



Kannaki and the Changing Concepts of Femininity

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Abstract

Cilapattikaram is a Tamil epic estimated to be written in the 5th century. The protagonist of the poem Kannaki is significant in the South Indian political and social scenarios. Cilapattikaram has been adapted into movies and plays several times and it garnered much popularity. In the present popular discourse, the ideas associated with Kannaki include 'pathivrathyam', 'karpu' and the power of laypeople. The idea of Kannaki plays a significant role in the definition of femininity of modern Tamil and Malayali women. Kannaki has a major presence in the subaltern as well. Different communities associate with her and their story of Kannaki is often discarded. It is interesting to see how a protagonist of an epic and subsequent related myths has such a major role to play in the notion of womanhood has been formulated, and how this then fits within the concepts/practice of patriarchal and larger political framework. The changes the myth's significance has undergone over time shows the definition and redefinitions of the myth of Kannaki in extension, expectation from a woman in the twentieth and twenty-first century. These versions and definitions and the subaltern version of Kannaki story make the topic wider and diverse. This diversity of the Kannaki myth, including the feminist and subaltern readings, can make the myth prominent in different periods and would add to its meanings and significance.

Keywords: *Cilapattikaram*, Kannaki, Femininity, Popular culture, Karpu, Tamil, Malayali.

Introduction

The paper will be a discussion about how the patriarchal norms defining the identity of the female adapts in different periods while maintaining its essential oppressive core. The popular concepts and values surrounding Kannaki from *Cilapattikaram* will be taken as an example for the same. The concept of ideal women has changed over the nineteenth and twentieth century. Similarly, this concept underwent a rapid change in Tamil Nadu. Anti-colonial struggle, religious reformation and social reformation attempt has influenced the formulation of female identity. But the questions of rights of women and justice for women were often addressed by male with little input by women. It can be assumed that what women should be was a decision made by male leaders of the society and despite their progressive ideas the relapsing patriarchal ideologies made its way into feminine identity.

Cilapattikaram is a Tamil poem written by Ilango Adikal. The exact date of composition is debated because there are scholars who say it was composed in 500-800 C.E. (Obeyesekere, 1984, p. 3) and some say it was composed in fifth century C.E. (Parthasarathy,



1993, p. 6) The plot of *Cilapattikaram* is quite famous yet I would like to offer a brief summary. The story begins in the Chola country with the marriage of Kovalan and Kannaki. Soon after their marriage Kovalan abandons Kannaki for Madhavi a courtesan and Kannaki waits for her husband's return. Kovalan suspects that Madhavi is betraying him with another man and promptly leaves her. He was penniless when he returned to Kannaki and offers her anklets to him. Kannaki and Kovalam goes to Madurai and their journey is described in detail. They reach Madurai the capital of the Pandya kingdom to start afresh and Kovalan goes to pawn one anklet of Kannaki. But the goldsmith who found that the anklet is similar to that of the Queen Kopuramdevi and decides to steal it and put the blame on Kovalan. He reports to the King that Kovalan is thief who stole the queen's anklet and the king, without further thought beheaded Kovalan. Hearing this news, Kannaki furiously walks around the streets of Madurai explaining the injustice she just faced and goes to the royal court to prove her husband's innocence. When she shows her anklet and proves that the King made a mistake, the king and the queen dies of shock. She asks the God Agni to burn the whole city down, rips off her breast and roams around the city. She travels to the Chera country where she ascends into heaven and this is witnessed by some tribes. On hearing this, Cheran Chenkuttuvan as per the instructions of his advisers decides to get a stone from Ganga and worships her as Goddess Pattini. King Gajabahu from Lanka also gets interested in this the story of Kannaki and adopts this faith.

Popularity of *Cilapattikaram*

Popularity of Kannaki and *Cilapattikaram* is evident in Tamil Nadu. The statue of Kannaki at the Marina Beach and the party offices of Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) is one quick example that comes to mind. The story of *Cilapattikaram* was adapted into movies and plays multiple times and many of them were very financially successful. "This story, titled 'Kovalan', was a popular stage play before movies talked. And, as a talkie it has been filmed more than once in Tamil, in 1933, 1934, 1942 and 1964 and also in Telugu in 1942. The most popular and successful version of them all was this film *Kannagi*" (Rangadorai, 2009). The Malayalam movie *Kodungalluramma* (1964) and the Tamil movie *Poompuhar* (1964) was also based on this story. Samhita Arni's novel *The Prince* (2019), Kandathil Sebastian's *Dolmens in the Nilgiri Hills* (2013), Jeyamohan's *Korravai* (2005) and R Murukavel's *Milir Kal* are few of the many novels that borrows from the plot of *Cilapattikaram*. Besides Amarchitrakathas, paintings and serials have been made depicting the story of *Cilapattikaram*.

