

Sacred Narratives and Gender: A Comparative Study of Mary Magdalene in the Lucan Gospel and *Āntāl in Thiruppāvai*

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Abstract

While sacred texts convey religious history and ethics, they also provide rich material for interdisciplinary studies within public theology. This paper explores the gendered dimensions of prominent female figures through a comparative study of Mary Magdalene in the Gospel of Luke and *Āntāl* in the 9th-century CE Tamil Vaishnavite text, *Thiruppāvai*. Utilizing qualitative textual, inter-textual, and intra-textual analysis alongside a historical-critical approach, this study investigates how both figures challenge patriarchal structures and traditional gender norms within Christian and Hindu traditions. The analysis illustrates how *Āntāl*'s intense devotional longing toward Lord Krishna and Mary Magdalene's deeply personal attachment to Jesus transcend conventional human love, transforming intimate emotion into a pathway toward mystical, divine union. Guided by the hermeneutics of gender and cultural sensitivity, the paper examines how these narratives subvert societal expectations and align personal devotion with cosmic purpose. The central hypothesis is that Mary Magdalene and *Āntāl* emerge as powerful personalities exemplifying spiritual authority and dignity. This carries profound relevance for Asia's multicultural and pluralistic context, where women's roles are frequently marginalized. By reshaping intimate human love into a vehicle for divine encounter, both figures offer essential frameworks for integrating gender-inclusive perspectives into contemporary Asian public theology. Ultimately, the study concludes that this comparative analysis inspires greater gender equality, mutual interfaith respect, and a robust theological foundation to resist marginalization, envisioning a more just and equitable society.

Keywords: Public Theology, Gender, Mary Magdalene, *Āntāl*, *Thiruppāvai*

Introduction

This paper undertakes a comparative theological exploration of two prominent female figures Mary Magdalene in the Gospel of Luke and Āntāl in the Thiruppāvai to examine how sacred texts reflect and shape gendered spiritual agency. While existing scholarship often treats these figures in isolation within their own traditions, there is a significant research gap in comparative analyses that bridge these distinct Jewish and Tamil contexts to address the common problem of gender discrimination in the spiritual sphere. By bringing Christian and Hindu devotional traditions into dialogue, this study moves beyond mere description to analyze how each figure reconfigures human love into a vehicle for divine encounter and public witness.

The choice of these specific texts is grounded in their unique status as narratives of gendered reversal. The Gospel of Luke is selected because, unlike other canonical gospels, it consistently affirms the dignity and integral participation of women in a redemptive mission that challenges the marginalization of 1st-century society. Complementarily, Āntāl's Thiruppāvai is chosen as a seminal work of the Tamil Bhakti movement that democratizes the spiritual path, illustrating how a female devotee can transcend physical and societal limitations to attain spiritual authority. Together, these texts provide a robust framework for examining how feminine spiritual longing can inspire broader ethical commitments.

Objective of the research

To conduct a comparative intertextual and intratextual study of Mary Magdalene and Āntāl, examining how their portrayals, identities, and devotional expressions challenge patriarchal gender constructs and redefine women's religious agency within the socio-cultural and theological contexts of early Christianity and the Tamil Vaishnava tradition.

Research Problem

The core problem is that despite the existence of strong female personalities in sacred texts who challenge traditional gender norms and exemplify spiritual dignity, their stories are not sufficiently utilized in contemporary public theology to create a shared ethical framework for gender equity and social wellbeing in modern, diverse societies.

Literature Review

Karen L. King (2003), in *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle*, offers a significant reassessment of Mary Magdalene's role in early Christianity. Challenging the long-standing Western Christian tradition that identifies Mary Magdalene as a "repentant prostitute," King argues that this

portrayal is a later ecclesiastical construction and finds no basis in the canonical Gospels. Instead, she presents Mary Magdalene as a prominent Jewish disciple and an influential leader in the early Christian community. King further highlights that Mary Magdalene is frequently listed first among the women disciples, suggesting her exceptional authority and status within the early Jesus movement. Her study has made an important contribution to feminist biblical scholarship by reinterpreting Mary Magdalene as a key apostolic figure rather than a symbol of repentance.

