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The Literary Representation of Buddhist Renunciation in Manimekhalai

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ABSTRACT

The Tamil epic *Manimekhalai*, attributed to Sīthalai Sāttanār, occupies a distinctive place in classical Tamil literature for its strong emphasis on moral reflection and philosophical themes. Among its central motifs, the idea of renunciation plays a significant role in shaping the narrative structure and character development of the epic. This paper examines how Buddhist renunciation is represented and articulated as a literary theme in *Manimekhalai*.

The study focuses on the transformation of the protagonist, whose rejection of worldly life becomes a central narrative moment that guides the progression of the story. Rather than approaching renunciation solely as a religious doctrine, this paper analyzes how the concept is constructed through literary devices such as narrative progression, dialogue, symbolism and characterization. Particular attention is given to episodes that portray the protagonist's withdrawal from worldly attachments and her commitment to an ascetic life.

Using close textual analysis of selected passages, the study explores how the epic frames Buddhist renunciation as both a moral and narrative turning point. The paper argues that *Manimekhalai* employs the motif of Buddhist renunciation not merely as a thematic element but as a literary strategy that structures the ethical and philosophical vision of the text, highlighting the intersection between narrative form and moral reflection in classical Tamil literature.

Keywords: Buddhist Renunciation, Tamil Epics, Narrative Representation, Classical Tamil Literature, Ascetic Motif.

Introduction

In *Manimekhalai*, renunciation is not presented as a simple act of withdrawal from society; rather, it becomes a literary principle that shapes the text's ethical vision and narrative movement. As one of the major Tamil epics, *Manimekhalai* stands apart for transforming a philosophical concern into a literary experience. The epic does not merely assert the abandonment of worldly attachment; it dramatizes this process through scene,



speech, and character development. In doing so, renunciation emerges as both an aesthetic and ethical category constructed through narrative form.

The significance of *Manimekhalai* lies in its ability to integrate story and thought within the framework of classical Tamil literary tradition. Unlike texts that emphasize kingship, conflict, or romance, this epic foregrounds interior transformation, discipline, and moral reflection. The heroine's movement away from worldly life is central to this design. Her transformation is not only a turning point in the plot but also reflects the text's broader concern with detachment, self-control, and the reorientation of desire. Thus, renunciation shapes both the protagonist's identity and the structure of the narrative.

This paper approaches Buddhist renunciation in *Manimekhalai* as a literary representation rather than a doctrinal exposition. It focuses on how the text constructs renunciation through characterization, narrative progression, symbolic language, and ethical tone. Through this lens, renunciation appears not as an abstract idea but as a lived and dramatized transformation.

This paper argues that *Manimekhalai* presents Buddhist renunciation not merely as a spiritual ideal, but as a literary and narrative strategy that shapes character development, plot movement, and ethical meaning.

Literary and Textual Context

Manimekhalai occupies a distinctive position within classical Tamil literature as one of the Five Great Epics and is traditionally read alongside *Silappathikaram*. Although the two works are narratively connected, their literary orientations differ significantly. *Silappathikaram* foregrounds love, justice, and royal authority through dramatic action, whereas *Manimekhalai* shifts toward ethical reflection and inner transformation. This marks an important development in Tamil epic tradition, where external conflict gives way to introspective and philosophical concerns. Early scholarship even describes the work as centering on "the renunciation of the heroine" rather than on conventional epic themes such as war or romance (Aiyangar 20).

The inward orientation of the poem becomes visible through the heroine's own reflections on desire:

"O dear one, is this the nature of passion?
If this is passion, I wish its power were destroyed"
(*Manimekhalai* 05-090).

This verse is important because it dramatizes the rejection of worldly attachment in the heroine's own voice. Rather than presenting renunciation as abstract doctrine, the poem expresses it emotionally and poetically. The line also signals the larger movement of the epic away from worldly life and toward ascetic transformation.

The narrative further reinforces this orientation through the speech of other characters:

"Manimekhalai... followed the advice of those sages
and renounced family life"
(*Manimekhalai* 24-080).