The depiction of Kannaki in each of these movies and novels are indeed interesting. In *Kodungalluramma*, we find Kannaki a wife who loves doing the household chores and addresses her husband as God. Contrary to the *Cilapattikaram*, Madhavi is shown as a selfish cruel seductress who abandons Kovalan once he is poor. In *Cilapattikaram*, Kovalan leaves by his free will, Madhavi gives birth to Kovalan's child and he abandons both of them though he knew about the child. In *Kannagi* she is an avatar of the Goddess Shakthi and she takes the avatar of Kannaki to prove she was more powerful than Lord Shiva. In the end, she is terrified by the destruction of Madurai and goes back to Kailasa and finds solace with Lord



Shiva. In *Poompuhar*, Kannaki's unwavering love to Kovalan is celebrated with songs and scenes showing her pining for her husband. In the novel, *Dolmens in the Nilgiri Hills* Kannaki is a tribal woman who becomes a Naxalite because her husband was killed by a powerful family who owned their lands illegally. But eventually she feels sorry for her violent actions and decides to serve the family who was responsible for her husband's death.

Karpu, Tamil and Kannaki

The idea of karpu is quite complicated- it involves love and submission to husband, virginity till her marriage and loyalty to one's husband even after death. This can be roughly translated as chastity or purity. The idea of pathivratyam comes close to karpu. Kannaki is popularly known as 'kappukkarasi' i.e. the queen of karpu. This phrase is etched on her statue in Marina beach and on the statue the translation for karpu is 'perfection of chastity'. In this case, more than anything, Kannaki's karpu was celebrated and taken as an ideal.

Karpu became the most important source of power for a woman. A woman with karpu, like Kannaki, should not be wronged, because injustice to her can bring ruin. The most unfair ideas would be that a widow's remarriage would be a loss of karpu. (periyar reference) Another extremely regressive idea associated with karpu is that raped woman would no longer have karpu- rape was/is referred as karpazhikkal (destruction of karpu) (Pandian J. , Goddess Kannagi: A Dominant Symbol in Tamil Society, 2017).

The ideal of the purity of Tamil language was often equated with that of the purity of Tamil women and here Kannaki's myth had a prominent role. The removal of Sanskrit and Hindi elements from Tamil was a goal of Tamil revivalists and this was associated with purity or the language. Tamil language became a Goddess, Mother Tamil, *Tamil tai*-a woman (Ramaswamy S. , 1997, p. 3). And a woman's purity got associated with chastity. When it got associated to Kannaki, a popular icon among Tamils, it got translated to the impure elements of Sanskrit, Hindi and English and make her pure, and chaste- chaste like Kannaki. As Jacob Pandian says:

The most fundamental principle involved in the symbol of Kannagi is that it enables believers to associate chastity with politics and ethnicity.... The goddess represents female chastity and spirituality, but functions as a dominant symbol to orient the Tamils to their heritage of justice and to sustain linguistic and cultural purity (Pandian J. , Goddess Kannagi: A Dominant Symbol in Tamil Society, 2017, p. 181).

The Modern Tamil Woman and Idealisation of Kannaki

It would be wrong to say women did not play any role in the freedom struggle or reformation movements of Tamil Nadu. Tamil women had a major role against in the Tani Tamil Iyakkam "An army of women consisting of a motley crowd of housewives, intellectuals authors and professionals assembled in front of the Theological High school in Madras. The women raised slogans like 'Down with English' and Down with Hindi' and 'Tamizh Vazhga...'" (Ramaswamy, 1998, p. 61). The presence of women in Self- Respect Movement is evident from the number of women who became party members of Justice Party. But the contradiction is regarding how many women had a say in the reformation of women and to what extent was the feminist movement allowed.



Achalambikari who was a prolific Tamil writer, who was well versed in English and Hindi argued that women should confine themselves to primary education imparted in Tamil. Her opposition to English education in particular and women's higher education in general was grounded in patriarchal logic. She and another writer Kumudini, writing in 1940s argued that western education rendered Tamil women unfit to be housewives and that the function of education to be provided through Tamil should be to make Tamil women ideal mothers and wives (Ramaswamy, 1998, p. 67).

The idea of education for women and voting rights for women were accepted by majority of the political parties but even progressive parties could not imagine a woman as a person who could have an identity beyond her family and household. She should be educated so that she can be a better wife and mother, not because it would give her more power. This is not an idea found in Tamil Nadu alone. From Rosseau to Ram Mohan Roy, there were many philosophers who advocated separate education for men and women so that they can perform well within the limits of their gender roles. Even when it comes to literature, there were works that women were not supposed to read, because it would corrupt their minds. Neelambikai Ammaiyar, a leading Tamil linguist, translator and Dravidian activist writes in *Muppenmanigal Valaru*, "Women should not be permitted to read texts like, *Alli Arasanikkovai Pavalakkodi Malai*, *Eni Etram* etc. which may lead them into bad ways. They do not only read such texts day and night but also read books (Brahmanical Sanskrit texts) like *Kaivalya Navaneetam* which are false doctrines" (Ramaswamy V. , 1998, p. 78). It is quite ironic considering that Sangam poems addressed female sexuality and desire in depth while she considered literature with erotic content has Sanskrit roots.

