The woman constitutes the 'centre' of life at home and hence forms the backbone of any human society. Nevertheless, she often proves to be a paradox extolled as an epitome of all virtues, on the one hand, and as a potential element of instability and destruction on the other, which, ultimately, gets exemplified in the downfall of the man in her life which may implicate, at times, even the fate of kingdoms in history. Nevertheless, by and large, human society has succeeded in perpetuating and institutionalizing the supremacy of the male of the species in all walks of life, social, political, economic and religious.

However, it is imperative that in order to gain a proper perspective of the woman in society, the roles she plays in the social, familial and cultural spheres need to be considered at some length. A feminist perspective, therefore, is deliberately being employed in this chapter as a tool for analysis in order to assess the roles envisaged for woman in Proverbs and Tirukkural, mainly with a view to relating the entire discussion of the works in question, to societal values of their respective periods.
Feminism as a movement for the recognition of women's rights, has radical, political and sociological implications. Concept-wise, 'feminism' is both a doctrine and a practice based on the belief in the fundamental rights of women. To Sarah Delamont, the distinguishing characteristic of all feminists is simply "a desire that women be recognised as individuals in their own rights" (The Sociology of Women: An Introduction 41). Simone de Beauvoir, the French feminist, goes to the extent of arguing how 'womanhood' is often the result of some kind of psychic conditioning. "One is not born but rather one becomes a woman." (295). Interestingly, such a statement also implies that the so-called 'feminine' and 'masculine' are mere social constructs, when viewed in respect of behaviour and social norms.

The patriarchal tradition presupposes that women believe in the tradition and style of behaviour, already assigned to them, as 'natural', ordained in the integrated, universal scheme of things, and those who refuse to conform to them, tend to emerge as rather 'unfeminine' or 'un-womanlike' in the literal sense of the term. Thus, it is patriarchy that has been eminently responsible for women's secondary position in society.
Oxford English Dictionary defines feminism from a political angle: "the advocacy of women's rights on the ground of the equality of sexes" (Joyce M Hawkins ed 518). Grolier's Encyclopaedia of Knowledge also underlines women's quest for equality with men only in terms of economic and socio-political spheres:

Feminism is the advocacy of women's rights to full citizenship - that is political, economic and social equality with men (235).

According to Sharon Spencer, 'feminism' implicitly suggests that

traditional definition of women are inadequate and that women suffer injustice because of their sex (American Writing Today Vol.12 157).

Perhaps, in an ideal situation, men and women are mutually dependent, as the statement of Bruham Carrie bears out:

Fathers should be patriarchal sovereigns and mothers, the queens of their households and the dependence is mutual (93).

Nevertheless, in the world of reality, men tend to assert their exclusive right to inviolable sovereignty over women in most societies today.
That the ancient world held women in general in contempt has been a well-established fact. According to J.R.W. Stott,

Plato, who went to the extent of believing that the soul is both imprisoned in the body and released only to be incarnated, went on to suggest that a bad man's fate would be reincarnation as a woman (Issues Facing Christians Today 235).

Interestingly, Plato's disciple Aristotle looked upon the female as "a kind of mutilated male" (The Generation of Animals 175).

William Barclay, the well-known theologian, makes a specific reference to an instance of the low status assigned to women in the Talmud:

In the Jewish form of morning prayer, a Jewish man, every morning gave thanks that God had not made him a Gentile, a slave, or a woman (235).

Moreover, the Jewish law held that woman was not a person but a chattel or thing meant for ownership in the hands of man. She was her husband's absolute possession and the latter could deal with her just in any manner he willed.
Commenting on the plight of women, in general, Graves, a contemporary sociologist makes the following, caustic comment:

She is yet too often found either the petted capricious plaything or a toiling care-worn slave and thus she lives and dies fulfilling her responsibilities as the helpmate of her brotherman - a being intended to be a co-worker in promoting the spiritual and intellectual advancement of the race (American Female Society, XVI).

Often, such a biased treatment of woman stems from the tacit patriarchal belief in the supposed inferiority on the part of the former:

The Euro-American feminist theories treat patriarchy as an isolable system responsible for the sub-ordination of women (Women Writing in India 600 B.C to the Present, Vol. I. 41).

On the other hand, Shulemith Furstone, a sociologist, highlights another fact that tends to subjugate women in the hands of men, namely, the biological predicament of women's child-bearing is the reason for her economic subjugation (The Dialectic of Sex, 30).
Viewing from a purely sociological perspective, Magnus Horschfield sees Feminism as:

an expression of resentment at the unjust treatment meted out to women. It voices the new woman’s objection to be treated as a doormat or a piece of furniture meant for the convenience of man, and rebels against the hostile environment in which a woman is forced to live. *(Woman, East and West 135)*.

Frederick Engel posits women’s inferior social position vis-a-vis that of men, attributing a basically materialistic motive to the entire issue. Still more recently, feminists like Matilda Joslyn Gage, have managed to carry the battle further into the theological territory and assert that it is wrong to use only the masculine form for ‘God’.

