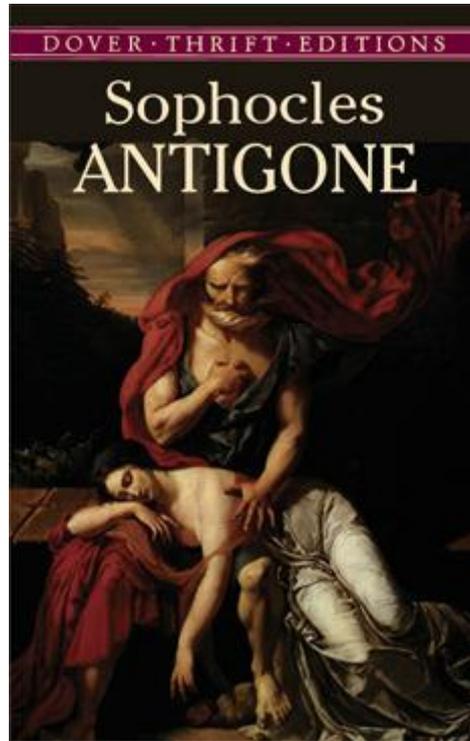


## Sophocles' *Antigone* and Sathanar's *Manimekalai* - Pioneers in Social Feminism

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### Abstract

Comparative Literature looks beyond regional and national borders. Propelled by this premise, this article seeks to bring regional literatures to a larger audience as they project a collective image of Indian consciousness in terms of its culture and ethos. The study here employs a correspondence between the protagonist of an ancient Greek work, *Antigone* by Sophocles and that of an ancient Tamil work, *Manimekalai*, a post-Sangam text and one of the early major epics written by the Buddhist poet, Mudurai Kulavanikar Sathanar in the sixth century according to Paula Richman. They thus belong to a fairly remote period when society was exclusively patriarchal in outlook and function. The two protagonists represent the populace of their periods, take “out-of-tune” decisions, and exhibit extraordinary courage and self-thinking. Much ahead of their times, their nature anticipates the tendencies of modern women who have now gained enormous freedom and distinct individuality.

**Key Words:** *Antigone*, *Manimekalai*, Comparative Literature – social feminism – regional literature – thematic universals

## Social Feminism

Social feminism is a branch of feminism that focuses upon both the public and private spheres of a woman's life and argues that liberation can only be achieved by working to end both the religious and cultural sources of women's oppression. According to Dietz, "Women who do not venture beyond the family or participate in practices beyond mothering cannot attain an adequate understanding of the way politics determines their own lives." She further says that women should have "a distinctly political consciousness steeped in a commitment to democratic values, participatory citizenship, and egalitarianism" (59).

Social feminism seeks to protect the private sphere from desecration. A discerned reader of *Antigone* and *Manimekalai* can easily discover the seeds of Feminism in general, and Social Feminism in particular, in the heroic deeds of the two women protagonists, Antigone and Manimekalai. They occupy different spaces located in different cultural contexts. But they share a common space at one point and exhibit a development of the thinking mind. They are ready to go into their selves and have a centre of sincerity in them. Their struggle in their respective times was to break the domination of men in the social and political spheres.

### *Antigone*

*Antigone* is the story of a passionate young woman who refuses to submit to earthly authorities when they forbid a proper burial for her brother. Illustrating the rival claims of the state and the individual conscience, Antigone is an excellent example for the modern social feminist. Antigone bestows the rites of burial upon her battle-slain brother Polyneices in defiance of the edict of Creon, who was the ruler of Thebes. In so doing, she thereby brings about her own death, the death of her lover Haemon, who is Creon's son, and that of Eurydice, Creon's wife.

King Creon orders the corpse of Polyneices to be left in the open, as the feast for animals and birds. He further orders that whoever tries to violate this order shall be sentenced to cruel death.

Antigone tells these gloomy tidings to her sister, Ismene and informs her that she has resolved to give a decent burial to Polyneices with befitting obsequies in spite of the stringent orders given by the king. Her sister refuses to join her to defy the regal instructions and instead she says "Weak women such as we cannot strive with men; rather were it seemly bow to those that are stronger than ourselves." She further says that Antigone will be put to death if she challenges the king's order. So pathetically noble is the response of Antigone to her sister's argument: she says she

will gladly meet death if as a dutiful sister she is going to be punished for performing the sacred duty to her dead brother.

