

FORTEES

The background of the cover is a deep blue. It features a stylized globe with a grid of latitude and longitude lines. Overlaid on the globe are several large, semi-transparent circles. In the foreground, there are several interlocking gears of varying sizes, also in shades of blue, creating a sense of mechanical complexity and interconnectedness.

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PORTES

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An Epic as a Socio Political Pamphlet

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Vaidyanathan Shivkumar²

Abstract

Epic stories are retold several times over a period of time. Every narration registers changes in the narrative and in the portrayal of its chief characters. These changes are a reflection of a change in the values and concerns of the society at that time. Silappatikaram, the Tamil epic, was written several times in the twentieth century. These reflected the concerns of a twentieth century society. In this article I look at how the epic story was retold by two stalwarts of the Dravida Movement, a regional movement in south India, to propagate their ideas of cultural identity and hostility to the North.

Key words: Epic, Kannaki, Dravida Movement.

Resumen

A lo largo del tiempo y en ciertos periodos, las historias épicas son contadas una y otra vez, y cada interpretación sufre modificaciones en su narrativa y en la representación de sus personajes principales; siendo estas modificaciones un reflejo de los cambios en los valores y las preocupaciones de la sociedad de ese momento. Silappatikaram, la épica Tamil, fue

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escrita en varias ocasiones durante el siglo xx, lo que refleja las preocupaciones de una sociedad de ese siglo. Por ello, en este artículo se analiza cómo esta épica fue interpretada por dos fieles del Movimiento Dravida, el movimiento regional del sur de la India, para transmitir sus ideas de identidad cultural y su hostilidad hacia el norte.

Palabras clave: épica, Kannaki, Movimiento Dravida.

Introduction

In January 1968, a statue of Kannaki, the protagonist of the Tamil epic *Silappatikaram* was installed on the Marina beach front in Madras. It marked the arrival of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), a regional party, as an independent ruling party of Madras state in 1967. It also marked the event of the International Tamil Conference held that year. The statue stands there to this day. The inscription in English identifies her as Kannaki: The Perfection of Chastity. In 2001 this statue was removed by the then AIADMK government. The plea was that the location of the statue was a hindrance to the smooth movement of traffic on the busy beach front road. In 2006, when M. Karunanidhi became the chief minister again, the statue was reinstalled with the information that it was removed in 2001 and with a description of Kannaki as the cultural symbol of the Tamils. The elevation of Kannaki as a 'Perfection of Chastity' and a symbol of Tamil culture by an avowedly atheist, rationalist party represents the party's and Tamil society's problematic engagement with a cultural past which could be owned but partially. It also reflects the close connection established in the region's Tamil nationalist politics between language, culture and gender.³ If the language Tamil acquired a mother goddess (தாய்மொழி) to represent it, Kannaki came to represent the entire culture of the Tamils. But the ancient epic of Ilango, *Silappatikaram*, and its protagonist Kannaki were reworked to suit the requirements of twentieth century Tamil regional politics.

The full version of the epic *Silappatikaram* by Ilango Adigal was published only in 1892. But Kannaki had a continuous

³ See SumathiRamaswami, *Passions of the Tongue: Language Devotion in Tamil India, 1891-1970* and 'Maps and Mother Goddesses in Modern India' in *Imago Mundi*, Vol. 53, 2001, pp. 97-114.

presence as part of the sacred landscape of south India as a goddess in temples. Most of these temples are now in Kerala. But in this tradition she had already been absorbed into the Bhagawati goddess cult very early in her cultural history.⁴ It has also been claimed that the ardhanareeswara idol at Thiruchengundram in Tamil Nadu was the statue of Kannaki and was mistakenly identified as ardhanareeswara in the eighth century.⁵ Most folk performance narratives of the story of Kannaki present her as an incarnation of Kali. Since the publication of the epic version, however, it is this version that was told several times in verse and prose through the twentieth century. Several plays based on the story were also staged and published during the same period. Along with the Kural, which was published in 1812, and hundreds of poems which collectively came to be called 'sangam' literature, Silappatikaram was quickly appropriated as a repository of Tamil cultural traditions. The framing of a distinct and unsullied 'ancient Tamil culture' was premised on the existence of this literature. By the forties of the twentieth century this literature contributed to the construction of Tamil nationalism.

Journals, newspapers and Tamil scholars who were supporters and/or members of the Self Respect Movement and later the Dravida Kazhagam led by Ev Ramasami (EVR) presented this literature as a fine example of Tamil literary genius and offered it as testimony to the social, ethical, economic and political achievements of the Tamils before being influenced deeply by the 'alien' north Indian language (Sanskrit) and culture (EVR) would differ on issues of gender and language. I shall discuss this later). The Movement attacked the culture of the north as that of the racially different Aryans represented by the Brahmins. EVR ridiculed the idea of heaven and hell and saw these as notions propagated by the Brahmins to maintain their control and claim of social and ritual superiority over the other castes.⁶ He insisted that to develop into a modern society based on principles of equality, Tamil society must divest itself of all influences of the north. The 'north' was presented as a

⁴ See Sally Noble, Ph D., dissertation submitted to the University of Chicago titled, "The Tamil Story of the Anklet: Classical and Contemporary Tellings of Cilappatikaram".

