

Twentieth Century Tamil Society's Ambivalent Engagement with a Cherished Past

The nineteenth century was important for south India, particularly for the Tamil speaking region, for the development of the idea that it was culturally distinct from north India. Language as a marker of identity, articulation of an idea of race, the conceptualization of the region south of the Vindhyas as one occupied by this race and the consequent understanding that people of the south live and lived from ancient times by a set of codes and social norms different from those of the people of the north were some of the elements that marked these developments. The publication of what came to be called the *sangam* literature, the *Kural* and towards the end of the century the epics *Silappatikaram* and *Manimekalai*, provided a substantial literary basis for this understanding. They underlined the antiquity of an ancient Tamil society as well as the depth of its literary achievements. But their reception amongst the literate reading public of Madras Presidency was not unambiguous or unmediated by twentieth century ideas of propriety. While the *Kural* escaped the censoring gaze of these times, some of the earlier literature and *Silappatikaram* did not. The discomfort of an articulate Tamil reading public with some aspects of the corpus of ancient literature informs about the concerns of the times. The past then was fashioned to suit the present even as it was held up as fit for emulation in the present. The preoccupation with the past led to a relook at some goddesses of the past and contemporary times as well. While I briefly mention the ambivalent responses to some poems of the *sangam* and a couple of goddesses, my primary focus is on the *Silappatikaram*.

Framing a Separate Identity

In the nineteenth century Sanskrit was taken to be the mother of all languages in India. A major contribution for this understanding came from the researches of Christian missionaries and Indologists of the Asiatic Society situated in Calcutta. However, from at least the second decade of the century the primacy of Sanskrit came to be challenged through philological scholarship undertaken by British administrators. The pioneer in this effort was Francis Whyte Ellis of the college of Fort St George at Madras, who showed through his research that the languages of the south were independent of Sanskrit except for some loan words that had crept into them over the centuries. With the publication of Caldwell's *The Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or South Indian Family of Languages* in 1856, however, the idea of the Dravidian family of languages was firmly established. Amongst these languages

Caldwell gave primacy to Tamil as a language that had a literary tradition more ancient than any of the others.¹ He asserted that Tamil being the most cultivated of all the Dravidian idioms “can dispense with its Sanskrit altogether, if need be, and not only stand alone, but flourish without its aid.”²

At this time language and race were taken to be inextricable. The idea of a distinct Dravidian race and its languages was an important contribution of the Orientalists in Madras. As Caldwell tried to show, the ‘Dravidian race’ inhabited much of India before they were pushed down to the south by the Scythians and this was even before the north faced the might of the ‘Aryans’.³ He also argued that the Dravidian race developed highly refined languages in the south before it was influenced by the Aryans who later came to the south. There was no clash in the south between these two races but a peaceful influence of the Aryan language and culture on the already developed Dravidian race.⁴ The equation between race and language was later abandoned by Max Muller, the ardent proponent of the idea of Aryan race, and he proposed that philology and ethnology should be delinked.⁵ But in the 1950s a separate state of Tamil Nadu was demanded not only on grounds of language but also ethnicity; that those who spoke the language were one ethnic group.⁶

If there was a distinct race that spoke a language of distinct linguistic origin, the idea of a territorial space for this race was not far behind. As early as 1827, Kavali Venkata Ramaswami published a map of the ‘Dekhan’ which reflected his understanding of the Deccan as a region. Even though he defined it as ‘Hindu’, he also linked language and territory.⁷ In 1859 Simon Casie Chitty identified the region of the people who spoke Tamil as “that part of India, which was formerly under the sway of the *Chera*, *Chola* and *Pandya* kings and of those of the eastern and northern provinces of Ceylon.”⁸ He further asserted “Few nations on earth can perhaps boast of so many poets as the Tamils.”⁹ Caldwell identified the

¹ Robert Caldwell, *A Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or the South Indian Family of Languages*, p. 6

² *Ibid.*, p. 47

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 107-111

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 112

⁵ Trautmann, *Aryans and British India*, p. 172

⁶ T. P. Meenakshisundaranar, *Thamizha, Ninaitthuppar*, p. 137 (First published in 1954)

⁷ Lisa Mitchell, ‘Knowing the Deccan’ in Thomas R. Trautmann (ed.), *The Madras School of Orientalism*, pp. 171-172

⁸ Simon Casie Chitty, *The Tamil Plutarch*, Preface

⁹ *Ibid.*

region of the Tamils (a word derived according to him from Dravida) as divided from ancient times into the subdivisions of Pandiya, Chola and Chera.

5.2 Society in the Imagined South

The contribution of Ellis at Fort St George was not limited to the discovery of a family of languages of the south. He also asserted that the laws, customs and mores of the societies in the south were different from those of the north. When the Calcutta Orientalists tried to form a code of Hindu law, Ellis contested the presumption and tried to show that a different situation and different authorities of law prevailed in the south.¹⁰ With his encouragement a law book, *Smriti Candrica*, was published in 1815.¹¹ The assumption that the societal norms of all of India had their source in Sanskrit texts was effectively challenged.

Print and the circulation of indigenous stories further contributed to the construction of a separate 'national' cultural identity.¹² The nineteenth century was the century of print in Madras Presidency as it was in other Presidencies of British India. Through the early decades of the nineteenth century a large number of books were published. Though the initial efforts were towards the publication of Tamil grammars and dictionaries, the efforts quickly turned to indigenous literature.¹³ These were important as the foundational bricks for the construction of a separate 'Dravidian' cultural identity. The publication of folklore in the latter half of the nineteenth century was a phenomenon noticeable in other parts of India as well. However, it carried an additional import in Madras Presidency. While in Calcutta, Bombay and elsewhere the publication of folklore contributed to the construction of a national identity and the idea of a pre-colonial indigenous culture, in Madras it also meant the retrieval of a cultural tradition that predated the influence of the brahmanical Sanskritic traditions from the north.¹⁴ A missionary Beschi had already stated in the eighteenth century that Tamil as it was in the folktales was free from Sanskrit.¹⁵ A 'pure' origin would be claimed for folklore. Charles Gover in the 1870s published *The Folk Songs of Southern India*. This was a collection mostly of the Siddhas. Gover described the songs as pure

¹⁰ Trautmann, *The Aryan Debate*, p. 95. Also Stuart Blackburn, *Print, Folklore, and Nationalism in Colonial South India*, p. 159

¹¹ Blackburn, *ibid.*, p. 159

¹² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 44

¹³ Blackburn, p.94, Appendix

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 158

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 159

Dravidian and asserted ‘episodes from the great epics and the erotic chapters’ were omitted since ‘both are purely Brahmanic, entirely foreign to the Dravidian literature and mind’.¹⁶ A major contribution in collection and publication of Tamil folklore was made by S.M.Natesa Sastri. Through the 1880s and 1890s, Sastri published a series of collections of Tamil folklore. He believed that, “every nation, whether ancient or modern, has had and continues to have its own peculiar wit and humor.”¹⁷

Another text that enjoyed popularity and continues to do so to this day is the *Thirukkural* of Thiruvalluvar. First published in 1812, it became in the subsequent decades a symbol of the originality and brilliance of the Dravidian Tamils. Gover included this text in his anthology. The *sangam* texts were yet to be published and the *Kural* continued to enjoy popularity as not only the oldest Tamil text but as one that described the moral world of the Tamils before they were influenced by the north. It was taken to be the description of a world before the inequalities of caste and ritual superstitions had crept in.¹⁸

By the last decades of the nineteenth century Tamil poems which could be dated to at least the early centuries of the Christian era were discovered and published. ‘Purity’ was claimed for these Tamil poems as well. But even before the publication the *sangam* poems, ‘purity’ was the adjective used to describe any Tamil poem which seemed not to have Sanskrit words. Commenting on a medieval Tamil poem Ellis had asserted its ‘purity’. Purity to him meant the absence of Sanskrit words.¹⁹ The publication of the *sangam* poems was important because now the corpus of Tamil literature consisted not only of folklore but also what could be labelled as classical Tamil which could be stood at par with Sanskrit.