Antigone is caught in the act of performing funeral rites to Polyneices, the alleged traitor of the country. Antigone has broken the laws of the king, while fulfilling the laws of the Gods; for, according to the ideas of the Greeks, to sprinkle dust thrice over the body of the dead was equivalent to burial. Until this rite was performed, his brother's spirit must wander through space. But now it was entitled to the home appointed for it in Hades. It is ordered that Antigone be led to the dungeon where she is to die of starvation. Along with her, her lover Haemon, son of Creon also dies by stabbing himself to death. It appears that this innocent girl is being sentenced to death for merely standing up for what she believes and her action is right in the eyes of Gods. Antigone understands that life is only ephemeral, but death is eternal and this is why she stresses the importance of following the laws of the Greek Gods.

### **Sophocles' Portrayal of Women**

Although ancient Greece was a male-dominated society, Sophocles' *Antigone*, portrays women as being strong and capable of making wise decisions. Antigone and her sister Ismene represent the ideal-driven and the tradition-bound woman respectively. Ismene is the traditional woman characterized as weak and subordinate. Through the character of Antigone, women finally get to present realistic viewpoints about their character. Antigone's spirit is filled with bravery, passion and fury which allow her to symbolize the very essence of woman. She is strong enough to do what her conscience tells her and follows the spiritual laws in defiance of the temporal laws of the land.

Antigone opposes Creon's law and buries her slain brother because she is compassionate and loves her brother very much. Creon however believes that his laws must be upheld and would do anything to prevent any type rebelling. He is even more infuriated when he learns that a woman has broken his laws. He tries to show Antigone his superiority by sentencing her to death. Conversely, Antigone shows how determined she is by accepting her consequences with pride. She does not try to hide that she is responsible for breaking Creon's laws; moreover, she takes all the credit. All the while she maintains her strength because she truly believes in her actions. These sorts of actions ultimately prove that Antigone is courageous and willing to stand up to men, which was completely against the norms in ancient Greece.

### **Also Filled with Sexist Male Viewpoint**

The play is also filled with instances of a sexist male viewpoint. Creon is the leader of the Theban throne, a position he highly regards. He believes that he has a divine rule and therefore his laws are just and fair. He rules the kingdom with an iron fist and demonstrates his prejudices towards women throughout the play. First, Creon is so upset at Antigone's breaking his laws that he tries to hurt her as much as possible. He tries to act as proudly as possible stating, "No woman shall seduce us, if we must lose, let's lose to a man, at least. Is a woman stronger than we?"(212).

It is proved that Creon does not see woman as equal to the authority of men. He feels that women have no common sense and, therefore, they must be punished for their irrationality. He eventually realizes that he has offended the Gods with his actions as ruler of Thebes. It is not until his own wife kills herself because of his tyranny against humanity does he realize his mistakes. This, of course, is too late for him to redeem his lost loved ones or take back his contempt for women.

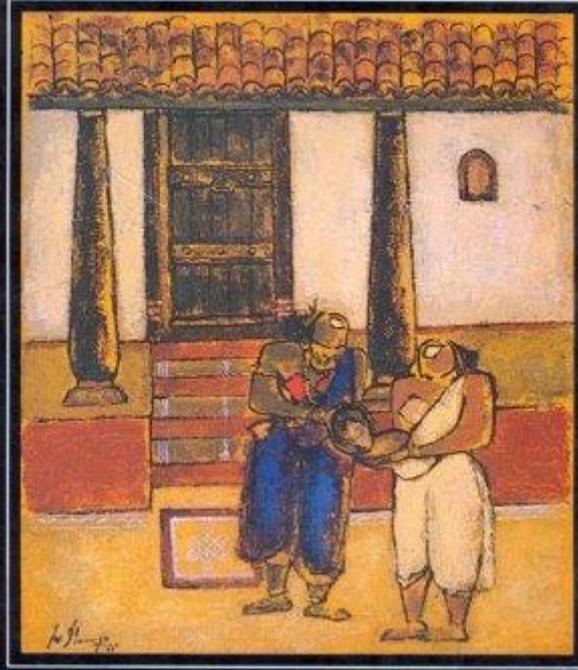
### **Character of Creon**

The character of Creon demonstrates through his tyrant rule the male chauvinistic viewpoint of the ancient Greek world. This play proves that gender bias has always been present in society. Antigone's rebellion is especially threatening because it upsets gender roles and social hierarchy. By refusing to be passive, she overturns the fundamental but man-made rules of her culture.