Peter Abir, A. and Aloysius Xavier, A. (2005), in *Commentary on Bible: An Introduction*, argue that the time of Jesus witnessed a gradual decline in rigid patriarchal authority, allowing women to assume more active roles in religious and social life. This shift is reflected in Luke's Gospel, where women are portrayed as active participants in Jesus' ministry rather than peripheral figures. Within this context, Mary Magdalene's transformation from a woman healed by Jesus (Luke 8:2) to a principal witness of the resurrection demonstrates the changing status and significance of women in the early Christian movement.

Meera Venkatesh (2024), in *Andal: The Poet-Saint's Journey from Awareness to Enlightenment* examines Āntāl's spiritual journey within the South Indian Bhakti tradition. Venkatesh identifies Āntāl as the only female among the twelve Ālvārs and argues that her devotional poetry embodies intense love and longing for the divine while challenging gendered spiritual hierarchies. The study highlights Āntāl's unique contribution to the Bhakti movement by demonstrating how her devotional voice affirms women's spiritual agency and religious authority.

V. S. Sampathkumaracharya (2002) in *Musings on Saint Andal's Tiruppavai* examines Āntāl's devotional tradition through the concept of bridal mysticism, highlighting her unwavering commitment to Lord Visnu and her rejection of mortal marriage in pursuit of divine union. The study interprets the Thiruppāvai not merely as a devotional hymn but as a philosophical text that articulates the path to liberation. He further argues that Āntāl's identity, reflected in the meaning of her name as 'the one who ruled,' symbolizes spiritual authority and agency, contrasting with the conventional domestic roles assigned to women in her historical context. This study contributes to the understanding of Āntāl as a transformative female voice within the Bhakti movement.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis based on secondary sources, adopting an interdisciplinary approach that integrates public theology and gender studies. The Lucan Gospel and the Thiruppāvai were selected as the primary

texts because they offer significant portrayals of Mary Magdalene and Āntāl, enabling a comparative exploration of female devotional agency across Christian and Hindu traditions. The analysis combines historical-critical, intertextual, and intratextual methods with gender-sensitive hermeneutics to examine the historical, theological, and cultural dimensions of the texts and the influence of patriarchal interpretations. A comparative framework is then used to identify similarities and differences in how both figures challenge conventional constructions of femininity and spirituality. This study is limited to qualitative analysis of written sources and does not include empirical or quantitative methods.

Women in the Gospels

An examination of Jewish history reveals that, within both societal and familial structures, authority and rights were predominantly vested in the male, particularly the father figure (Genesis 38:24). By the first century CE, women in Jewish society continued to be marginalized, especially within social and religious spheres. However, scholarly perspectives suggest that this patriarchal authority had somewhat diminished during the time of Jesus (Peter Abir, A. & Aloysius Xavier, A. Peter Abir - A. Aloysius Xavier, 2005: 76). In contrast to prevailing cultural norms, the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth as depicted in the canonical Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John presents a significant reconfiguration of gender roles. Women are not portrayed as passive or peripheral figures but as active participants in the life and mission of Jesus. They are consistently shown as expressions of deep faith and commitment, contributing meaningfully to his work. The Gospel of Luke, in particular, emphasizes this perspective in the infancy narrative, where Mary and Elizabeth are presented as exemplary models of piety, prophetic insight, and divine favor (Luke 1-2). This narrative reframing reflects the broader New Testament vision, which challenges the marginalization of women in first-century Jewish society and affirms their central role in the unfolding of God's salvific plan.

While the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) contain numerous overlapping accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus, each evangelist contributes distinctive theological emphases and narrative elements. Among these, the Gospel of Luke is particularly distinguished by its extensive attention to the roles and experiences of women. In contrast to the prevailing patriarchal norms of first-century Jewish and Greco-Roman society, which frequently marginalized women, Luke's Gospel consistently affirms their dignity, agency, and integral participation in the redemptive mission of Christ.

Luke incorporates more female figures and episodes involving women than any of the other Gospels, with notable references found in chapters 1, 2, 7:11-13, 7:36-

50, 8:1-3, 10:38-42, 21:1-4, 23:27-31, 23:49, and 23:55-24:11. These passages span a wide range of social and theological contexts, including annunciations, prophetic utterances, healings, acts of discipleship, and participation in the Passion and Resurrection narratives. Crucially, Luke is the only Gospel writer to record the lament of the women of Jerusalem as Jesus makes his way to the cross (Luke 23:27-31), a poignant moment that underscores both the compassion of the female followers and the theological motif of reversal often emphasized in Luke's writings. The Luke narrative portrays women not merely as passive recipients of divine action but as active participants in the unfolding of salvation history. Luke's Gospel is especially notable for portraying the important roles played by women from the very beginning of Jesus' life and ministry. This focus continues through to the resurrection narrative. Given that the focus of this study is on Mary Magdalene, it is appropriate to undertake a detailed examination of the Gospel narratives pertaining to her, in order to understand her role and significance within the broader context of the Gospels.