It is in this context of a connection with a distinct and glorious cultural past that in the nineties of the nineteenth century the epics in Tamil were published. The story of Kannagi as she is in the epic was possibly known to only a few in the Tamil regions of southern India in the late nineteenth century. U.V.Swaminatha Aiyar, the indefatigable champion of Tamil, lamented that many in the villages who had palm leaf copies of Ilango’s epic were unaware of its value. He travelled to homes in distant villages in Tamil Nadu in search of palm leaf copies of the epic. Even those who possessed the works were unaware of their value and allowed them to crumble to dust in the attics of their homes. Other works of the *sangam* age

¹⁶ Quoted in Blackburn, op. cit., p. 161

¹⁷ Quoted in Blackburn, *ibid.*, p. 171

¹⁸ Blackburn, p. 162

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 159

were also published around the same time and with the same effort.²⁰ These publications generated a lot of interest. Even though the publisher struggled to publish them for lack of funds, they were appreciated by the few hundred that it reached for their literary value and for the light they shed on an age long forgotten. They constituted the repositories of what came to be represented as 'true Tamil culture'. U.V.Swaminatha Aiyar managed to bring out a full version of the epic *Silappatikaram* in 1892. By then others had published some sections of it. This and the subsequent publication of its twin *Manimekalai* further shored up the Tamil's sense of self and pride in a distinct and deep cultural past.

By the turn of the century then, through the efforts of British administrators and Indian scholars newly trained in European education and tools of research, the wherewithal for the conceptualization of a 'south' was complete. The 'south' was now a region inhabited by a people who spoke a different family of languages (the oldest of which was Tamil), who had a deep history attested to by their ancient literature and which was free from the influence of Sanskrit. This literature was taken to encapsulate the essence of Dravidian/Tamil culture. Tamil ethics was contained in the *Kural*, Tamil notions of justice and ideal of womanhood was encapsulated in the epics, primarily the *Silappatikaram*.

5.3 Fitting the Past to the Frame

The idea of separateness deeply influenced the writings on language and culture through the twentieth century. But the past as constituted in the literature of the *sangam* and the epics was used selectively to define this culture. Some aspects of ancient Tamil society as reflected in the poems of the *sangam* were interpreted in ways that would fit contemporary sensibilities. Some religious practices were similarly criticized as unsuitable for a people who were proud inheritors of an ancient Tamil culture. On the other hand some elements of this ancient culture were elevated as quintessential to Tamil culture.

Many early writings on Tamil culture and literature celebrated the deep cultural past of the Tamils and expressed regret that this glorious ancient culture had remained hidden for

²⁰ U.V.Swaminatha Aiyar, *En Charithiram*. The entire work is a documentation of his struggles for education and in the publication of these works.

centuries. An early work which argued on these lines was by V.Kanakasabhai.²¹ He attempted to show the Tamils as a distinct race that had been submerged through regular inclusion in their society of "Canarese, the Moguls, the Telugu Naicks, the Mahrattas". He claimed that these people collectively endangered the very existence of the Tamils.²² This reflected the developing sense that a glorious Tamil past, its culture and language had been sullied by external influences over several centuries.²³ Hence there was a desire to reclaim this past culture in its purity, without any trace of varied outside influences.

This 'external influence' was most clearly seen to be in the influence of Sanskrit on Tamil language and Brahmanical influence (as constituted in elements like caste, rituals and temples) on Tamil society. Kanakasabhai described a Tamil society that was hierarchical in nature where when men of the "higher classes passed in the streets, the lower classes made way for them. The Pulayan or scavenger on meeting a nobleman bowed before him, with both his hands joined in a posture of supplication."²⁴ Yet, he complained that the Brahmin grammarian Tholkappiyar tried to bring the Tamils under the caste system.²⁵ Certainly, the objection was to inequalities based on birth, but there was a hesitation in acknowledging that Tamil society in its supposed pristine state was not without inequalities of class and hierarchies of occupation. Yet, Kanakasabhai himself used caste as a category when referring to bards in ancient Tamil poems. He said, "There are four classes of bards mentioned in ancient Tamil poems-The Panar, Kooththar, Porunar and Viraliyar. The Panar were a very low caste and lived in the outskirts of the towns among the harlots, and when they wandered about from town to town, they were accompanied by their wives and children and carried with them their begging bowls and cooking utensils."²⁶ The simultaneous reverence for the past and desire to change with the times is attested to in the conclusion where he, on the one hand, was thankful that "a sterner and superior race of pale-faced men dropped, as it were, from the clouds, and saved the Tamils and all other races of India from anarchy and misrule",²⁷ and under the English, "Tamils ...present the unique spectacle of a race of people who have retained their language and civilization almost unchanged for the last two thousand

²¹ V. Kanakasabhai, *Tamils Eighteen Hundred Years Ago*

²² *Ibid.*, p. 237

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 114

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 116. Later writers would reject the idea that Tholkappiyar was a Brahmin.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 132

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 237

years or more.”²⁸ But on the other hand he suggested that, “Tamils should now awake from their apathy of ages, if they wish to reap the full benefit” of changes brought by the English.²⁹ Change was to be brought about “on the lines of western civilization, avoiding its vices...”³⁰ Women, in this transformation that he wished to see of Tamil society, feature only as wives and mothers when he exhorts the Tamils to “educate their women and train them to be intelligent wives and mothers...”³¹

In this sense of separateness, it was imperative that goddesses that were elevated as fit for worship met the standards of 'Tamil culture'. If they did not there was a call for their rejection as unfit to belong to 'Tamil culture' at all. The relationship between goddesses and mortal women was thus, real and immediate. For instance, the northern belt of the Tamil region was and continues to be dotted with numerous temples dedicated to Draupadi, the wife of the five Pandava brothers of the *Mahabharata*. The tradition is dated to the period of the Pallavas who ruled this belt between the 6th and 9th centuries.³² So, the tradition was at least a thousand years old in the twentieth century. Yet, a writer in 1955 condemned the worship of Draupadi not only on grounds that she did not belong to the Tamil culture but also because her worship might cast aspersions on the character of all Tamil women.³³ He said:

மங்கையர் கற்புப் பொற்புடன் விளங்கிய நாட்டில், கற்புத் தெய்வங்கள் பல வாழ்ந்த தமிழ் நாட்டில், பிற நாட்டுப் பெண் தெய்வங்கள் குடிபுகுந்தன. தமிழ் நாட்டின் முழுப்பகுதியில் அல்லாவிட்டாலும், ஒரு சில பகுதிகளிலாயினும் எப்படி இந்தத் துரோபதியின் கோயில் இடம் பெற்றது என்று எண்ணும் போது வருந்தாதிருக்க முடியவில்லை....துரோபதி இங்குத் தெய்வமாகப் போற்றப்படுகின்றாள் என்றால், அது தமிழ் நாட்டுப் பெண் குலத்திக்கே வரும் இழிவுதானே? ...வெளி நாட்டான் ஒருவன் இந்த வழிபாட்டைக் கண்டால், தமிழ் நாட்டுப் பெண்கள் எல்லாம் இப்படிப் பலரை மணக்கும் வழக்கத்தாலேதான் அவளை வணங்குகின்றார்களோ என எண்ண மாட்டானா?... 'உயிரினும் செயிர்தீர் காட்சிக் கற்புச் சிறந்தன்று,' என்று போற்றிய - போற்றி வரும் - தமிழ் நாட்டில், எப்படி இந்தப் புதுப் பத்தினியின் வழிபாடு குடி புகுந்தது?³⁴

While Draupadi could be rejected by the scholars as unfit for worship by the Tamils and they could deride her worship by the illiterate, their silence on the ancient Tamil goddess of victory, Korravai is intriguing. Korravai features in several of the *sangam* poems. Even