⁵ Pazhanisaami K., Kongu Selvi, p. 11.

⁶ Ramasami Ev., Ramayana Kurippukal, p. 1.

non-egalitarian society based on caste which was legitimized by a brahmanical ritualistic religion.⁷ The Ramayana and the Mahabharata were rejected as representing the subservience of the south by the north and the Tamil epics and the 'sangam' literature were installed in public discourse as more worthy of veneration. Kannaki was important in this construct as a symbol of not only Tamil womanhood but Tamil culture. The elevation of Silappatikaram and of Kannaki as symbols of Tamil culture and the installation of Kannaki's statue by a Dravidian party in 1968 was a tangible public demonstration of this conscious shift made in the decades before this time.

Yet, the epic and its protagonist Kannaki are ill suited to be symbols of the Dravidian Movement. How do we understand this dramatic rise of a literary character from relative obscurity to an icon of a nationalist ideology? This issue becomes even more of a puzzle when we note that in the story she apotheosizes into a goddess by virtue of her unquestioning loyalty to her husband and performs the supernatural act of burning down a city with her breast. That such a person became an icon for the Dravidian movement that had atheism and rationalism as its foundational ideological planks and that spoke eloquently against patriarchy and for woman's freedom makes the phenomenon even more curious. Further, the story as told by Ilango Adigal⁸ is steeped in superstitions and the supernatural.

Conventionally, Silappatikaram is taken to be the work of Ilango, the ascetic younger brother of the Cera king Senguttuvan. The Prologue and the last canto of the epic indicate as much. He is supposed to have been a Jain. Jain traditions and customs are referred to frequently in the work. However, other gods and goddesses, religious traditions and beliefs are mentioned as frequently. Korravai, the goddess of victory, Shiva and Murugan, share space with Vishnu and Krishna. Mythic stories of the north like the Ramayana had clearly seeped into peninsular India when Ilango wrote his epic and so we have references to Rama, a veena playing Narada and Indra of a thousand eyes. In fact,

⁷ This 'Tamil Culture' and 'Tamil past' was as framed by the ideologues of the Dravidian Movement. Historians have tried to show that caste as a social category existed in Tamil society before the coming of the 'Aryans' / Brahmins. See George Hart, *Four Hundred Songs of War and Wisdom*, p. xvii.

⁸ Even though there are folk renderings of the story, it is the epic version by Ilango that was used by the leaders of the Dravida movement and proclaimed as representing a glorious Tamil past, Tamil culture and Tamil language.

writing in the context of 'oral residue' in the epic, Parthasarathy has suggested that 'Kovalan' derives from the Sanskrit word 'Gopalan', guardian of the cow.⁹ Superstitions, belief in omens and the efficacy of sacrifices thrive amongst some sections of the people. The concept of karma runs like a thread through the story. Events are explained through actions in previous births. There is a vivid description of a human sacrifice. Cities have their guardian deities. Fire takes the form of a Brahman. There is scope for the miraculous as well. Humans become jackals when cursed and return to their original form after some time. The text refers to several temples. The chief characteristic of the protagonist of the story, Kannaki, is that she was a woman of exceptional virtue. In fact, she had supernatural powers because she was a virtuous woman. This power enabled her to burn the city of Maturai with her breast. Kannaki's dead husband comes back to life briefly to speak with her. Heavenly beings are referred to frequently. Kannaki's life in this world ends with her being taken away to the heavenly world. The last section of the epic deals with the apotheosis of Kannaki, and the installation of her statue for worship in Cera country by the king.

The Story

Kannaki and Kovalan are children of two prominent merchants of Pukar. The story begins in the city of Pukar 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 on the day a dancer named Matavi performs for the king, Kovalan buys a garland of leaves from the maid of the dancer and begins to live with her. Due to a misunderstanding with Matavi, Kovalan returns to Kannaki who accepts him back without reproach. The couple decides to leave for the city of Madurai in order to restart their lives. A sage Kavunti accompanies them in this journey. She leaves the couple in the care of a herdsman in the outskirts of the city of Madurai and continues her journey. Kovalan goes into the city with Kannaki'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 jeweler,

⁹ Parthasarathy R., *The Cilappatikaram*, p. 320.

who is himself the thief. The king orders the execution of Kovalan without verifying the claims of the goldsmith. Kannaki 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 Kannaki 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 she is taken away to the heavenly world by Kovalan. Senguttavan, the Cera king mounts a military campaign on the kings of the north, particularly two named Kanaka and Vijaya, gets a stone for a statue of Kannaki from the Himalayas, consecrates it in the Ganga and then installs the statue of Kannaki in his kingdom and begins her worship as a goddess.