Mary Magdalene in the Gospels

Mary Magdalene is first introduced in the Gospel of Luke, in the section entitled 'Galilean Women Follow Jesus' (Luke 8:1-3) "Afterward he journeyed from one town and village to another, preaching and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. Accompanying him were the twelve and some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities. Mary called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, Susanna, and many others who provided for them out of their resources." In this passage (Luke 8:2-3, John 20), Mary Magdalene is described as having been delivered by Jesus from seven demons. When Luke lists the names of these women, he mentions Mary Magdalene first, highlighting her importance and significance. The group of women mentioned here appears to have offered financial and material support to Jesus and the apostles, indicating their active and essential role in His ministry.

Comparable references are found in Matthew 27:55-56, where Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee are noted as having been present in Galilee. Similarly, Mark 15:40 affirms that these women followed Jesus and ministered to Him during His ministry in Galilee. Matthew 28:10 further records that, on the day of Jesus' resurrection, the risen Christ appeared to Mary Magdalene as she was returning from the tomb. According to Matthew's account, it was through these women that the message of the resurrection was conveyed to the apostles (Dyanchand Carr, 2013: 123).

The New Testament provides limited information concerning Mary Magdalene's early life. Nonetheless, all four canonical Gospels explicitly reference her (Luke 8:2, Mark 16:9, Matthew 27:56; 61, 28:1, John 20:1; 18). Both Matthew 27:55-56 and Mark 15:40 attest that she was among the women who followed Jesus and ministered to Him during His time in Galilee.

The earliest Christian literature, including the gospels that came to reside in the New Testament, portrays Mary of Magdala as a prominent Jewish disciple of Jesus of Nazareth. Her epithet 'Magdalene' probably indicates that she came from the town of Magdala (Migdal), located on the west shore of the Sea of Galilee (Lake Gennesaret), just north of the city of Tiberias. Along with many other women, she accompanied Jesus throughout his ministry. She was present at his crucifixion and burial, and was a witness to the empty tomb. (Karen L. King, 2003: 141)

Early Christian gospel traditions generally accord Mary of Magdala a prominent position among the followers of Jesus, especially among the women followers, as is attested by the frequent practice of placing Mary's name first in the lists of women who followed Jesus. She is one of the main speakers in several first and second-century texts recording dialogues of Jesus with his disciples after the resurrection. Indeed, she is portrayed as the first or among the first privileged to see and speak with the risen Lord. (Karen L. King, 2003: 142). In the Gospel of John, the risen Jesus gives her special teaching and commissions her to announce the good news of the resurrection to the other disciples (John 20:11-18). She obeys, and is thus the first to proclaim the resurrection. Although she is never specifically called an apostle, she fills the role and later tradition will herald her as "the apostle to the apostles" (Karen L. King, 2003: 143).

In Western European art and literature, Mary Magdalene is most often portrayed as a repentant prostitute, the Christian model of female sexuality redeemed. Where did this portrait of Mary Magdalene as a repentant whore come from? Contrary to popular Western tradition, Mary Magdalene was never a prostitute. Eastern Orthodox traditions have never portrayed her as one. She appears in the Gospel of Mary in a role closer to her actual position in early Christian history, an early and important disciple of Jesus and a leader in the early Christian movement. (Karen L. King, 2003: 149)

An Introductory Overview of Ālvārs and Āntāl

In the Hindu tradition, particularly within the Vaishnavism, the Ālvārs are revered as deeply devoted saints of Lord Vishnu. They lived in South India between the 6th to 9th centuries CE. A total of twelve Ālvārs are recognized, and they played

a significant role in the Bhakti movement. They composed hymns expressing intense love and longing for Lord Vishnu. The four thousand hymns compiled in the Nālāyira Divya Prabandham are considered sacred texts within the Tamil Vaishnava tradition. These compositions of the Ālvārs captured the essence of the Vedas, making it more accessible to the common people. Among the twelve Ālvārs, one notable figure is Āntāl, who is revered as the only female Ālvār. She is the author of the Tiruppāvai and the Nācciyār Tirumoli (Meera Venkatesh, 2014: 184).