²⁸ Ibid., p. 238

²⁹ Ibid., p.239

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., p. 240

³² Alf Hildebeitel, *The Cult of Draupadi*, p. 13

³³ A.M. Paramasivanandam, *Pen*, p. 84

³⁴ Ibid., p. 84

though she is originally the goddess of one eco region (*palai* or the arid zone), she was known in the entire macro-region of Tamilakam.³⁵ She was closely associated with blood sacrifice and there are frequent references in the poems about the offering to her of rice mixed with the blood of either the slain enemy soldiers or of the devotee himself.³⁶ She is also worshipped as a mother who carried Murugan, the god of the hill regions, in her womb.³⁷ Yet, this goddess was not elevated as a Tamil goddess in the twentieth century even while sections of Tamil scholars were rejecting Sita and Draupadi as unfit for worship and emulation. I would venture to suggest that this was for several reasons. Korravai had an autonomous presence in the *sangam*. She did not have a spouse. Even when there were references to her as the mother of Murugan, there is no simultaneous reference to the father. Reference to Shiva as her husband does not occur until the tenth century when she was already fully appropriated in the *puranic* tradition.³⁸ Secondly, the close association of this goddess with blood and flesh sacrifice would not appeal to the twentieth century literate community who were crafting a past for themselves from the same *sangam* literature but as a rational society. Thirdly, when she was closely associated with Durga and acquired Shiva as her spouse, the entire mythology had already been assimilated within a brahmanical religious tradition. For the society of the twentieth century, the *Thirukkural* of Valluvar which emphasized a secular ethic and chaste Kannagi who fought a monarch to avenge the death of her husband, were much more appealing as icons of Tamil culture.³⁹

The attempt to tailor the ancient Tamil culture as reflected in its literature is visible in the translations into English of ancient Tamil texts that were undertaken through the latter half of the twentieth century. Some of the verses in the work were found to be not in keeping with the twentieth century Tamil's sense of propriety. Ilakuvanar attempted to obfuscate certain aspects of *Tholkappiyam* that he found unacceptable within this sense of Tamil culture. For instance, in *Meypattu iyal*, Tholkappiyar, details the different stages in the emotions of the *kilatti* when she experiences passion for the *kilavan*. In the third phase, the verse reads:

அல்குல் தைவரல் அணிந்தவை திருத்தல்
இல் வலியுறுத்தல் இரு கையும் எடுத்தலொடு

³⁵ R.Mahalakshmi, *The Making of the Goddess*, p. 55

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 51

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 53

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 2

³⁹ Kannagi was also by now assimilated within the Bhagavathy tradition. But that was usually dismissed by literary scholars as a corrupt practice of the illiterate. See pp. 161-162 below.

சொல்லிய நான்கே மூன்று என மொழிய⁴⁰

This verse is translated by Murugan, in a work published in 2002, as:

The third phase of the clandestine love manifests in:

Her seeing her hips down off from exposure as the garments slip,

Correcting the waist-ornaments thereon,

Her pretence to be unassailed by slings of passion,

And her hands rising her pretence notwithstanding.⁴¹

P.S.Subrahmanya Sastri translated it thus, using a Latin word for *alkul*:

They say that the third consists of four:-placing the hand on the pudendum muliebre,

bringing the ornaments to their original position, pretending to be strong and raising both the hands.⁴²

Ilakkuvanar however, translated it thus:

Softly touching the waist, correcting the wearings, exhibiting the power of resistance without having it, and lifting the two hands-these four belong to the third stage.⁴³

Several poems of the *sangam* clearly indicate that men and women sought and brought about sexual union in rendezvous with their loved ones before marriage. Tholkappiyar devoted an entire chapter to how a poet could handle situations of secret love. *Agam* poetry included sexual union, elopement and marriage. However, in the social context of the twentieth century, when sexual expression was much more restricted, there was insistence by authors that lovers met before marriage but there was no sexual intercourse. In an anthology of ancient Tamil poetry published in 1959, Nalladai R.Balakrishna Mudaliyar stated, “When furtive love or kalavu leads to or culminates in ceremonial or open marriage, it is called karpu, or conjugal life. During secret engagement or kalavu period, though there was physical contact between the lovers like embracing, decorating the lady-love etc there was no sexual intercourse.”⁴⁴ What is more, the translator went on to translate ‘*iyarkai punarchi*’ as

⁴⁰ Murugan, verse 1205, p.520

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² P.S.Subrahmanya Sastri, *Tolkappiyam*, verse 259, p. 141

⁴³ Ilakkuvanar, verse 263, p. 215

⁴⁴ Nalladai R.Balakrishna Mudaliyar, *The Golden Anthology of Ancient Tamil Literature, Vol. II*, pp. xv-xvi

‘providential first meet of the lovers, love at first sight’⁴⁵, when it clearly means natural sexual union, because *punarchi* in this context means sexual union.

5.4 *Karpu* and Tamil Women

The desire to rework the past to meet the concerns of the present led some writers to present ancient kings as social reformers. The story of Kannagi the wife of king Pekan was well known amongst Tamil scholars. A couple of *Purananuru* poems refer to Kannagi as the aggrieved wife whose husband, the king, was enamored of another woman. Her sorrow is communicated to the king by poets who visit him. In 1947 a writer used this reference to write a play where he presented the king as not only changing his ways on the advice of poets but ending the practice of prostitution altogether in his realm. King Pekan announces to his people:

ஆதலால் என் அறிவுத் தமிழகத்துக் குலமகளிர் விலைமகளிர் என்ற இருபிரிவு இன்றோடு ஒழிகதில். இம்மா லையோடு மறைகதில். ஒழுக்க நெறியான், தமிழ்மகளிர் என்ற ஒரு குலமே நிலவுக; வாழ்க.⁴⁶

Echoing the attitude to prostitutes that the twentieth century society had he says:

தாயாம் பெண் குலத்திற்குப் பரத்தையர் ஒரு மறுப் போல்வர்; பாலில் நஞ்சு போல்வர்; கண்ணில் பூப்போல்வர்; நெஞ்சில் துளைபோல்வர்.⁴⁷

The king further recommends and orders the marriage of prostitutes:

பல காரணங்களால் இந்நாள்வரை மெய்விற்று உடல் வளர்த்த பொருட்பெண்டிர் இனித் தத்தமக்கு ஏற்ற ஓர் ஆடவனை விரும்பி வரைந்து விருந்தோம்பும் இல்லறம் நடத்துதல் வேண்டும் என்பது உங்கள் அரசு அப்பெண்டிர்களுக்குச் செய்யும் வேண்டுகோளும் விதியுமாம்.⁴⁸

We can immediately see the echo of the debate on prostitution that raged in these years. The solution recommended by most was the marriage of prostitutes as Thiru.Vi.Ka did. These were serious concerns of the forties and fifties and the attempt here was to reform contemporary society. But this was done as an ideal society that ancient Tamils had already

⁴⁵ Ibid., p.xvi

⁴⁶ V.S. Manikkam, *Manaiyiyin Urimai*, p. 112

⁴⁷ Ibid., p.111

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 111-112

attempted to achieve. If ancient Tamil women were women of *karpu*, then the references to prostitutes in ancient literature could be rectified only by endowing the ancients with the desire to marry these women and thereby make them women of *karpu* as well. The preoccupation with *karpu* as a cultural concept unique to the Tamils found expression in many general essays on women in these decades. By the early 1960s *karpu* came to be listed as one of the essential qualities of a Tamil woman and as a unique achievement of the Tamils. One S.K. Saami in an essay titled 'தமிழர் வாழ்வில் கற்பு' said that the word was sacred and brought honour to women and to the culture of the Tamils.

அது பெண் குலத்துக்கே பெருமை தரும் புனிதச் சொல். தமிழகப் பண்புக்கே மாண்பு தரும் ஒரு மகிமைச் சொல்.⁴⁹

He reasoned that since ancient Tamils had maritime trade as their primary occupation, it became essential to develop the concept of *karpu* to protect the women from straying and to enforce the high ideal of one man for one woman.⁵⁰ But Saami recommended that contemporary women follow the rules of *karpu* by basing his arguments on the couplets of the ancient, the revered Valluvar. He suggested that women worship their husbands as recommended by Valluvar for it is the husbands who give them life and most importantly they give them the good fortune of becoming mothers.

எல்லா வரங்களையும் விடப் பிள்ளைவரம் சிறந்ததல்லையா? இல்லற வாழ்வைவிட எந்த வாழ்வுதான் சிறந்தது? திருமணம் செய்துகொண்ட நாளிலிருந்து ஒவ்வொரு பெண்ணுக்கும் அவளுடைய கணவன் தான் தெய்வம்.

