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Article abstract

Un conte populaire indien contemporain et des écrits plus classiques tiennent pour l'essentiel le même discours sur la nature de la femme. Les deux genres littéraires montrent que, dans la vie quotidienne, les femmes sont plus faibles que les hommes, mais s'entendent aussi pour dire que, dans certains cas, les femmes font preuve de pouvoirs spéciaux qui ne sont pas en rapport avec leurs capacités physiques. En Inde comme dans d'autres cultures, on associe l'infériorité du statut aux pouvoirs visionnaires et à la faculté de manipuler l'essence cosmique des choses. Ces différences sont étudiées par l'analyse des rapports d'autorité, des récits concrets d'événements et à travers un choix de métaphores employées par le conteur.

The Role of Women in a Tamil Folk Epic

BRENDA E.F. BECK

The general stereotype of women in India, as held by the uninformed outsider, suggests that they are meek, submissive beings. They are thought to be housebound and subject to iron rule, first by their fathers and then by their husbands. Such a view has some basis in fact, furthermore. If we look to the ancient and greatly revered Hindu lawgiver, Manu, it is easy to develop this view of the female with direct quotes. According to Manu, women are expected to be sweet tongued, modest in manner and models of eternal patience. They should be the family custodians of good conduct, and they should display an unflinching loyalty towards their male relatives at all times. Their goal in life is simple. They are meant to serve others, first their fathers and later their husbands and sons. In old age a woman may come to control the domestic world within the home, but no woman is free of certain social expectations imposed on all females alike. Men, too, are subject to constraints. They, too, should bow to the will of their male elders, and act righteously at all times. But there can be no doubt that in the traditional Hindu view, there is a qualitative difference in the degree of conformity expected of men and of women. Women are always subject to more constraints, more controls, than are their male counterparts.

Western social theory, however, suggests that underprivileged persons or groups are frequently accorded compensatory powers of a superhuman sort. In part, this may be due to a general human interest in status reversals. Not only are status reversals interesting and revealing as an experience undergone, but many social and psychic tensions seem to find release in such settings. There is also the logic of power relations. Persons without temporal power are "free" to speculate about alternatives. Unfettered by the urgencies of practical matters, a person without power can take a cosmic view of temporal developments. It is in this way that Indian women, according to my view, are compensated for their clear secondary status in other respects. And it is precisely this aspect of the ideology of the Hindu female that has not been given sufficient emphasis in previous inquiries.

In Manu's *Dharmaśāstras* there are indeed many references to this "other side" of the female's nature. But their implications are not well understood by the outside observer. For example, Manu calls the woman a "harbinger of blessings". Metaphorically, a wife constitutes fully "one half" of her husband's body. She is also her husband's counselor. And where a woman is present and serves as an exemplar of good conduct, in her house the gods themselves are said to dwell.

These writings of Manu the lawgiver date back to roughly the third century A.D.[1] Yet the attitudes described there are still honored by the vast majority of Hindus at the present day. Furthermore, Manu wrote in a classical language (Sanskrit) for an elite and learned audience. His works are part of India's great literary tradition. And yet, in contemporary folk epics from the South we find the same essential ideas expressed. The following essay will take evidence from one such epic, *The Story of the Brothers,* an impressive work that forms part of the contemporary oral tradition of the Koṅku region of Tamilnad to this day.[2] By quoting from this work I shall try to illustrate and further develop these classical ideas about women described above. In the following pages, then, it will be shown that a woman's physical weakness is compensated for by her magical strength. In addition, a female's general submissiveness can be seen as matched by her occasional personal strength in certain grave circumstances. The female is preoccupied with bearing children. She alone has the ability to produce a new life. Yet this gift is balanced by an equal power to destroy life or to redistribute its benefits. Thus she may unexpectedly give to the weak what once belonged to the strong. Furthermore, the life of the female is seen as constrained. Sometimes she must even undergo voluntary death in the service of others. Yet she is compensated for this by her powers of vision. At times a female may even pass through death and return alive. Women are often described by vegetal epithets. They are said to be creepers, or clinging vines. But the same women are also recognized as having a special liaison with the gods. They are both dependent creatures and utterly independent divine beings. As we shall see, then, the very nature of the female rests on her contradictory qualities. Men, by contrast, are simple and straight-forward. Perhaps this is why men are given the management of most temporal affairs. Perhaps it is also why a woman must always be carefully controlled by her male counterparts. Men have simple constitutions, relatively speaking. Women are complex and unpredictable.

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[1] A.L. Basham, *The Wonder That Was India* (New York: Grove Press, 1954), p. 112, and P.V. Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra* (Poona, Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1930–62).

[2] This epic takes 19 evenings, or about 50 hours to recite. As transcribed, the text runs to nearly 700 pages. It is extremely popular in the Koṅku region, but unknown elsewhere in the South.

1) The weakness and the strength of the female

In *The Story of the Brothers* we learn of three generations of women in the family of a great line of kings. These kings are farmers and sometimes the narrator speaks of their wives going to the family fields to look at the crops or to help with the work. There are also descriptions of servant women who leave the palace to fetch water. In the main, however, the wives and sisters of important men remain inside their homes. They come out mainly to visit temples on festive occasions, and to travel to visit shrines or relatives. It is in the latter situation that their typical physical weakness is made most evident. For example, when the father of "The Brothers" marries he must take his new bride from her ancestral home and travel across country with her to his own lands. At this moment in the story the new husband is very poor. Thus, the couple are forced to walk. After they have gone a short distance the new wife cries:

> Husband, my ankle is really hurting
> I am loosing control
> Tie me, leave me and go
> My knee-caps are hurting a lot
> I am panting
> I am very thirsty for water, husband
> My tongue is parched
> I am yearning for cold water
> My teeth are becoming dry
> Husband! I need a handful of water for my thirst . . . .
> Husband! My face has not seen the sun for sixteen years.
> I cannot walk," she said and lay down under a banyan tree.

The same kinds of descriptions appear when other journeys are described. Men become tired too, but the women tire much faster.

A second kind of description of female weakness appears when this same wife is later banished (with her husband) from his ancestral lands. The two wander in search of shelter and finally find a place to live in a stable in a neighbouring kingdom. They are badly in need of food and when the wife learns that other women in the area are being paid to husk rice she turns to her husband and says:

> "Husband! The people are going to husk rice. Watch the child.
> I shall go, husk rice, and return."