The ownership, with pride, of *Silappatikaram*, by the proponents of the Dravida Movement, despite its apparent unsuitability as a vehicle for the ideas of the movement can be understood only in the context of the socio political context of Tamil Nadu in these decades.¹⁰ The epic as narrated by Ilango was suitably modified and used by the ideologues of the Dravidian Movement as a medium for the propagation of their ideas. This epic story, ironically, fit in well with the socio political agenda of the Dravida Parties, in a way that *Manimekalai* or the *Jeevichachintamani*, the other major epics of Tamil language could not. Both are much more of religious texts in a way that *Silappatikaram* is not. Even if we deleted the religious from the *Silappatikaram* there is still a powerful human story to be told. The same cannot be said of *Manimekalai* and *Jeevichachintamani*. *Silappatikaram* is suited to carrying a political message for two other reasons as well. Ilango locates the story in the traditional three kingdoms of Tamilagam, the Chola, Pandiya and Cera and the last section of the work, the book of Vanci, deals entirely with the march of the Cera king Senguttuvan on the north to teach a lesson to the northern kings. This structure of the work is a neat fit with the political position of the Dravida parties with their innate distrust and hostility to the 'north'. 'North' however, did not mean Andhra or Karnataka but the Hindi speaking areas further north.

¹⁰ EVR's Dravida Kazhagam split in 1949 when CN Annadurai formed the DMK, but remained ideologically indebted to the parent party.

The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam abandoned the idea of a separate Dravidian nation (even the constricted one comprising the Tamil speaking areas) in the sixties. Yet, the idea of a Tamil culture, as distinct from the culture of the north, was never abandoned as a political slogan. As we shall see, the detailing of this Tamil culture had consequences for the idea of gender equality which was one of the contributions of the Self Respect Movement led by a strident EVR. Also, it allowed for a social conservatism on issues of gender which anyone claiming to be following in the footsteps of EVR would be embarrassed by. In other words, regressive ideas about women, their place in society and unequal gender relations were sought to be legitimized through the narration of the ancient Tamil story of Kannaki and Kovalan even as the epic became a vehicle for ideas of racial hostility and Tamil pride.

The way the epic was presented by the ideologues of the Dravidian movement is an indication of an ambivalent engagement with a past which could neither be celebrated nor rejected in its totality. Hence, a selective use of the past as reflected in the sangam literature and the epics. The story of Silappatikaram could be molded to convey ideas of anti Brahmanism and pride in a Tamil cultural past unsullied by the north. But, as I shall try to show, construction of this glorious Tamil cultural past through narration of the Silappatikaram story involved retention of certain ideas inherent in the epic and at the same time by the introduction of others that the epic as narrated by Ilango was innocent of. It also involved the deletion of events and concepts that are crucial in the epic. We can understand this through the works of two important ideologues of the Dravidian Movement. In 1968, M. Karunanidhi wrote the story of the epic as a play which was later made into a film.¹¹ Six years earlier, another celebrated author, Bharatidasan, rendered the story in verse.¹²

Since the publication of the full text of the epic in 1892, several writers had presented the story to a new readership of the printed world as plays and poems. But the works of Karunanidhi and Bharatidasan are significant because if the former was a political leader who used his skills in Tamil language to propagate political and social ideas, the latter was an acknowledged proponent of the

¹¹ Karunanidhi M., *Silappatikaram-Nataka Kappiyam*.

¹² Bharatidasan, *Kannaki Puratchi Kappiyam*.

strident rationalist movement. When Karunanidhi wrote the play he was the minister for Public Works in the first DMK government in the State. Bharatidasan on the other hand was briefly in the Pondicherry Legislative Assembly but made his name mainly as a prolific Tamil poet. He was a staunch follower of EVR and like him was an atheist to the end. While both conveyed the Dravidian party ideology through the narrative, there were, as we shall see presently, differences in the manner in which these ideas were conveyed. Bharatidasan presents his verse narrative interspersed with comments and explanatory notes. These comments are as important for an understanding of his socio political ideas as the narration of the story. He presents the epic as a narrative of a Tamil past which his contemporaries could be proud of. He also uses it to highlight the differences between the supposed 'Tamil culture' and an alien 'Aryan culture'.¹³ For Karunanidhi's play, CN Annadurai has written the foreword. He asserts that through the epic Ilango has presented "the pulse of the good and righteous life that ancient Tamils lived."¹⁴ Karunanidhi reiterates in the prologue that, "Silappatikaram is not only an emotional story; it is also a book of Tamil History."¹⁵