This statement is significant because it defines the heroine through renunciation rather than through marriage, romance, or courtly identity. The phrase “renounced family life” marks a decisive break from social attachment and confirms that the protagonist’s transformation forms the structural core of the narrative.

The text repeatedly associates *Manimekhalai* with sacred and ascetic spaces:

“She worshipped the sacred feet of the Buddha”
(*Manimekhalai* 05-095).

Such moments connect the heroine’s journey with spiritual discipline and ethical withdrawal. Scholars of the poem observe that *Manimekhalai* traces the heroine’s movement away from worldly existence and toward ascetic fulfillment (“The Poem”). Thus, the epic is particularly suitable for studying Buddhist renunciation as a literary representation because the narrative itself is organized around the heroine’s ethical and symbolic transformation.

Therefore, *Manimekhalai* is not simply a story about a female protagonist; it is a literary work in which renunciation becomes the central narrative structure. Through dialogue, symbolic action, and poetic expression, the epic transforms philosophical withdrawal into lived literary experience.

Buddhist Renunciation as a Literary Motif

Renunciation as Narrative Principle

In *Manimekhalai*, Buddhist renunciation is presented not as an abstract doctrine but as a lived and narrativized experience. Within the literary structure of the epic, renunciation signifies a conscious withdrawal from worldly desire, social attachment, and material life. Rather than explaining renunciation through philosophical exposition alone, the text develops it through action, dialogue, and symbolic transformation. As scholars observe, the poem fundamentally centers on “the renunciation of the heroine,” making it the structural core of the narrative (Aiyangar 20).

This inward movement becomes visible in the heroine’s own reflections on worldly existence:

“This body gives only trouble.
It is born, becomes old, falls into sickness and dies.
I want and have decided to do good dharma—
that is the life I am leading”
(*Manimekhalai* 18:140–143).

This verse is significant because renunciation emerges as an ethical realization shaped through experience. The rejection of worldly life is expressed not through abstract theory but through poetic reflection on impermanence and suffering.

Renunciation as a Recurring Motif



Renunciation repeatedly appears throughout the epic as a recurring literary motif that shapes both action and meaning. One of the earliest expressions of this motif is the heroine's rejection of Prince Udayakumaran and her refusal to participate in worldly desire. The text repeatedly associates her with ascetic discipline and detachment:

“Maṇimēkhalai had assumed
the dress of a nun with the begging bowl in her hand”
(*Manimekhalai* 16:45–46).

The image of the nun's robe and the begging bowl becomes a recurring symbol of renunciation throughout the narrative. It visually separates the heroine from courtly life, wealth, and romantic attachment. Thus, renunciation functions not as a single event but as a continuing condition that shapes the heroine's identity and the direction of the story.

The motif is reinforced again through her commitment to compassion and ethical duty:

“May hunger cease on earth for evermore!”
(*Manimekhalai* 11:76).

This brief but powerful line connects renunciation with social responsibility. The heroine's withdrawal from worldly life does not lead to isolation; rather, it develops into active compassion toward others.

Events Leading to Renunciation

The emergence of renunciation in *Manimekhalai* is closely tied to key narrative events that shape the heroine's transformation. As the daughter of a courtesan, she initially belongs to a world associated with beauty, desire, and social expectation. However, the narrative gradually distances her from this environment and directs her toward ascetic life.

One decisive turning point occurs when she receives the sacred alms bowl, which becomes a symbol of her new identity and ethical mission:

“The nectar-surgings bowl was placed in her hands
so that the suffering of hunger might disappear”
(*Manimekhalai* 11:92–93).

The bowl transforms renunciation into active ethical practice. Instead of merely rejecting worldly life, the heroine adopts a life centered on compassion and service. Through such events, the epic constructs renunciation as a gradual and meaningful transformation rather than a sudden decision.

Renunciation as the Core Motif of the Epic

Ultimately, renunciation functions as the central motif that drives the narrative of *Manimekhalai*. The story moves away from worldly attachment toward ascetic discipline, compassion, and ethical fulfillment. The

repeated references to impermanence, detachment, begging, and service demonstrate that renunciation governs both the heroine's transformation and the structure of the epic itself.