On the other hand, it is interesting to note that, to Lanci, an anthropologist,

The Hebrew word ‘El Shaddai, the Almighty’ when translated even today suggests something distinctively feminine (45).

Feminists accord a great emphasis to the true meaning of the compound word ‘freeman’, which implies a free human being, regardless of gender -- ‘a free man’
or 'a free woman'. They often project the system of marriage as one of the factors leading to the female subjection at the hands of the male. According to Joyce Gillo, there are three types of feminists -- the Reformist, the Radical and the Socialist. While the Reformist feminists seek equality through freedom, radical feminists perceive society as rooted in inequality based on patriarchy and the only solution to the problem, according to them, is transforming the existing social condition through a process of creating awareness. Socialist feminists, rooted more firmly in Marxist theory, wish to develop a strategy in order to jointly attack male domination and sociological injustice, thereby restructuring the very basis of the currently obtained male-female relationship. 'The radical feminists', according to Vicky Randall, see that both the family and state are seen to embody systematic male power and domination. Alliances with men are not possible .... Women must form separatist groups, shun relations with men and seek an end to male domination .... Their major points of attack are marriage, family control, reproduction and violence against women. (44).

Ultimately, what women care for most, is an understanding presence which men hitherto are extremely
hesitant to accord to them. Woman, thus, often remains 'invisible' because of man's own blindness, and inability to see her as she really is. Further, the central issues of feminism arrange themselves around a view that literature is essentially sexist in the portrayal of woman, and often, the text reveals injustices of a male society in which women are implicitly assigned to an 'inferior' status.

It is quite obvious that several of the views of both the Jewish Wisdom writer and Tiruvalluvar fall much short of the expectations of modern feminists, as they have been much circumscribed by the socio-cultural conditions obtained in the ages in which these two works were conceived.

The family pattern of the Israelites was predominantly patriarchal and centred entirely around the tribe or clan to which an individual belonged. In their turn, the tribes traced their relationship back to their own respective ancient forefathers, strictly along patriarchal lines. Within the tribes, the individuals chose to identify themselves only by their father's houses as exemplified by the following catalogue of familial inheritance:

Abraham begot Isaac, Isaac begot Jacob, and Jacob begot Judah and his brothers. Judah
began Perez and Zerah by Tamar, Perez begot Hezron and Hezron begot Ram, Ram begot Amminadab. Amminadab begot Nahshan and Nashhon begot Salmon. Salmon begot Boaz by Rahab, Boaz begot Obed by Ruth, Obed begot Jesse and Jesse begot David the king. David the king begot Solomon by her who had been the wife of Uriah. (Matthew 1:2-7).

Incidentally, it may be noted that only the names of significant women like Tamar, Ruth and Bathsheba who had been Uriah's wife are recalled here.

The authority vested on the title "father", among the Jews, was enormous. The husband in any household was considered virtually the ruler, enjoying complete dominion over his wife and children. Indeed "to marry a wife is expressed by the verb ba'äl, the root meaning of which is 'to become a master'" (Roland de Vaux 26).

Interestingly enough, the Israelites also practised "a form of marriage by purchase" (26). For instance, "mohar" was a sum of money which the fiancé was bound to pay to the girl's father (Genesis 34:2 and Exodus 22:16), commensurate with the social standing of the family (I Samuel 18:23). The new bride was supposed to leave her parents, in order to live with her
husband and join his clan, to which her children would absolutely belong. For instance, Abraham would not allow Isaac to go to Mesopotamia, if the bride chosen for him would not come to Canaan (Genesis 24:5-8). As a critic points out,

"It was the custom to take a wife from among one's own kith and kin. The custom was a relic of tribal life (Ancient Israel 30)."

Further, the wife addressed her husband as 'Lord' (Genesis 18:12), even as a slave or subject would, his master or king. The woman also did not enjoy any right of inheritance to ancestral property, as Roland de Vaux rightly observes:

"The wife does not inherit from her husband nor daughters from their fathers except when there is no male heir. (39)."

However, despite all such obvious social disadvantages, the wife of an Israelite was by no means treated totally on par with a slave. For instance, a man enjoyed the right to sell his slaves or even daughters (Exodus 21:17), but could never sell his wife even when he happened to acquire her as a mere captive in war (Deuteronomy 21:14). Within the confines of a family too, the status of a wife was considerably
enhanced on the birth of her first child especially if it happened to be a male.

All the manual labour within the domestic limits rested on the shoulders of the wife. Normally, the woman managed the household so well as to continually increase its total wealth. Elizabeth Roberts highlights the role the woman played in running the routine in an ancient household:

Fundamentally whatever else a woman might do in her life, the ultimate responsibility for the daily care of the home and the family lay with her and not with the male members of the household. (A Woman's Place 23).