The Aryan/Brahman

In the epic the Brahmin is a presence like many other categories of people. In the inclusive world that Ilango describes Brahmins co-exist with Jains and Buddhists. It is noteworthy that in the epic no individual or group of people are either ridiculed or vilified. Words used to describe a Brahmin are varied. Parthasarathy has translated « ḒṢĀ_iŸ, « ó¼½₂Ÿ and ¼Ḓ¼ĒÖ Ő_iŦṢ¾_iŸ as Brahmin. There are references to the area where the Brahmins reside (« ḒṢĀ_i ÷ þŦì ḒḒ_Ḓ).¹⁶ Brahmins are messengers who carry news or letters for Kovalan from Matavi. « ó¼½₂Ÿ is used to describe an ascetic Matalan, who brings news of Matavi to Kovalan. He also informs the king that Kavunti and Matari who were responsible for the protection of Kannaki have taken their own lives for having failed to do so. He is described thus:

¹³ Sally Noble in her Ph D., dissertation submitted to the University of Chicago has compared and analyzed these two works. However, the emphasis is not on Kannaki.

¹⁴ Silappatikaram-Nataka Kappiyam, p. 5. All translations from the original Tamil works of Bharatidasan and Karunanidhi are by me.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁶ Swaminathalyer Uv., Silappatikaram, p. 138.

Kannaki and the sage Kavunti in a fenced in protected space away from the gaze of Brahmins. The point Bharatidasan makes by introducing this in his narration is that Brahmins are untrustworthy and women should be protected from them.²⁸ In the epic there is a brief conversation between a grieving Kannaki and her friend Tevanti wherein the friend suggests that Kannaki should take a dip in the sacred lakes of the Sun and the Moon to receive the blessings of the gods. Kannaki says, “It does not make me proud”.²⁹ But Bharatidasan uses this occasion to embark on a tirade against the Brahmins and has Kannaki say, “are you, seeing me vulnerable, imposing your false ways on me?”³⁰ In the epic a Brahmin Kausikan brings a letter for Kovalan from Matavi. He takes a letter from Kovalan and leaves. Bharatidasan narrates the event and describes the departure of the Brahmin as “ŞĀĭÖ Āó¼ĭŸ”.³¹ It is impossible to translate this into English. It is like ‘good riddance’. He also associates Brahmins with bad omens and cause of misfortunes. At one point the sage Kavunti tells Kovalan that he has nightmares because they are in a place where Brahmins reside.³² The sage as portrayed by Ilango would never utter an unkind word about anyone. By attributing such sentiments to her, Bharatidasan brings her down from the revered position she enjoyed in the hands of Ilango.

Since there is a vivid description in the epic of Kovalan and Kannaki being married by the Brahmin according to vedic rituals, Bharatidasan asserts that this was because the wedding was not a Tamil wedding. Tamil wedding is when the hearts of a girl and boy come together and the consent of the fathers is irrelevant:

ĭ °ōĀÖÇōĀĭ ĩ ĩ ŐÇō ĩ Ÿ Ú Āđ¼ĭø
 « ōĭĭ Ā¼ĭŸ Ā½ ĭ ĀŸĀĭ÷ « ¼ ĩ Ē ĀđŞ¼
 « ōĀŸĀĭ÷ ĩ ōĀ¼ĭø ĩ Ā ĭ ¼Ÿ Ē ?³³
 When the hearts of the girl and boy unite,
 It is a state of marriage.
 What has the consent of fathers do with it?³⁴

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

²⁹ Parthasarathy, p. 91.

³⁰ Kannaki Puratchi Kappiyam, p. 65.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 87.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

³⁴ The translations into English from the Tamil works of Bharatidasan and Karunanidhi are by me.

Reflecting the radical ideas of the Self Respect Movement that were sensitive to gender relations, he questions the concept of a girl being handed over to a man in marriage:

¾ó´ ¾¾¾ÁÔ ÁĪ òġĀġŌÇġ ÁĪ ´´ ¼øÄġŪ?³⁵

Is a girl an object to be handed over by a father?

However, in the story as narrated by Bharatidasan the father of Kovalan pleads that he desired to see his son married and had ordered his son to marry a girl named Kannaki and he had consented. Since such a marriage is conducted only by an Aryan, he had called him to conduct the wedding. Bharatidasan lampoons the Brahmin priest in this episode as a greedy man who could barely speak proper Tamil. The elders consent to the marriage but suggest that it should not be entirely Aryan since that might lead to bad consequences:

« ò¾´ ÉÔò - ġĀĀġöþŌġ ġ ŠĀñ ¼ġō
¾¾¾ÁĀġ´ Ç ×ñ ¼ġġ Ō³⁶

Let not all (rituals) be Aryan,
bad events will follow.

