

Kannagi- A Legendary Tamil Women In The Epic Silappatikaram

Dr. S. Little Flower

Assistant Professor of Tamil

Jayaraj Annapackiam College for Women (Autonomous)

Periyakulam

ABSTRACT

Ilango's Silappatikaram, however, is important because it is his rendition of the possibly earlier folk tale that was used as a model for subsequent renditions of the story in varied genres in later centuries. Moreover, it is his work and his story that the Dravida movement picked up in the twentieth century and presented to a new reading public as holding a mirror to ancient Tamil culture, Tamil literary genius and Tamil ideals of womanhood.

Key Words: Silappatikaram, Tamil culture, Kongu region, Kannagi temples

INTRODUCTION

The story of Kovalan and Kannagi is one of the oldest legends of the Tamil country. The earliest Tamil poetry called „Sangam Poetry“ has been collected into eight anthologies and „Silappatikaram“ was composed by Ilango Adigal, younger brother of Chera Chenguttavan and a possible date for the composition of „Silappatikaram“ could be 500 A.D. The epic being the oldest and widely accepted form in literature renders the story of the adventures and successes of men in war. These long narratives also deal with the incarnations of gods and goddesses and their interventions in human life. The country India is popular for its wide range of epic and mythological narratives which are numbered among the fine classics in the contemporary society. The Indian epics are full of discourses on morality, etiquette and on sacredness. They instruct and direct people in their social life through beautiful stories. All these epics and mythologies, in a way, found to be teachings to women on their duties and responsibilities and on the kind of behaviour expected of them. Most of the epics are replete with accounts of women who are revered for their virtue. Tamil literature has a literary tradition that is more than two thousand years old. Chronologically, Tamil literature began to take shape and find articulation around 600 BC, which approximately marked the beginning of the Sangam Age. The age derived its name from the three successive Buddhist Sangam or poetic assemblies which produced almost entire bulk of literary work of the time available to us now.¹ This collection contains 2381 poems written by 473 poets; among them 102 are anonymous authors. Sangam literature is primarily secular dealing with everyday themes in the South Indian context. 2 The postSangam period (2nd century-6th century) saw many great Tamil epics being written, including Silappatikaram, Manimekalai, Seevaka Chinthamani, Valayapati and Kundalakesi. These were written during the sunset years of the Sangam era, the period of which is still a subject of debate among the Tamil scholars. Of the five epics, two, namely Valayapati and Kundalakesi are no more

Kannagi- A Legendary Tamil Women In The Epic Silapathikaram

available. All these epics are about the life of ancient Tamils - kings, urban traders and commoners alike, who practiced a religion with integral Vedic components and fortified with the attributes of the then emerging Jainism and Buddhism. The most popular of these epics is Silapatikaram or 'The Epic of the Anklet' which has a woman protagonist called Kannaki. It is presumed to be written by a Jain prince called Ilango Adikal. It was written in Muthamiz that is a mixed style comprising of iyal (narrative), isai (musical) and natakam (dramatical). The narrative poem is divided into three books as Pukar Kandom, Madurai Kandom and Vanci Kandom, named after the capital cities of three Tamil kingdoms. Each book is further divided into cantos. The three books also represent the three different moods through which the story moves: the erotic, the mythic and the heroic. The Pukar Kandom explains the marriage between Kovalan and Kannaki, their happy life after marriage, Kovalan's desire for Madhavi and his life with her. In MaduraiKandom Kannaki and Kovalan went to Madurai for a new beginning where Kovalan is unjustly killed and the curse of Kannaki reduced the city of Madurai to flames; whereas in Vanci Kandom Kannaki is raised to a heroic status

THE MOTHER- GODDESS KANNAKI IN SOUTH INDIA.