As found in Proverbs, it was the woman again who tended the flock and crops in the fields, cooked the food and spun the yarn (P31: 13-16). However, it should be stressed here that all such apparent drudgery, far from lowering the standing of the woman among her peers, considerably enhanced her domestic status. In fact, as pointed out in Proverbs 31:29, this industrious woman is greatly admired, praised and loved by both her husband and children. The Old Testament simply ordains the man to earn by "the sweat of his brow" (Genesis 3:19), and the woman to keep hearth and "beget children" (Genesis 3:16). It enabled the man to take charge of all the
work in the field outside, while confining the woman to her limited, well-defined place at home, and this may be viewed either as a means of relegating her to a position of subservience or as a pragmatic approach towards division of labour.

With regard to the social background of women in ancient Tamil Nadu, here too the woman had been looked upon either as a boon or a bane. On the one hand, the woman was the sacred deity, adored and worshipped and on the other hand, she was a profane object of lust and a potential instrument for evil from whom the men would do well to seek escape some time or other, as implied in the ancient concepts of (i.e.) grahasta (household phase) and Vanaprasta (Ascetic phase). All the same, the society was quick to honour and celebrate the woman’s potential for motherhood, so long as she chose to remain assiduously subservient to its dictates. As Carle C. Zimmerman remarks,

The ancient Indian documents such as the Mahabharata, the Ramayana and the Vedas give women a very high and protected place in their basic moral codes. Husband and wife stand as equals before God (Family and Civilization in the East and the West 86).
In a Vedic hymn, a husband addresses his wife in the following manner:

A friend, thou shalt be, a friend thou hast become,

May our friendship be everlasting

(K.R.Bhashyam 9).

The institution of monogamy in the society of Rig Veda constitutes in itself an eloquent recognition of the high social status of women. Sarojini Naidu rightly traces the roots of the progress of Indian women to the recognition they enjoyed during the Vedic times:

In those beautiful days of Vedic period of India, the glory of which still surrounds the country like a faint halo, women took part freely in the social and political life of the country .... It is with such a heritage as the foundation that the present women's movement in India has evolved. (Women in Modern India 4).

Nevertheless, such a glorious Vedic period was followed by a phase of technological transformation. Anthropologists assert that historically, it is the growth of surplus wealth and private property, and the consequent anxiety to protect one's inheritance and lives in the patriarchal family system, that eventually paved the way for increased restrictions imposed on
women, ultimately resulting in numerous wars. Consequently, women came to be treated not only as a protected lot, but as jealously guarded possessions in the hands of their respective male partners, thereby assuming, in symbolic terms, the status of an item of valuable property.

Further, it was Manu, the first codifier of the Hindu law, who made an explicit provision around 200 B.C., for the legal dependence of woman on man. During the medieval period, with the exception of a few eminent women making their mark in different walks of life, most women resigned themselves to a low-profile life:

There was a steady deterioration in their position and status in society. Denial of education to the girls brought out far-reaching effects on the status of women and, consequently, on the role of women in society. (Changing Status and Adjustment of Women 40).

Over the centuries, the woman was increasingly made to suppose that she would attain her supreme salvation in a home, purely in terms of the quality of her relationship with her husband and children. Social and intellectual strivings were not at all expected of her. She was considered as potentially vulnerable and
hence, meant to be guarded against danger. This was indeed another subtle pretext to keep women personally dependent on their men.

It is interesting to note that woman enjoyed a temporary phase of ascendancy during the Buddha’s time, i.e. around the 6th century B.C. According to Indira Kulshreshta,

When India witnessed the advent of Buddhism, there was a welcome change in the position of women in society, for it allowed women to be educated, to travel as missionaries and even to remain unmarried (5).

However, with the advent of the alien Moghul rule in India, the status of Indian women nose-dived and reached the very nadir. As K.M.Panicker remarks,

The rigorous seclusion of women became the rule as a result of both of the imitation of the system of purdah which the Muslims enforced, and a sense of fear arising from the lack of general security (Women of India 9).

The demands made on the wife in contemporary Indian society, are numerous. She functions as a mother, nurse, cook, teacher for the children and an efficient accountant for the household, and also
undertakes all other onerous tasks that demand total commitment and self-effacing love on her part. Nevertheless, she is still, by and large, visualized only as a necessary beast of burden that suffers silently, bearing nothing but implicit obedience to her earthly master.

As Mary Jacobus observes,

The fate of woman is different in different countries but in all they are more or less treated as slaves. (Women Writing and Writing about Women 113).

It is even said that in modern life, education and jobs have tended to masculinize women, leading ultimately to the loss of their former, feminine charm. In the words of chauvinistic analysts like Farnham,

Careers and higher education were leading to the masculinization of women and enormously dangerous consequences to the home. (Feminine Mystique 37).

