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The Female Gaze in early Tamil Poetry: Mullaippattu

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ABSTRACT

The early *Sangam* poem, *Mullaippattu*, which has been traditionally attributed to *Napputhanar* centers on a warrior's wife, who is awaiting her husband's return from the battle. Although she remains within her home, the poem lingers over her interior world. Her longing, uncertainty and hope structure the emotional movement of the poem. Her waiting becomes the narrative's central condition.

The wife and the women's viewpoint complicate the classical *Sangam* distinction between the domestic sphere (*akam*) and the external realm of war (*puram*). What emerges is the form of agency expressed not through action in the outer world, but through presence, perception and interpretation. The wife's emotional labour constitutes a quite claim to authority over her own experience. In this way the women find meaning on their own terms, challenging the trope of the passive woman awaiting her husband's return.

Read in this light, *Mullaippattu* offers a vision of feminine subjectivity that resonates beyond its ancient context. The poem demonstrates that the act of looking, waiting and interpreting can itself be a form of resistance and self-assertion, with deeper roots in early literary traditions than is often acknowledged.

Keywords: female gaze, *Sangam* poetry, *Mullaippattu*, feminine agency, *akam* and *puram*

Introduction

Sangam literature is the ancient Tamil classical literature that was composed roughly between 300 BCE and 300 CE. The name *Sangam* refers to the legendary academies of poets and scholars that flourished in the ancient *Pandyam* Kingdom of *Madurai*. *Sangam* poetry is uniquely classified into two conceptual categories- *Akam*, which comprises of the inner life and *Puram* which caters to the outer life. These concepts are first classified in *Tolkappiyam*, where *Akam* poetry deals with the themes of love, while *Puram* poetry focuses on outer, public themes like war and kingship. *Sangam* literature is a corpus of eighteen major works. The collections of short to medium length poems are called the eight anthologies or *Ettuthokai*. The longer narrative poems are called the Ten Idyll Poems or *Pattuppattu*. *Mullaippattu* is one of the Ten Idyll Poems.



Mullaippattu is the fifth of the *Pattuppattu* series, composed by *Napputhanar*, the son of a dealer of gold. It is of 103 lines, the shortest of the Ten Idyll Poems. The theme of this poem centers on the heroine who is also known as *Thalaivi* in Tamil. The story of *Mullaippattu* is that of a heroine awaiting the return of her husband, the hero who has gone for a military campaign. The poem shows her loneliness, her waiting, the landscape around her when she is waiting, the women interpreting omen and performing prayers and also the description of the King's temporary military camp. This is the crux of the poem, but the poem not only shows the *Thalaivi*, but the other women around her as well. The poem presents the complexity with which the women experience is constructed.

The image of a woman waiting for her man is considered and perceived as common across world literature, even if some exceptions to this can be found. Often she is portrayed as passive, her life is put on hold while her man pursues glory. The *Mullaippattu*, may in the beginning seem to follow the same image of a woman waiting for her man, as the central theme of the poem. But oftentimes, simplicity hides broader perspectives and intricacies within itself. This poem too hides in plain sight the agency and the female gaze. Not just the *Thalaivi*, but also all the other women have their own roles that are woven with subtlety within the poem that showcase their agency, interpretation and lives within the circumstances of the poem.

The female gaze is a way of seeing a representing the world from a female subject's perspective. It centers her interior thought process, desires, and experiences rather than presenting her as an object to be viewed by a male observer. In literature, it manifests through sensory details filtered through a woman's consciousness, where nature, events, and other characters are perceived and interpreted according to her emotional reality. Unlike the male gaze, which often positions women as passive objects of visual pleasure, the female gaze reclaims the act of looking, perceiving, making women active subjects who shape how their world is understood.

