

**Woman as Good Mother  
in *Proverbs* and *Tirukkural***

**Dr. S. Chelliah, M.A., Ph.D., D.Litt.**

Professor, Head & Chairperson

School of English & Foreign Languages

Madurai Kamaraj University

Madurai – 625 021

Tamil Nadu, India

Cell: 9442621106 / 7339129324

[schelliah62@gmail.com](mailto:schelliah62@gmail.com)

**J. Kavithanjali, MBA, MLISc., PGDCA, Ph.D. Scholar**

Department of Library and Information Science

Madurai Kamaraj University

Madurai – 625 021

Cell: 9976751006

[shivakavitha1111@gmail.com](mailto:shivakavitha1111@gmail.com)

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**Abstract**

This paper is an attempt to depict the feminine responsibilities in society as ‘picturized in *Proverbs* and *Tirukkural* which are different from other ethical and spiritual works and both of the works belong to the category of wisdom, literature. In both the works, the role of woman as mother, life companion and responsible woman in the society are pictured with apt examples for picturization.

**Keywords:** *Proverbs*, *Tirukkural*, Spiritual Wisdom, Idleness, Virtues, Sacrifice, Universal truth.

There is no denying the fact that *Tirukkural* being rich in thought and wisdom has inspired much appreciative writing in Tamil as Shakespeare has in English. Many thinkers throughout the ages have given their thoughts to mankind. *Tirukkural* focuses on the importance and value to the flowering of the individual as a perfect human being. Likewise, *Proverbs* which belongs to the category of wisdom literature of the Ancient Near East deals with the kind of human experience common to all, ascribed to King Solomon having a collection of more than 3000 proverbs giving counsel, moral and social values, which are applicable to people of all nations and all times irrespective of their different social, religious and political creed.

Both *Proverbs* and *Tirukkural* deal with a great variety of subjects – love and hate, anger and meekness, wealth and poverty, industry and idleness, relationship between God and man, kings and subjects, husband and wife, parents and children, man and woman and friend and enemy. E.M. Blaiklock suggests, “Solomon had contacts with Egypt. He married Pharaoh’s daughter and from

1000 B.C. The cultural interchange between the lands could have been wide. Solomon, the brilliant monarch of Israel's golden Age is claimed as the author and compiler of separate but similar collection of pithy wisdom" (P 100). As regards the *Tirukkural*, the style of structuring the couplets and the mode of expression of ideas belong to one person. "There is considerable internal evidence to show that the whole text belongs to one person. Apart from the prosodic metre which is the throughout the same, the general pattern to which the text is made to conform, and certain mannerisms of expression go to show that the text is from the pen of one and the same author" (Subramanian 13).

Though the *Proverbs* and the *Tirukkural* belong to Ancient Near East of the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. and Tamil Nadu of 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. respectively, in spite of their diverse authorship, the role of woman as mother, life companion and responsible woman in society in both the societies is the same with regard to such basic facts as her elementary feelings and passions, her virtues and responsibilities. Though women did not take an active part in public life, her role as wife, mother and a responsible woman in society is found to be essential. Unlike the woman of the Ancient Near East who gets strength from her fear of God, a chaste woman rises to honour through husband-worship i.e., respect for her husband, and divinity is attached to woman in accordance with the Tamil cultural tradition. In *Proverbs*, mother is a teacher who is considered as the second source of wisdom and children are exhorted to listen to the instructions of both father and mother. But Tiruvalluvar makes father intellectually superior to mother and makes him responsible for children's education. However, a close reading of both these texts *Proverbs* and *Tirukkural* show insights into the virtues, responsibilities of woman as mother, wife, social being, companion, etc.

From a comparative standpoint, S.S. Prawer writes:

"Comparative literature can be defined as an examination of literary texts including works of literary theory and criticism in more than one language through an investigation of contrast, analogy, prominence or influence or a study of literary relations and communications between two or more groups that speak different language" (P 8).