If worshipping their husbands as gods was recommended, dying with them at their deaths was elevated as a virtue as well. Saami categorized women who died at the death of their husbands into three. The most distinguished women of *karpu* were those who died as soon as they even heard of their husbands' death. He referred to Koppenrundevi, the wife of Nedunchezhiyan of *Silappatikaram* as an example of this kind of *karpu*. He then referred to women who lived for a few days after the death of their husbands and then joined them on the funeral pyre. In the third category were women who lived on for some years after attaining widowhood on account of their children. They followed all the rules of widowhood and died

⁴⁹ S. K. Saami, *Thamizhar Vaazhvil Karpu*, p.15

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.6

after fulfilling their responsibilities towards their children. Thus he established a close association between *karpū* and death.⁵¹

Another essayist drew heavily from Valluvar when he exhorted women to follow the rules set for their lives by the ancients.⁵² The essay is in the form of a series of letters from a mother to her daughter in which she tells her daughter the duties of a housewife. In one letter the mother informs her daughter that Tamil Nadu alone gave the female of the human species a place of honour in society.⁵³ She further adds in the same letter that women are compared to milk which once spilt cannot be poured back into a vessel. Then she states:

நமது மரபு கற்பு மேம்பாட்டை உயர்த்திப் போற்றி வந்திருக்கிறது. நமது கதைகளும் காவியங்களும் கற்பின் மாட்சியையே எடுத்து உரைக்கின்றன. பத்தினிப் பெண்டிர் வாழும் நாட்டிலே மழை வளம் நிறைந்தும் ஆட்சி மாட்சி உச்ச நிலையிலே திகழும் என்பது நம் மரபிலே எழுந்த நம்பிக்கை.⁵⁴

Thiruvanan (in the voice of the mother to her daughter) rejected Bharatiyar's critique of traditional expectations from women. He reiterated the qualities that ancient normative texts assert as the qualities of women:

"நாணம், அச்சம், மடம், பயிர்ப்பு" என்னும் இந்த நான்கு பண்புகளும் நங்கையர் இனத்திற்குக் கட்டாயம் இருக்க வேண்டிய இயல்புகள் என்று நமது நூல்கள் முரசு கொட்டுகின்றன. ஆனால், இன்று பலர் நாணம், மடம், அச்சம், பயிர்ப்பு என்னும் இந்தப் பழைய பண்புகள் தேவையில்லை என்று கொக்கரித்துப் பேசுகிறார்கள். 'நாணமும் அச்சமும் நாய்க்கு வேண்டுமாம்' என்று பாரதியார் கூறியுள்ளாரே என்று துள்ளிக் குதிக்கிறார்கள்! விடுதலைப் போராட்டத்திலே பெண்ணினம் குதிக்க வேண்டும் என்ற வேட்கையின் காரணமாகப் பாரதியார் அப்படிச் கூறியிருக்கலாம்!⁵⁵

Thus not only were the norms reflected in ancient literature accepted selectively and uncritically for all women in contemporary society as befitting Tamil women, even the rare criticism and rejection of them by Bharatiyar was dismissed as an aberration belonging to a colonial era.

⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 42-50

⁵² Thiruvanan, *Kudumbathil Pennin Kadamai*

⁵³ Ibid., p. 91

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 94

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 95

5.5 *Silappatikaram* and Tamil Culture

Silappatikaram, along with the entire corpus of *sangam* poetry and the other epics, was utilized fully through the twentieth century to assert not only the unique cultural traditions of the Tamil people, but also their antiquity and purity. Essays of comment and criticism on the *Silappatikaram* published in these years reiterated these themes. In the pristine Tamil society of the ancient past as conceptualized in the twentieth century men were courageous and honourable. Women were defined by their *karpu*. Kannagi was projected as a prototype of an ideal 'Tamil woman'. But Kovalan abandoned her to live with Matavi, a courtesan. There was discomfort with this part of the story in these years. There was an attempt to rehabilitate Kovalan through various interpretations of his actions in the story. Similarly, Matavi received sympathetic assessment from most of the writers and commentators.

Silappatikaram in this developing literary tradition was appropriated as an epic that highlighted and symbolized the unified Tamil Nadu, Tamil people and their exemplary culture in the times gone by. As early as 1915, retelling the story in prose form for the benefit of students and the lay public, T.Selvakesavaraya Mudaliar wrote in his foreword, “this book is eminently suited not only for lovers of Tamil but also for anyone who understands Tamil, to explain the leadership of Tamil land in the age of the epic, the good conduct of the Tamils, the various religions that thrived in the Tamil land, the greatness of Tamil, the state of culture amongst the Tamils and the manliness of the Tamil soldiers.”⁵⁶ Having said this, Mudaliar did not embellish the narrative in any way to make his point.

M.P.Sivagnanam's writings on the text were much more political in their aims. In several writings in these decades the epic represented the culture of the Tamils. Even Sivagnanam saw it as such. But in his hands it also transformed into a text of a territorially identified people. For him *Silappatikaram* was not just a literary text. It connected a people, their language and a territory. In the foreword to a collection of his articles on the epic published in 1973, he said he had realized a quarter century before that *Silappatikaram* was an instrument to transform the Tamil regions into a true Tamil Nadu, land of the Tamils:

தமிழ் வழங்கும் நிலப் பகுதியை உண்மையான தமிழ்நாடு ஆக மாற்றுவதற்குச் சிலப்பதிகாரம் ஒன்றே சிறந்த கருவி என்று கால் நூற்றாண்டுகட்டு முன்பு அறிந்தேன்.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ T. Selvakesavaraya Mudaliar, *Kannaki Charittiram*, p. x

⁵⁷ M.P.Sivagnanam, *Silappatikara Thiranaivu*, p. 10

As in several works in these years, *Silappatikaram* was not taken as a work of fiction. It was a **true** representation of society and the culture of a people called Tamils who lived 'eighteen hundred years ago'. It was a text that every Tamilian could be proud of. Sudananda Bharathiyaar was convinced, for instance, that if the Tamils read the epic and owned it as their own they can be like the Himalayas before the world.⁵⁸ He wondered if Tamil Nadu would ever witness the same greatness ever in the future:

அத்தகைய வீறு பெற்ற இன்பத் தமிழகத்தை, உண்மைத் தமிழகத்தை, சுதந்திரத் தமிழகத்தை, இனிக் காண்போமோ!⁵⁹

He wanted to see the Tamils and Tamil Nadu attain the same greatness:

தமிழும், தமிழரும், தமிழகமும் மீண்டும் பழம் பெருமை பெற்று விளங்க வேண்டும்.⁶⁰

He exhorted the Tamils to read the epic since it had the capacity to infuse their veins with 'Tamil courage':

தமிழீர், உங்கள் நரம்புகளில் தமிழ்விறு ஏறுக! ஆந்த வீற்றை யேற்றும் ஒரு சக்திக்கனல் சிலப்பதிகாரத்தில் உள்ளது.⁶¹

Lastly, *Silappatikaram* came to be presented as an adornment of the goddess of Tamil-தமிழ் தாய். U.V.Swaminatha Aiyar had imagined the *Silappatikaram* as one of the adornments of the goddess of Tamil as early as the 1890s, wherein the work of Ilango was her anklets.⁶² At other times it was one of the five ornaments that decorated the chest of the goddess of Tamil.⁶³ A glorious ancient Tamil culture was further shown to reflect best in the character of the protagonist, Kannagi, who came to symbolize not only Tamil ideal of womanhood but 'Tamil culture' itself.

⁵⁸ Sudananda Bharatiyaar, *Silambuch Chelvam*, p. 20

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ramaswamy, *Passions of the Tongue*, p. 116

⁶³ Aranga Venkatachalam Pillai, *Silappatikaram*, p. 6

5.6 Kannagi, Matavi, Kovalan and Tamil Culture

Commentators felt free to interpret the *Silappatikaram* and its protagonists in a way that added to the sense of cultural pride and identity that was an all pervasive theme in the writings of these years. In the process they fleshed out the characteristics that would befit a Tamil woman and to some extent Tamil man. Not all of these commentators wrote avowedly to highlight the elements that constituted 'Tamil culture'. Yet, their writings reflect an awareness of a cultural past and a distinctive present.