Therefore, Buddhist renunciation in *Manimekhalai* operates not merely as a religious idea but as the primary literary force that shapes the narrative logic and thematic coherence of the text.

Narrative Representation of Renunciation

Renunciation as a Turning Point in Speech and Action

In *Manimekhalai*, renunciation enters the narrative not as a detached idea but as a decisive movement in thought and action. The epic repeatedly frames this movement as a refusal of rebirth and attachment. One later passage puts it clearly:

“Only people who do not want to be born again
and are born in their white birth reach moksha.
This path is called chembokku”
(*Manimekhalai* 27-155).

This verse is useful because it shows renunciation as a conscious direction toward liberation rather than a passive withdrawal. The heroine's transformation is therefore not merely social; it is narratively tied to the text's larger movement toward release from worldly existence. In this sense, renunciation becomes a turning point through which the story changes its direction.

From Desire to Detachment

The poem then translates this inward shift into action:

“Manimekhalai, beautiful as a vine, left the prince
and entered the temple of the ancient goddess”
(*Manimekhalai* 18-150).

This moment is crucial because the epic does not move toward romantic closure. Instead, it shows the heroine leaving desire behind and moving into a sacred space. The temple scene turns Buddhist renunciation into a visible literary event.

Spatial Movement and Narrative Redirection

Renunciation is also shown through movement from one space to another. The heroine's withdrawal from the prince is followed by her change of form and social identity. The narrative uses space to represent transformation: the temple becomes the place where worldly pursuit is interrupted and a new identity begins. In that sense, the poem turns renunciation into a pattern of movement across symbolic spaces.

Renunciation as Productive Ethics

The text then shows that renunciation does not end in isolation. Instead, it becomes service:

“they were surprised and thought,
‘She has only one pot in her hands yet she feeds many people’”
(*Manimekhalai* 19-050).

Later, the poem connects this action to public duty:

“You have the Amudhasurabhi pot
the remedy that save people’s lives, in your hands.
It is your duty to go there like rain and protect them”
(*Manimekhalai* 28-160).

These lines show that renunciation is not passive withdrawal. It becomes an ethical force that feeds the hungry and protects the suffering. The poem thus turns detachment into compassionate action.

Before and After Renunciation

The contrast between “before” and “after” renunciation is central to the epic’s structure. Before the turning point, *Manimekhalai* belongs to a world of desire and courtly expectation. After it, she is identified by the temple, the begging bowl, and acts of service. The plot therefore moves away from romantic closure and toward ethical circulation. Renunciation is the narrative force that reorganizes the heroine’s identity and gives the epic its direction.

Language, Symbolism, and Literary Devices to Represent Renunciation

The Language of Contrast

Building on the previous section, *Manimekhalai* represents renunciation not only through narrative events but also through carefully constructed language. One of the most striking stylistic features of the epic is its use of contrast: beauty and restraint, desire and detachment, worldly ornament and ascetic simplicity. Miyamoto notes that *Manimekhalai* is at times described with jewels, flowers, and beauty, while at other moments she appears as a nun devoted to ascetic life (Miyamoto 4–6). This contrast creates tension between worldly identity and renunciatory identity, allowing the reader to witness the heroine’s gradual transformation.

The poem expresses this contrast through vivid metaphor:

“His worn-out robes away ...
Lightly its garb of flesh”
(*Manimekhalai* 18.736–743).



The image compares the human body to clothing that can be discarded. This metaphor emphasizes impermanence and detachment, presenting worldly existence as temporary and unstable. Rather than explaining renunciation philosophically, the poem communicates it through poetic imagery and symbolic language.

Symbolic Objects and Imagery

The epic also gives renunciation symbolic form through recurring objects and sacred imagery. The Buddha's footprint, the island of *Maṇipallavam*, and especially the alms bowl become important literary symbols. When the king encounters *Manimekalai*, she is described as having a:

“serene unworldly look, [and] carries an alms bowl”
(*Manimekalai* 18.746–748).