Woman is considered as an invaluable treasure due to her indispensability for the conjugal life of the householder to whom she is subordinate in both the cultures. The woman of *Tirukkural*, unlike the woman of *Proverbs*, confines herself to home in accordance with the ancient Tamil cultural tradition and skillfully manages the economy of the family by making both ends meet. But the woman in *Proverbs* not only manages the household finance but also adds to her husband's income. In both *Tirukkural* and *Proverbs*, mother is described as the one who deals with the general attributes of mother, her joy over her children's wisdom, her duty to children, interrelationship between mother and children and also a mother's position in society.

Thiruvalluvar does not deal with mother's duty to children but the Proverbs wisdom writer does. The basic facts with regard to mother's attitude to children have been the same irrespective of their different religious, racial and cultural creed.

A mother is one who gives birth to children and rears them up into persons of uprightness and integrity. While in *Proverbs*, the wisdom writer considers children as the crown of old men, Thiruvalluvar in *Tirukkural* considers them as goodly ornaments. Both the writers do contribute to the same idea of children being the glory of one's family. The differences in the role and position of mother and woman in family and society are due to their different cultural background.

In *Pennin Perumai*, Thiru V. Kalyana Sundaram writes:

“The sages in Tamil Nadu have divided womanhood into 7 stages and they have given the years into which each stage falls – Pedai (1-7 years), Pedumbai (7-11 years), Mangai (11-13 years), Madanthai (13-19 years), Arivai (19-25 years), Therivai (25-31 years) and Perilam Pen (31-40 years). After the fortieth, year, a woman passes into old age. They have made this classification in accordance with the climatic conditions. A woman becomes marriageable in Mangai stage and her marriageable stage can extend upto Madanthai. It is a wise act to give woman in marriage before Arivai state which is a suitable period for conjugal Bliss” (203-204).

In the olden days, a woman became a mother even in Mangai stage. Truly speaking a mother's love for her children is genuine and sacrificial, for she does serve her children without expecting anything in return. “In a mother lies the prosperity as well as the destruction of the world. What will be the condition of the future world if her children are reared up in evil ways! If so, we cannot find a life of love in this world” (Sundaram 16).

Taking into consideration the value and importance of mother, the fifth of the Ten Commandments given to the Jews by Yaweh through Moses is the commandment with a promise as:

“Honour thy father and thy mother;  
that thy days may be long upon  
the land which the Lord thy God  
giveth thee” (Exodus 20:12).

What is to be understood in common terms is that the primary aim of a women's birth in this world is to serve the world in the person of mother. According to the Tamilian conception, “Mother

and Father are the visible gods” (Krishnaswami 15). In the true sense of the term, children from the crown and glory of a family which is blessed with a greatness of a mother.

In *Proverbs*, it is stated that “children are the crown of old men; and the glory of children are their fathers” (Proverbs 17:6). They were considered as unlimited blessing and the reward of God in the ancient world. “So, children are an heritage of the Lord; and the fruit of the womb is his reward” (Psalms 127: 3). Hence, children are regarded as the reward from God. James Hurly observes:

“For most Israelite woman, the great events of their lives were birth, marriage, giving birth and death. A woman who had given birth especially to a son who could carry on the family name and inheritance had a special place of honour. Without children, she lamented her fate and was sometimes scorned” (P 42).

In *Tirukkural*, Tiruvalluvar wants the family life to be adorned with virtuous children. Good children are the goodly ornaments of a family are given in *Tirukkural* 60:

“A woman’s housewifely excellence, they say, is a blessing and begetting good children is an embellishment to the excellence” (Couplet 60).

It means, “Family life is nothing but a bed of roses and incense when adorned with a loving wife and gifted children.” In a word, “The house’s ‘blessing’, men pronounce the house-wife excellent. The gain of blessed children is its goodly ornament” (Pope).