Apart from sheer economic compulsions in the modern age, the archetypal image of woman, in what Jung calls "collective unconscious", continues to modulate and qualify the actual outlook of the society at large on woman. To Enrich Frimm,
Woman appears as the eternal-dualities --
Mother and Bitch, Lover, Temptress and Witch
.... She was the goddess of Life as well as
Death. (The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness
157).

According to Rose Mary Agonito, in St. Augustine's
account again,

Woman emerges in the threefold role of
Temptress, Wife and Mother, all of which
emphasize her instrumental status in human
society (History of Ideas on Woman: A Source
Book 74).

The projections of woman as the avenging spirit,
devouring mother, temptress, devout wife and sacrificial
goat are all embodied in the literature of the Greeks
through different symbolic figures - Eumenides
(Aeschylus), Jocusta (Euripides), Siren (Homer),
Penelope (Homer) and Iphigenia (Aeschylus).

In sharp contrast, the role of woman as wife in
Indian society was highly eulogized and immortalized in
the epics and puranas of Indians. R.K.Narayan pointedly
observes how,

India owed its spiritual eminence to the fact
that the people here realized that a woman's
primary duty and divine privilege was being a wife, for the dominant quality of the epic heroines is a blind, stubborn following of their husbands, like the shadow following the substance (The Dark Room 141).

The complimentary roles that the husband and wife play are very vital for the ultimate harmony and peace in any family, especially where it concerns the healthy development of children. Interestingly, W.O.E. Oesterley, a critic of repute, underlines the patriarchal scheme of values embedded in Proverbs in the following manner:

Woman is thought of and spoken of almost wholly from the point of view of man. Marriage is for man’s benefit, not the woman’s. She is useful to him to look after the household, minister to his comfort, bear children, all for the man. She can be divorced but she cannot divorce her husband; he can have a couple of wives or more and concubines if he can afford to keep them all; she may only have one husband (IXXX).

Verses in Proverbs such as the following take on an implicitly chauvinistic tone about them, as the point
of their perception happens to be a pronouncedly masculine one: "whoso findeth a wife, findeth a good thing and obtaineth a favour of the Lord" (Pr8:12).

In the words of C.H. Toy, such a man

.... findeth not only a good thing but a good fortune which he must regard as a special favour from God who bestows all good fortune (ICC 365).

Further, C. Bridges sees "The prudent wife" (Pr9:14) as honoured as a special blessing to be obtained by our prayers at the hand of the giver (278), as 'prudence' implies not only her wise governing of her household but "that godly consideration connected with divine wisdom by which she becomes the joy and confidence of her husband" (278).

Again in an interesting Jewish collection of acrostic poems, under an Alphabetic Code or Golden ABC of the perfect wife in Proverbs chapter 31, the ideal wife is described as

industrious, sagacious, capable of doing business, manager of the house, a kind-hearted mistress, the trusted friend of husband and children, honoured in her own person of what
she does, a picture not romantic but also not Philistine (C.H.Toy 542).

An incisive look at the above instance may suggest traits or virtues associated with a modern, twentieth century liberated woman as well, although Derek Kidner is of the view that

The traditional beauty of Jewish home life is both explained and illustrated in (P31: 10-31) for we may well believe that the picture presented reflects what was a reality in many a Jewish home (Tyndale's Old Testament Commentaries: Proverbs 190).

From the verses in Proverbs we may safely infer that the woman in Jewish society provided maintenance of her household from all quarters (P31:14); ensured the preparation of cloths and garments in wool and flax (P31:13), and was adept in the culture of vine (P24:30). As Prof C.H.Toy points out, the woman was skilful in dying garments with purple colour matter obtained from Mediterranean shell fish, an important Phoenician industry of women, as such garments worn by the housewife indicated their wealth or high rank (543).

For his part, the husband took no part in the domestic administration, being totally occupied with
public affairs as suggested in Proverbs 31:23. "Her husband is known in the gates When he sits among the elders of the land" (P31:23).

Significantly, a husband derived civil benefit from his wife's reputation and it was assumed that the head of the so well-ordered household, as vividly portrayed in Proverbs 31:23, must be a worthy man. However, an average man was concerned with getting the right kind of wife, and was not content with getting just any woman.

Further, chastity is one of the most prized virtues in the eyes of the author of Proverbs. For the uninterrupted continuance of family life, the virtuous woman should "retain her honour as strong men retain riches " (P11:16). Dake interprets the term 'Chayil' or 'Virtuous' as 'strength of mind' (649). Such a woman of moral strength is cherished as "a crown to her husband " (P12:4). In contrast, the weakling contracts and communicates diseases which bring rottenness to the bones. A fair woman who lacks modesty is compared to "a golden ring in a swine's snout." (P11:12).

In Asiatic countries, a nose jewel is very common (Genesis 24:47). A jewel on the swine's snout is as unbecoming as a beautiful woman that is destitute of
good breeding and modest courage, who has lost all moral sense and purity (Dake 648).

