

SELF-RESPECT AS RESISTANCE : A PERIYARIST ANALYSIS OF CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES

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Abstract:

This paper examines how the ideas of Periyar contribute to women's emancipation. Particular attention is given to the themes of self-respect, education and social autonomy in understanding the position of women within Tamil society. His emphasis on dignity and reason further strengthens this framework. These themes are reflected in the everyday experiences of contemporary women. The discussion further considers issues related to marriage, gender expectations and social constraints. Using a thematic approach, the paper identifies recurring patterns of resistance, negotiation and transformation in women's narratives. Selected excerpts from interviews are used as supporting evidence to illustrate these patterns. Ultimately, the findings suggest that self-respect and education remain important mechanisms of empowerment for women. At the same time, social inequalities continue to shape many aspects of women's lives. Therefore, the paper concludes that Periyar's thought remains relevant today for understanding and interpreting women's empowerment in contemporary society.

Keywords: Periyar, Self-Respect, Women's Emancipation, Social Constraints, Resistance.

Introduction

Is it possible for a nation that denies dignity to women to be considered civilised?

This question central to Periyar's radical thought remains relevant in contemporary discussions concerning gender and social justice. Periyar's criticism of religion, patriarchy and caste was not merely ideological but grounded in a rationalist commitment to human dignity. He argued that women are equal human beings capable of independent thought and action, a position that stood in opposition to many dominant social norms in Tamil society.

By rejecting religious orthodoxy and oppressive customary practices, Periyar advocated a vision of liberation based on self-respect, reason and social equality.

Self-respect occupies a central position within Periyar's thought. He argued that women who are denied dignity remain confined within structures of domination and inequality. In the absence of self-respect, women are often unable to challenge systems that subordinate them through the institutions of marriage and family.

Periyar's ideas regarding women's education, freedom in marital choice and rejection of imposed gender roles challenged deeply rooted patriarchal structures. In this sense, his ideas may be understood not only as social reform but also as a radical rethinking of human relationships based on

equality and reason. Considerable progress has occurred in education and economic development since Periyar's time. However, many of the conditions identified by him continue to persist in both visible and subtle forms.

Women continue to experience inequality in access to social and economic resources, restrictions on mobility and limited control over their own lives. Social institutions continue to regulate and shape women's experiences in ways that reinforce existing hierarchies. These continuing inequalities raise important questions about the extent to which transformative ideas have been realised in practice. They also highlight the need to explore how women themselves understand, negotiate and respond to these conditions in their everyday lives.

In this context, women's narratives provide valuable insight into lived experiences of gender. The voices presented in *Kolgai Veeranganaigal* (கொகை வீராங்கனைகள்) by V.C.Vilvam, illustrate how women interpret and negotiate concepts such as self-respect, education and autonomy within their specific social contexts. However, this study does not treat these narratives as isolated or purely individual accounts. Instead, they are examined as representations of broader social processes that reflect both continuity and change in Tamil society.

This study adopts a qualitative thematic approach to explore how

women describe their experiences in relation to structures of power and control. Periyar's thought serves as the theoretical framework for analysis. Selected interview excerpts are incorporated as supporting evidence to illustrate recurring patterns and themes. Through this approach, the study seeks to connect ideological perspectives with lived realities.

The paper argues that although structural constraints continue to shape women's lives, the assertion of self-respect and the pursuit of education remain significant forms of resistance. Periyar's thought therefore remains relevant beyond its historical context. It continues to provide an important framework through which contemporary struggles for equality and dignity may be understood.

Self-Respect and Women's Agency

Periyar's understanding of self-respect was rooted in the principles of dignity, equality and rationalism. Manoharan argues that Periyar's approach to women's liberation extended beyond legal reform and was closely connected to his idea of "radical freedom" (Manoharan 3). This concept emphasised women's independence and their ability to make decisions concerning their own lives. In this sense, Periyar regarded women's autonomy and dignity as essential components of social transformation.

Self-respect functions as an important

means through which women challenge social restrictions that confine them to subordinate positions. George observes that Periyarist feminist practices attempted to create social awareness regarding inequalities of caste, gender and class through collective social engagement (George 268). Similar perspectives emerge in the narratives documented in Kolgai Veeranganaigal, where women repeatedly associate self-respect with independent thought and social equality. Kalaimani emphasises the importance of rejecting oppressive customs and developing confidence in one's own identity (V.C. Vilvam 18). Her observation suggests that dignity forms the foundation for resisting unequal power relations within society.