Children were so much valued that Tiruvalluvar gives the view that “away all the benefits that may be acquired, there is no greater benefit than the acquisition of intelligent children” (Kural 61). It simply means that the world gives so many blessings and delights, but nothing is so great a bliss as getting virtuous, intelligent children:

There is no denying the universal truth that intelligent and knowledgeable offspring are invaluable assets of a family. In *Proverbs*, wise children are considered to be the rewards from God but in *Tirukkural*, they are regarded as one’s wealth because in their belief, it flows to them through the deeds which they perform in their behalf”.

“Good children are the wealth of men; their wealth flows from their actions” (63).

So, Tiruvalluvar epitomises the view of the Hebrew sages with regard to the value and importance of children in couples 61 & 63). Parents have their five senses satisfied by means of their children who possess greater wisdom and good disposition free from vice. Thus, children were regarded as wealth and ornaments of family which is blessed with the excellence of a wife.

In both *Proverbs* and *Tirukkural*, mother gets the deepest joy when she sees her children growing and developing into persons of wisdom, uprightness and integrity. In *Proverbs*, it is made explicit how both father and mother rejoice over wise children and feel broken-hearted over the foolish children: “A wise son maketh a glad father; but a foolish son is the heaviness of his mother” (Proverb 10:1). If the children act up to the family’s honour and preserve the fame, their “father and mother shall be glad and she that bore them shall rejoice” (Proverbs 23:25).

The story of broken-hearted king David mourning over his son Absalom is a good illustration given in *II Samuel* 19:1 of the Bible. By means of wise children, the parents can subordinate the opponents. The wisdom writer says that wise children enable him to answer the opponents who reproach him. Hence children’s wise living makes the parents lead a life of significance and human values in all respects.

In *Tirukkural* also, a mother’s joy overhearing her son being wise is greater than the joy she felt at the time of his birth:

“Elation of a mother hearing others praise her  
Children is greater than the pleasure of begetting them”  
(Kural 69).

It means in that hearing from the mouth of others that her son is a worthy gentleman the mother feels a delight that far exceeds the delight she had had while giving to him. Unlike the wisdom writer of *The Proverbs*, Tiruvalluvar makes it clear in Tirukkural – couplets 64, 65 & 66 - how a mother’s love for her children expresses itself in the innocent pleasures of bodily contact. The very touch of children turns ordinary food into sweet ambrosia. A mother bears a special responsibility for the future quality of her children. The mental health and happiness of her children depend on the love and maternal care provided during early childhood. Hence “home is the primary and most important factor in the education of a young person” (Interpreter’s Bible 860). The mother’s part in educating children is indicated while the wisdom writer – instructs children to “keep their father’s commandment and forsake not the law of their mother” (P 786).

Mothers had the practice of instructing and influencing their children at all stages of life. What is given in *Proverbs* chap-31 are the words of king Lemuel that his mother taught him. In the pen portrait of the virtuous woman given by Lemuel’s mother, she is pictured as a good teacher from which one can understand that much of the teaching activity in that time took place at home. A good mother is one who “openeth her mouth with wisdom and in her tongue is the law of kindness” (Proverbs 31:26). Mothers seem to have good education and training in those days. A mother here is

regarded as a second source of wisdom. *Proverbs* pays rich tribute to mothers. The volume-IV of *The Interpreter's Bible* states:

“The instruction of mothers may be less stern than that of a father but it may provide the climate of love and affection in which the best attributes can grow. A mother provided the emotional security which is needed by everyone” (P 957).

These lines make one think rather obviously that mothers also played an important role along with fathers in moulding the personality of children by giving them instruction and emotional security which would stand them in good stead in times of need and crisis. Besides giving instruction to children to lead them in the right way, she is a good provider for the physical needs of her children and manages the household chores.