Throughout the narration Bharatidasan displays a virulent hostility to the Aryans/Brahmins. However, the social and political ideology of the Dravidian Movement was defined by such hostility. By 1962, when Bharatidasan produced his work, Madras state had witnessed the most aggressive attacks on the Brahmins of the state. A movement attacking the images of gods and goddesses identified as those worshipped by the Brahmins and presented as symbols of Tamil degradation swept the state in the early 50's. It is possible to see that Bharatidasan used the epic to subvert the prevailing caste relations. Brahmins presided over a world of social hierarchy where sections of the population were condemned to eke out a living at the outskirts of society. Notions of pollution and purity rendered large sections of the population as social outcasts. Bharatidasan overturns this world through the narration of the story of Kannaki and Kovalan where he makes the Brahmin the outcaste, unfit for social interaction. But in the process he imprints the epic with emotions of hostility and hatred which the epic of Ilango is free from.

Karunanidhi engages with the issue of Brahmins in ancient Tamil society as reflected in the epic by deleting them

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

out of existence altogether. He does not mention either Matalan or kausikan, the messengers in the epic. In the way he narrates the story of Silappatikaram, he acknowledges their presence only on two occasions, once by allusion and the second time to highlight the superior rational culture of the Tamils as compared to the culture of the Brahmins. He introduces Kannaki and Kovalan as a married couple in the story but alludes to their marriage conducted the Aryan way through a reference to it by Kannaki when she expresses her apprehension that she might lose the happiness of her life. There is a subtle suggestion here that a marriage so conducted is not immune to the vagaries of human life. In the second case, Kovalan intervenes in a dispute between a Brahmin couple where the husband resolves to leave his wife. Kovalan reasons with the Brahmin, who exclaims, "... good explanation... one this Brahmin did not understand." To this Kovalan replies, "Tamil marai has accustomed us to this".³⁷ Tamil marai is the Tamil way. In other words, rationality comes naturally to a Tamilian.

The Pristine Tamil Culture

The two writers detail the nature of Tamil society in their own unique ways. The attempt, in both the texts, is to describe a 'Tamil culture' with minimal influence of what can be categorized as elements of 'northern culture'. This entailed deleting out or obfuscating details of the influence on Tamil society, as portrayed in the epic, all references to anything that could be seen as evidence of this influence. There are numerous examples to illustrate this shift. I shall mention a few. An important event in the story is the Indra festival, an occasion when citizens of the city of Pukar went to the seaside for some fun and frolic. It is during this festival that Kovalan and Matavi part ways. Bharatidasan refers to this festival but as Kaveri festival or an occasion to celebrate the river Kaveri. Karunanidhi however, makes Indra a Tamilian³⁸ and a Tamil king.³⁹ Similarly, while Bharatidasan omits to mention the dance of the tribal women in the presence of Kannaki, a dance in praise (amongst other gods and goddesses) of Krishna and Vishnu,⁴⁰ Karunanidhi refers to

³⁷ *Silappatikaram Nataka Kappiyam*, p. 30.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁴⁰ Parthasarathy, pp. 177-178.

the dance as simply the dance of the tribal people.⁴¹ In the epic the Cera king Senguttuvan embarks on a military campaign to the north for the purposes of defeating the northern kings Kanaka and Vijaya and to get a stone from the Himalayas to carve out a statue of Kannaki from. The two northern kings are made to carry the stone on their heads. The stone is also consecrated in the river Ganga. Thus in the epic, the cultural connections between the north and the south are retained even in a context of political conflict. Both Karunanidhi and Bharatidasan refer to this event but while the latter mentions the consecration of the stone in the Ganga without comment, the former does not refer to it at all. But the stone for the statue coming from the Himalaya Mountain is explained as a mark of victory of the Tamil forces over the forces of the north. Karunanidhi further adds “these rocks are inscribed by the courageous Tamils.”⁴² Bharatidasan explains that even though the rocks of the mountains in the south are more mature, they are protected by the Tamils and there is more merit in getting a stone after a display of the might of the south over the north.⁴³ Both the writers mention that the Cera king made the kings Kanaka and Vijaya carry the stone on their heads. This is as it is in the epic.

So, while the north and its culture are either erased or vilified, the two authors paint a picture of a Tamil culture where the men are courageous, honest and honorable and the women are chaste. This called for the rehabilitation of Kovalan as a taintless Tamilian as well. In the context of the early twentieth century when middle class societies across India were struggling to ‘reform’ social and religious practices that could be called ‘backward’ or ‘primitive’, the cohabitation of a Tamil hero with a prostitute, and his neglect of a chaste wife like Kannaki was unacceptable. Apologies and justifications for the actions of Kovalan began almost as soon as the epic was published and most commentators of the epic throughout the century gave varied explanations for the actions of Kovalan. As early as 1904, V. Kanakasabhai wrote, “Kovilan who was an accomplished musician, and passionately fond of music, was charmed by her performance and wished to make the acquaintance of the young actress. In a fit of enthusiastic admiration for the

⁴¹ *Silappatikaram Nataka Kappiyam, op cit.*, p. 75.

⁴² *Silappatikaram Nataka Kappiyam*, p. 89.

