of epic traditions and mythic narratives in Indian literature. This paper sets out on an endeavor to cull out the ecological ethic of interconnectedness in Ilanko Atikal's *Cilappatikaram* and Terry Tempest Williams' *When Women Were Birds* through a close reading of the ecofeminist symbolism in the aforementioned texts. This paper also aims to analyse the similarity between both the texts, in terms of ecological consciousness despite a temporal divergence of about two and a half millennia.

Cilappatikaram is an alluring love story of passion, betrayal, tragedy, Karma and revenge, penned in conventional Tamil poetry.

Kovalan and Kannaki get married and the city of Pukar, the flourishing seaport of the Chola kingdom comes together to celebrate Kovalan the union of this young couple. Kovalan fawns over his dutiful wife and they lead a life of bliss for a few years. Matavi, a courtesan peddles her garland of gold through her maid Vancantamalai, who proclaims that the buyer is welcome to become the husband of her mistress. Kovalan chooses to buy this garland gifted by the Chola king and deserts Kannaki to enjoy his rendezvous with Matavi. Kannaki pines for her husband, but Kovalan revels in the voluptuousness of versatile Matavi. During the festival of Indra, Kovalan and Matavi sing songs that accidentally elicit suspicion in both of them. Perceiving his relationship with Matavi a masquerade of fabrication, Kovalanrealises his fallacy and returns to Kannaki after siphoning off all this weath. Kovalan and Kannaki decide to start their lives afresh relying on Kannaki's anklets, to be the only source of capital. They leave Pukar and head to Madurai without the knowledge of their parents. What plight of the anklet changes the destiny of the characters in this epic.

The royal goldsmith, who had stoten the queen's anklet is approached by Kovan to ascertain the cost of Kannaki's anklet. The goldsmith uses this opportunity to frame Kovlan as a thief and the king orders his guards to behead him and retrieve the anklet. Kannaki hastens to the palace to demand an explanation for the murder of her husband. The King's defences are shattered when Kannaki smashes her anklet on the floor to reveal gems, whilst the queen's anklet had pearls, thus proving Kovalan's innocence. The guilty king dies and is followed by the queen. Kannaki's anger is unquenchable. She wrenches her left breast and tosses it over the city of Madurai which catches the fire of her curse. Two weeks later Kannaki ascends to heaven in the chariot of Indra to join her husband and the epic ends with her apotheosis as a goddess.

When Women Were Birds is another text chosen for study and this poetic memoir was written by Terry Tempest Williams, a contemporary writer of popular environmental literature classics like *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Time and Space* (1991), *An Unspoken Hunger* (1994) and *The Hour of the Land: A Personal Topography of America's National Parks* (2016). Currently she is a writer-in-residence at Harvard Divinity University and pioneers environmental activism and advocacy in many significant fields including the spiritual implications of climate change.

When Women Were Birds is Williams' exploration of her identities as a daughter, wife, woman and an environmental advocate. This work is a lyrical exploration of the meaning of voice and what is truly means to have a voice. Her reflections on the notion of voice evolves with each chapter and reaches the zenith of a full-fledged aria as it resounds from the past to the present, with its reverberations on the future. From an individual quest for voice to an odyssey of the collective voice of a community, this work lulls the readers to a tranquil experience that has the might to catapult from mediocre indifference to visionary action.

Cilappatikaram and When Women Were Birds converge at the employment of symbolism with ecofeminist insights. This literary device used, can be interpreted with the paradigms of ecological ethics to establish a nexus between the form and function of language. Ilanko Aligal's comparison of Kannaki's tousled hair to a forest is an unusual symbolism to deliberate upon. Forest as a symbol carries many feminist and ecological undertones. Kannaki, with her disheveled hair, considered to be a sign of ill omen, goes around the burning city of Madurai, mourning the death of her husband and in this same state she ascends to heaven, and is adored and celebrated by the Gods and ultimately this mortal woman, a rare treasure among earthly women, becomes an immortal goddess. The metamorphosis of Kannaki from a naive mortal who silently endures Kovalan's misconduct to a mighty goddess - a juxtaposition to the plenitude of abandoned and helpless women in literature, is impeccably chronicled by Ilanko Adigal with structural coherence.