Kannagi existed in the cultural space of south India for several centuries as a goddess in temples before she was elevated as a symbol of Tamil culture in the twentieth century. She had a more continuous life as a goddess in temples and continues to do so to this day. Several temples, particularly in Kerala, are dedicated to her. As mentioned earlier she has been absorbed in the Bhagawati goddess worship in these temples. The sthalapuranas of these temples tell the story of Kannagi as an incarnation of Kali or Durga. There are also claims that several Amman temples in the Kongu region were in fact Kannagi temples, including the arthanariswara temple in Thiruchengundram which otherwise is primarily a temple to Murugan. Kannagi exists regionally not only in Kerala and Tamil Nadu in India, but also in certain parts of Sri Lanka. Even within the two states of south India, there is tremendous variation in the way she is positioned in the cultures of communities and regions appropriates the story of Kannagi to suit the local needs of the temple and adapts the story accordingly to tie her to the temple and to the communities that worship at the temple. Therefore, there are several and varied renderings of the story of Kannagi in multiple temple traditions.

THE ANCIENT TAMIL EPIC 'SILAPATIKARAM'

The story of Kannagi might have circulated as a folk story for sometime before Ilango chose to render it in an epic form. Also, it is likely that the epic story as told by Ilango influenced some of the folk narratives. In this chapter I look at a few of the folk ballads of the story of Kannagi and Kovalan that are associated with temples. 'Kannagi and Kovalan are children of two prominent merchants of Puhar. The story begins in the city of Puhar with the marriage of the two. She is married at the age of twelve to Kovalan who is sixteen. There is no indication in the epic version of the story that they had ever met before the marriage. They set up a separate home and live together for a few years. Then one day, on the day of the first performance before the lying of a dancer named Mathavi, Kovalan buys the garland put up for sale at the city street and begins to live with her. He lives with her for a few years and has a daughter with her. But due to a misunderstanding with Mathavi, Kovalan returns to Kannagi who accepts him back without reproach. The couple decide to leave for the city of Madurai in order to restart their lives. At this point the couple has nothing but a single pair of Kannagi's anklets. A sage Kavunti accompanies them on this journey. She leaves the couple in the

care of a herdsman, Matari, in the outskirts of the city of Madurai and continues her journey. Kovalan goes into the city with Kannagi's anklet to sell it so as to begin his occupation as a merchant. In the city he is falsely accused of the theft of the queen's anklet by the king's jeweller, who is himself the thief. The king orders the execution of Kovalan without verifying the claims of the goldsmith. Kannagi enters the city with the twin of her anklet. She proves the innocence of her husband before the king who immediately falls dead. The queen falls dead as well. But Kannagi goes on to burn the city of Madurai by wrenching out her left breast and flinging it on the city. She commands the god of fire to spare the Brahmans, cows, the old, children, good men and the chaste women of the city. She then reaches the Cera region where after fourteen days, the gods take her away to the heavenly world and she reunites with Kovalan. The stone for the statue of Kannagi is obtained from the Himalayas by the Cera king Senguttavan and he installs Kannagi as a goddess. Silappatikaram the story of Jewelled Anklets, is rooted in the ordinary lives of the early Tamils of the Pandyan Kingdom in the first century A.D and is regarded by many as the national epic of the Tamil people. At last the patron goddess of the city interceded with Kannagi, and she agreed to withdraw her curse, and the fire abated. Weak with loss of blood from her self-amputated breast. Kannagi struggled to a hill outside the city, where after a few days she died, and was reunited with Kovalan in Heaven.