One of the earliest prose narratives of the story of Kannagi was by V. Kanakasabhai who in his book published in 1904; just 12 years after the publication of the full version of the epic; included the narratives of both *Silappatikaram* and *Manimekalai*. Even though he followed the epic *Silappatikaram* closely in his narrative, he also introduced some elements absent in the epic. He was perhaps the first to begin the rehabilitation of Kovalan in the eyes of an imagined Tamil community. In his rendering when Kovalan returns to Kannagi after several years of cohabitation with Matavi, he says, "I am ashamed of myself. I have wasted all the wealth given to me by my parents on a deceitful actress".⁶⁴ The words used by Ilango in this situation may be open to multiple interpretations. Kovalan says:

சலம்புணர் கொள்கைச் சலதியோ டாடிக்
குலந்தரு வான் பொருட் குன்றந் தொலைந்த
இலம்பாடு நாணுத் தருமெனக் கென்ன⁶⁵

Translating this verse, Parthasarathy has taken the last line to mean shame on account of the poverty Kovalan has brought upon himself through his actions:

*By keeping company with a liar,
Full of deceitful conduct, I have lost,
The mountainous hoard of wealth left to me
By my family. The poverty has brought shame on me.*⁶⁶

It is not accurate to interpret Kovalan's words to mean his shame for his actions. The most generous interpretation of these lines would be that he regretted that his actions led to his

⁶⁴ V. Kanakasabhai, *The Tamils Eighteen Hundred Years Ago*, p. 147

⁶⁵ Swaminatha Aiyar, *Silappatikaram*, p. 243

⁶⁶ Parthasarathy, *The Cilappatikaram*, p. 92

losing the wealth that he had received from his parents. It is poverty இலம்பாடு that is a cause for shame. Kanakasabhai's free translation would indicate as much but without the close association the epic verse seems to carry between poverty and shame. Rendering the story in prose in 1915, Mudaliar remained close to the verse and translated it as:

"மாயப் பரத்தையோடு மருவியொழுகிய காரணத்தால் நமது குலத்தில் நெடுங்காலமாய் நீடித்துவந்த நிதியெல்லாம் தொலைந்து வறுமையுற்றேன். இவ்வறுமை எனக்கு மிக்க நாணைத் தருகின்றது" என்று கூறினான்.⁶⁷

Later writers were much more willing to gloss the actions of Kovalan in more definitive ways as we shall see. Another significant departure that Kanakasabhai made from the work of Ilango was that he omitted the mode used by Kannagi to burn the city of Madurai. He endowed her words with the power to burn: "'This king shall die and his palace shall be destroyed by fire,' said Kannagi in the bitterness of her anguish, and invoked the wrath of the god of fire."⁶⁸ Clearly, Kanakasabhai and at least some of the writers in these decades were squeamish about mentioning body parts of women.

If general essays on 'Woman' and 'Tamil Woman' detailed what a Tamil woman should be, Kannagi was presented as an ideal from the epic past fit for emulation. It was within a larger frame of 'Tamil culture' that 'Tamil woman' and Kannagi as an epitome of that ideal were placed. Writing an essay on the epic titled *Silappatikara Araichi* in 1942, Auvai S.Duraisaami Pillai asserted:

இது...தமிழ் வேந்தரின் ஆட்சி நலனும், அவர் காலத்தே அவர்களால் தமிழ் மகளிர் கற்புநிலை நன்கு மதிக்கப்பெற்று வந்த திறனும், தமிழுக்கு அவர்கள் ஆற்றிய தொண்டின் பெருமையும் நமக்கு உணர்த்துவது; ... தமிழ்த் தொண்டு புரிதற்கண் உயர்நிலையோர் தாழ்நிலையோர், அரசர், வணிகர், வேளாளர் என்ற வேறுபாடன்றிப் பண்டை மக்கள் அனைவரும் கருத்தூன்றியிருந்த காட்சியினை நம் கருத்திற்காட்டி மகிழ்வுறுத்துவது; ... சுருங்கச் சொல்லின், இற்றைக்கு ஆயிரத்தெண்ணூறு யாண்டுகட்குமுன் நம் ஆருயிர்ச் செந்தமிழ் நாடிருந்த செல்வ நிலையின் செம்மைக் காட்சியை இன்று நம்மனோர் இனிது கண்டு மகிழ்ந்து அந்நிலையினை யெய்தி மேம்படுதற்கு முயலுமாறு ஊக்கும் முத்தமிழ்ப் பெருங்கலை நிலையம் என்பது சாலும்.⁶⁹

We must notice that not only is *Silappatikaram* presented here as a true reflection of Tamil society but also as an ideal that contemporary Tamil society must strive to achieve. This is a

⁶⁷ T. Chelvakesavaraya Mudaliar, *Kannaki Charittiram*, p.25

⁶⁸ Kanakasabhai, *The Tamils Eighteen Hundred Years Ago*, p. 160

⁶⁹ Auvai S. Duraisaami Pillai, *Silappatikara Araichi*, p. 1

society that was egalitarian, where kings ruled well and respected virtuous women. While it is one of the stated purposes of the epic to show that virtuous women would be respected even in the heavenly world, Pillai, like several commentators after him detailed the characteristics of Kannagi to emphasize that she was a Tamil woman. He insisted that Ilango showed the greatness of a 'Tamil woman' through the character of Kannagi. He said:

இவர் கற்புக்கடம்பூண்ட பொற்புடைத் தமிழ்மகள் என்பதைப் பலவிடங்களில் இவர் கூறும் சொற்களால் இனிது தெளியலாம்.⁷⁰

The actions of Kannagi are presented as the actions of a 'தமிழ்மகள்'. In this reasoning even her demand for justice before the king is motivated not by a desire for justice as a value in itself but to correct the dishonour to someone born in தமிழ்க் குடி:

மானமுடைய தமிழ்க் குடியில் பிறந்த மறமகளாதலின்⁷¹

It is because she was a Tamil woman that she reacted the way she did when her husband was unjustly executed. It was, as Pillai asserted, the desire of all Tamil women of yore to see their king rule righteously. He said:

பண்டைத் தமிழ் மகளிர் தம்கற்பு நெறிகளுள் தம் நாட்டு அரசன் செங்கோலனாதல் வேண்டுமென்னும் வேட்கையுடையராதலை ஒன்றாக பேணி வந்தனர்.⁷²

In a detailed analysis of the character of Kannagi, Pillai repeatedly emphasized the *karpu* of Kannagi and the code of conduct of a virtuous woman, 'கற்பு நெறி', that she lived by. Pillai pointed out that Kannagi did not marry Kovalan after falling in love with him but her husband was chosen for her by her parents. Yet, the love she had for him was truly a love that had the fragrance of Tamil love:

கணவனாகிய கோவலன், காதலொழுக்கத்து விழுமிய நெறியால் வாராது, பெற்றோர் புணர்ப்பவந்த காதலனாயினும், அவன்பால் இவர் கொண்டொழுகிய காதலொழுக்கம் தமிழ் கமழும் காதலின்ப ஒழுக்கமாகவே திகழ்கின்றது.⁷³

Pillai observed with approval that Kannagi refrained from wearing any ornaments other than the one that signified her married state when she was separated from Kovalan. Another quality that Pillai emphasised as an exemplary quality of Kannagi is her silence when

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 42

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 56

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

Kovalan lived with Matavi. In the Tamil literary tradition, Pillai pointed out, it is permitted for a wife to refer to the prostitute that her husband visited with bitterness. Yet, Ilango did not present Kannagi speaking ill of either her husband or Matavi. This Pillai interpreted as Ilango's attempt to show that a woman who did not show her pain and who did not complain was an exemplary woman:

இவ் வாற்றால், தமக்குறுந் துயரத்தை மகளிர் புறத்தே புலப்படுக்காது பொறுத்தாற்றுதலே பெண்மையெனக் கருதும் பெற்றியராதல் தெரிகிறது....கொழுநரால் உறும் குறைகளைத் தாங்குபவரே பெண்டிர் என்று இதனால் இவர் வற்புறுத்துவது காண்க.⁷⁴