Self-respect is also closely connected to women's ability to make independent decisions regarding both personal and public life. Periyar consistently argued that women should possess the freedom to determine the course of their own lives rather than remain subject to patriarchal authority. Manoharan notes that Periyar viewed institutions such as marriage and family as structures that frequently restricted women's liberty and reinforced systems of control (Manoharan 4). Similar concerns are reflected in the interviews analysed in this study. P. N. R. Aranganayagi explains that women must learn to direct their own lives instead of accepting imposed limitations without question (V.C.Vilvam 29). Her statement reflects the relationship between dignity and agency, particularly

in relation to women's capacity for self-determination.

At the same time, the assertion of self-respect often encounters resistance in familial and social environments. Expectations surrounding obedience, conformity and traditional gender roles continue to regulate women's behaviour in both visible and subtle ways. George argues that Periyarist feminism emerged in response to such inequalities by encouraging women to critically examine the structures shaping their experiences (George 270). The narratives presented in *Kolgai Veeranganaigal* similarly demonstrate that women who question patriarchal authority are frequently perceived as disruptive or disobedient. These tensions reveal the continuing presence of social norms intended to restrict women's autonomy and preserve existing hierarchies.

Despite such resistance, dignity continues to function as a significant force for social change. Periyar believed that transformation could emerge through the rejection of oppressive customs and the cultivation of rational thought. This perspective remains visible in the narratives documented by V.C. Vilvam. *Kurukkaththi Kamalam* reflects upon the difficulties women encounter within patriarchal society and emphasises the importance of confidence and self-worth in overcoming social barriers (V.C. Vilvam 78). Her experience illustrates that self-respect possesses both individual and collective

significance because the assertion of dignity can gradually reshape social attitudes and expectations.

Furthermore, Periyar understood self-respect in relation to broader questions of caste and social justice. George similarly observes that Periyarist feminist practices attempted to challenge multiple forms of inequality simultaneously rather than treating gender oppression in isolation (George 271). The experiences examined in this study reinforce these perspectives by demonstrating that women's agency is shaped both by personal experiences and by larger social structures.

Overall, the analysis demonstrates that self-respect remains a crucial element in the articulation of women's agency. Although structural inequalities continue to influence women's experiences, the assertion of dignity enables women to question, negotiate and resist oppressive social conditions. The recurring emphasis on confidence, autonomy and rational thought in the narratives documented in *Kolgai Veeranganaigal* further highlights the continuing relevance of Periyar's thought in contemporary Tamil society.

Education as Empowerment

Periyar believed that education was an important tool for liberating women from societal oppression. He viewed it as a means of providing women with rational thought and knowledge. He continuously criticised social institutions that denied women access to education

and intellectual freedom. For Periyar, education was not simply about literacy or professional advancement. It was also a means of empowering women to develop self-confidence, question oppressive social traditions and achieve equality within society. Chakravarti argues that both caste and patriarchy are sustained through systems that regulate a woman's access to knowledge and social mobility (Chakravarti 13). Therefore, in relation to Chakravarti's argument education may be understood as a way of achieving dignity, autonomy and equality.

The narratives documented in *Kolgai Veerangaigal* repeatedly associate education with confidence and self-awareness. For example, Baby Santha discusses the importance of acquiring knowledge as a means of developing independent thought and increasing social participation (V.C. Vilvam, 74). Her experience suggests that education enables women to think beyond patriarchal norms and actively participate in shaping their own lives. In many societies, women are expected to remain silent and dependent upon men in various aspects of life. Education therefore provides women with the opportunity to express opinions, challenge restrictions and critically evaluate social realities.

Education also contributes significantly to women's social and economic independence. Women who receive education are often

able to participate more actively in employment and public life, thereby reducing dependence upon patriarchal family structures. Kabeer defines empowerment as the process through which individuals acquire the ability to make meaningful choices and act autonomously within socially restrictive conditions (Kabeer 437). In this sense, education functions as a resource that enables women to make decisions regarding both personal and social aspects of life. The experiences analysed in this study reflect similar concerns. Malarkanni describes the difficulties women encounter while pursuing education in family environments that prioritise domestic responsibilities over intellectual development (V.C. Vilvam 127). Her account illustrates how educational aspirations frequently require negotiation against traditional gender expectations.

At the same time, the pursuit of education continues to be shaped by broader forms of social inequality related to caste, class and gender. Access to education remains unequal and many women continue to encounter structural barriers that restrict educational and professional advancement. The experiences documented in *Kolgai Veerangaigal* demonstrate that education is often achieved through persistence and resistance rather than through social support. Women who pursue higher education frequently encounter pressure to prioritise marriage and domestic responsibilities

over academic development. These competing expectations reveal the continuing influence of patriarchal attitudes that seek to regulate women's ambitions and social mobility.