⁴³ *Kannaki Puratchi Kappiyam.*, p. 186.

sweet songstress who ravished his ears, he purchased the prize necklace which was offered for sale...⁴⁴ Kovalan is later “dazzled” by her beauty and was “unable to quit her society.”⁴⁵ In a prose narration of the story in 1940, As Panchapakesa Ayyar wrote, “He (Kovalan) was carried away by Madhavi’s skill and charm and felt himself regretting that Kannaki knew neither song nor dance.”⁴⁶ Another writer suggested in 1958 that Kovalan was a lover of the arts and wished to live a life that was close to the arts. He goes on to suggest that Kannaki did not understand the life that Kovalan desired to live.⁴⁷

It is in this long tradition of apologies for the actions of Kovalan that both Karunanidhi and Bharatidasan wrote. They lose no opportunity to portray Kovalan as an ideal man, a male replica of the female ideal Kannaki. But in doing so they departed from an important aspect of the story as narrated by Ilango. In the epic Kannaki is the protagonist. The characteristics of the husband, whether or not he was worthy of her devotion was immaterial. This emphasis in the epic, on the conduct of the wife, unrelated to the nature and conduct of the husband, is an important element in the depiction of the woman. Karunanidhi however, finds an apology for Kovalan’s association with Matavi, the dancer. It is important to remember that Ilango presents the entire event —of Kovalan buying the garland, reaching the bedchamber of Matavi and forgetting his wife and home—in a matter of fact way. In fact this dramatic event which impacts the lives of all the three main characters and decides the future course of their lives and the story is narrated in precisely ten lines. Ilango does not present an apology for Kovalan leaving Kannaki or for his living with Matavi for several years. Other actions and events in the life of Kovalan are explained by Ilango as consequences of his past life. A recurrent theme in the epic is the concept of ‘karma’ or the idea that one has to pay for one’s wicked actions in past lives. Ilango refers to this several times during the course of the story. He refers to it when Kovalan leaves the city of Pukar with Kannaki and travels to Madurai. But he does not refer to karma when Kovalan buys Matavi’s garland and decides to live with her, abandoning his wife.

⁴⁴ V. Kanakasabhai, *The Tamils Eighteen Hundred Years Ago*, p. 142.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ A.s. Panchapakesa Ayyar, *Kovalan and Kannaki*, p. 10.

⁴⁷ M. Shanmugam, *Silappatikarakkatturaigal*, p. 55, p. 57. Translated from Tamil by me.

This flaw in the character of Kovalan, which was important to underline the nobility of the character of Kannaki in the epic, became a flaw in the story itself for Karunanidhi and Bharatidasan and all those who wrote before them and several who have narrated the story since. Both of them attempt to rectify the situation in different ways. Bharatidasan suggests that Kovalan is a lover of the arts and Kannaki was more interested in her duties as a wife.⁴⁸ Secondly, he has Kovalan witness the dance of Matavi and describes their being attracted to each other at first sight.⁴⁹ What is more he pays for the garland after Matavi garlands him.⁵⁰ Karunanidhi's narration of the event is more elaborate. The event as narrated not only absolves Kovalan of all wrong doing it is also an occasion to highlight 'Tamil culture'. Kovalan buys the garland up for sale to protect Matavi from having to be with an old Greek merchant who offers to buy the garland. This is not only to protect a Tamil girl from the clutches of a Greek but also because it is not 'Tamil culture' for a young girl to wed an old man.⁵¹

Gender Relations and Kannaki

In the light of the ideological traditions of the Self Respect Movement the issue of gender is the most problematic in the way Kannaki was elevated as a symbol of Tamil culture and as icon of Tamil womanhood for all Tamil women to emulate. A brief digression is necessary to understand the complex ideological heritage of the Dravidian movement on issues of gender.

From its beginnings in the 1920s the Self Respect Movement was a bitter critic of the 'culture of the north'.⁵² EVR insisted that the epics of the north, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, were carriers of not only a caste ideology which placed the Brahmins on top of the social hierarchy; they also represented the dominance of the north over the south.⁵³ He attacked the main characters of the epic as immoral. His attack on Sita was particularly virulent. He sought to drag her down

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁵¹ Silappatikaram Nataka Kappiyam, p. 31. Incidentally, CN Annadurai split with EVR and formed the DMK in 1949 when the latter, at 72, married a woman of 26.

⁵² This 'culture' was framed as being entirely 'aryan'/Brahmin, drawing from the values of the epics and the puranas.

⁵³ EVR, Ramayana Kurippugal, p. 1.

from her high pedestal as a virtuous woman by insisting that she was attracted to Ravana and flirted with him.⁵⁴ He also insisted that there was sexual contact between them with Sita's consent.⁵⁵ He rejected Sita as an ideal on grounds of her problematic (in his reading of the Ramayana) sexual morality. He further attacked the gods of the Hindus as incestuous and rapacious.⁵⁶ Gods and heroes of the epics of the north, then, were not worthy of emulation.