King Solomon enjoins man to practise monogamy, although polygamy was quite prevalent at his time. He exhorts the youth "to rejoice with his own wife" (P5:8). In the words of Bridges,

Cherish her with gentleness and purity as the loving hind and pleasant roe which were objects of special delight and endearment, a picture of the lively delight which the wife naturally engages (An Exposition of Proverbs 65).

Also, significantly,

the relationship of Yahweh and Israel was often compared to that of a man and wife (The New Bible Dictionary 1259).

In the light of the above discussion, we may safely affirm that the Jewish sages attached great value to marriage as an exalted, social institution. There is practically "no mention of divorce either for the incompatibility of temper or for adultery" (W.O.E.Oesterley in Proverbs. IXXX).

Beyond any shade of doubt, the woman in every household in Israel was expected to play a pivotal role as indicated by the following verses:
Every wise woman buildeth her house. (P14:1),

and The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her (P.31:12).

As for the possibility of a power struggle in any family, Bridges goes on to say:

If it implies subjection, it involves no degradation. Indeed, no greater glory could be desired than that which is given to it that it should illustrate the great mystery — Christ and the Church (528).

In Tirukkural also, 'illal' (housewife) or the mistress of the household' is endowed with the domestic virtues of frugality, thrift and industry. In the words of Rev. Ellis, the term illal signifies "she to whose safeguard, domestic happiness is entrusted" (196).

According to H.A.Popley, "Tiruvalluvar regards family life as noble as the life of the ascetic" (The Sacred Kural 17), and hence the choice of the wife assumes a crucial significance in any man's life. Commenting on this thematic trait, Dr. Xavier S. Thaninayagam says,

The very purpose of married life is to provide the companionship and joint partnership which promotes altruistic love and entertainment. (Tiruvalluvar 87).
In the view of the Tamil sage, it is the responsibility of the woman to serve her husband as "his helpmate" (T.51), "possessing household excellence" (T.52). In Sangam tradition, as V.Sp.Manickam puts it, the society depended upon the consciousness of women, of their responsibility for its stability and existence. (The Tamil Concept of Love 37).

Like the Jewish writer, Tiruvalluvar also accords a tremendous value to chastity: "Nothing is more excellent than a wife if she possesses the stability of chastity" (T53). To Tiruvalluvar, as to the other classical writers,

Karpu (chastity) is power invincible, power dynamic. It sets the environment, the world going right in its path and if, by chance, the environment or the world goes wrong, it annihilates the world. (K.Appadurai 66).

Even as in the Jewish sociological structure, the woman in Tirukkural is assigned the position of a caretaker of her husband and household name, through the preservation of her chastity. Significantly, to Tiruvalluvar, chastity is not merely a virtue pertaining to the physique but is an entity concerning
the mind: "Of what avails is watch and ward, Honour is a woman's safest guard" (T 59).

Chastity for a woman also means implicit obedience to her husband. Such an obedient wife earns for herself the name of pativratā and only she possesses "the rocky strength of a moral purpose" (Balasubramanian, 22).

In fact, Tamil epics and puranas abound in examples of wifely devotion. In Silappatikāram, dated 5th century A.D., Kannagi is extolled as the very embodiment of the ideal of chastity. To Ilankovatikal, the sage-author of Silappatikāram,

Chastity is an absolute virtue for women, and Kannagi is the only Goddess on earth possessing the mighty virtue.

(Silappatikāram. "Adaikalakathai", Lines 142-144).

The Kannagi cult is celebrated even today through elaborate rites and rituals in certain parts of Tamil Nadu. Sita, the central protagonist of Kambar’s epic Ramāyanā, according to Uma Chakravarthi, is

the archetype of Indian womanhood with her self-effacing qualities — loyalty, obedience and chastity .... the quintessence of wifely devotion (70).
Several such women characters figuring in Indian epics and puranas are considered as prototypes of loyalty and chastity. As A.W.Oak points out,

Sita, Ahalya, Draupadi, Gandhari, Mandodari, Damayanti .... were held as lofty examples of womanhood for their loyalty to their husbands, their steadfastness and chastity. (26).

Nevertheless, it may be pertinent to bear in mind that in defining the virtues of his ideal woman, Tiruvalluvar merely affirms the popular view of the ancient Tamil epics and cultural legends:

No God adoring, low she bends before her Lord,
Then rising serves, the rain falls instant at her words. (T 55).

Despite all the nobility and charm assigned to the woman of virtue in the above verse, there is also an implicit assertion of the superiority of the male over the female in the sociological scale.

K.M.Balasubramanian, a contemporary critic, offers the ingenious comment that ‘God’ in the above verse does not refer to the supreme God but only to ‘kāman’, a relatively petty deity, the prototype of Cupid in the Tamil pantheon (Tirukkural of Tiruvalluvar 295). However, Balasubramanian’s comment is not tenable here,
as such an interpretation of the verse will grossly reduce the importance that Tiruvalluvar attaches to chastity, and warp and limit the richness and scope of the meaning, conventionally assigned to the verse.