According to the sources of the Puranas, the foremost and most respected Ālvār is Periyalwar, also known as Vishnuchittar. He found infant Āntāl beneath a Thulasi plant in his garden. From that moment, he adopted her as his daughter and named her Gothai, (gift of the earth or daughter of the earth (A. Srinivasa Raghavan, 1991: 36).) Along with her father, the young Gothai led a life deeply immersed in devotion to Lord Vishnu. (Meera Venkatesh, 2014: 184) Out of her deep love for Lord Vishnu, Gothai developed the habit of adorning herself with the flower garlands that Periyalwar had prepared for Vishnu every day, and without her father's knowledge, she would put it back where she had taken it. However, when her father Periyalwar saw that Āntāl's hair was in the garland meant to be offered to Lord Vishnu, he became angry and reprimanded her.

However, Lord Vishnu is believed to have appeared in a dream to Periyalvar, affirming that the garlands worn by Gothai were the only ones truly acceptable to Him. This divine revelation led Periyalvar to acknowledge the exceptional intensity of Gothai's spiritual dedication. In time, Gothai herself proclaimed that she was the consort of the Lord and continued to live a life wholly committed to devotional worship (Meera Venkatesh, 2014: 184).

On this incident, realization dwelt on Periyalwar that Gothai was divine and truly the bride of Lord Vishnu. As Gothai grew up, her devotion turned deep and profound. Gothai, now named Āntāl, meaning one who rules, by her father, refused to marry anyone except the Lord. As a young girl of about sixteen, she went in her bridal attire from her abode in Srivilliputtur to Lord Vishnu in the avatar of Ranganatha in the temple of Srirangam (in present day Tiruchanapalli district, Tamil Nadu). Even as the wedding ceremony was underway, Āntāl solemnised the marriage by immersing herself in the sanctum of the Lord and immortalized herself as the wife of Lord Ranganatha. From then on, Āntāl is worshipped as the wife of Lord Mahavishnu. Along with Sreedevi or Mahalaksmi, Āntāl appears as the consort of Lord Vishnu as Bhudevi the personification of Mother Earth (Meera Venkatesh, 2014: 185).

The Significant Mystical Union of Āndāl

Āndāl's Mystical Marriage:

From an early age, Āndāl exhibited a profound sense of bridal mysticism, perceiving herself as the divine consort of Lord Vishnu. This deep spiritual devotion became evident when her foster father, Periyālvār, discovered that she had been adorning herself with the garlands meant for the deity. Rather than being reprimanded, this act was divinely sanctioned when Lord Vishnu revealed that He would accept only those garlands worn by Gothai, thus affirming her unique spiritual status and her role as His chosen bride (Venkatesh 2014: 185).

Solemnization of Marriage:

As her devotion deepened, Āndāl refused to marry any mortal, vowing to accept only the Lord as her husband. At around sixteen years of age, she journeyed to the Srirangam temple dressed in bridal attire. There, she solemnized her divine marriage by immersing herself in the sanctum of Lord Ranganātha, thereby attaining immortality as His eternal consort (V.S. Sampathkumaracharya, 2002: 13).

Purity of Intent:

The appeals made by Āndāl and the Gopīs in the Tiruppāvai are not driven by a desire for material possessions or sensory gratification, but rather underscore the devotee's aspiration for a deeper, transcendent union with the Divine (Sampathkumaracharya, 2002: 154).

A Brief Exposition of Āntāl's Thiruppāvai

Āntāl's Tiruppāvai is widely recognized as one of the most profound and aesthetically rich compositions within Tamil devotional literature. Comprising thirty verses, the work occupies a central position in the Vaishnava mystical tradition and is often situated in relation to the broader Tirumurai canon. Revered for its poetic elegance and theological depth, the Tiruppāvai is celebrated as 'Sangath Tamil Malai', or 'a garland of classical Tamil' (Sujatha Desikan, 2013: 3). Subsequently, these verses appear to have been designated as the Tiruppāvai in later devotional and literary traditions (Sujatha Desikan, 2013: 3).