The interviews further demonstrate a strong relationship between education and social awareness. While education expands intellectual knowledge, it also increases awareness of social inequality and discrimination. Kalaiselvi emphasises that education enabled her to recognise the importance of self-confidence and independent thinking in confronting oppressive social attitudes (V.C. Vilvam 116). Her experience illustrates how education functions as a process of social awareness through which women become conscious of their position in larger systems of power and control.

In addition to increasing individual awareness, education contributes to broader social transformations by influencing future generations and reshaping attitudes towards women. Educated women frequently encourage younger women to value independence, critical thought and equality. Periyar regarded rational inquiry as essential for challenging superstition, caste prejudices and patriarchal domination. Similarly, the experiences analysed in this study indicate that educated women often function as agents of change within families and communities by promoting awareness and questioning oppressive customary practices.

Although structural inequalities continue to affect women's lives, education remains one of the most significant instruments of empowerment available to women. The experiences documented in Kolgai Veeranganaigal demonstrate that women consistently associate education with dignity, confidence and autonomy. Ultimately, education enables women to resist oppressive traditions, articulate their experiences and imagine alternative social possibilities. The continuing emphasis on learning and rational thought throughout these narratives therefore reinforces the enduring relevance of Periyar's ideas in contemporary Tamil society.

Marriage and Patriarchal Control

Periyar's critique of patriarchy was deeply rooted in his belief regarding marriage and gender inequality. He viewed marriage as one of the principal means through which women's autonomy and individuality were restricted. Periyar believed that marriage should be based upon the principles of equality, respect and individual liberty. However, traditional forms of marriage frequently created dependency among women by regulating their behaviour, mobility and decision-making. In this context, the narratives presented in Kolgai Veeranganaigal provide important insights into how women continue to negotiate patriarchal expectations in family and social environments.

Patriarchal domination often operates

through expectations of obedience, silence and conformity. Women are frequently encouraged to prioritise family honour and domestic responsibilities over personal aspirations and individual choice. Rao argues that marriage in South India functions as a social institution that reinforces caste and gender hierarchies, particularly through the regulation of women's autonomy and social behaviour (Rao 412). Similar tensions emerge in the experiences analysed in this study. Rakkuthangam describes the pressure placed upon women to remain patient and accepting even under unfair domestic conditions (V.C. Vilvam 63). Her experience illustrates how patriarchal expectations become normalised in everyday family life and are frequently regarded as natural aspects of womanhood.

Marriage also becomes a social space in which women negotiate between personal identity and collective expectations surrounding femininity. Women who challenge established gender roles frequently encounter emotional and social resistance from family and community structures. Periyar strongly criticised social customs that denied women the freedom to make independent decisions regarding their own lives. The experiences described in Kolgai Veeranganaigal suggest that many women continue to experience restrictions upon independent thought and self-expression in domestic environments. Kulanthai Therasa reflects upon the emotional pressure she

experienced when attempting to question certain customs or express her opinions in the family structure (V.C. Vilvam 23). Her experience demonstrates that resistance in marriage often occurs through gradual negotiation rather than direct confrontation.

Patriarchal authority is further reinforced through broader systems of social hierarchy, including caste. Rege argues that gender oppression cannot be understood separately from caste because women's experiences are shaped by multiple structures of control operating simultaneously (Rege 6). This perspective is reflected in the narratives analysed in this study, where women repeatedly associate social respectability with conformity to traditional expectations. Women who challenge patriarchal authority are frequently perceived as disobedient or lacking moral character. As a result, women are often required to negotiate between personal autonomy and social acceptance.

Despite these restrictions, the narratives documented in Kolgai Veeranganaigal also reveal significant forms of resistance and self-assertion. The experiences described by these women do not portray them merely as passive recipients of patriarchal systems. Instead, they demonstrate how women actively develop strategies through which they preserve their dignity, resist oppressive conditions and maintain a sense of personal

identity. Several women emphasise the importance of confidence, patience and self-awareness in confronting unequal social relationships. These experiences suggest that resistance does not always emerge through direct rebellion. It may also appear through everyday acts of persistence and self-assertion in restrictive social environments.

Finally, the institution of marriage continues to reflect broader inequalities related to gender and social power within contemporary society. Educational opportunities and employment options available to women have expanded over time. However, patriarchal attitudes continue to shape expectations regarding domestic roles and feminine behaviour. Women are frequently expected to balance personal aspirations with responsibilities imposed by family and community structures. Consequently, the narratives documented by V.C. Vilvam reveal the continuing tension between women's desire for autonomy and the persistent influence of traditional social expectations.