Further, in the chapter entitled "Felicity to Domestic life", only a subordinate position is assigned to the woman, but the householder is pictured as entitled to all reverence, regardless of his own status.

If wife be wholly true to him who gained her as his bride,

Great glory gains she in the world where gods bliss abide (T59).

In another verse, Tiruvalluvar goes to the extent of asserting that only a subservient woman deserves to be "blessed with great glory in the world where Gods in bliss abide" (T 58). It is also significant that though Tiruvalluvar does not particularly stress chastity for man as he does for woman, in one remarkable instance, he asserts that greatness will accrue to a man, only if he guards himself like a single-hearted woman. (T 974)

Manly excellence, that looks not on another's wife,

Is not virtue merely, 'tis full propriety (T 148).
Further, any man who covets another's wife is described as 'a great fool' and is 'numbered with the dead while he lives' (T 143). Such a man "will acquire guilt that will abide with him imperishably for ever" (T 145), and from him will depart nevermore "hatred, sin, fear, foul disgrace, these four" (T 146). Thus, both the works do enjoin chastity for man, and condemn adultery with one voice.

The role of the woman defined in Proverbs will not be complete without a reference to the consequences that befall a non-compliant individual. Further, the pronouncement of such warnings is made primarily from an extremely andro-centric point of view, as exemplified by the following verse: "The contentions of a wife are a continual dropping" (P19:13).

The Israelite sage does not dwell much on the contentious man though he says "It is an honour for man to keep aloof from strife" (P20:3). He dwells at length on the undesirability of the brawling female who is compared to a perpetual cloudburst that is overwhelming, and the whirlwind that cannot be contained at any cost. It is thought wiser for a man "to retire to the attic" than to be "worried by a quarrelsome wife" (P21:9). In the words of Dake, such a woman is described as follows:
She cannot sit, stand, work or sleep without her continual and perpetual nagging (655).

The image of the disagreeable woman looms large in the world of Proverbs, which readily subscribes to the lower status assigned to the woman in the family. In contrast, it must be pointed out that Tiruvalluvar does not dwell at length on the unpleasant aspects of the nagging or hysterical woman, though he underscores domestic harmony as being free from such:

Domestic life with those who don’t agree
Is dwelling in a shed with snake for company
(T 890).

While Proverbs stresses the role of woman in "building up one’s house" (P12:1), Tiruvalluvar interprets the efforts of raising one’s family as a "manly act and knowledge full" as "untiring perseverance in both effort and wise contrivance to raise one’s family" (Drew. T 1022).

A man’s true manliness consists in making himself the head and benefactor of the family
(T 1026).

The fearless hero bears the brunt amid the warrier throng
Amid his kindred so the burden rests upon the strong (T 1027).
I'll make my race renowned, if man shall say,
With vest succinct the Goddess leads the way
(T 1023).

The above kurals make it abundantly clear that man is
the natural head of the house, with the onus of serving
its cause selflessly. Both the writers are, more or
less, of the same mind on this subject.

It is interesting to note that Tiruvalluvar warns
man "not to give his soul to the love of wife" (T902);
"quaking before his wife" (T905); and "submitting to
her" (T903); for, "being obedient to woman's law as
such, a meek submission will clothe him with everlasting
shame" (T902); and "no virtuous deed, no seemly wealth,
no pleasure rests with him" (T909). He is of the
opinion that "foolishness which results from devotion to
one's wife will never be found in those who possess a
reflecting mind " (T 910).

In the light of the above kurals, it may be safely
surmised that there must have been at least some bones
of contention at the micro-level man-woman
relationship, occurring in several households even
during the days of the Kural. Also, there must have
been some kind of tacit struggle for power going on
between several householders and their spouses, despite
all the veneer of male superiority shown off in public.
A contemporary critic, Ramakrishnan, has recently averred that Tiruvalluvar has not spoken about the rights of women in any of his couplets (Dinamalar: Nagar Malar, Daily, Nellai 3rd Oct’92, 7). Though very little can be said in defence of Tiruvalluvar’s chauvinism, one should also bear in mind that the Tamil sage also was influenced by the views prevalent in his times, and consequently developed his own peculiar weak spots.

M. Annamalai seeks to justify Tiruvalluvar’s opinion of women vis-a-vis men, in the light of sociological conditions prevalent in his age:

In the male dominating society, in which a man alone has the sole responsibility of eking out the livelihood, caring for the family and moving with different kinds of individuals, all for the betterment of his family and society, if Tiruvalluvar thinks man is to be esteemed more than woman, there seems to be nothing wrong in it (Valluvar Tanitanmai 43).