The Emotional State and the Mind as a Landscape

*Elderly women went near the well protected
Ancient town carrying rice paddy and mullai
Flowers in their bowls, and prayed with their
Palms pressed together, sprinkling newly opened,
Fragrant mullai blossoms as swarming bees*

The poem mentions how the separation of the *Thalaivi* with her husband who is going on a war is a painful experience. That the hero has to go away from her causes her to suffer from the loneliness of being separated from her lover. But she waits and hopes for his safe return. This is also depicted by the other women in her vicinity who perform prayers for the safe return of the warriors. Through this they take back the agency of being helpless to finding their own mechanism of waiting.

Her anxiety, longing and hope are mapped onto the *mullai* season. The cool breeze, the blooming *mullai* which is a white flower local to the region, the gentle rain, and the returning herds are not just settings but active agents that trigger her memories, heighten her solitude, and measure the passage of time. Her subjectivity is so intertwined with the environment that the environment becomes an extension of her own psyche. Her thoughts, fears and memories constitute the primary context of the poem. This grants her subjective experience not merely visibility but also makes it primary to the text. She is not an object to be observed from the outside but a subject whose internal reality becomes the poem's core concern.

Her waiting itself is a type of active work done on her part. She constantly stays aware of her surroundings, mentally maps his route and listens for sounds of his return, while also maintaining her household. Her sadness is profound but she handles it with quite grace. Through this, the poem acknowledges the invisible

work of maintaining emotional life. The *Thalaivi* has to manage her worry and anxiety, sustain hope even if it is through external support and especially when it is hard to remain hopeful and she has to fear for the life of her husband and not just separation, keep her memories of the better times alive, as well as prepare for the reunion. This way, the emotional labour, which traditionally remains unrecognized, is given dignity and visibility in the poem.

The psychological aspect of the woman is depicted through her surroundings and her situation. Though she may never complain or speak, the narrative is in the presentation of her consciousness. Her experience is structured around the *akam* poetic convention of *thinai*, where the external landscape becomes a mirror for her internal self. One of the most significant aspect of *Mullaippattu* from a female perspective is its deep immersion in the *Thalaivi's* psychological landscape. The poem does not narrate external events but rather unfolds within the *Thalaivi's* consciousness.

Agency, Voice and Role in the Outer World

The home is the domain of the women; her waiting is not passive because she is the guardian of the home's integrity. Even if she is alone, sad and with a broken heart, still she may keep her house well lit, as it is her agency. Though she is desperate with longing for her husband, she still takes care of her bangles and looks. The poem subtly subverts the division of men and women by showing that the private space is not empty or unimportant. The *Thalaivi's* emotional labour and resilience are presented as equally significant, even heroic in their own way.

*Women tied strong hilted, bright swords
That make night appear as days, to their
breastcloths with many colors. Hair cascaded
Down their beautiful small backs and small
Bangles adorned their forearms.*

In the poem, several women play curiously important role in holding the fort even when the men are at the camp for war. They are shown as the ones with a sword tied to their breast cloth, showcasing that they may have participated in the war or at least may have knowledge of warfare and are capable of protection. Even if they do not fight, they make sure that the men living in the temporary war camp are guided by ever burning lights, ensuring that they are not secondary in their role. But this does not mean that they devoid themselves of their beauty and femininity, which their long cascading hairs and the bangles on their forearms.

*A young calf tied to a small rope was in
deep distress. On seeing that, a herder
woman with arms clasped around her
shoulders said to the calves, "Your mothers
will come soon, nudged behind by herders*

The herder woman is also an important character due to how she represents the women who have been working the jobs of both the men as well as women when the men are away at war. But her work does not have to be like men, because she chooses to keep her self as a woman intact. She provides maternal care to even a calf whose mother is away. This represents the kind of care that asks nothing in return. In this way, the female gaze does not isolate anyone who needs them, recognizes struggle wherever it resides, and seeks out, with whatever means available, the small and profound ways of making things better for those in their circle.