THE TALE OF AN ANKLET

It must be noted that Kannagi is also viewed as a brave woman who could demand justice directly from the king and even dared to call him „unenlightened king“. The point here is that while she was behaving in a non-interfering manner with her domestic problems, she was no meek woman that would brook injustice in the rule of the law. The central identity of the protagonist is that of a married woman. Because she is a good married woman who forgives her husband and is chaste, she becomes powerful. Her grief - that of losing her husband - also gives her the moral right to burn down a city. It is interesting to note that the epic never talks of the couple having a child, because epics tend to source women's power to chastity - motherhood being a venerated state gives them the benefit of virtue. Besides, anger in a mother is read as being an extension of protective maternal instinct, as opposed to the denial of femininity. Kannagi never seeks justice for herself within the sacred relationship. She does not question it. Her rage is justified not only because of the injustice of killing a man for a crime he did not commit, it is more so the injustice of having widowed her. Kannagi has been criticized as being foolish to fight on behalf of her husband who had done her injustice. It is one of the mysteries of life that many a woman continues to love her man despite his failings. Vairamuthu, a very popular Tamil poet, in his first book on poems „Vaigarai Megangal“ has written that the reason for Kovalan leaving Kannagi is because the latter does not know how to keep her husband to herself. A well known column writer Gnani wrote in „Anandha Vikatan“, a Tamil magazine that Kannagi is just a teddy bear doll. Strangely he made his comments just a day before the reinstallation of the statue of Kannagi. People were shocked and copies of the magazines were burnt in protest. Eric Miller's work on "Tamil Nadu's Silappadhikaram, Epic of the Ankle Bracelet; Ancient Story and Modern Identity" is extremely interesting and insightful. He travelled through Tamil Nadu taking pretty much the same route that Kannagi had travelled, reflecting on contemporary identity in Tamil Nadu. His conversations with people along the route gave him a clearer perspective on why the story of Kannagi appeals to the psyche and is seen as the representative of the culture. The political leaders of the world should know the story of Kannagi

Kannagi- A Legendary Tamil Women In The Epic Silapathikaram

and how the Pandiyan king punished himself when he realized he had made a mistake. Eric Miller says, “In my home town, New York city, we have a pessimistic saying: „You cannot fight City Hall“. But Kannagi proved that you can fight City Hall, and this is the core of the story. That one person - with no money, in a place that was not native to her, with no family in sight – could go before the highest civic authority, and speak, and win her case - that is great”.

There is also in the sangam tradition, images of mothers young and old. Children as a source of happiness and fulfilment in life occur as a theme in some verses. There are of course the images of women, mothers of warriors, who take pride in the lives and heroic deaths of their sons in battle. Even the Kural has verses extolling the virtues of motherhood. But Ilango opted to keep Kannagi childless. He thus retained the focus on the wife, her power as a chaste woman, the king and his duty to do justice.

PUHARKANDAM

Kannagi’s journey starts from the Chola capital of Puhar, in present day Nagapattinam district of Tamil Nadu, where she as a daughter of a rich Nagarathar merchant enters into an arranged marriage with Kovalan, the son of another Nagarathar merchant. She settles down in a disciplined and stable domestic life abiding by all the unspoken rules and regulations to maintain the honor of her marital family. In this continuity of a stable married life, suddenly Kovalan falls in love with a dancer named Madhavi behind whom he spends his entire ancestral wealth. They even have a daughter named Manimekalai. But behind the back of Kavalan and Madhavi, Madhavi’s mother was extracting money from Kannagi on the pretext of saying Kovalan wanted money and none of which Kovalan knew off. It was later when Madhavi revealed of this knowledge that made Kovalan realize his misdeeds towards Kannagi. He returned to Kannagi abandoning Madhavi and tried to restart a fresh beginning with Kannagi.

MADURAIKANDAM

Kovalan and Kannagi left Puhar for Pandya capital Madurai and tried to chalk out a new life without the help of their parents. On this journey, they were joined by Kavundi, a renunciant who also decided the path to Madurai. After reaching the outskirts of Madurai, Kavundi left them in the care of an animal herder. Realizing the need of money, Kannagi hands Kovalan one of her anklets gifted to her by her mother at the time of her wedding. Unfortunately for Kovalan, his misfortunes started from here. He went to the royal smith to sell Kannagi’s anklet. He had no idea that the same royal smith had stolen the anklet of the queen of Pandyan King Neduncheliyaan. After seeing the anklet, the royal smith put the entire blame of stealing of anklet on Kavalan and brought him in the Pandyan darbar. The king without cross checking the facts believed the royal smith and ordered of convicting Kovalan where he was murdered. Hearing the unjust death of her husband, Kannagi immediately went to the royal palace for justice. Here Neduncheliyaan agreed to give Kannagi an audience to hear her grievance. Kannagi showed the other anklet. She proved that the queen’s anklet had pearls while the anklet with Kovalan had rubies. She showed the other pair. Neduncheliyaan realizing his mistake, had a heart attack and fainted on spot. Seeing the king fainting, the queen also lost her consciousness. There seems to be a commotion in the palace. Kannagi took a torch and set the palace on fire. It is said that the Sun God had given her a boon that entire city of Madurai will be destroyed by fire and so did the city of Madurai was destroyed by fire. Only the family Goddess of the Pandyas, Bharatan was saved. The Goddess tells how Kannagi and Kovalan were linked in earlier birth