Interestingly enough, there are instances in the kural which at least implicitly highlight certain situations in life in which men sought approbation of their own behaviour, strictly from the feminine point of view. Their condition can be deduced from certain
imagery pertaining to women, used primarily as simile or metaphor:

When master from field aloof hath stood,
The land will sulk like wife in angry mood

(T 1103).

The average man felt morally indicted by the disapproval of his woman when he was caught in the habit of indolence. The fact that a woman's frown or angry disposition could elicit a better behaviour from her man, can also been seen in the following kural:

The earth, that kindly dame, will laugh to see
Men seated idle pleading poverty (T.1040).

While the Jewish Wisdom writer does not deal with the fact of a man being mocked at, admonished or guided by any woman, Tiruvalluvar condemns outright a man's excessive vulnerability and susceptibility before the charms and allurements of women, including his wife.

As regards the position of motherhood, Proverbs pays a high tribute to mothers. In the Hebrew text, we see that the mother is to be honoured (Exodus 20:12) and feared (Leviticus 19:3). As Elizabeth B.Hurlock puts it

The authority and prestige of the mother in the eyes of the world are not so great as they once thought .... As their attitudes change
with changes in their concept of the mother’s role, they become less respectful and loving and more critical -- a condition that has a strong impact on mother-child relationship.

(Child Development 510).

In terms of the time spent in the company of the child, the mother has greater opportunities than the father to influence her offspring’s psychological growth and behaviour. Further, tradition also favours the mother’s influence, since "child-rearing in our culture is generally recognized primarily as the mother’s privilege and responsibility" (George G. Thompson 630).

As pointed out by Ross D Parke, mothers seem to be more important than fathers in shaping the social behaviour and the moral development of children, because mothers seek information about their children’s feelings and their interpretation of their transgressions before punishing their children whereas fathers favour immediate punishment without discussion .... In addition to offering more verbal cognitive structuring of moral contingencies in the situation, she may offer a more positive social model of sensitivities and concerns with the perceptions and feelings of others (477).
Also, there are experimental evidences to show that the sight, sound, touch and warmth offered by the mother not only have social and emotional significance for the development of the child but also have repercussions on the development of nerve centres in the brain, as the most important stimuli come from the mother (S. Dutta Ray 2).

Even the ancient Hebrew society of Proverbs did recognize the positive role played by women in the domestic context:

While the woman was deemed a piece of property, practically she was valued in her home and the community for the sake of her personal worth (R.B.Y. Scott, 197).

In the Proverbs, king Solomon is in agreement with the Jewish law that condemned the faults of the children against their mother, and commanded equal honour to be given to father and mother:

whoso robbeth his father or his mother and saith it is no transgression, the same is the companion of a destroyer. (P28:44).

It is significant that Tiruvalluvar does not have anything to say, as regards this aspect of children ill-treating their own parents.
The mother is indispensable to children and home. Her strength lies essentially in her innate capacity for compassion, intimate closeness and sacrifice:

A mother is a Guru and an unremitting pillar of security .... capable and withstanding the rust of time .... soft yet firm like petals of a flower which protect the bud .... when fortune and friends turn against, one person always by the side, giving warmth and solace enabling to endure the long chilly winters of adversity. ("My mother", The Hindu - Young World 18th September’93 4).

In Proverbs, there are various references to family life from which one sees that the mother occupies a position as important as the father does in the domestic sphere. There are certain areas where identical treatment is given to men and women, especially in the context of children: "A wise son maketh a glad father: but a foolish son is the heaviness of his mother." (P10:1).

Tiruvalluvar also points out how wise children are a source of joy not only to their own parents but also to the entire community:
Their children’s wisdom, greater than their own confessed,
Through the wide world is sweet to every human heart. (T 88),

In Proverbs, the woman is held wholly responsible for domestic happiness, and the virtuous woman is praised by her husband, children and society:
Her children arise up and call her blessed:
her husband also and he praiseth her.
Many daughters have done virtuously,
but thou excellest them all
(P31:28,29).

In Tirukkural also, the virtuous woman is highly praised. She is referred to as "the choice treasure doth the world contain" (T54). While the father is responsible for the education of the children, the mother is basically responsible for producing children of good disposition and blameless nature.

N.Subramanian and R.Rajalakshmi are of the following view:
To Valluvar, woman is a traditional subordinate, charming, enjoyable, begetter of children, an ideal follower who is not to presume to lead man; she is to treat her husband as the only God (IXXIV).
It is true that there is ample room for such an argument, deduced on the basis of selective kurals that Tiruvalluvar wants women to idolize the men in their lives. However, such a gross deduction cannot be tenable in the light of some other kurals which capture man's helplessness, susceptibility and craving for approval when contrasted with situations that highlight women's superior grace, compassion and sensual charm. So the higher political position that Tiruvalluvar assigns to men over the women should not be made much of, beyond reasonable limits.