Ultimately, the analysis indicates that marriage remains an important form of patriarchal regulation in contemporary Tamil society. Although many women increasingly assert dignity and independence, social structures continue to restrict women's autonomy and freedom. Periyar's critique of marriage and gender inequality therefore remains highly relevant for

understanding contemporary women's experiences and struggles for equality.

Economic Independence and Labour

Periyar regarded economic independence as central to his notion of women's liberation because he believed that financial dependency often supports patriarchal domination. For Periyar, economic independence was an essential requirement for achieving genuine freedom for women. Otherwise, they would remain dependent upon male authority. In many traditional social structures, women's labour has remained devalued or confined to domestic environments where it remains invisible and unrecognised. Economic independence may therefore be understood as closely connected to dignity, independence and equal participation in society. In this context, the experiences presented in *Kolgai Veeranganaigal* provide valuable insight into how women understand and negotiate labour, survival and financial self-sufficiency in contemporary Tamil society.

Women's labour frequently involves economic responsibility in addition to family and social obligations. Even when women participate in paid employment outside the household, they continue to be associated with caregiving and domestic management.

Consequently, women are often required to negotiate multiple forms of responsibility at the same time. Jayamani reflects upon the difficulties

women encounter while attempting to maintain financial stability alongside family responsibilities (V.C. Vilvam 69). Her experience illustrates how women's labour extends beyond formal employment and includes emotional and domestic responsibilities that frequently remain unrecognised.

Financial independence also contributes significantly to women's confidence and social participation. Women who possess financial security are often able to gain greater control over personal decisions and are less likely to conform to restrictive social expectations. Periyar believed that financial self-sufficiency could weaken the structures of dependency that limited women's freedom within marriage and family life. Similar concerns emerge in the experiences analysed in this study. P. Rejina emphasises the importance of employment in developing self-confidence and an independent identity in society (V.C. Vilvam 83). Her perspective suggests that financial independence functions not merely as economic support but also as a source of self-respect and social recognition.

At the same time, women's access to economic independence continues to be influenced by gender inequality, caste hierarchy and social expectation. Employment opportunities are not equally accessible to all women, and many continue to experience economic insecurity, social restrictions and discrimination. Working women are

frequently expected to fulfil professional responsibilities without abandoning traditionally assigned domestic roles. Such expectations reinforce the belief that women's primary responsibility remains located within the household regardless of their economic contribution to family survival. These contradictions therefore demonstrate the continuing influence of patriarchal attitudes in shaping perceptions of women's labour and mobility.

The experiences presented in Kolgai Veeranganaigal further demonstrate that economic independence frequently requires persistence and resilience. Many women describe labour not merely as a means of survival but also as an important source of dignity and independence. Indiragandhi reflects upon the importance of determination and self-reliance in overcoming economic hardship through work (V.C. Vilvam 90). Her experience illustrates how labour becomes closely connected to identity and self-worth, particularly for women attempting to negotiate restrictive social conditions.

Economic independence also contributes to broader social transformation. Women who achieve financial autonomy are often able to support education, influence family decision-making and encourage future generations to pursue independence. Economic activity therefore possesses both individual and collective social significance. Periyar's emphasis on

equality and rational social organisation remains relevant because economic empowerment continues to challenge patriarchal dependency and unequal power structures.

Although social inequalities continue to persist, women's employment remains an important means through which independence and freedom are expressed. The experiences analysed in this study demonstrate that women consistently associate economic independence with confidence, dignity and social participation. Through employment and financial self-sufficiency, women acquire greater capacity to negotiate oppressive conditions and make independent decisions regarding their own lives. The experiences presented in Kolgai Veeranganaigal therefore reinforce the continuing relevance of Periyar's ideas concerning equality, dignity and women's liberation in contemporary Tamil society.

Rationalism and Social Reform

The rationalist approach formed the foundation of Periyar's social and political thought. Social inequality cannot be dismantled unless people question religious orthodoxy, superstition and oppressive customs. Periyar argued that irrational beliefs were often used as mechanisms to preserve social hierarchies such as caste, patriarchy and discriminatory social practices. Rationalism therefore became an approach through which

Periyar promoted equality, dignity and individual liberty. In this sense, rational thought represented an important step towards broader social reform and women's liberation.

Periyar consistently encouraged individuals to question social norms that restricted human equality and limited independent thought. He rejected the idea that customs should be followed merely because they possessed religious sanction or social acceptance. Instead, he argued that social practices should be evaluated through reason and human welfare. These concerns remain relevant in contemporary Tamil society, where many women continue to encounter restrictive social norms justified through tradition and morality. The experiences presented in Kolgai Veeranganaigal reflect similar concerns by connecting rational thought with awareness, dignity and social change.