Generally, it may be perceived that a woman waiting for her husband to return may be isolated from the world, but in the poem, the *Thalaivi*, even when she should prefer so, is never left by other women around

her. As a result, she has a support system, other women around her who would understand her pain and support her through it. The very presence of women around her, trying to uplift the mood of the *Thalaivi*, shows how friendship and togetherness work for women. This also shows that there is a sort of acceptance within the women, who do not criticize each other for their anguish and inability to function well all the time. This creates a safe space for women to speak freely without scrutiny. They share information among themselves, provide emotional support and even amplify each other's voices. Thus, solidarity transforms isolation into the collective strength.

This poem demonstrates that ancient Tamil literature contains sophisticated portrayals of the female experience. The *Thalaivi's* agency is not freedom in the modern sense but a nuanced negotiation within limits. This offers a more complex model of female power than simply situating women between being a victim or being liberated. The *Thalaivi* and all the other women in the poem as well understand the limitations of their agency, but even within it, they choose to take all the form of agency they can take back. The *Thalaivi*, when her husband is away is left behind alone. She may mop, may remain sad but she is also the symbol of resilience. In the ancient Tamil world, where wars were frequent and had quite an important role for the men, the subsequent result was that the women were left at home, waiting for the man. But this wait was not only helplessness on their part, there was uncertainty and hardship for the women but it was rooted in strength required for the commitment and hope they chose to exercise through this waiting. Her waiting, therefore, is the necessary counterpart to the public world of the *puram*. Her endurance becomes a form of power that contrasts with the public glory of war.

Nature as Mirror

The poem uses the *thinai* of *mullai* to paint the picture of the *Thalaivi's* feelings. *Mullai* itself is a white flower found in the local region. The *mullai thinai* is associated with patient separation from the loved ones. The landscape is set within the forest and the season is rainy. The inner aspect of this *thinai* is "*Iruthalum Iruthal Nimithamum*" which means the heroine consoles herself alone and waits for the hero to return from wherever he has gone to, be it for war, to acquire money, to gain knowledge and scholarship or something else too. In the poem, the *mullai* landscape is not mere backdrop but an active extension of the protagonist's psyche.

*Heavy rains fell during the evening hours of
painful separation*

Nature acts as a mirror to the emotional state and perspective of the *Thalaivi*. The *Thalaivi's* body becomes a site of feeling. The chill of the breeze intensifies her loneliness; the scent of *mullai* awakens desire and memory. This integration of physical and emotional experience reflects a distinctly feminine mode of being in the world. *Mullaippattu* employs the female gaze, where the way of seeing and experiencing the world is rooted in female subjectivity. In the poem the world is presented as she sees and feels it, centering female experience rather than female appearance. This ensures that every external detail is filtered through her perception, making the natural world a manifestation of her inner emotional reality.

In the very beginning, the rain feels like *Thirumal*, which shows protection from the god as well as good news for the people. This relates to how the heroine prays for the protection of her husband and suffers through the emotion of separation. Her observations of her surrounding, shows her inner mind. She observes how the trees have lost old leaves, the new flowers have bloomed. This highlights her waiting for a very long period of time for her husband to return from the war. She observes the mating of stag and doe, with longing for her husband to come back from the war. The returning herds are a reminder to her that her husband who has not returned yet may return soon, as she is told by the elderly women. The various blooming flowers in

different colours and the blooming *mullai*, represent love and union for her which makes the separation yet more painful.

Conclusion

Analyzing *Mullaippattu* from the female gaze reveals a text far more complex than a simple poem of separation of lovers and longing. The *Thalaivi* is not a passive figure waiting for her husband's return. Instead, through the poem's deep focus on her inner world and the use of nature as a reflection of her emotions, she emerges as a woman of resilience, depth and quite strength. Her waiting is active endurance, her patience is deliberate emotional labour, and her bond with other women provides voice and agency within constraints.

Mullaippattu stands as a testament to the sophistication of *Sangam* literature and its capacity to represent female experience with nuance and dignity. The *Thalaivi's* resilience, hope and emotional depth invite us to recognize that women's interior lives have always been rich, complex, and worthy of serious attention. In giving voice to her waiting, the poem ensures that her experience is not forgotten but remembered, honored and understood,

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