where Kovalan killed her husband. Kannagi gave her life by jumping off the cliff. This describes the cycle of Karma and justice was even then embedded in the Tamil Hindu society.

VANJIKANDAM

Lastly Chera King Senguttuvan. Kannagi ascended to the heavens in Vanji. When Senguttuvan heard about the story of Kannagi, her devotion and chastity towards Kovalan and retaining her loyalty even after his death, he was spell bounded. He ordered a stone from Himalayan region and curved out a life like statue of Kannagi. She was given the stature of 'Goddess of Steadfastness'. Senguttuvan introduced the Pattini cult where Kannagi is still worshiped as a Goddess today

The Tholkappiyam details the structure of poetry but does not set the rules for the great narrative poem. In fact there is no mention of a long poem in the sense of an epic in the work. However, a later work, Tantiyalankaram, sets the rules for such a poem. Several characteristics of the narrative poem as stated in this work are found in the Silappatikaram. It begins with an invocation to God, its characters live out three of the four ends of human life and there are descriptions of nature in the work. It also deals with lovers' quarrel and sexual love. These are all characteristics of a narrative poem detailed by the Tantiyalankaram. But this work is usually dated to the twelfth century. It is made further clear that much depended on women being women of karpu. Prosperity of the people, the coming of the rains and the uprightness of the king's sceptre depended on the existence of women who took the vow of fidelity to their husbands. In the epic the sage Kavunti says as much:

A goddess, she has taken

The vow of faithfulness essential to women
Devoted to their husbands. We have seen

No shining goddess but her. Don't you know
The old saying that in a land where women
Are virtuous, the rains never fail, prosperity
Never declines, and the triumphs of the king
Of this vast world never diminish?
The epic otherwise follows the rules laid down in the Tholkappiyam. Most of the characters that feature in the classic tradition of poetry are in the epic. Silappatikaram combines within itself two clearly demarcated forms of ancient Tamil poetry - aham and puram.

As noted earlier, karpu is expected to bestow sacred power. Kannagi is portrayed as a woman of exceptional karpu. The sacred power acquired through karpu made it possible for Kannagi to burn down the city of Madurai. But it is equally important to note that this supernatural power that she possessed had no role to play when she proved the innocence of her husband. That was pure evidence which was available at hand. Ilango did not introduce a divine voice to testify to the veracity of Kannagi's claims. He also did not allow any miraculous event to interfere with the process of Kannagi proving the innocence of her husband. The incident in the Mahabharata of the disrobing of Draupati in the court of Dritarashtra is comparable for the difference. There, Sri Krishna provides endless streams of cloth to protect her from being disrobed. Divine miracle comes to the rescue of Draupati. But in the Silappatikaram the issue was justice. Justice then, as conceptualised by Ilango, depended on verifiable evidence. In fact, anyone with the same proof could have established the innocence of Kovalan. However, to avenge the wrong done to her, a wrong which cannot be reversed, Kannagi needed the power of her karpu. She burns down the city with her breast, a task only a woman of karpu with exceptional spiritual and sacred power could have performed. Ilango focused on the power of the woman acquired through a life of karpu. In the epic the presentation of his character as being flawed enhances the lustre in the character of Kannagi. However, this very important detail would be lost in

Kannagi- A Legendary Tamil Women In The Epic Silapathikaram

subsequent renderings of the story in the twentieth century. For various reasons that we shall look at in later chapters, subtle changes would be made in the story to show Kovalan in better light than as he is in the epic. The attempts to gloss the various faults of Kovalan in the twentieth century would be ridden with difficulties that would be hard to overcome.