Pillai further pointed out that Kannagi did not consent to worship at any temple to get her husband back from Matavi. Here the words Kannagi utters in the epic are: 'அது பீடன்று'. These words were interpreted by most writers to mean that she thought it inappropriate to worship any god but her husband. Pillai does the same. In a short biography of Kannagi he made the same point:

கணவனையல்லது பிற தெய்வங்களைக் கைதொழுதல் கற்புடைய மகளிர்க்கு ஒவ்வாத ஒன்று என்பது தமிழர் கற்புநெறி.⁷⁵

Other events in the life of Kannagi are also interpreted to fit the idea of an ideal Tamil woman. After the execution of Kovalan, Kannagi repeatedly reiterates her own innocence. Pillai omitted to mention this. He also ignored her assertion that she shall not suffer the way other women who had lost their spouses suffered. Instead, he mentioned only that:

கணவனை இழந்த மகளிர் கைம்மை நோன்பு நோற்று வாழும் காட்சி தெரிகிறது

and later

கைம்பெண் எனத் தான் ஆவது கண்டு அருவருக்கின்றார்⁷⁶

In this reasoning it is difficult to reconcile the burning of Madurai by Kannagi. Pillai tried to explain it in two ways. One, that the event was a fulfilment of *karma* through the action of Kannagi. Second, that at the time of her action, her anger clouded her better judgement:

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 45

⁷⁵ Auvai S. Duraisaami Pillai, *Perunthakai Pendir*, p. 66

⁷⁶ Auvai S. Duraisaami Pillai, *Silappatikara Araichi*, p. 52

கொலை குறித்தது கேட்டுக் குமுறியெழுந்த அவர் சினத்தீ, வழக்குரைக்கு மிடத்து முறுகி நின்று, இறுதியில், அவரது இயற்கையறிவையும் கல்விகேள்விகளினாலாகிய செயற்கையறிவையும் மறைத்துவிடுகிறது. அதனால், அவர் வேந்தனும் தேவியும் இறந்த பின்னும் சினம் தணியாது, நகரைத் தீக்கிரையாக்கிய பின்பே தணிகின்றார்.⁷⁷

Finally, in Pillai's analysis of Kannagi she becomes a self conscious Tamil woman who saw the injustice done to her as a blot on all of Tamil *nadu* and corrected the error by burning down the city of Madurai:

கண்ணகியார் தமக்கு நேர்ந்த துன்பத்துக் கேதுவாகிய பாண்டி வேந்தன் செயல், தமிழ்நாட்டிற்கே நேர்ந்த பழியாகக் கருதி, அதனை வழக்குரைத்து அவனையும் உணர்வித்து, தமிழ் மகளின் கற்பு மாண்பை நகரைத் தீப்படுத்து நிலைநாட்டி என்றும் பொன்றாத இறைமைநிலை யெய்தியது எண்ணுந்தோறும் நமக்கு இறும்புது பயப்ப தொன்றாம்.⁷⁸

This work was published by the Saiva Sidhanta Publishing Society which was engaged in publishing ancient Tamil works and it was devoted to the Saiva Sidhanta ideology. But Pillai writing his piece was certain that the story as narrated by Ilango cannot be given a Shaivite tint. In fact, he clearly disapproved of the portrayal of Kannagi as a ferocious Kali in the popular *koothu* tradition. He further condemned the folk traditions when he compared them poorly to the doorkeeper of the court in the epic. The doorkeeper, Pillai said, was not foolish like the நாடகமாக்கள் of today. He understood that Kannagi was not Kali or Durga:

அவன் இக் காலத்து நாடகமாக்களைப் போலக் காளியென்றே துணிந்து நடிக்கக் கூடிய மடமையுடையனல்லன்⁷⁹

This kind of representation by the illiterate, he said, revolted and saddened the scholars:

இக்குறிப்பறியாத, கல்லா நாடகமாக்கள், நம் பத்தினிக் கடவுளாகிய கண்ணகியாரை, உயிர்க்கொலை வேட்டுத் திரியும் கூளியாக்கி நடித்துத் திரிகின்றனர். இஃது அறிஞர்க்கு எத்துணை அருவருப்பையும் வருத்தத்தையும் தருகிறது, ஓர்மின்.⁸⁰

We must notice that he used the collective pronoun 'நம்' when addressing his readers. Here, he clearly excluded the 'illiterate' and rejected the popular folk traditions associated with

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 67

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 69

⁷⁹ Ibid., p.59

⁸⁰ Ibid., p.54

Kannagi. He took a similar stance when he analyzed the character of Matavi. For him Matavi was a woman of exemplary virtue and ignorant of this contemporary நாடகமாக்கள் portrayed her as a duplicitous woman who hankered for wealth:

அவள் முடிவுகாரும் கோவலனை யன்றிப் பிற ஆடவரைக் கருதாத பெருங்கற்புடையவளாய் விளங்கினதை அறிகின்றோம். இதனையறியாது, இக் கால் நாடகமாக்கள், மாதவியை வன்கண்மையும் பொருள் வேட்கையும் பொய்யன்புமுடைய 'மாதகி'யாக்கி நடித்துத் திரிகின்றனர்.⁸¹

We cannot miss the contempt he had for the performers in the folk tradition. In his reading of the epic and the characters of the story, Matavi cannot but be a woman of exemplary virtue. She was true to Kovalan and when she knew he was not coming back she renounced the world. As he said, even though she was a woman born in the community of performers, she had the qualities of a குலமகள்.

இம் மாதவி, நாடக மகளாயினும் குலமகட்குரிய கற்பும் பொற்பும் உடையளாய் இருந்தமை தெளிய விளங்குகிறது.⁸²

However, Pillai had no sympathy for Kovalan. Deviating from the general trend in these years of explaining his abandonment of Kannagi as his love for the arts, or Kannagi's preoccupation with domestic chores, Pillai dismissed Kovalan as a man whose love for Kannagi or Matavi was not 'great love'. He was driven by passion (காமம்) and not love.⁸³

For another writer this very passion became the reason for Kannagi losing Kovalan. Writing a detailed essay on the epic in 1948, S.R.Margabandhu Sarma insisted that it was not Kovalan's love of the arts but Kannagi's inability to fulfill the carnal desires of Kovalan that led to his seeking the company of Matavi.⁸⁴ In the years that they were together, Kannagi spent much of her time in extending hospitality to guests and offering alms to ascetics. Kovalan wanted her to spend more time with him.

அவன் பருவத் தூண்டுதல் காரணமாகக் கண்ணகி தன்னுடன் பெரும் பொழுதைக் கழிக்க வேண்டும் என்று விரும்பினான்.⁸⁵

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 73

⁸² Ibid., p. 71

⁸³ Ibid., pp. 31-32

⁸⁴ S.R.Margabandhu Sarma, *Silambin Rasanai*, pp. 47-48

⁸⁵ Ibid., pp. 51-52

Kovalan, Sarma reasoned, was too generous at heart (பெருந்தன்மை) to explain to Kannagi that these chores could be performed in later years as well but youth once gone would never return. Kannagi was ignorant of his desires. So, it is no surprise, Sarma said, when Matavi put up her garland for sale, Kovalan bought it immediately:

சில யாண்டு காலமாக இடையீடற்ற இன்பம் துயக்க வேண்டுமென்று ஏக்கம் பிடித்திருந்த கோவலன் ஒரு வாய்ப்புக் கிடைத்ததும் வாளா இருப்பானோ?⁸⁶

Kovalan went seeking his pleasure and did not think that Kannagi who was more interested in domestic chores would be troubled by his departure.

தம் இன்பத்தையே எண்ணிச் சென்றவன், தன்னுடைய பிரிவால் கண்ணகி கலங்கமாட்டாள் என்றே கருதினான். ஏனெனில் அவள் தன்னோடு காலம் கழிப்பதிலும், அறப்பணிகளைச் செய்வதிலேயே அதிக ஊக்கங்காட்டி வந்தாள்.⁸⁷

He concluded that she was not interested in the pleasures of the flesh.

ஆகவே அவளுக்குத் தன்னைப்போல் காம நுகர்ச்சியில் விருப்பம் இல்லை என்று அவன் உணர்ந்து கொண்டிருந்தான்.⁸⁸

It was no surprise then that he settled down with Matavi. Why should he worry about a woman who was not interested in giving him pleasure?