...Indra, Lord of the immortals with other gods
Thought that day to be right for worship,

Praised the glorious name of this revered woman,
Rained unfading flowers upon her, and adored her.
In a heavenly chariot, by the side of Kovalan
Slain in the royal city, Kannaki, her hair
Thick as a forest, ascended into heaven (Parthasarathy, lines 201-209)

The book of Pukar, the erotic segment of Cilappatikaram, often eulogises Kannaki's thick fragrant hair and tender body in a carnivalesque style which continue to evolve as symbols till the end of the Book of Vanchi, the mythical segment of this epic. Untied hair of a woman, an unpropitious omen becomes sacred in the case of Kannaki who once used to wear her hair in five fragrant plaits, when her husband was alive. R. Parthasarathy notes that the way the disheveled hair of Kannaki struck the people of Madurai, including the king, with terror, is comparable to the myth of Medusa, the gorgon, who turned to stone anyone who cast a glance on her.

A woman's hair is a symbol that shows the interconnectedness of gender, nature and culture. On being compared to a forest, it can be inferred that women and nature complement each other in the sustenance of life. Untied hair and forest are symbols of unfettered freedom that is crucial for survival. A widow is expected to shave off her head, once her husband is dead, and this practice of whittling away a woman's dignity is concurrent with deforestation. Forcible removal of trees and tresses signify patriarchal predominance that aims to politicise and control the physical glory of the Earth and women. Kannaki is apotheosed and ascends to heaven in all her feminine, earthly glory and this identity is not conferred because of Kovalan, but her female sensibility as an embodiment of love and courage. Kannaki leaves human culture, to become an irrepressible force of nature. Breaking free from the constraints and injustices of patriarchal society including Kovalan's infidelity and King Nedunchezhiyan's erroneous judgement, Kannaki braves forth as a symbol of freedom and courage amidst a plethora of distressed damsels, represented in literature.

The aspect of deforestation and women being a significant source of reforestation to affirm their voices and also the voice of the Earth is discussed by Terry Tempest Williams in *When Women Were Birds*, as she reflects on her experience with Wangari Maathai, a Kenyan environmental activist and the first African woman who bagged the Nobel peace prize. Wangari Maathai was able to diagnose the problem that was decimating the African nations - deforestation, and this core issue was eclipsed from the rest of the world. She made it her mission to sensitize the local people, especially the native women, to understand the implications of deforestation in perturbing their livelihood. She relied on country folk - women without white collar jobs who carried the vicious weight of environmental crisis on their backs and it was through them she hoped to regain the health of the Earth. Women who get lured away by the charms of culture and urbanisation, often forget their roots and the significance of giving back by nurturing nature.

Maathai's visionary zeal to retrieve the forests of Africa is noted by Williams as a realisation of the suffering of women to be environmental problems, that are actually economic issues fuelled by social and gender injustice. Maathai was known to instill the hope of trees in many and she succeeded in reforesting many denuded hillsides through the work of the women and their families she empowered. A simple, feasible solution of planting trees had the power to fuel a positive transformation in the entire community as Maathai helped them nurture possibilities earn income and restore the lost glory of the Earth and women. This deed helped the women regain their voices and Williams uses reforestation as a powerful symbolism to reiterate the importance of having a voice of one's own. Maathai taught Williams to mobilise change in this world not through anger, but through love and also taught her the art of being assertive in boldly proclaiming the bitter truth regarding the plight of our planet. The Green Belt Movement which was initiated by Williams to alleviate the desertification at the Great Basin in Utah. Williams uses reforestation as a powerful

symbolism to assert the voice of women. Thus, women like Kannaki, Waangari Maathai and Williams show that ethics can be put to practice only through action and actions inspired by love establish justice to make this world a better place. Women should be partakers in rebuilding the voice of the planet.

The voice of women should be an integral part of cultural dialogue and at times, women should be voleuses de langue, or burglars of voice to subvert silence that can be fatal. Silence can be powerful but to have a voice that can transform is more powerful, for this voice has the power to heal, like how the song of the birds at dawn and dusk heal the world through joy. The ecological ethic of valuing the intrinsic worth of the Earth and all its beings - especially those at the fringes of the society is the missing voice that needs to be restored to establish a synchronous, inclusive harmony.

References

1. Parthasarathy, R. Cilappatikaram. By Ilanki Atigal, Penguin Classics. 1993.