The husband answers:

> "Oh woman! Up to now you have never even held a pestle in your hands. Therefore can you really go and husk paddy?"

The wife is determined to go, however, and leaves despite her husband's doubts. When she joins the other women not a single one agrees to accept her as a working partner. They see that this lady is frail and unaccustomed

to hard work. Yet the heroine perseveres. After obtaining magical help from the gods, she does manage to husk the rice. Nonetheless, she returns home with her hands covered in blisters. This and other similar episodes make it clear that women of the upper classes are commonly protected from heavy work and hence are physically weak.

The final and most expressive indication of this protected status of the upper class woman is her association with the indoor swing. Upper class women are supposed to spend their time amusing themselves on these pleasureful, moving couches. They are to be found sitting in them frequently. Such swings are likened to children's cradles and they are clearly womblike in their cosiness. They seem to be particularly popular with unmarried, adolescent girls, as in this description of the hero's sister at age fourteen.

> The swing of the chaste girl is rocking
> Swinging for Pārvati who sways like a golden garland as she walks
> See the silver charriot moving for the chaste girl
> It moves rhythmically for the girl who is shaped like a sculpture
> (of a goddess)
> The swing is swinging for the chaste girl
> The golden-sculptured Pārvati who walks as if she floated (on air)
> The chaste girl on the swing
> Pārvati is sleeping deeply

In all of the above descriptions, then, a woman of a high family is described as a protected, tender being.

These tender images, however, must now be set alongside several contrastive excerpts that show the same women under special circumstances where they exhibit great physical strength. One example of such special strength can be found in a description of the hero's mother, Tāmarai, on her way to perform penance in heaven. Through such penance she hopes to obtain a son. Tāmarai takes her husband with her on her journey, but now he, not she, is the one to tire. She soon turns to him and says:

> "Husband! Having come (this far) we must not turn back towards home. I will tie you on my back and crawl up the mountain," she said. And she tied her husband thus and began to crawl upwards.
>
> Stretching out her palms
> The chaste lady climbed upwards
> Extending her thumbs
> Tāmarai is climbing to the mountain top

Here, when a woman's energy is directed towards obtaining children she suddenly finds that she has superhuman strength. And this demonstration of superhuman physical achievement is redoubled when our heroine actually reaches heaven. Now the god Vishnu turns to her and says:

> "O.K. Put (the) necklace around your neck. Rub sacred ash over your whole body."
>
> Having said this Vishnu planted seven needles on a stone with their points together. On this he placed seven sacred prayer beads, on these he placed seven glass beads, on these seven red flowers, and on these seven red oleander flowers, to make the pillar of penance. "O.K., Tāmarai. Climb this place of penance, sit with one leg folded and one leg hanging down, close both eyes, extend both arms and meditate on Siva with complete austerity," he said.

Tāmarai proceeds to hold herself in this position for twenty-one years. At the end of it her body is dried and emaciated. Birds have begun to nest in her nose. Yet she survives the ordeal and eventually returns to her family having obtained the boon that she will at last bear children. The conclusion is clear enough. High class women are generally weak, much weaker physically than high class males. Yet, when they are sufficiently determined they can muster a magical strength much greater than that of the ordinary man.

2) Submission vs. Authority and Self Confidence

It is also evident from this folk epic that a female is thought to have less ability to control her emotions than a male. Although both men and women break down and cry at various points, it is the females who do so more often. Besides crying more frequently, women are often described as crying to their husbands or for their pets. Men, on the other hand, cry directly to the gods. Women cry to the gods too, but generally only after the domestic context fails them. Thus, they seem to be more dependent on finding emotional solace from their immediate companions than men.

More important, however, is the interesting pattern of give and take between husbands and wives. Often women are the source of suggestions for their husbands' actions. More strikingly, we frequently see them telling their husbands what to do. For example, at one point this central female figure exclaims:

> Husband! In your parents' time they did the thrashing with elephants. Go to the Chola Country and ask the king for some elephants. We will do our thrashing with them."

An even more vivid example is the point at which Tāmarai calls to her husband and tells him to place his head under the wheel of a great temple chariot and commit suicide. She believes it to be the gods' will that they die thus and she plans to place her own head under the other wheel at the

same moment. Her husband objects briefly, but then does as he is told.[3] There are also times when a wife meekly obeys her husband but these are far fewer in number. The most heart-rending one I have noticed in this epic is the time when Tāmarai's husband banishes his wife from their palace for having disobeyed him. (She went to visit her brother, was badly beaten by him and has thus brought dishonour to the family name.)[4] Tāmarai's response is to attempt suicide once again. As above, Vishnu eventually rescues her.

From all of this evidence it becomes clear that women may at times exercise considerable authority. They often deal directly with the gods, they often order their husbands about, and at times they even dare to disobey them. But women can be even more intimidating than this. At several points in the epic studied, we find a women abusing a male (Brahman) priest, or a fearful local goddess. From the quotes below, it is clear that both can be intimidated.

Tāmarai:	"Oh you Brahman! What did you say, previously? And what is that you say now? Be careful! If you say anything more your life (will leave you and) ascend to the world above!"
The Brahman:	"Lady! Don't be angry! What would I speak for? . . . Do as you like!"
Tāmarai:	"Kali, lady! You close the temple door and sleep, as a woman returns from taking a beating at her brother's house? Villain!" she said with anger. As she tried the door the bolt fell away.
(The goddess):	Kali, frightened, had bolted the door and was hiding in a corner.

Tāmarai, the much respected mother of the two heroes, sometimes even challenges the words of the great god, Vishnu, himself.

Vishnu:	"Tāmarai! Your husband died when his time was finished. What can I do? Am I Siva, that I can give your husband life? For my part, I can do nothing, woman."
Tāmarai:	"Vishnu! There is nothing that can not be done if you desire it. You must get my husband up immediately!"
Vishnu:	"Tāmarai! O.K.! Take some water and come (with me)."