In the Thiruppāvai, Āntāl describes the greatness of devotion arising from her immense love for Lord Krishna, as she wakes up early in the morning to worship Him. The Tiruppāvai, composed by the Tamil poet Āntāl, is a seminal work in the corpus of Tamil devotional literature. It comprises thirty hymns that are thematically centered on the Mārgazhi month (Month of December) ritual observances and deeply embedded in the aesthetics of bhakti (devotion). The early verses of the Tiruppāvai (verses 1-14) are characterized by vivid depictions

of dawn, where Āntāl poetically narrates the act of awakening her companions and inviting them to participate in the ritual bathing an allegorical call to spiritual awakening and collective devotion. These verses are rich in symbolic references to the early morning, representing both a literal time of day and a metaphorical new beginning in the devotee's spiritual journey. In the 15th verse, Āntāl shifts from the act of awakening to direct dialogue with the gopīs (cowherd girls), emphasizing communal participation in divine service. The subsequent hymns transition into an appeal to Lord Kirishna (referred to affectionately as Kannan) to awaken and bestow His grace upon the devotees. Notably, the 25th hymn is composed as 'May the pain of separation from you be removed'. The 29th hymn is composed as 'May we, who are attached to you, not be tempted by other things'. The 30th and final hymn encapsulates the spiritual rewards promised to those who recite the Thiruppavai, highlighting the bliss and liberation attainable through sincere devotional practice. The verses also make it clear that Āntāl, out of his love for Krishna, has called him by many names. (He is referred to by many other names such as Narayana, Kesava, Madhava, etc.)

Āntāl's life and writings are seen as a journey from creating awareness among individuals to attaining enlightenment at the feet of Lord Vishnu. Her poetry is often described as a philosophical treatise that offers deep insights into the ultimate path to liberation and enlightenment (moksha). Through her work, the Tiruppāvai, she reveals the truths found in Vedānta.

Mystical Experience and Enlightenment in Tiruppāvai

Path to Salvation (Moksha):

Tiruppāvai is steeped in layers of spiritual awareness, piety, love, devotion, and surrender to the Divine. Its core message articulates not only the ultimate goal of human life but also elucidates the means to attain it. These compositions serve as a pathway to moksha-salvation and enlightenment-guiding individuals away from worldly desires and toward spiritual redemption (Venkatesh, 2014: 187).

Total Surrender:

The Tiruppāvai articulates the profound theological concept of total surrender to the Lord, emphasizing it as the most accessible and efficacious means to attain eternal union with the Divine. It delineates how the soul can achieve liberation not through complex rituals or ascetic practices, but through a simple, spontaneous, and wholehearted act of devotion and self-surrender. In doing so, the text democratizes the spiritual path, making it accessible to all, regardless of caste, gender, or learning (Sampathkumaracharya, 2002: 10).

Transcending Human Limitations:

Āntāl's life itself is a testament to mystical experience. Through her unwavering devotion, she transcended the physical human form and gender, illustrating that any individual, regardless of their background, can be accepted by the Supreme Being through genuine devotion (Meera Venkatesh, 2014: 185).

Eternal Connection and Divine Grace:

The Gopīs' prayers, particularly in verses such as Pāsuram 29, express a fervent plea for an unwavering and eternal connection with Lord Vishnu across all future births, with all other desires completely renounced. This devotion earnestly seeks the Lord's grace and protection recognizing Him as the ultimate source of compassion and strength (Sampathkumaracharya, 2002: 54).

“Tiruppāvai - 29 - Raga: Malayamarutam, Adi
Govinda! In the wee hours of morning we have come to worship you
and praise your golden lotus-feet;
Pray hear our purpose. You were born in the cow-herd clan, now
you cannot refuse to accept our service to you.
Know that these goods are not what we came for.
Through seven lives and forever we would like to close to you
and serve you alone. And if our desires be different, you
must change them”
(Sujatha Desikan, 2013: 61)

Āntāl's mystical experience is revealed through her deep and unwavering devotion to the god Vishnu, which ultimately leads her to enlightenment and eternal union with the divine. The path to mysticism is evident in her devotion.