Tiruvalluvar believed that the prosperity of the family lies in the hands of the *illal*, even though “in those days women did not enjoy a good status in society as they were deprived of their rights and remained in ignorance” (Murugaratnam 15). Despite the fact that Tiruvalluvar does not make woman directly responsible for children’s education, it is clear that to obtain knowledge which is more pleasing to all men of this great earth, a sense of emotional security, self-sufficiency and nutritious diet can be offered only by a mother. Tiruvalluvar makes father and mother share equal responsibility in rearing children as the wisdom writer does though he makes father intellectually superior to mother.

Though it is not given explicitly in Tirukkural, mothers in Tamil Nadu might have instilled noble ideals and virtues such as courage, fearlessness, hospitality and charity into the hearts of their children for which many illustrations can be had from Purananuru. While sending her son to the battlefield, a courageous mother gives instruction to her son in the absence of her husband. Hence, mothers are said to have played a significant role in moulding the personality of their children, thereby providing emotional security along with love, courage and manly virtues to them at all levels possible;

“In the Old Testament, speaking generally, woman is thought of wholly from the point of view of man marriage is for man’s benefit; she is useful to him in looking after the household chores, ministering to his comforts and bearing children” (Osterley 81).

In *Proverbs*, woman is wholly responsible for domestic happiness though she does not involve herself in public life. The virtuous woman is praised by husband, children and society at large:

“Her children arise up and call her blessed;  
her husband also and he praiseth her.  
Many daughters have virtuously; but  
thou excellest them all” (*Proverbs* 31:28).

Hence, the virtuous mother has an honourable place in Jewish society. In *Tirukkural* also, the virtuous woman who possesses domestic excellence is highly respected by husband, children and society. By guarding herself, taking care of her husband and children and preserving an unsullied fame, she makes herself praise-worthy. In Tamil tradition, man has the duty to educate children and woman rises to honour through humility and committed sacrifice to family and society along with respect for her husband and emotional security for her children.

In the society as described by Tiruvalluvar in *Tirukkural* and the wisdom writer in *Proverbs* it is futile to ask who is indispensable to the family and society. It is almost like asking whether day or night is more necessary. “Tamil scholars used such terms as kilavan, kilati, Talaivan, talaivi and katalan and katali to suggest the importance of woman in the society” (Manickam 217). In both *Proverbs* and *Tirukkural*, descriptions of virtuous woman who serve as life’s companion and mother and also the weak women who lure weak-willed man for the sake of their wealth are given. The portrait of a virtuous woman who is a good wife, her responsibilities and her status in the society are given in *Proverbs* - chapter 31:

“The adulteress who is referred to  
as the strange woman, wife of another man  
who forsaketh the guide of her youth  
and forgetteth the covenant of her God” (2: 17).

In the well-organised community, ‘illal’ has her responsibility for husband, children, household and society at large. In *Proverbs*, there are high tributes to virtuous woman who has qualities of thrift, frugality, industry, love for husband and honour. She is regarded as an invaluable treasure and a gift from God. She has a worthy place in society. According to Tiruvalluvar, womanhood is more to be esteemed than the manhood that performs the behests of wife.

“The dignity of modest womanhood excels  
His manliness, obedient to a woman’s law  
who dwells” (Kural 907).

What Tiruvalluvar means by this couplet is that women of modesty are far higher in glory than men who fancy their errands or acts that suit their delicate hands. In the words of Tiruvalluvar,

there is nothing more excellent than a chaste wife and hence a chaste wife is invaluable. The same idea is conveyed in *Proverbs* also in the comparison of the virtuous woman to rubies where the writer says that her price is far more valuable than rubies. Woman, according to Valluvar, has the power to make rain fall instant at her words:

“No God adoring, how she bends before her Lord,  
Then rising serves: the rain falls instant at her words.”  
(Tirukkural 55)

To conclude, it may be stated that both *Proverbs* and *Tirukkural* bring home the essential point that woman is not only a provider of wisdom and emotional security to her children in domestic life but also a virtuous and potential woman of modesty far higher even in the societal commitment joining hands with her husband for the flavoring of love, for children, responsibility for husband, cherishing qualities of thrift, frugality, industry, household and societal culture at large.

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