Though there are passages in the epic which suggest female submissiveness, then, there are also many that suggest their self-confidence and

[3]The two are subsequently "rescued" by Vishnu and do not actually die. Still, the gesture is dramatic enough

[4]It is generally considered a great disgrace for a wife to be beaten by anyone but her own husband. It is interesting, however, that the context of her disobedience is her desire to visit her brother and his children. The brother-sister bond is extremely important in Tamil culture and this is a good example of how it sometimes vies, in importance, with the husband-wife tie.

ability to speak out. Great women are not to be tangled with lightly. Though they may appear meek they are capable of great courage. In the service of matters they judge to be important, their words become commanding.

3) Creative and Destructive Powers

One of the clearest and most pervasive themes of this Southern folk epic is that a woman greatly fears being barren. The absence of children after marriage has a heavy psychological impact. As a result women go to great lengths in their efforts to obtain issue. It is this one desire which most clearly drives them to draw upon their hidden wells of energy and courage. Furthermore, their fear of infertility is linked to images of dying altogether. We see this in the following lament sung by the narrator and by the hero's mother:

Narrator:
The gold-like, chaste Tāmarai
Was spilling her tears on the earth
The pearl-like tears of the chaste lady
Were spilling on her cheeks
The coral-like chaste lady
Was spilling her tears all over the earth
She was crying
The chaste woman cries, the Kāntēri-like one[5] is spilling tears
The good woman cries, the flower parrot is pining

Tāmarai:
If worms grow in cow dung, my Lord
The whole sea, my Lord, will be
Full of fish attacked by worms, by worms there
If there are worms in my stomach, my Lord
If there are worms there
The Kollitam river, my Lord
Will be full of fish attacked by worms, by worms there
I have become rotten wood,[6] like a rotten oil press
I have become a fallen tree, I have become a rotten oil press

But more than the fear of decay, there is the suspicion that the lack of issue is just compensation for some misdemeanor committed in the past. Hence the women feel guilty and repeatedly ask themselves what they have done wrong.

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[5]Kāntēri, a major figure in the *Mahābhārata*, is known for her chastity and devotion to her husband. She cries when she loses her sons in battle.

[6]This linkage of excessive memory to rotting or dying is reminiscent of themes Claude Lévi-Strauss has found in his study of the mythologies of North and South America.

Tāmarai: Oh King, I have no son
In that world, in that country
I was called a sinner, a sinner there
Oh, King, since I don't have a child
In the country where the Kollitam river flows
I was called a sinner, a sinner there

There is also a fear of gossip and of social rejection, as can be seen from the next few lines:

Husband, of those who have cut teeth, half are gossiping about it!
Of those in the kingdom, some are speaking about it!
Of those who exist, the truthful ones are speaking about it!

But worst of all, there is the belief that barrenness is contagious. Because the heroine is without issue, so too are all the animals on her farm. As she, herself, comments, "Everything that accepts water from (me) becomes barren. Consequently, other women become frightened for themselves and for their own children."

Other women: "Elder sister, the barren one, comes towards us
The children will develop sores
The demoness, the demoness, comes towards us
The children will develop some sores"

The barren wife: "Lord! The villains! They were speaking like this and when they saw me they turned around and went back. They went back without visiting the temple . . . . Husband. Several crores of people in this world are talking about me. Several crores are insulting me. I am known as the barren one, the barren one."

The barrenness may spread, not only to the animals, but also to the crops. Hence Tāmarai refuses to sow seeds for her husband, traditionally a woman's task, for fear that they too will not bring forth new life. The fact that women normally do sow seeds is, of course, of great symbolic import. It fits with the fact that women are thought to be the source of fertility in general. So strong is their link to this theme, that the goddess Parvatī (and not her husband Siva) is the one to bring the "prosperous, non-timid farmers" into existence in the first place, at the very beginning of the story.

The barrenness of the heroine, however, is finally converted into extreme fertility at the completion of twenty-one years of penance in heaven. When she does finally obtain the boon to produce new life all the original imagery becomes inverted. When the barren woman finally is granted an audience by the great god Siva she says:

Tāmarai: "Lord! Still, all those that are capable of drinking water in my home are barren. All these must have the blessed boon of a child, Lord!"

Siva: "O.K. I will give you some sacred Ganges water. Give a little of this sacred water to whomever wants a child. They will immediately give birth."

Now she is able to distribute the boon of life to whomever she pleases. And on her way home various animals stop her and beg her to spread her new gift of life amongst them. For example, a great cobra blocks her path and demands:

Cobra: "Woman, Tāmarai! Have you come having obtained a boon for me?"

The Wife: "Oh Nākēntiran (great cobra): Having obtained it, I have come. Here, take a little of this sacred water and drink it. You will become pregnant immediately," she said, and she poured out a little sacred water. Nākēntiran drank it and became happy.

So extreme barrenness has as an outcome, extreme fertility. And, in addition, the fertility of the heroine is of no ordinary sort. The souls of her children to be are those of great heroes of the past, and they are placed in her womb by Siva himself. When the time for the children's birth arrives, furthermore, these babes step from the womb whole and active beings. They are delivered by Caesarian section and Vishnu himself serves as the midwife. This and other facts about the heroes' childhood lend them superhuman power. They are not ordinary men, just as their mother was no ordinary woman. Their mother serves as an extreme model of feminity, a woman "writ large". She simply partakes of the basic female contradiction, that of controling life and non-life, creativity and sterility, more fully than ordinary women do.

Is the relationship here unidirectional? Once barrenness becomes life is the heroine "cured" of the destructive side of herself forever? For as long as her children and husband live, perhaps. It does seem likely, however, that a woman's destructive side can lie dormant. In our story, at any rate, no female serves as a destroyer after the birth of her children.[7] But judging from other folk materials a woman's fearful side can resurface when and if she loses her husband.[8]

The destructive powers attributed to females, furthermore, contain certain standard symbolic elements. Two common ones are the ability to

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[7] Indeed, this may be the key to why the fearful local goddesses of Hinduism are always childless.