Mary Magdalene and Āntāl in Comparative Perspective Longing and Devotion

In Thiruppāvai, Āndāl expresses an intense personal longing and devotion for Lord Vishnu (Kannan). From an early age, Āndāl exhibited a profound sense of bridal mysticism, perceiving herself as the divine consort of Lord Vishnu. This deep spiritual devotion became evident when her foster father, Periyālvār, discovered that she had been adorning herself with the garlands meant for the deity. Rather than being reprimanded, this act was divinely sanctioned when Lord Vishnu revealed that He would accept only those garlands worn by Godai, thus affirming her unique spiritual status and her role as His chosen bride (Venkatesh, 2014: 185). Āntāl's love transcends the boundaries of conventional religious worship, as she envisions herself as the beloved of Vishnu, using the language of a devoted lover to reach out to the divine. The ultimate desire articulated in her verses, especially in the 29th hymn.

In Luke's Gospel, Mary Magdalene is depicted as a close follower of Jesus, someone who has been profoundly transformed by her encounter with him. While her devotion to Jesus is different in form, it is similarly marked by closeness, respect, and dedication. Her longing to be with Jesus is evidenced by her presence at the crucifixion, her role in preparing for his burial, and her discovery of the empty tomb, which signifies a deep, committed devotion (Luke 23:55-24:11). She is among the women who followed Jesus from Galilee and were present as witnesses at his crucifixion (Luke 23:49). She is also present at Jesus' burial, following Joseph of Arimathea to the tomb and observing how Jesus' body was laid (Luke 23:55).

Transformation through Divine Love

Āntāl's love for Vishnu transforms her entire being, symbolizing the soul's journey towards divine union. Her hymns often depict a progression from human affection to an all-encompassing divine love, representing how earthly emotions can be sanctified and redirected towards spiritual fulfillment. Āntāl's life and compositions thus illustrate a path of transformation through surrender to divine love.

In the Gospel of Luke, Mary Magdalene undergoes a profound transformation after encountering Jesus, often symbolizing redemption and a renewed life through divine love. The gospel describes her as someone who had been healed of 'seven demons' (Luke 8:1-3). Suggesting that her encounter with Jesus fundamentally altered her life. Her journey reflects a transition from personal struggle to spiritual renewal, representing the transformative power of divine love.

Community and Ethical Living

In Thiruppāvai, Andal's devotional practices are not only personal but also communal, as she envisions her devotion as part of a ritual involving friends and fellow devotees. Hymn number two explicitly details a communal "plan of action" and sets forth ethical guidelines for the devotees: "All ye who live in this world! Listen to our plan of action for our Lord... We fast, forsake milk and ghee and Bathe early... Nor decorate ourselves with kohl or flowers... Nor do inappropriate acts nor say harsh words Will give charity, will give alms and be good to saints Think noble thoughts to attain salvation, my girls". Through her devotion, Āntāl becomes a model of ethical life, promoting values that benefit the community.

In the Gospel of Luke, Mary Magdalene's devotion to Jesus also extends to the community (Luke 8:2-3). Her participation in Jesus's ministry involves supporting

him and his disciples, symbolizing a commitment to a life of compassion, service, and moral dedication. Her devotion is not isolated but forms part of a larger narrative of community support and ethical living, making her an example of selfless love and devotion.

Transition from Earthly to Divine Love

Āntāl's hymns depict a journey from earthly affection to divine love, where her intense personal longing for Kannan gradually becomes a symbol of the soul's pursuit of ultimate reality. This transition is emblematic of Bhakti (devotional) traditions, where human emotions are directed towards a higher, divine purpose, thus transcending personal love. In hymn two, the maidens undertake vows such as fasting, forsaking luxuries, practicing charity, and thinking noble thoughts, with the clear intention "to attain salvation, my girls".

Mary Magdalene's relationship with Jesus reflects a similar transcendence. While initially characterized by gratitude and personal closeness, her devotion ultimately aligns with Jesus's divine mission and the hope of eternal life (Luke 24:1-12; 23:55-56). This shift from a personal connection to a spiritual devotion symbolizes a transition to divine love, where her relationship with Jesus becomes part of the broader Christian vision of salvation.

Public Theology Insight

Challenging Gender Norms through Devotion:

Both Āntāl and Mary Magdalene offer examples of feminine devotion that defy the constraints traditionally placed on women within their religious contexts. Public theology can use these figures to reflect on the ways in which gendered expressions of faith contribute to communal spirituality and to advocate for greater inclusion of women's voices in religious and public discourse.