Kannagi (Kannaki Amman) is eulogized as the epitome of chastity and is worshiped as a goddess. She is praised for her extreme devotion to her husband in spite of his adulterous behaviour. She is worshiped as Goddess Pathini in Sri Lanka by the Sinhalese Buddhists, Kannaki Amman by the Sri Lanka Tamils Hindus' and as Kodungallur Bhagavathy (Kodungallur Devi / Kodungallur Amma) and Attukal Bhagavathy (Attukal Devi / Attukal Amma) in Kerala.

CONCLUSION

Kannagi transformed from a silent, patient woman who burnt down a city with her breast, to a vocal but still patient and suffering wife in the plays of Bharatidasan and Karunanidhi in the twentieth century. Every new narration of the story reflects something of a changed society and the needs of the class that received the narrative. If she articulated social reform concerns in one narrative, she became a symbol for Tamil culture in many others. She also emerged as one of the icons of Tamil nationalism during the same time. Kannagi was placed in multiple locations during the course of the twentieth century and for centuries before that to serve diverse ends in the cultural landscape of Tamil society. Ilango drew heavily from existing literary conventions and social norms when he etched the character of Kannagi. The grieving wife of Pekan who was named Kannagi and several women of sangam poetry who threatened to tear off their breasts in grief or in anger coalesced in the Kannagi of Ilango's epic. Ilango rejected even as he selected the characteristics that his Kannagi would have. While she would be chaste and draw power from this quality, she would not be like Korravai who demanded human sacrifice. She would also not engage in sexual activity before marriage as several women of sangam poetry did. Ilango was probably inspired by a story in the folk tradition. Kannagi of this folk tradition was not adapted to other forms of literature even when the print medium revolutionized communication. She remained confined to sthalapurana literature that circulated in temple town contexts. While the folk narratives were complex for these reasons, none of the characters as portrayed in these texts could be held up as icons to illustrate an idealized Tamil past. She continues to be important to large sections of population in the folk performance tradition who may not find Kannagi as a symbol of Tamil culture or the secular Kannagi of the Dravida Movement as appealing.

BOOKS FOR REFERENCE

1. Aiyangar, Srinivasa M. Tamil Studies, New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1986.
2. Aiyar, V.V.S., Subrahmanya Shiva, The Kural, , Madras 1916.
3. Ali, Daud (ed.). Invoking the Past: The Uses of History in South Asia, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999.
4. Anna, Arinjar. Aariya Mayai. Chennai: Dravida Kazhaga Veliyeedu, 2007.
5. Arnold, David, Hardiman, David (eds.). Subaltern Studies VIII. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994.
6. Ayyar, Panchapakesa A.S., Kovalan and Kannaki, Madras: C.Coomaraswamy

- Naidu and Sons, 1940.
7. Bayly, Susan. Saints, Goddesses and Kings. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
 8. Beck Brenda, E.F. "The Study of a Tamil Epic: Some Versions of the Silappatikaram Compared." Journal of Tamil Studies , 1972.
 9. Bharatidasan, Pavender. Kannaki Puratchi Kappiyam. Chennai: Anbu Noolagam, 1962.
 10. Dandayudam, Dr Era. Sanga Ilakkiyam:Ettuthogai. Madras: Tamil Puthagalayam, 1978.
 11. Dikshitar, Ramachandra V.R. The Cilappatikaram. Madras: South India Saiva Sidhanta Works Publishing Society, 1978.
 12. Govindan, Che. Silappatikaram:Padinoram Nootrandu Kappiyam. Madras: Maruthy Press, 1975.
 13. Hardgrave Jr, Robert L.,. The Dravidian Movement. Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1965.
 14. Hart III, George L. "Women and the Sacred in Ancient Tamilnad." Journal of Asian Studies, 1973.
 15. Adikal, Ilango. Silapatikaram. Tr. Sri KarthikaPeruman. Thrissur: Kainur Kandarenkavu, 2010.