[8] This is perhaps an important reason why women were traditionally encouraged to commit suicide when their husbands died, rather than to remain in this world as malevolent widows.

burn things or to destroy them in a flood of rain. Women are also able to make magical use of handfuls of earth. Tāmarai instantly kills her brother's fourteen children, for example, simply by throwing a handful of soil in their direction.[9] If fire, water and earth can be used destructively by women, however, each of these three elements can also be used constructively. In the epic under study, Tāmarai twice summons the rain to put out fire. And later we see her daughter turn earth (actually sand) magically into cooked rice. However, a woman can not accomplish such feats alone. She must always call on the gods before such events can be brought about. Men engage the help of the gods also, for example, on in ordinary matters. They receive Vishnu's help in battle, for example, on in chopping firewood, or in harvesting grain. But all magical manipulation of the three basic elements: fire, water and earth,[10] is left to women. This would seem fitting, since it is women who are concerned with the primary forces of the cosmos, the most fundamental of these being the force of life itself. Men, by contrast, manage a society's mundane concerns.

Giving birth is clearly the most central preoccupation of women in this folk account, but their interest in fostering new life does not stop there. Supporting children in the early years of life is also a primary female concern. The two heroes in this epic, for example, can not be raised from birth by their true mother because of a threat from the clansmen to kill them. Vishnu therefore gives these boys to the local goddess, Celātta, to raise.[11] (It never occurs to this great god to look after the babes himself). When the children reach age five, however, Celātta decides to return the boys to their human mother. Now Vishnu is called upon to demonstrate the reality of this unrecognized maternal tie. The god does this by making milk from Tāmarai's breasts pass through seven magical curtains and into the boys' open mouths.[12] Through her milk, a mother can be seen to continue to nourish her child with a life-giving force. Breast feeding can thus be seen here as a forceful symbol of the mother's prime role.

The epic under study makes it clear, furthermore, that a child's dependency on its mother continues right up to the time of marriage. Only with

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[9]A little later she revives the children, only to again turn two of the daughters to stone. The women wait, in this frozen condition, until Tāmarai's own sons are finally born and are ready for marriage. The women, when re-animated, then become (cross cousin) brides.

[10]The fourth element, wind or air, though recognized by classical doctrine, does not seem to be important in the folk literature. The same seems to hold true for South Indian (Tamil) proverbs. There, too, fire, water and earth are quite important while wind and air receive little attention.

[11]The fact that Celātta takes care of the brothers during their infancy no doubt increases their magical potency. To be raised by a goddess clearly gives them a special quality. In addition, Celātta keeps them underground, subtly reinforcing their symbolic bonds with the earth and their claims to clan land.

[12]A similar feat is also described at an earlier point in this epic where the heroes' father (who was found under a pile of stones as a babe) accepts milk from his own foster mosther's mouth across a series of curtains.

this event does the mother's responsibility to sustain her offspring taper off. Thus the several mothers in our story fight frantically against death while their children are still unwed. They clearly see this event as the final significant responsibility left in their lives. After the children's marriages (more accurately, after the weddings of all male children are completed) women are willing to accept death passively and without protest. With the wedding of her son a woman passes her responsibilities of life-creation and life-maintenance to her daughter-in-law. Only then can she rest tranquil and begin to contemplate her own death.

One further interesting aspect of the frightening power of the childless female, however, remains to be explored. In two places in this epic a woman destroys a palace full of great wealth. In both cases the palace is a place where children have been born and raised. At both burnings the woman who causes the destruction also arranges for a redistribution of wealth. All the people of the area are called and a brief free-for-all ensues. Those neighbours who get to the wealth first take what they can. This redistributive symbolism may extend, implicitly, to the birth of children too. If this is so then the allocation of wealth would symbolize the desire of these childless females that life-giving powers in the university be re-distributed as well.

Finally, a woman's creative powers are understood to balance out, in some way, her inferior position vis-a-vis more wordly matters. As Tāmarai laments, before the birth of her sons is assured:

> I was born as a woman, oh Lord
> I was born, there
> Why was I not born as sand?
> Why was I not born (as sand) on this earth, my Lord?
> Why was I not born as sand?
> Why did I not grow as a weed on this earth?

From this passage it would seem that a woman takes for granted her socially inferior position. But she does have the hope of bearing children and hence of participating eventually in the divine order of things. If she is not compensated in this way, then she is truly a lowly being, without children she is nothing but a "weed," while with children she becomes a tree of life.

4) Repeated Death and the Power of Vision

It would seem that these contradictory ideas about a woman: her lowliness and yet her participation in a divine order of things, are neatly brought together by this epic in repeated references to symbolic death. The most striking example of this is found in the barren wife Tāmarai's

trip to heaven to perform penance. First she summons up a super-human will to enable her to cross the boundaries that separate earth and heaven. And second, once in heaven she must spend twenty-one years in deep meditation. As already seen, she balances for this period on an improbable pinnacle constructed of needles, beads and flowers. And for this feat she is also appropriately attired. Her body is covered with milkwhite ashes, over which she wears a coat of mail, special ascetic earrings, a saffron body cloth and a necklace of sacred beads. Readied for the feat, Vishnu next takes her life from her and seals it in a golden box. He also braids her hair in four strands. Then he says to her:

> Vishnu: "Endure the winds and the rains that beat down upon you", he said. Let the braids become fixed to the four corners of the ground. Remain like this for twenty-one years. Afterwards I will give you a boon."

Twenty-one years later Tāmarai's body is emaciated and withered. There are bugs in her hair and parrots nesting in her nose. Finally, Vishnu takes her body to the Ganges river and revives it by moistening it with sacred water.

With Tāmarai's revival she is counted as having passed through one death. In this she is brought to the same level as her husband, who also dies once while waiting for her return. But now Tāmarai must undergo another six deaths in heaven at the hands of the great god Siva before she is finally ready to receive the promised boon.[13] After these latter deaths are, if anything, more horrific than the first. To accomplish a second death Vishnu tells Tāmarai to remount her penance post. As she does this Siva begins to suffer from a burning sensation. Discovering the presence of a penitent in heaven this great god comments to his assistants:

> Siva: "That villain. Who brought her to the God's counsel chamber? Oh assistants! Pull her down and cut her into little pieces with an axe, drop her to the bottom of three hell pits, trample on her, and come."