The phrase “serene unworldly look” reflects her separation from worldly desire, while the alms bowl symbolizes her new ethical identity. The bowl no longer represents poverty alone; it becomes a sign of compassion and service. This symbolism becomes more explicit when *Manimekalai* says:

“It is your bowl that has come into my hands”
(*Manimekalai* 18.748).

The transfer of the bowl symbolically marks the transfer of responsibility, discipline, and spiritual duty. Through such objects, the poem transforms renunciation into a visible and dramatic literary experience.

Dialogue, Moral Tone, and Repetition

Another important literary device in *Manimekalai* is repetition. The text repeatedly returns to ideas of leaving, renouncing, feeding, and protecting others, creating a steady moral rhythm throughout the epic. This repetition reinforces the ethical direction of the narrative and constantly reminds the reader of the heroine's transformed identity.

The poem's dialogue also contributes strongly to its moral tone. In one significant passage, *Manimekalai* declares:

“To love all creatures and serve them in their need,
this is the highest virtue”
(*Manimekalai* 17.716–717).

The directness of this statement gives the poem a didactic quality. Renunciation here is not merely self-denial; it becomes compassion expressed through action. A similar ethical image appears when the heroine's actions are compared to nourishing rain:

“like welcome rain”
(*Manimekalai* 19.797–798).



This simile transforms renunciation into a life-giving force. Instead of presenting ascetic life as withdrawal and silence, the poem portrays it as socially meaningful and ethically productive. Thus, through contrast, symbolism, repetition, dialogue, and imagery, *Manimekhalai* constructs renunciation as a literary experience that shapes the emotional, ethical, and poetic texture of the epic.

The Ethical Imagination of Renunciation in *Manimekhalai*

Renunciation in *Manimekhalai* is important not only because it shapes the plot, but because it gives the poem its ethical direction. This connection becomes especially clear in the poem's treatment of *aram*, where moral life is linked with responsibility toward others. The epic does not present renunciation as withdrawal into silence; instead, it turns renunciation into care, charity, and social action.

“May hunger be unknown in the whole world”
(*Manimekhalai* 16.135).

This line shows that the heroine's life is oriented toward relieving suffering, not merely escaping the world. The ideal of renunciation here becomes a compassionate ethical vision. The poem makes the same point more explicitly when the king is told:

“You have the Amudhasurabhi pot
the remedy that save people's lives, in your hands.
It is your duty to go there like rain and protect them”
(*Manimekhalai* 28.160–163).

The simile “like rain” is especially important, because it presents renunciation as life-giving rather than world-denying. In this way, the poem joins spiritual discipline with public responsibility.

The broader ethical frame of the epic is also visible in its discussion of karma:

“Creatures are born in the worlds
as one of the above six kinds according to their good and bad karma”
(*Manimekhalai* 30.060–061).

“If you would know what good karma is,
it is when people do not do all the ten bad deeds.
They have good qualities.
They will perform much charity”
(*Manimekhalai* 30.070–073).

These verses show that the poem links moral conduct, charity, and rebirth in a tightly connected ethical system. Thus, renunciation in *Manimekhalai* is not simply a personal ideal; it is the bridge between literary form and ethical meaning.

Conclusion

Manimekhalai presents Buddhist renunciation not as a simple rejection of the world, but as a literary principle that gives shape to the entire epic. Through the heroine's transformation, the text turns renunciation into a narrative movement, a symbolic pattern, and an ethical force. The poem's language, imagery, and structure work together to show how withdrawal from worldly desire can become a meaningful mode of life and a powerful literary expression. By centering Manimekhalai's ascent toward ascetic life, the epic also links individual transformation with broader moral reflection. In this way, renunciation becomes the point where literature and ethics meet. The study of this theme reveals that *Manimekhalai* is not only a major classical Tamil text, but also a sophisticated narrative that converts philosophical thought into artistic form. Ultimately, the epic demonstrates that Buddhist renunciation functions as both a thematic core and a structural force, making it essential to the literary identity of the text.

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