In Tamil Nadu, the ideal wife trope borrowed a lot from the Kannaki myth. Like Kannaki from *Cilappatikaram*, she is expected to be of few words and be happy to be identified as a wife, mother, daughter or sister. She was able to burn down a city and possess such terrible power because of her devotion to her husband. So in the modern context, the idea became that, it is not that a woman cannot have power, but to possess that power she should be chaste and loyal to her husband, because her source of power is *karpu*. Like Kannaki, her role is to be a wife- that is her identity which must not be taken lightly, by her and the society. She is expected to quietly suffer the injustice and extra marital affairs but she would get furious the moment her household is threatened. But even such expressions of power can be destructive and irrational, because Kannaki sought revenge on the whole city. So keeping the power under control was important. Even today the heroines of Tamil films are seen observing the ideal qualities of *acham*, *vekkam*, *madam*, *payarppu* (roughly translated as fear, shyness, innocence and chastity) all of the qualities which are embodied in Kannaki.

The case of Bharathanatyam shows how the image of Indian woman or Tamil woman was framed. The reinvention of Sathirattam, the dance practiced by Devadasis, was reinvented by the Tamil danseuse Rukmini Devi Arundale, as Bharathanatyam, as a classical dance which could represent India. This process of reinvention was to make it less erotic



which might find some parts of it unacceptable and immoral. “The art form was also de-commercialised because there was a desperate attempt to erase its devadasi history. Eroticism was cleansed and the content of dance became almost wholly devotional.... there was a perilous pressure to uphold the image of a “good woman” in choreographies” (Sengupta, 2018).

Similarly, out of the many female characters in Tamil classical literature, the one fictional character who has a statue and a museum for her happens to be Kannaki, precisely because she fits in the modern ideal Indian/Tamil woman. She is a woman with dignity because of her status as a wife, a woman who has power but is willing to keep it under control, the happy wife willing to go unto any levels to save her marriage, the chaste woman who still has power and a sense of justice.

Another example for the idealization of Kannaki is her presence in school level textbooks. In TNBSE syllabus, while teaching about exemplary women in the history of Tamil Nadu for Class 5 students, Avvaiyar is given more importance than Kannaki according to the studies conducted by V Geetha. But in TNBSE Class 10 Tamil text book there is a lesson in which a brother advises his sister how to be an ideal woman and Kannaki is given great focus here. “The brother commends his sister’s married status and notes how he never thought that the mischievous careless girl he knew would grow up to be such a good, caring and responsible housewife. He however thinks she should not rest on her status, and, instead, seek to cultivate her mind. He recommends that she reads: old classics, like the *Silappdikaram*, which tells of the virtues of the chaste Kannagi, and modern texts that tell of achieving women, such as the life of Marie Curie” (Geetha & Selvam, 2012) The history texts in CBSE introduces *Cilappatikaram* and Sangam poetry as examples of the culture that existed in South India. Sixth standard Tamil textbooks contain portions of Canto 1 of the Book of Pukar, the song of Praise introducing the Chola king. The current syllabus of TNBSE tenth standard Tamil textbook, include Canto 5, describing Madhavi’s dance. In the eleventh standard text, one finds Canto 23 where Kannaki goes to Pandiya king to ask about her husband’s death.

Opposition towards Kannaki and *Cilappatikaram*

But the idealization of Kannaki and *karpu* was not taken in without opposition. One of the people who clearly opposed the idealization of Kannaki and the concept of *karpu* was E.V. Ramaswamy, more popularly known as Periyar. He mocked *Cilappatikaram* starts with adultery and ends with stupidity. As a person who valued self-esteem, he said, is she had any dignity and self-respect, she would have given up on Kovalan (Pandian, Anandhi, & Venkatachalapathy, 1991).

Periyar supported divorce, remarriage and opposed *karpu* because it enslaved women. The idea that opposed these was *karpu* and Kannaki embodied the ideal woman that opposed these. She forgave her husband when he betrayed her. Even Periyar said she should have divorced him. She literally worshipped him and felt her life was over without Kovalan. His death deprived her of her existence. She raves through the city of Madurai, gets a vision of her husband, and ‘she collapsed on the ground and clasped the precious feet of her husband



with both hands Radiant with bangles...” (Parthasarathy, 1993, p. 180). In the court of Pandiyan, when she introduces herself as a woman from Pukar, the wife of Kovalan, who is the son of Macuttuvan (Parthasarathy, 1993, p. 188). This shows how she defined herself and the following passage shows how she accepted widowhood as her fate:

Like the unhappy women who keep painful vows
After their dear husbands vanished in the pyre,
Must I suffer and be ruined
Because I lost my husband through the fault
Of a king despised by his own people (Parthasarathy, 1993, p. 180).