Tāmarai suffers her second death in this way. But no sooner is she cut up and trampled upon than Vishnu comes to her aid. With a forked stick in hand, this benevolent god goes to the hell pit and fishes out three of the heroine's bones. He puts them in the river Ganges to moisten them, then lays them out on a hillock and brings them back to life. Tāmarai suddenly jumps up a whole woman once more. Her subsequent five deaths are simple repetitions of the second one, with one added twist. The seventh

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[13]Seven is of course, a sacred number. The reason for seven in this case, however, is explained by the fact that Tāmarai's father-in-law once unwittingly killed seven cows. His daughter-in-law must now pay for these lives before she can bear issue for his son.

time Siva has Tāmarai's head cut off. He then plants it on a stake at the gates of heaven as an example to other would-be penitants. Vishnu is now powerless to revive Tāmarai and can only proceed to do so after obtaining Siva's explicit approval. Vishnu can revive bodies killed in other ways, but only Siva can revive one that has been beheaded. This suggests that the head has some special symbolic significance as the seat of life, a theme which we see reappear elsewhere in the story.[14]

But more important than the means of death, however, is the fact that the heroine passes through this barrier successfully seven times, and eventually wins her boon. Siva now promises her three children, two sons and a daughter. But these children are no ordinary mortals, instead they are reincarnations of very special beings. The two sons are rejuvenated forms of Bhīma and Arjuna, the heroes of India's great classic epic, the *Mahābhārata*. But the daughter is in a sense even more interesting, for she is to be one of the seven young goddesses of the South[15] embodied in living flesh for the period of her brothers' life on earth. In the promise that Siva gives Tāmarai he confirms that this girl "will have a fire in her breast that will enable her to foresee the future." Through the symbolic death of the mother, therefore, the daughter acquires the powers of a living goddess.

The symbolism of fire in the breast is very significant too, for having fire in the breast seems to mean that a woman has control over fire, particularly a destructive fire that can kill.[16] Control of such a fire suggests in essence, then, control over death itself. More accurately, perhaps, control of fire signifies the ability to pass through death. This is clear from the more general cultural context where loyal widows were traditionally urged to enter their husband's funeral pyres and die with them. Such a death was considered only a mortal one, as is well attested from the number of local shrines dedicated to such women who are said to become goddesses in their own right, as a result.

So control over fire can be symbolically equated with being able to pass through fire and return to (a more divine) life. A similar series of repeated deaths are also attributed, in well known Hindu myths, to Siva's own wife. And in our epic they are not limited to Tāmarai's experience in heaven. The wives of the brothers also undergo several magical deaths.

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[14]As for example, when the great boar has been killed and his meat distributed Via a clever trick, Vishnu obtains the head of the boar This is a sign recognized by the brothers as an omen of their own impending death For a further discussion of the symbolic significance of the head in Indian folk tradition see Brenda Beck, "The Body Image in Tamil Proverbs," *Western Folklore*, 38:1 (1979), 21-41

[15]These goddesses, called the Kannimār or "young virgins" are popular figures in local folk belief.

[16]One cannot help but link this description with the famous story of Kannagi, whose firey beast burnt the entire city of Madurai, another South Indian epic story well known in popular folk tradition.

Two of these occur before their marriage to the heroes, (perhaps to purify them for this great event?) and the last is a firey death forced upon them when their own husbands die. All these female deaths add up to one important conclusion. Truly great women can pass through death. By doing so they become cleansed, both in heart and in soul. And the more deaths they experience, the more refined their essential nature becomes. This makes them better wives, but it also confirms their essentially female nature. A woman's power over death and her surprising ability to see into the future thus seem to be linked through these funereal images.

The best examples of this power of female vision come from epic descriptions of Tāmarai's daughter, Tankāl. At five different points in the story Tankāl uncovers a potentially disastrous situation in a frightening dream. Each time she is sleeping in her cradle-like swing, to the sound of a lovely lullaby, when a horrific vision suddenly descends upon her. Twice she discovers her elder brother in danger and summons her younger brother to rescue him. Once she divines that a palace servant has been kidnapped by the enemy, while two other visions concern her brothers' impending (and actual death). Such visions are extraordinary. And they occur in a cradle, at a time when Tankāl is already at one step removed from ordinary life. Being in a cradle is like being in a womb, where one is "dead" because one is, paradoxically, yet unborn.

Aside from this one young girl, however, the women in this epic do not have special visions in their sleep. Instead they are able, in their waking state, to see beyond what others see. For such women ordinary events often become signs or omens worthy of special interpretation. Thus, in this story females divine the future by observing a black cat cross a person's path, a headload striking the beam of a door, or a flower wilting too soon. In these events, which others see as ordinary occurrences, they read special (and correct) meanings of portentious events to come. Usually such omens are inauspicious and supply a portent of some unwelcome fate. But there are times when such omens bring good tidings too. For example, at one point the clansmen of Tāmarai's husband roast seeds which he is about to plant. By doing this they hope to prevent their germination, hence spoiling the crop. Tāmarai notices this but her husband decides to plant the seeds anyway. Later the grains (which do eventually grow) do not fruit properly and the denoument now requires Tāmarai's special powers of insight again. It is she who discovers that inside each head on the new plants lies a jewel. The family's wealth for years to come rests on their successful harvest of these precious gems.

This ability of the wife to see further than the husband, and more accurately, is not accidental. Instances of this special power of vision recur throughout the story. At one point, for example, Lord Vishnu

appears before Tāmarai and her husband as a beggar. She recognizes his true identity right away. Her husband does not. The same holds true for the gods. At one point Vishnu visits Siva to beg a favour of him, but he comes in disguise. Siva's wife Parvatī welcomes him and she immediately recognizes him for his true self. Yet Siva is deceived (or at least pretends to be). Where a knowledge of the extraordinary is required, then, it is the women who have the edge. Their visionary powers, and their ability to see beyond superficial appearances go hand in hand with their lack of fear of death. If women think of suicide more often than men (which in this epic they do) it is not just because they lead unhappy lives. It is also because they "see through" death more clearly than do men. Men's skills are intended to cope with the present world. In Hindu terms this means that they deal largely with superficial matters. Women's abilities are more suited to understanding that other world where the gods move. And it is that world which lies at the source of things. In the Hindu view of things it is that other world which is the non-superficial or truly "real" one.