Valliyammai emphasises the importance of questioning practices that restrict women's freedom and limit their participation in society (V.C. Vilvam 91). Her observations suggest that rational thinking enables women to challenge customs that legitimise inequality and silence. In many social contexts, women are expected to obey patriarchal authority without criticism. Rational inquiry therefore becomes an important means through which women develop the confidence to analyse and resist oppressive social expectations.

Rationalism also contributes to

broader social reform by encouraging the rejection of discrimination based upon caste, gender and religious hierarchy. Equality cannot exist so long as society continues to maintain divisions based upon inherited status and social privilege. The experiences analysed in this study similarly demonstrate that women frequently associate awareness with the desire for collective social transformation. The emphasis placed upon dignity and equality in these narratives further reflects the continuing influence of Periyarist thought in contemporary discussions concerning women's rights and social justice.

At the same time, the continued presence of conservative attitudes and restrictive social expectations indicates that the struggle for rational social reform remains incomplete. Women who question traditional customs are frequently criticised for challenging cultural values or social norms. Such reactions demonstrate the continuing influence of patriarchal and hierarchical structures in society. The experiences presented in *Kolgai Veerangaigal* indicate that women often encounter resistance when attempting to express independent opinions or reject oppressive practices. These tensions reflect the continuing conflict between rationalist ideals and deeply rooted social traditions.

M. Kavitha emphasises the importance of awareness and critical thinking in confronting inequality and encouraging

social change (V.C. Vilvam 98). Her reflections illustrate the relationship between rational consciousness and social responsibility. Rationalism therefore functions not only as personal awareness but also as a collective effort to challenge injustice and transform unequal social structures. Critical thought and intellectual independence enable women to question systems that restrict freedom and reinforce discriminatory attitudes.

Furthermore, rationalism contributes to women's empowerment by encouraging confidence and independent thought. Periyar believed that liberation required individuals to reject fear, blind conformity and unquestioned authority. Similarly, the experiences analysed in this study demonstrate that women increasingly recognise awareness and rational thinking as important means of expressing dignity and freedom. Rationalism therefore becomes closely connected to the broader struggle for equality because it encourages women to view themselves as active participants in society rather than passive subjects of oppression.

Overall, the analysis indicates that rationalism continues to remain an important philosophical framework for understanding social reform and women's empowerment in contemporary Tamil society. Although oppressive customs and patriarchal attitudes continue to persist, women continue to challenge unequal social

structures through rational thought and social awareness. They also imagine alternative possibilities for freedom and dignity. The experiences presented in Kolgai Veeranganaigal therefore reinforce the continuing relevance of Periyar's rationalist philosophy in contemporary struggles for equality and social transformation.

Conclusion

The present study examined women's experiences through the framework of Periyar's thought by analysing selected interviews from Kolgai Veeranganaigal. The analysis focused upon themes such as self-respect, education, marriage, economic independence and rationalism in order to understand how women negotiate patriarchal structures and social inequality in contemporary Tamil society. Rather than treating the interviews as isolated personal narratives, the study interpreted them as reflections of broader social conditions that continue to shape women's lives.

The findings demonstrate that self-respect remains central to women's dignity and agency. Women repeatedly associated confidence, independence and rational thought with the ability to resist oppressive social expectations. The assertion of self-respect enables women to question patriarchal authority and negotiate unequal power relations in family and community structures. In this sense, Periyar's emphasis on dignity and rational equality remains highly

relevant in discussions concerning women's liberation.

The study also identified education as a transformative force in women's lives. The interviews consistently associated education with awareness, social participation and intellectual independence. At the same time, access to education continues to be influenced by inequalities related to caste, gender and socio-economic conditions. Marriage emerged as another major theme because many women expressed the desire for greater autonomy while continuing to experience patriarchal expectations surrounding obedience and domestic responsibility.

The study further demonstrates that economic independence functions as an important source of women's empowerment and self-respect. Many women associated employment and financial independence with confidence, dignity and social participation. However, social inequalities and social expectations continue to limit women's equal access to opportunities and recognition.

Overall, the study demonstrates that Periyar's ideas continue to provide an important framework for understanding contemporary women's experiences in Tamil society. Although social transformation has created new opportunities for women, patriarchal structures and social inequalities continue to influence many dimensions of social life. The interviews analysed in

this study indicate that women continue to negotiate these conditions through self-respect, education, rational awareness and economic independence.

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Author Introduction

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