She destroys the city and goes to the Chera country with a vow that she will not rest till she finds her husband. On the fourteenth day, she meets her husband and is ascended to heaven. Madhavi, the lover of Kovalan, is abandoned by Kovalan, though he knew she was with child and later she gives birth to Manimekalai. She gives up the life of a courtesan and becomes a nun. After giving birth to the child, she gives up her life like a pathivratha woman was expected to do.

Thus, it is clear why Periyar opposed these ideas. He found it outrageous that *karpu* is expected from women and not men and *karpu* is the sole virtue expected of women. He considered *karpu* as an Aryan concept. “In Aryan context, *karpu* translates to *pativrata* which enslaves women. In my opinion, *karpu* is inspired by the *pathivrata* concept. This instructs women to consider husbands as Gods, and thus women becomes slaves while their husbands become their masters” (Ramaswamy E. V., 1928, p. 208).

Another opposition to deification of Kannaki came from V K Subramaniya samiyar. He asks if a poem that encourages women to be submissive to get justice be something that makes Tamilians proud (Subramanyaswamiyar, 1951, p. 21). He also asks if Kannaki, even as fictional character has done anything for Tamilakam and it is unfair to prioritize over poetesses like Kakaipadanaiyar, Ponmutayar, Vennikuthiyar, Adimangaiyyar and Avvaiyar who contributed to Tamil literature (Subramanyaswamiyar, 1951, p. 21).

The not so Popular Stories about Kannaki

The oral literature about Kannaki vary from place to place, community to community and the Kannaki we encounter there is totally different from the one we see in the poem. The stories of the subaltern groups about Kannaki present a totally different picture about her. Kannaki becomes a woman who can protect, avenge, organize a war and instruct a community to create a particular lifestyle. Two of the many stories about Kannaki found among subaltern groups will be discussed here.

For instance, the Muthuvan community living in Kerala-Tamil Nadu border areas believes they migrated from Tamil Nadu to Kerala. Muthuvan community believes they carried Kannaki on their backs (*muthuku* means back in Malayalam) and thus earned the name Muthuvan (Manjusha, 2013). In their stories, the Pandiyan king is depicted as a villain character and his defeat was celebrated by the good people of Madurai. Further she instructs the Muthuvans how to live in the new settlements.



“The Muthuvans and Kannagi entered the Western Ghats. Deep in the forest, Kannagi instructed them to stop. There she founded their society. She said to them, "Live in the jungle with unity. Treat each other as brothers and sisters. Together, use the resources of jungle to live." She instructed them as to how to organize their first settlement and how to build their first building. How to weave leaves to make roofs. She showed the women how to tie their saris in such a way as to carry their young just as they had carried her. Then Kannagi went inside the first structure and disappeared” (Miller, 1991).

In the thottam paattu and mudippurappattu tradition in Southern Kerala, we find Kannaki as an avatar of Goddess Shakthi. She was born from the third eye of Shiva and she is given to a couple who prayed for a child. She is a woman with power and voice unlike Kannaki in *Cilappattikaram*. When her husband is killed she goes to resurrect him and wages a war against the Pandiya king with the help of Lord Shiva’s army. She destroys the villages of goldsmiths. The story insists she is a virgin, but it is not her virginity or devotion to her husband that makes her powerful. The language used in this song is a mixture of Tamil and Malayalam and is still sung in temples in Kollam and Thiruvananthapuram. But these are orally taught songs often performed by lower castes and tribes and hence do not receive much popularity (Namboothiri, 2016)

Conclusion

It is not my intent to argue that the less popular versions of Kannaki were the true stories which was later twisted by the patriarchal system. Nor it is my intention to say the subaltern narratives were progressive or feminist. The conclusion drawn here is to the fact that despite the overt political attempt to modernize a society and ensure rights to women, women still end up as the defined entities. The models are chosen for them and the traits of the model which are supposed to be inspiring are the ones that agrees with the patriarchal norms.

The story of Kannaki and the expectations from Tamil woman were not taken made considering the opinions of lower castes or lower caste women and hence their concepts and stories, much like their existence, remained marginalised. But they are very much the part of our society and including their ideas in the ever evolving concepts of feminine would make the myth more relateable and open to progressive ideas. The story of Kannaki would be incomplete without including the many stories and versions about Kannaki popular among smaller groups, often the underrepresented less privileged groups. By including those stories, the ideas about Kannaki become more wholesome. It becomes relevant to more progressive times else it might be discarded as a prop used to inculcate patriarchal values.

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