5) Material Epithets and Divine Associations

If we now turn to the epithets used to describe the two most important women of the story, Tāmarai and her daughter Tankāl, we find that a similar theme emerges. With the exception of the single phrase, "chaste woman" or "chaste girl", all of the epithets referring to those two women employ non-human metaphors. Most common are the vegetal epithets "fine creeper vine", and "good mango", one suggesting dependency, the other ripeness and fecundity.[17] This same domain of vegetal metaphors is also drawn upon to suggest barrenness or old age. As cited earlier, the childless Tāmarai at one point cries to god calling herself both a "weed", and "rotten wood". More striking are the number of inanimate things used as metaphors for women. Thus, they are sometimes spoken of as like "gold", the "sun", a "pearl", a "jewel", or a "sweet light." And young Tankāl is frequently described as "shaped like a sculpture". Animal metaphors for women refer exclusively to birds, specifically the colorful (domesticatable) parrot and peahen. All references to four-footed animals such as "he with the strength of an elephant", are reserved for men.

Such choices of imagry are not accidental. Of the entire range of living creatures birds are perhaps the least humanlike, with the exception of bugs and reptiles, whose poetic associations are largely negative.[18] Fish,

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[17] The same epithets are also common in proverbs. There creepers and flowers are regularly used as metaphors for females. Fruits suggest the presence of children.

[18] Women's vaginas are sometimes described as "cobra hoods" in classical Southern literature. Though meant to be a positive image of beauty, this parallel clearly evokes overtones of divine danger as well. Other reptile references, if they exist, should have still more negative overtones.

also obvious candidates from the animate-but-far-from-human category, are associated with women elsewhere in the folk tradition, though not in this particular epic.[19] Not only are the birds far from humanlike, in terms of physical form, they also go (by flying) where no human can follow. Being airborne, furthermore, suggests an association with the gods, who also have the power to fly or at least to move through the air in a carefree fashion. Indeed, several species of birds serve as vehicles for the Hindu gods. The peacock is a famous divine mount, and the parrot has strong associations with Kāma, the god of sexual desire. Thus, these bird metaphors evoke erotic and divine associations simultaneously.

Vegetal and object metaphors for women carry us still further from the realm of human form. These latter images bring out the ambiguity of the female position even more strongly than do the bird images described above. Jewels and gold are objects of human rivalry and manipulation. Vegetables and fruits are grown and eaten in a similarly utilitarian manner. There is no doubt that these "object" metaphors express common attitudes towards women that are found both in everyday life and in the classical literature of India. Women are "objects" in a social world. At a wedding, for example, the bride is expressly so treated. On this day she is supposed to behave as a wooden doll whose every move must be engineered by her attendants. At their marriages, women are "goods" to be circulated in a larger social system where the interested parties are men.[20]

If being treated as an "object" is demeaning, however, a complementary aspect of elevation is also involved. In referring to a woman as a piece of gold or as a precious jewel she is being linked to the elemental qualities of things. Plants, as primitive and fast-growing forms of life, have similar symbolic associations. Women are thus likened to the fundamental constituents of matter. They can be compared to elementary particles, to borrow a metaphor from science. This may make them lowly, but paradoxically it also makes them semi-divine. They are closer to the elemental forces which energize all things, than are men. This probably also explains the many metaphors that refer to women as "the sun" or as a "ray of light."

In case this line of reasoning be doubted by the cautious reader, we can also give examples of epithets which link the women of this epic more directly with the world of divine beings. Tāmarai, for instance, is called "the goddess of the agriculturalists", and the "all-knowing one." Her daughter Tankāl, furthermore, is specifically said to be a young

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[19] As in the name of the famous goddess of Madurai, which is Meenakshi, meaning "fish-eyed".

[20] There can be no doubt that Lévi-Strauss' general discussion of women as social objects to be exchanged between men correctly describes much in traditional Hindu wedding symbolism.

goddess in human form. Tāmarai's birth, too, is divinely inspired. She is the outcome of Siva and Parvatī's love play, in which the great god's semen falls on a lotus leaf and then is quickly transformed into a baby girl.[21] More interesting still, she is immediately compared to Laksmi, the goddess of wealth. Such associations only reinforce the gold-object-for-circulation idea already discussed.

Finally, as if this were not enough, many of the actions of females in this epic also attest to their divine connections. Tāmarai, a female, is the only one to reach heaven and to return to earth bearing the gift of life.[23] But Tāmarai is not simply the transporter of fecundity. She also has an ability to revive the dead. At one point she revives fourteen of her nieces and nephews with a golden wand sent to her from heaven. At another point she helps Vishnu to revive her own husband, fetching water for the god to sprinkle on him. Her daughter Tankāl enjoys the same powers in her turn and is able to briefly revive her own brothers from death with a similar wand. None of the male heroes of the story have the power to resurrect the dead, though male gods do. Hence this particular ability is clearly not so much sex-linked as it is a marker of divine power more generally.

6) The Role of Female Animals

Most revealing of all, perhaps, is the role of animals in this local epic. At least three animals, a boar, a tiny dog and a parrot, have a critical influence on the action. And two of these, the dog and the parrot, are female. Other animals with significant roles are cows, horses, tigers and cobras. A frog, and a cat have a minor position in the whole and there is also repeated reference to a mythical eagle-like bird used both by Vishnu and by a lovely ascetic maiden. Elephants occur in metaphor and even a bandycoot's hole is important at one point.

It is important to note at the outset that all these animals are motivated by human sentiments appropriate to their sex and to their social status. Hence the females are concerned to bear offspring, and the great boar is a male bully who thinks his size counts for everything. Nor is it an accident that the tiny, female dog (the smallest character in the story) is the one who effectively kills this great, fearsome animal. She measures exactly one span while the male boar is said to be seventy feet long. Yet she wins the contest when she bites his testicles with her poisoned fangs. Thus we

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[21] This is a rather common event both in local and in all-India myths.

[22] Perhaps this can be compared with Lévi-Strauss' discussion of trips to heaven to obtain food or fire in new world mythology.

see a female's terrifying power "writ large", so-to-speak, when projected onto characters in the animal kingdom. Here, in the non-human realm, sexual imagery is given free reign and we see the so-called "weaker" sex conquer even in the face of exaggerated strength.