மாதவியின் வீட்டிலேயே அவன் தங்கி விட்டதற்கு வேறு தகுந்த காரணமும் இருக்கக் கூடுமோ? தன்னை மகிழ்விப்பதில் கருத்துச் சிறிதும் இல்லாதவள் வருந்தினாலும் அவன் ஏன் கவலைப்பட வேண்டும்?⁸⁹

No writer in these years or even later asked the same question from the point of view of Kannagi. That she would be a goddess by virtue of her steadfast fidelity to Kovalan precluded such speculations. But she was not beyond being held responsible for her own misfortunes in her life as a human being. Sarma first assumed that Kannagi was not fulfilling the needs of Kovalan and then blamed her for his departure. While like most writers in these years Sarma did not find Kovalan's love of music and Kannagi's ignorance of matters of the arts a reason for his desertion of Kannagi, he did hold her responsible for lacking in another quality. In any event it was some lack in Kannagi that led to Kovalan's desertion of her.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 52

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

Another Tamil scholar who received much fame in his lifetime as a writer of distinction was M.Varadarajan. He worked for several years at Madras and Madurai Universities. He wrote several novels and critical works on the *Silappatikaram* and other Tamil classics. He was a prolific writer through the middle decades of the last century. His two essays on Kannagi and Matavi reflect his engagement with the primary theme of *karpu* and love. Kannagi was like the Sun in her *karpu*, கற்பின் சூரியிற் கண்ணகி.⁹⁰ *Silappatikaram*, according to Varadarajan, tells of the greatness of women, particularly the greatness of a woman who had the firmness of *karpu*.

சிலப்பதிகாரம், பெண்ணின் பெருமையைக் கூறுகிறது; கற்பு என்னும் திண்மை உண்டாகப் பெற்ற பெண்ணின் பெருமையைக் கூறுகிறது.⁹¹

It is the greatness of *karpu* that someone like Kannagi could have courage that is the quality of great men. Kannagi stands as an example of the greatness of a virtuous woman that Valluvar spoke of.⁹²

Varadarajan compared the relationship between a wife and a husband to the one that was expected between a religious leader (*guru*) and his follower.

குருவழிபாடாக, வீரவழிபாடாக மற்றத்துறைகளில் விளங்கும் இதுவே, குடும்பத் துறையில் கற்பு என்னும் பெயர் பெற்று விளங்குகிறது. உண்மையும் தூய்மையும் கொண்டு கணவனை வழிபடும் மனைவியின் நெறியே கற்பு நெறி.⁹³

Under the most trying of circumstances the wife must act with restraint and even resist the temptation to seek the aid of any god. This quality is highlighted in the character of Kannagi when she rejects the idea of visiting the temples of the Sun and the Moon as suggested by her friend Devanti. Varadarajan interpreted this event, like Auvai Duraisaami Pillai before him, to mean Kannagi's rejection of the idea as inappropriate for a woman who worshipped her husband. He quoted Valluvar's verse to emphasize his point and observed that some women had slowly given up on that practice but Kannagi was steadfast in her devotion to her

⁹⁰ M. Varadarajan, *Kannaki*, p. 119

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 111

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 110

⁹³ *Ibid.*

husband.⁹⁴ But this devotion was an element of **Tamil culture**. A married woman might worship a god with her husband by her side. But it was not customary for a Tamil woman to worship a god for herself:

கற்புடைய மகளிர் தெய்வம் தொழுதல் பண்டைக் காலத்துத் தமிழ்மரபு அன்று. கணவன் தொழுதால் அவனுடன் இருந்து தொழுதல் உண்டு; தனியே இருந்து தனக்காகத் தெய்வம் தொழும் வழக்கம் இல்லை.⁹⁵

Kannagi should not be criticized for her patience. She was incapable of using harsh words because she was a 'cultured woman' பண்பாடு மிக்க கண்ணகி.⁹⁶ In fact her patience with Kovalan might be an indication of his qualifying for such devotion. In the few years that they lived together there was much love and affection. Kovalan was also a man with a generous heart, evidence of which is scattered in the epic. It was in memory of the years they were together that Kannagi remained faithful to him even while he was with Matavi. This then was 'true love'.⁹⁷ Moreover, Kannagi lived by the rules of *karpū*:

கண்ணகியோ கற்பால் வாழ வேண்டியவள்; கற்புக் காரணமாக நாணத்தையும் உயிரையும் துறக்கத் துணிந்தவள்.⁹⁸

Kannagi then, in this interpretation, played multiple roles in her relationship with her husband. She followed husband as an acolyte would, worshipped him as a devotee would and tolerated his excesses as a friend would because of his other good qualities. It is striking how this Kannagi is a neat fit with the ideal womanhood that was being etched out in these years.

If Kannagi was a woman with such fine qualities Kovalan was not without qualities to recommend him either. Like his contemporaries, Varadarajan was at pains to 'explain' the behaviour of Kovalan. He acknowledged that Kovalan did not possess the qualities of culture and contentment that Kannagi had. But on those grounds he cannot be judged as a cruel or as a man of poor character.⁹⁹ Like his contemporary M.P.Sivagnanam, Varadarajan observed that the one quality that Kovalan did not have was the firmness of *karpū* 'கற்பு என்னும் திண்மை'. But there were two reasons for this lack in him. One was the social context and the other was his love for the arts. Women in society were divided into those of the family and

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 97

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 96. Emphasis added.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 90

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 58

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 79

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 75

public women or prostitutes. *Karpu* was emphasized for women of the family and not for men. It was this state of social morals that was a reason for Kovalan's behaviour.¹⁰⁰ Also only men of wealth in those days had the opportunity to associate with prostitutes. Kovalan was a man of wealth. So, he was in a position to buy the garland sent by Matavi in the street.

Secondly, the fundamental reason for Kovalan seeking the company of Matavi was his love for the arts. He had witnessed the dance performance of Matavi and lost his heart to her art.¹⁰¹ Had he been a man of loose morals, he would not have waited even for the few years that he lived with Kannagi to seek other pleasures. Nor did he seek Matavi for carnal pleasures. Had that been the reason he would have sought the company of more women. In fact, Varadarajan argued, that Kannagi waited patiently for him also goes in his favour. Had he been a man of easy morals she would not have had so much love him. Kovalan needed several years to realize the value of Kannagi's love. Until then he was caught between life and art. Here Kannagi symbolized life and Matavi symbolized art. Kovalan did not abandon Kannagi. He forgot her for a few years. What is more, his new relationship was not lacking in love. Matavi was equal to Kannagi in culture.¹⁰² In addition she was exceptionally beautiful and proficient in dance and music, qualities that Kannagi lacked.¹⁰³

It is important to remember that in the epic there is no indication that Kovalan had witnessed the dance performance of Matavi before the king. Matavi sent her maid to the street frequented by the wealthy and Kovalan bought the garland there. Most writers in these years felt compelled to have Kovalan witness the performance of Matavi. Without this ruse there is absolutely no explanation for Kovalan buying the garland, except that he gave in to temptation and sought carnal pleasure with Matavi. Ilango does not pretend otherwise either. Ilango has Kovalan reach the bedchamber of Matavi immediately after buying the garland. Clearly, Ilango was not willing to put a gloss on the action of Kovalan as later critiques of the twentieth century, in the thick of issues of Tamil culture and Tamil pride, did.

The flaw in the character of Kovalan, which was important to underline the nobility of the character of Kannagi in the epic, becomes a flaw in the story itself for Karunanidhi and Bharatidasan. Both of them attempted to rectify the situation in different ways. Bharatidasan suggested that Kovalan is a lover of the arts and Kannagi was more interested in her duties as

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 77

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 78

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 80

¹⁰³ Ibid.

a wife¹⁰⁴. Secondly, he had Kovalan witness the dance of Matavi and describes their being attracted to each other at first sight.¹⁰⁵ What is more he pays for the garland *after* Matavi garlands him.¹⁰⁶ 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.¹⁰⁷ Thus in the narrative of Karunanidhi Kovalan emerges as a protector of Tamil culture. This was a dramatic transformation of a character whose flaws several writers since the publication of the epic in 1892 struggled with. As pointed out in chapter 5, most writers remained within the available situation presented by Ilango and explained Kovalan's desertion of Kannagi as his love of the arts or Kannagi's preoccupation with domestic duties or lack of knowledge of music and dance. By introducing the character of the Greek merchant, Karunanidhi elevated Kovalan as a man of high purpose and a true representative of 'Tamil culture'. This relocation of Kovalan takes away the shine from the character of Kannagi.