### ***Manimekalai***

Like Antigone, Manimekalai, the protagonist of the Tamil epic, *Manimekalai*, is a highly evolved, self-thinking and self-activating individual. She sets out on making changes for the betterment of both herself and her society. Born to a courtesan, Madhavi and her paramour Kovalan, the protagonist of another early epic, *Silppadhikaram*, Manimekalai is expected to follow the traditional profession of her predecessors. Madhavi prefers renunciation after Kovalan's death, leaving Manimekalai to fend for herself. She has already grown into a damsel. When she goes into the garden to pick flowers, her captivating beauty enchants Udhayakumaran, the Chola prince of her native kingdom. Manimekalai avoids him and as he pursues her passionately, she goes into hiding. The prince's hot pursuit proves unsuccessful and so determines to win her hand through Manimekalai's maternal grandmother, Chitrapathi. The old lady also is consistent in her efforts to bring Manimekalai back into the traditional fold. She encourages the prince in all possible ways to realize his goal of winning Manimekalai's affection so that her class of women could continue to serve the male sex.

# Silappadikaram Manimekalai



Lakshmi Holmström  
Illustrations : A.V. Ilango

Even Manimekalai's trusted friend Sudhamathi innocently tries to wean Manimekalai away from her self-willed, self-chosen path of social reform and sainthood. She briefs Manimekalai of the prince's single-mindedness to marry the protagonist. But Manimekalai has other plans and the plans are already getting concretized in her mind. In addition, the sea goddess of Manimekala, through her oracles, helps Manimekalai to realize her goal in life. The goddess takes her to the Maniballava Island. Sudhamathi is much aggrieved at Manimekalai's social consciousness and, however, she is convinced about the task that Manimekalai has taken upon herself as envisaged in her previous birth itself.

## Amudhasurabhi

A divine monk on the island presents her with the Amudhasurabhi vessel and with this she embarks upon eradicating the evil of hunger. Udhayakumaran who has been madly in love dies in mysterious circumstances while trying to woo Manimekalai. The king overcome with grief puts Manimekalai in prison as he feels that she is responsible for her son's death. Soon the king realizes the mistake and, filled with remorse, seeks Manimekalai's forgiveness. She preaches him to give up

lust, revenge, alcohol, falsehood, and theft. She remains unperturbed and steadfast in her conviction despite the patriarchal threats and values.

### **A Victim of Male Domination**

Manimekalai's grandmother, Chitrapathi symbolizes the average woman in such a male-dominated society and also represents a victim of male domination. Manimekalai transcends the traditional femininity and rises above both men and women in her contemporary society and proves to be unique and individual. She breaks the so-called traditional image of woman and elevates the woman to the level of a divine being. Her moral strength and unswerving conviction lend her an added dimension, given the circumstances of her birth. She had descended from a family of courtesans, but determined to wipe off the stigma that was naturally attached to her by birth and also the vestiges of such an avocation from society itself.

### **A Determined Woman to Serve Humanity**

Manimekalai proves to be as strong as a man, or even stronger than the male sex. She sends signals to her gender that women should transcend the tradition-bound, male-dominated societal barriers and break free from the male-oriented, self-serving norms if they want to attain political and social independence and assert their individuality. Manimekalai not only shuns marital bond and motherhood in favour of her independent thinking and social service but also strives to reform her society in particular and the world in general. She capitalizes on the boon of Amudhasurabi as a tool to establish a hunger-free humanity and becomes a Buddhist Bikkuni and no doubt, her true democratic consciousness is quite relevant even today.

### **Did Not Succumb to the Pressures of Traditions and Temptations**

Had she succumbed to the pressures of traditions and temptations and chosen an easy-going life like those of her class, she would have either revived her mother's profession or married Udhayakumaran to taste the worldly pleasures. Like Antigone, she too refuses to be passive and overturns the fundamental but ill-balanced rules of her culture. By stepping out of a domestic circle, she steps into the bastions hitherto held by the male sex to rule the world as a social reformer and as a spiritual guru. She is not only a reformer herself but a tool of reformation. Manimekalai has thus established through her personal life that a woman can acquire such strength that she need not be, and should not be, "the other". Like Antigone's martyrdom, Manimekalai's self-sacrifice for the cause of social feminism results in the self-realization and re-awakening of Chitrapathi, King Creon, and the Chola king, father of Prince Udhayakumaran.

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