The little female dog, who is so critical to the story's denouement, has more than just poisoned fangs, however. She also has the power to curse and she uses this power against the brothers themselves when they forget to take her with them for the great boar hunt. The younger, more virile brother falls ill as a result. He then loses control over his soldiers and they die in battle against the boar's defenders. This causes the two heroes to lose their social status at home. They can no longer return to their own region, for the widows of the dead soldiers will take revenge.[23] Hence one little female dog, who measures just a span, is in a sense responsible for the downfall or the epic's two great kings.

The power of the chaste woman to curse the unrighteous is not the only female quality, however, that is shared between the animal and the human kingdom. All the animals described by this epic have the gift of speech. The females of these non-human species have the gift of foresight as well. For example, five different female animals come to Tāmarai as she leaves on her pilgrimage to heaven. Each asks her to bring them a boon so that they too may bear children. Since Tāmarai's barrenness has been the cause of the barrenness of all the animals in the kingdom, it is reasonable for Tāmarai to take on this responsibility of obtaining boons for others as well.

The first to approach Tāmarai is a cow. When she agrees to aid the cow, it promises calves that will amuse Tāmarai's own children. A female horse, who is the next supplicant, promises that her colts with serve as mounts for Tāmarai's sons when they wish to travel. The third to approach Tāmarai is a female boar who lies across the path she is travelling along. This boar is impertinent and refuses to move, so Tāmarai kicks it in anger. That gesture is understood (correctly) by the boar to be an extreme insult. As a result the third outcome is very different. The boar vows that she will perform penance too and obtain a son independently of Tāmarai's efforts. This son, she warns, will eventually attack Tāmarai's human offspring.

We must remember that Tāmarai's barrenness is due to the accidental death of seven cows affronted by her father-in-law. Now her affront to an animal will reap its just reward too. At each step, then, the unjust treatment of living beings brings retribution at a later point. There is no sharp distinction made here between animals and humans. The rules of ethical

[23] An example, perhaps, of the fearsome powers widows are thought to possess.

behavior apply to both with equal force. The fourth animal to approach Tāmarai is a female dog. The dog promises that her pup will kill the malevolent boar. The fifth is a cobra whose words of encouragement are that her child will help search for Tāmarai's sons in the forest when such help is needed. All five animal mothers predict the future accurately, of course. Their children do just as they promise, later in the story. All these animal "women", then, also have the power to see into the future.

Female animals also have an acute sense of "fate". They cry poetically, just as human females do. Yet they can also resign themselves to what they know must be. A particularly nice example of this is provided in a song that a parrot sings to her husband before she is captured and hung next to Tankāl's swinging cradle as a caged pet. The female parrot sings:

> To enslave us to look at, enslave us there
> To capture and confine us, they have come to confine us
> They carry a fine cage for us, the Lord carried a cage
> They have come, the villains, the farmers, the farmers there
>
> I have lost my turmeric,[24] I have lost it
> I have lost my mind, my king, I have lost my flowers
> The wedding necklace, the good wedding necklace, I have lost it
> Now it is time to let my hair free[25]
> Husband, that day has come.
>
> Will a tree separate from the earth, my Lord?
> Will shade separate from a tree, my Lord?
> Will the complexion separate from the girl, my Lord?
> Will the fragrance separate from the flower, oh King?
>
> Husband! Siva has written on my head that I shall be separated from you. All right, husband! Get up quickly and run to (the town) of Vīrappūr."

Taking his wife's advice the male parrot flees, but the female is caught and must become the heroes' sister's pet.

The captured female parrot is of great significance. Up to this point in the epic the heroes have been exclusively occuped by a long-lasting rivalry with their clan cousins over clan lands. But now the brothers rest secure in their family's hegemony. Their cousin rivals have been soundly defeated and have fled to establish a new life for themselves elsewhere, never to be heard from again. It is at this point that the social tensions of the story shift dramatically. Now the heroes are free to think of expanding their kingdom towards the edges of the forest where a powerful group of hunters dwell.[26]

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[24] A sign of beauty for women. Turmeric may not be used by widows.

[25] Losing flowers and the wedding necklace, and loosening the hair are also signs of losing one's husband.

[26] This group are called Vēttuvās. From the descriptions given it seems that the Vēttuvās practised some agriculture at the time these events occur but their associations with the great boar, the forest, tigers, etc. suggest (as does other information on the history of this particular caste) that in the eyes of the agriculturalist heroes they symbolize something half civilized and half wild.

Significantly, it is the heroes' younger sister who starts the new epoch. She demands that her brothers bring her a parrot from the hunters' territory, so that she may have a pet. The brothers agree to this escapade and, after great effort, bring back the female parrot described above. Since the parrot is female, and since "lovely parrot" is also used as a metaphor for human women, it would seem that this bird's capture can be read at a symbolic level to suggest the "capture" of a female belonging to the hunters' camp. This idea is strengthened by the fact that these forest men, just like the agriculturalist heroes, have an unmarried sister of their own. The parrot couple specifically take refuge with this forest girl. There the hunter's sister treats them as her special protégés. When this girl learns from the male parrot (who escapes capture) that his wife has been trapped and carried off, she quickly sends her huntsmen brothers to seek revenge.

The type of revenge planned is equally significant. The hunters now plan to kill the heroes and capture Tankāl. She is to be brought back to their forest palace where she will become a slave. The hunters do not succeed in actually capturing the heroes' sister, however. Instead they run off with one of the maids by mistake. This woman is soon recovered by trickery. Tankāl is threatened again, however, when the great boar comes to root around in and spoil the heroes' crops. Thus the initial capture of a female bird, and subsequent attempts to gain revenge by deporting and enslaving the heroes' sister, become symbolic arguments over the control of women more generally. In the earlier parts of the story these erotic overtones were inappropriate, since all jealousies were between men of one clan. Such clans are exogamous. Courting a woman inside the clan would be tantamount to attempting incest. But the moment the scene shifts to a rivalry with strangers, then the capture of the opponent's women becomes a major issue. The symbolic capture of a "foreign" female is not only erotic, it also has important overtones of insult and of magical power. To control a rival's female is clearly an insult, because it implies that her own male kinsmen are unable to protect their most valued possession. Capture can also threaten the group's social status, however, since family females are a group's primary repository of purity. If they are sullied, even symbolically, the whole group tends to lose status.[27]

In addition to these important themes, there are several clear references to the fact that females can transfer magical powers to the men

[27] This idea would seem to be that female impurities become transferred to the males of a group through food (which the women cook), and through the womb (in which sons of the group are nurtured). That theme remains implicit, however, both in this material and elsewhere in the folk literature.

who protect them. Thus, when the brothers set out to capture the parrot, their sister first blesses their swords. They come back victorious. Later on, however, when the brothers set out to wage war against the boar, their sister refuses to bless their war implements.[28] Consequently, now these men never return from the battle. Instead they die in the forest. Tankal eventually has to search for them there.