Expressions of Love and Feminine Spiritual Longing:

The gendered expressions of love in Āntāl and Mary Magdalene's devotion reveal how deeply personal, feminine longing can inspire broader spiritual and ethical commitments. Public theology can engage with these narratives to promote an understanding of devotion that values feminine perspectives, using their stories to inform public ethics and spirituality that honor diverse experiences of faith.

Gender and Spiritual Transformation:

Both Āntāl and Mary Magdalene exemplify the transformative potential of feminine spirituality. Their stories invite public theology to explore themes of personal and collective renewal, promoting an understanding of religious devotion that embraces gender diversity. By integrating feminine perspectives

on transformation, public theology can create a space where gender-inclusive models of faith contribute to societal wellbeing and ethical responsibility.

Ethical Living and Gendered Expressions of Duty:

Āntāl and Mary Magdalene's gendered expressions of duty and ethical living provide valuable models for public theology in shaping social and ethical commitments. Their stories emphasize that women's roles in ethical and spiritual life are not peripheral but central to community wellbeing. Public theology can leverage these figures to foster a more inclusive framework where gendered perspectives on duty and ethics inform public policies and communal values.

Results and Discussion

A comparative study of Mary Magdalene and Āntāl shows that both challenge patriarchal constructions of women's roles through transformative devotional agency. As active theological figures rather than passive recipients of divine grace, they demonstrate that female devotion is a transformative force that reconfigures gender and society. A significant finding of this study is that both women fundamentally redefine conventional gender roles within their respective religious and cultural contexts. In the Gospel tradition, Mary Magdalene's transformation from a woman healed by Jesus to a devoted disciple, supporter of his ministry, and the first witness to the resurrection decisively challenges the marginalization of women in first-century Judean society. By placing a woman at the heart of Christianity's foundational proclamation, her witness affirms that spiritual authority derives not from gender or institutional status but from faithful discipleship and active participation in God's redemptive mission.

Similarly, Āntāl transcends the patriarchal constraints of ninth-century Tamil society by rejecting mortal marriage and embracing divine union with Lord Vishnu. Rather than conforming to prescribed gender roles, she constructs a spiritual identity grounded in divine love and total devotion. Through the Tiruppāvai she transforms human love into a theological expression of mystical union, establishing an enduring paradigm of female spiritual authority within the Vaishnava tradition.

Viewed through the lens of public theology, these narratives transcend personal religious experience and become powerful resources for ethical reflection and social transformation. Mary Magdalene and Āntāl demonstrate how sacred narratives can confront structures of exclusion, advance gender justice, and affirm women's agency in shaping theological thought and public ethical discourse. In the pluralistic context of Asia, where gender inequality remains pervasive, their witness offers a compelling theological foundation for inclusion, equality, and human dignity.

Furthermore, the devotional lives of Mary Magdalene and Āntāl demonstrate that authentic spirituality necessarily entails ethical responsibility toward the wider community. Mary Magdalene embodies discipleship through faithful service, unwavering witness, and active participation in God's redemptive mission, while Āntāl presents devotion as a communal ethic of compassion, generosity, moral integrity, and collective well-being. Together, they exemplify a model of public discipleship in which profound devotion to the Divine becomes the foundation for ethical action and the pursuit of the common good.

This comparative study argues that devotional agency constitutes a transformative theological category. By examining Mary Magdalene and Āntāl together, it demonstrates that spiritual authority is exercised through devotion, witness, and ethical leadership rather than institutional power. Their lives call contemporary theology to recover marginalized female voices and affirm devotion as a catalyst for social transformation, gender justice, and meaningful public engagement.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the devotional lives of Mary Magdalene and Āntāl present feminine spirituality as a profound source of spiritual authority, ethical agency, and social transformation. Across distinct religious and historical contexts, both figures transcend gendered constraints through devotion, witness, and theological creativity, challenging exclusion and advancing gender justice. By bringing Christian and Vaishnava traditions into comparative dialogue, this research highlights devotional agency as a vital framework for contemporary theology, interfaith engagement, and inclusive ethics. The Tiruppāvai and the Gospel of Luke reveal how women's spiritual voices challenge restrictive gender norms and inspire more just understandings of faith and society. In the diverse context of Asia, the examples of Āntāl and Mary Magdalene provide enduring resources for public theology, demonstrating how feminine spirituality can foster gender equity, interfaith respect, and a more inclusive ethical society.

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