Even as he held the northern/Aryan/brahmin culture responsible for several of the ills of contemporary Tamil society, he did not hesitate to criticize what was perceived as quintessentially Tamil culture. He was a bitter critic of Tamil society as well. For instance he challenged the concept of 'karpu' or chastity and questioned the social demand that it should be a necessary code of conduct for women. In a series of articles in his newspaper *KudiArasu EVR* and numerous other contributors to the paper attacked the prevailing unequal gender relations in society. He even challenged the venerated Valluvar, the author of the *Thirukkural*, and his ideas on 'karpu'.⁵⁷ He insisted that if Valluvar had been a woman he would not have had such opinions on 'karpu'.⁵⁸ He was a staunch supporter of gender equality and argued for equal rights for women, including their right to control over childbirth. He was perhaps alone in demanding a woman's control over childbirth for her own freedom and dignity at a time when birth control was being recommended on grounds of excess population, women's health or family economy.⁵⁹ Incidentally, E.V.R. did not appreciate the epic *Silappatikaram*. He described it as a story "which began in prostitution, grew in 'chastity' and ended up in foolishness and superstition".⁶⁰ He also refused to be reverential towards a language, even Tamil. Speaking at a public meeting in Coimbatore in 1939, he declared, "I do not have any devotion for Tamil, either as mother tongue or as the language of the nation. I am not attached to it because it is a classical

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.

⁵⁶ *EVR*, *Puranam*, pp. 69-73.

⁵⁷ *EVR*, *Penn Yen Adimai Aanal*, p. 11, pp. 14-22.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.11.

⁵⁹ *EVR*, *Kudi Arasu*, April 6, 1930, p. 10.

⁶⁰ Periyar, *Arivu Virunthu*, p. 28. Quoted by Anandhi S. in her unpublished Ph. D dissertation, 'Middle Class Women in Colonial Tamil Nadu, 1920-1947', pp. 172-173.

language, or because it is an ancient language, or because it was the language spoken by Shiva, or the language bestowed upon us by Agastya... Such an attachment and devotion is foolish.”⁶¹ But clearly, his companions in the movement and the party did not share his opinion of the epic or his irreverence towards the Tamil language.

EVR challenged unequal demands of sexual morality on men and women in general as well. His ideas originated not only from a hatred of the north, racial concepts of Aryan and Dravidian but also from a desire for a world that would be free from all kinds of inequalities and oppression. In his world, this would be a society free from inequalities based on race and gender. But ironically, his critique of the Ramayana and of Sita on the issue of sexual morality had within it the rationale for the elevation of Kannaki as the ideal for all Tamil women to emulate. In portraying Kannaki as a symbol of chastity, his followers would ignore EVR’s critique of Valluvar and notions of ‘karpu’ and instead follow in the footsteps of Valluvar in making the husband worthy of worship by the wife.

Not all of his followers were ready for a revolution that would be a social revolution as well. Even by the time of the anti Hindi agitation of the late 1930s and through the forties the early zeal for radical social transformation of Tamil society had been blunted.⁶² What is more during the anti Hindi agitations of the 1940s women themselves likened the Tamil language to Kannaki and chastity and clamored for ‘purity’.⁶³ So, it is entirely understandable that both Bharatidasan and Karunanidhi held steadfast to the concept of ‘karpu’ in their narration of the epic *Silappatikaram*. Both the writers were willing to make subtle and not so subtle changes in the content of the story and in the depiction of some of the characters in the story. In their hands the Brahmin characters are either absent or vilified. Kovalan is transformed from a man tossed around by karma and his own weaknesses to a lover of the arts and protector of Tamil women and culture. But Kannaki not only remains what she was in the hands of Ilango Adigal, her character is further embellished to make her innocently responsible for her own misfortunes. In

⁶¹ Quoted in Sumathi Ramaswamy, *Passions of the Tongue*, p. 235.

⁶² Anandi S., ‘women’s Question in the Dravidian Movement, 1925-1948’, *Social Scientist*, Nos. 4 & 5, 1991.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

Karunanidhi's narration of the story, it is she who encourages her husband to save Matavi from the fate of ending up with an old Greek merchant. It is she who asks him to go to Matavi to explain why he cannot be with her and thus being the cause of the two meeting and then ending up as lovers. Not only does Bharatidasan refer to her repeatedly as a woman of 'karpu', mother of 'karpu' even⁶⁴, he just falls short of calling Kovalan a god. Instead, he insists, for a woman the husband is everything.⁶⁵ However, elsewhere he refers to women of Pukar waking up and worshipping their husbands:

¾±0óÐ ÁĒĀĀĒ ĒĪ | °óÓó ŠĀĪ¾0
 Ī¾ĀĀĀ ÁĪ | ĀĀĀ Ī ĀĒĪóŠ¾
 ±¾0ŪĒ ĪĀĀĀĀ Āó | ¾Ī0¾ ĀĪ Ī2ó
 ±0óŠĀĪ¾0⁶⁶
 When the Sun rises,
 Young women rise
 Worshipping their husbands