Many areas of Proverbs, especially chapters 1-9, are devoted to warning the youth against illicit sexual experience. After the manner of wisdom literature which insisted that instruction is primarily meant for man, and hence he is instructed to guard himself from the seductive charms and viles of any strange woman. John Garlock comments,

He who yields to her seduction is as hopelessly naive as these simple-minded creatures -- ox, fool-bird, (P7:22,23) no matter how strong. (894).

In the Israel of the past, as elsewhere in the ancient East, adultery was considered not only a sin against one's neighbour but also against God:
For by means of a whorish woman, a man is brought to a piece of bread; and the adulteress will hunt for the precious life (P6:26).

Tiruvalluvar considers adultery as a crime; and concubinage as folly and waste of money. Unlike the Jewish Wisdom writer, Tiruvalluvar does not portray man as the gullible victim and woman as the active seductress, who makes man fall from the path of virtue. He simply instructs man to protect himself from the materialistic pursuit of prostitutes and from adultery. Though prostitution was accepted as a way of life, Tiruvalluvar condemns it as a bad personal habit. His counsels are not merely utilitarian but also reflective of his idealistic preference for marital fidelity.

The place of woman in society is an absorbing subject of interest. Various economic, social and personal factors determine a woman’s position in society, and it has taken a long and difficult struggle to bring about some changes in her condition.

In Proverbs and Tirukkural the ideal of family life is highly extolled. Monogamy is idealized as the desirable norm: Parents are viewed as responsible guides of their children, entitled to obedience and respect.
The woman is clearly reckoned as a source of power, inspiration and charm in the house, capable of rendering a home mirthful or miserable. In both the cultures, chaste women who show moral strength are exalted. Man is deemed the head of the house but invested also with the onus of raising and sustaining the entire family. Chastity is enjoined for man also and adultery is unequivocally condemned. There is no mention of divorce or polygamy in both the works which shows the authors' high esteem for marital fidelity and conjugal love on the one hand and the high degree of stability enjoyed by families in those days, on the other.

In Proverbs, the virtuous wife is described as a gift from God and by whom man obtains favours from God. She builds her house, which metaphorically also implies laying the foundation for domestic prosperity. She is industrious, sagacious, charitable and functions as a business manager and provider of maintenance of her household, manifesting most of the salient traits of modern, liberated women.

In Tirukkural also, the ideal woman is thrifty and capable of tackling the expenditure within the means of her husband and possesses the merit of taking care of her husband, children and herself.
The verses in Proverbs give us a unique glimpse into the intimacy of familial bonds. One finds an accurate portrait of the same in the description of an Israelite couple:

An Israelite wife was loved and listened to by her husband and treated by him as equal. It was a faithful reflection of the teaching enshrined in (Genesis 2:18,24), where God created woman as a helpmate for man to whom she was to cling (39).

However, it must be pointed out that the Israelite sage does not deal with the aspect of contention in man in elaborate terms, as he does for a brawling nagging woman, a fact that points to the definite possibilities of the prevalent chauvinistic trends in the ancient Jewish society.

Tiruvalluvar also talks of the plight of a man living with a nagging and contentious wife. Though the wife played only a subservient role in the society of the times of Tirukkural, there are instances where she was hailed as the mistress of the household bringing forth children, who are the ornaments of the family. Tiruvalluvar's ideal woman is chaste, hospitable, charitable and frugal. She lends such a valuable
support to her husband that he bears himself honourably, with a lion-like gait in the midst of enemies. She elicits divine energy through her humility and utter devotion to her husband. She is regarded as a choice treasure and a veritable boon to her husband and the society at large.

It is interesting to read Tiruvalluvar’s condemnation of men in the context of their susceptibility to the charms or power of women, even within the bond of marriage. Perhaps, it might have been the result of a subtle sociological power struggle that was being carried on in the society of the day. He deliberately relegates woman to a subservient position in the household as well as the society at large. On the other hand, he extols the man who works with devotion to raise the family, saying that his true manliness lies in bearing the burden of the family and in his capacity to face challenges as the head of the household.

Regarding the status of woman in the ancient world, be it Israel or India, the woman was deprived of her fundamental rights and privileges by man except in the domestic sphere of life. It must be conceded that socially, woman occupied a lower rank in the domestic
sphere. However, there are unassailable instances in Tiruvalluvar which bear eloquent testimony to men’s susceptibility and sensitivity to the opinions of righteous women even when the women happen to belong to ordinary households. It was a fact of life that an average householder could find happiness and harmony in life only when his ways of social behaviour could enlist the total approval of the woman in his life. It shows that even in the ancient World, women did make substantial contribution to the moral behaviour of their so-called superior male partners.

Thus the works of the Jewish wisdom writer and the Tamil sage Tiruvalluvar reveal certain common thematic concerns, irrespective of their linguistic and cultural differences. The similarities in the ethos and values governing the moral behaviour of men and women in respect of the ancient Jewish and Tamil societies are truly amazing. The above analysis throws light also on the domain of certain feelings that define the relationship between man and woman in finer terms.