The magical blessings of an unmarried, chaste sister are highly valued. If one captures such a woman, then her magical powers become transferred with her. Such actions reduces the potential powers of the opponent and boost those of her captors simultaneously. In addition, there is some indication that chaste wives also have a magical role to play. The two heroes agree to matrimony on one condition: that they never touch their wives[29] even in the wedding ceremony itself.[30] The two women are subsequently locked in a special palace, called the palace of "prosperity". There they do nothing but spin thread for years on end.[31] Perhaps this spinning suggests the presence of some kind of unexploited, stored-up sexual energy.[32] However, just how this energy gets transferred to these women's husbands, and thus operates to their benefit, remains unclear.

Let us return now to the question with which we began. To what extent are the women depicted in this regional South Indian epic similar in character to those described in the classical *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyana?* Despite the gulfs of time, language and geography that separate these great works from a contemporary and highly localized story, certain basic resemblances remain. Firstly, only women of aristocratic birth find a significant place in either literature. The female servants who populate great palaces occasionally enter these stories for a brief moment. However, it is only the mothers, wives, sisters and daughters of well born heroes who are described in depth. Indeed, we may go further, saying that in neither form of epic literature do women appear alone.[33] Instead, important females are always found paired with one or more powerful male kinsmen, for whom they function both as a practical and as a symbolic counterpart.

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[28]Foreseeing their doom, she first asks them not to go.

[29]There is a specific part of the wedding ceremony where the newly wed couple are supposed to link little fingers. The brothers go to such lengths not to "touch" their wives that they have special gold finger extensions made. Thus they need not touch their wives even during this ritual.

[30]At first they resist marriage, saying it will reduce their virility.

[31]They finally die in a great fire set by their sister-in-law. The women have already agreed to die when their husbands do, so Tankāl is only executing a fate already accepted by all concerned.

[32]This spider, as a creator, is found elsewhere in Asian mythology and has been interpreted by some psychoanalysts as a mother symbol.

[33]For the classical Sanskrit evidence on this point see Ratnamayidevi Dikshit, *Women in Sanskrit Drama* (Delhi, The Sanskrit Book Depot, 1964), pp. 16, 65, 130.

The women of Indian epic tradition are also living embodiments of felicity. In return, men are bound to protect and to control them, almost as if these women constituted the more vulnerable half of their own corporate, social condition. The distinction made between various kinds of women is not so much one of independence or dependence on males as it is one between the maiden and the married female more generally. The former is especially associated with images of wealth and good luck, while a wife is seen to embody a whole spectrum of life-giving forces. Maidens, for example, are touched along with lucky objects, before proceeding to battle. Chaste wives, by contrast, can often revive their husbands from imminent death.[34] Such images persist in the contemporary epic literature and seem to reveal the continuity of modern metaphors with classical models.

There is one very significant way, however, in which the local epic we have studied seems to deviate from classical traditions. This is the strong stress the regional story lays on the role of sister. Unlike either the *Mahābhārata* or the *Rāmāyana,* Tankāl plays a vital role as sister of the heroes. in many ways Tankāl resembles Savitri, a chaste maiden described in the *Mahābhārata.* But Savitri, marries a forest hermit, and later revives him from death at the ninth hour. Tankāl remains unmarried. It is her brothers whom she revives from their death in a similar forest setting.

Conclusions

The above pages have discussed the role of women in an important contemporary epic, popular in one particular region of South India. Though folk poetry lacks the sophisticated vocabulary and metre of classical writings, we have found the two in essential agreement in their understanding of the female as a distinct "species".[35] In both types of literature the female is generally weaker than the male. But both agree that in certain circumstances she can exhibit powers quite out of proportion to her physical build. And if the female is commonly submissive, there are also circumstances where she may exhibit startling self-confidence. Furthermore, a woman's attitude towards death differs from that of the male. Women submit to death more easily. They also pass through death to new life more readily. As a result they enjoy a special kind of vision, an ability to predict the future which men lack. Women are thought to see through

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[34] See the *Mahābhārata,* VII, 82.21 and 7.9, and XIII, 11.14, as quoted in Shakambari Jayal, *The Status of Women in the Epics* (Delhi, Motilal Banarsidas, 1966), p. 18 in reference to maidens. See the *Mahābhārata,* III, 293.299 and Jayal, p. 111, in reference to a married woman.

[35] Indeed the folk expression "pen jati" does suggest that women are a caste or species apart. Certainly the differences between males and females in this epic overshadow the different between "human" and "animal" as distinct categories.

the superficial qualities of things in an uncanny way. Most important of all, perhaps, are the extensive associations women have with the elemental forces of life itself. They can curse, they can destroy people, and they can render a landscape barren in a way no man can. They also control the three basic elements: fire, water, and earth. Women are also creative. They are the source of new life, and of magical blessings. Indeed, this folk epic makes little distinction between human and divine women at any point. But if women are goddesses, so too are goddesses typical women. Both are, by their very constitution, female or all that is good and all that is terrifying wrapped up in one.

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Résumé

Un conte populaire indien contemporain et des écrits plus classiques tiennent pour l'essentiel le même discours sur la nature de la femme. Les deux genres littéraires montrent que, dans la vie quotidienne, les femmes sont plus faibles que les hommes, mais s'entendent aussi pour dire que, dans certains cas, les femmes font preuve de pouvoirs spéciaux qui ne sont pas en rapport avec leurs capacités physiques. En Inde comme dans d'autres cultures, on associe l'infériorité du statut aux pouvoirs visionnaires et à la faculté de manipuler l'essence cosmique des choses. Ces différences sont étudiées par l'analyse des rapports d'autorité, des récits concrets d'événements et à travers un choix de métaphores employées par le conteur.