In a similar way Karunanidhi has Kannaki touch the feet of Kovalan and there is a reference to Valluvar's adage:

¾0Āó | ¾ĪĒĪĪ | ¾Ī0Ī | ¾Ī0ĪĪĪ
 Īó | ĪĪ | Īóóó ĀĀĒ⁶⁷

Vvs Aiyer translated this verse as:

Behold the woman who worshipping not other Gods but worshipping her husband even as she riseth from bed: the rain-cloud obeyeth her commands.⁶⁸

Kannaki falls at the feet of Kovalan again when he returns to her after his misunderstanding with Matavi.⁶⁹ Nowhere in the epic of Ilango does Kannaki fall at the feet of Kovalan. Interestingly, Karunanidhi even has Matavi and Kannaki refer to each other warmly.⁷⁰

There is another irony in the way Kannaki was presented by the ideologues of the Dravida Movement. In the work of

⁶⁴ Kannaki Puratchi Kappiyam, p. 174.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 67-68.

⁶⁷ Kural, verse 55, Silappatikaram Nataka Kappiyam, p. 36.

⁶⁸ Aiyar Vvs, The Kural, p. 15.

⁶⁹ Silappatikaram Nataka Kappiyam, op cit., p. 61.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 53, 61. By the time Karunanidhi wrote his play, it was illegal to take another wife while one wife was alive except with the consent of the wife. Karunanidhi had remarried while his second wife was alive and Kanimozhi, his daughter was born to his third wife on January 1, 1968, the year the play was published. His first wife died early.

Ilango, Kannaki acquires supernatural powers, power enough to burn down a city, because of the way she lived-patient, forgiving and chaste. What is more she would not only go to the heavenly world with her husband, she would be worshipped as a goddess by the mortals on this earth. That would be her reward for living the life of a chaste woman. However, Bharatidasan and Karunanidhi rewrote the epic with a different purpose. The idea was to showcase Tamil culture, one in which Kovalan has to be blameless and Kannaki has to be chaste and forgiving. From the rationalist atheist position Kannaki cannot have supernatural powers and she cannot become a goddess. In this ideal society that the two authors portray she is denied even that which is promised in the story as narrated by Ilango. Her apotheosis is an essential aspect of the story. In the works of the two playwrights however, a statue is made but only to 'speak the story of chastity'.⁷¹ Karunanidhi refers to the statue briefly but has Matavi place her daughter Manimekalai at its feet. He uses the statue and its installation to advocate harmonious relations between the women in the life of the man Kovalan.

The supernatural is edited out of the story as well. In the epic the breasts of Kannaki acquire supernatural powers by virtue of the nature of her life. Kannaki could use her breast as a torch to burn the city of Madurai. Even in the varied representations of Kannaki in the folk and textual traditions the city of Madurai burns through an action of Kannaki. Her curse, her breast or water droplets from her hair cause the fire. In the story as narrated by Bharatidasan and Karunanidhi, however, she is deprived of this power even as her 'karpu' is emphasized upon. In the narration of Bharatidasan the people of the city of Madurai burn it down when the king executes Kovalan unjustly and in the case of Karunanidhi, the fire starts by accident. So, then, in the hands of the two staunch supporters of Dravidian ideology, women must live within the bounds of 'karpu' but could enjoy no powers as a consequence. Tamil women must live a virtuous life in the name of Tamil culture.

Conclusion

The middle decades of the twentieth century redefined the politics of the then Madras Presidency and later Madras state. DMK came

⁷¹ KannakiPuratchiKappiyam, p. 178.

to power in Madras in 1967. But by then the Justice Party, and more importantly the Self Respect Movement and the Dravida Kazhagam of EVR had contributed significantly in redrawing its social, cultural and political frame. The DMK drew heavily from this ideological pool and acknowledged it with pride. It retained the hostility to the north and all that it supposedly represented. The discourse of race was never completely abandoned. But it also departed from its ideological parent in important ways. EVR critiqued the Tamil cultural past as represented in the *Kural* of Valluvar and the epic *Silappatikaram* as much as he attacked the Aryan/Brahman north. The DMK however, glorified the cultural past uncritically and rewrote an ancient text, as in the case of *Silappatikaram* only to remodel them to suit a political agenda. This new election driven agenda did not have a radical social programme. The leaders of the Dravida Movement wanted to oust the Congress (described as a party of the north and of upper castes) from power. They did not want a social revolution. The interventions of EVR, that vociferous champion of women's rights, were completely disowned through silence. The elevation of Kannaki as a symbol of Tamil culture and as the embodiment of chastity reined in the social radicalism of EVR. The statue of Kannaki on Marina beach then, represents this retrograde social stance of the Dravidian Party that abandoned the more radical social programme of EVR. The reworked epic was useful to convey the ideology of cultural nationalism, regional politics of the Dravidian variety and yet with its innate social conservatism.

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