Many writers who studied the *Silappatikaram* analyzed the character of Matavi as well. In a detailed monograph on Matavi, Varadarajan presented her as a woman who is as worthy of admiration as Kannagi. Fitting into the metaphor of slush and lotus, he described Matavi as a woman who was a woman of *karpu* despite having been born in a community of prostitutes:

பிறப்பின் காரணத்தால் அமைந்த கணிகையர்வாழ்விற்குக் கட்டுப்படாமல் கற்புடைய மங்கையாய் வாழ்ந்த நல்வாழ்வு முதலாவதாகப் போற்றத் தக்கது.¹⁰⁸

In fact, he asserted Matavi was perhaps more suited to be Kovalan's mate than Kannagi because of her proficiency in the arts:

¹⁰⁴ Bharatidasan, *Kannaki Purathi Kappiyam* pp. 25-26

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 37

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 38

¹⁰⁷ Karunanidhi, *Silappatikaram Nataka Kappiyam*, p. 31. Incidentally, Annadurai split with E.V.R. and formed the DMK in 1949 when the latter, at 70, married a woman of 26.

¹⁰⁸ Varadarajan, *Matavi*, p.78

இருவருள்ளும் மாதவியே கோவலனுடைய கலையுள்ளத்திற்கும் விருந்து நல்கக் கூடியவள் ஆகையால், அவனுடைய துணைவியாக வாழ்வதற்குக் கண்ணகியைவிடத் தகுதி மிகுந்தவள் என்றும் கூறலாம்.¹⁰⁹

Unlike in the lives of Kannagi and Kovalan, there was ஊடல் and உறிமை in the lives of Matavi and Kovalan. In fact, Varadarajan gave the absence of this activity in the lives of Kannagi and Kovalan as one of the reasons for Kovalan living for several years with Matavi.¹¹⁰ The love that Matavi had for Kovalan was also உண்மைக் காதல் or true love.¹¹¹ Having lived a life of love Matavi could not have taken another lover when Kovalan left her. So, the only honourable option available to her was to renounce the world and take to a spiritual path. What is more, she considered her daughter as the daughter of Kannagi and made her a monk as well. No writer of the twentieth century questioned this action that arrested the life of Manimekalai in her youth. Matavi thus became a woman worthy of praise. Varadarajan concluded that Matavi was a social reformer (சீர்திருத்தம்) and a revolutionary (பெரும் புரட்சி).¹¹² That she took to the life of a monk and made her daughter a monk as well made her a woman of exceptional qualities despite her birth in a 'disreputable' community.

Written in the 1940s when debates about prostitution and the *devadasi* system raged in the Madras Legislative Council and in the media, it is understandable that most writers in these years tried to rescue Matavi from the reality of her birth. Tested on the touchstone of *karpu*, Matavi was adjudged a woman of exceptional *karpu* because she took no lover after Kovalan left her. But that there were women who were prostitutes by profession was a blot on a luminous Tamil past. So, Varadarajan asserted that in no truly cultured society can we see this. Even though the epic described a time when 'Tamil Nadu' had achieved much in many ways, it also had a 'backward' blot like prostitution.¹¹³

Many writers saw the epic as a message from Ilango that making proficiency in music and dance the exclusive preserve of prostitutes and unrelated to family life damaged the society at large.¹¹⁴ So long as the situation remained unchanged more Kannagis would be born and

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 45

¹¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 29-34. The word means feigned anger. In Tamil literary tradition when a wife pretended to be angry the husband appeased her. The reconciliation that resulted from this interaction led to an enhancement of love and passion.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p.38

¹¹² p. 87

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 77

¹¹⁴ M.S. Vimalanandam, *Silambu Pudayal*, P. 23

more cities would burn. But Vimalanandam did not present his interpretation as a response to the contemporary preoccupation with prostitution but as a need to go back to a past where such separation presumably did not exist. He said:

பண்டு போல் கலையில் வாழ்வையும், வாழ்வில் கலை மணமும் கமழ விழையவேண்டும். இன்றேல் என்றும் இழவும் இழப்புமே என்று எச்சரிக்கின்றார் இளங்கோ தம் காப்பிய வாயிலாக.¹¹⁵

However, he did not explain which past contemporary society must emulate since clearly, such separation of art from family life existed in the epic times that Ilango described!

In the epic Kannagi lived for fourteen days after the death of Kovalan. Within the ideals that were being etched out during these years a woman dying immediately after the death of her husband was taken to be the ancient way. Thus the wife of the King of Madurai, Kopperundevi, was an ideal wife who dropped dead when she realized her husband was dead. Many writers then felt the need to explain Kannagi's last fourteen days. Shanmugam gave his own twist to Kannagi reaching Madurai city. She had come to Madurai to burn with her husband, he asserted. In fact, she lost the opportunity to burn with her husband because Kovalan forbade her to do so. It was Kovalan who asked her to seek justice. Shanmugam further speculated that Kannagi probably burnt the city to burn herself! But the words of the deity of the city assuring her that she would be taken to heaven after fourteen days prevented her from burning herself.¹¹⁶

M.P.Sivagnanam presented *Silappatikaram* as the cultural treasure trove of the Tamils (தமிழ்இனத்தின் பண்பாட்டுப் பெட்டகம்).¹¹⁷ In this cultural frame Kannagi was not just a fictional character but a historical figure who acted as a symbol of Tamil culture:

கண்ணகி சிலப்பதிகாரக் கதையின் தலைவி. அதற்கு மேல், மண்ணகத்தார் வழிபடும் கற்புத் தெய்வம். தமிழினத்தார் தலைவணங்கிப் போற்றும் தாய். அவள் கற்பனைப் பாத்திரமல்லள்; வரலாற்று வழியே நமது முன்னோரைச் சார்ந்த மூதாட்டி.¹¹⁸

It is through Kannagi that one can know the way of the virtuous (கற்பு நெறி). Within this frame, a wife did not worship any god but her husband and did not wear ornaments when he

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 65

¹¹⁷ M.P.Sivagnanam, *Silappatikara Thiranaivu*, p. 17

¹¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 358-359

deserted her.¹¹⁹ When he returned to her, she tried to assuage his sadness by offering her anklets and when he asked her to follow her to Madurai, she did so without demur. Kannagi was to Kovalan what a creeper was to a pole.¹²⁰ Writing in the 1970s, Sivagnanam added further to the qualities of a woman of virtue. Kannagi was a உத்தம பத்தினி, Sivagnanam asserted, because she stayed at home and thus ensured that she was out of the sight of any man other than her husband.¹²¹ If such a woman did not die the moment her husband died, as a virtuous woman must and as the queen of Madurai did, it called for an explanation. Sivagnanam explained that it is because she had to avenge the death of her husband that Kannagi continued to live even after the death of Kovalan. Such a woman was jealous of the queen of Madurai.¹²² Sivagnanam regretted that despite having such a virtuous woman to worship, the women of Tamil Nadu looked to Arundhati for an ideal of virtue.¹²³ So, Kannagi was not just a woman, even an exceptional and historical one, of days gone by, but an ideal to be emulated by Tamil women in contemporary times.

However, while Sivagnanam applauded Kannagi for all her qualities that fell within his frame of கற்ப நெறி, he could not approve of the one extreme act that Ilango credited her with. The burning of the city of Madurai, Sivagnanam insisted was not the righteous way.¹²⁴ It was born out of rage due to extreme sorrow. Her actions may be condoned if we kept in mind the political context of the times Kannagi lived in and that was what the author Ilango wanted to emphasize. Ilango did not want such incidents to recur and that was why he had Kannagi burn the city with her breast, which is an unnatural act. Had he made her burn the city with a torch, there would have emerged thousands of Kannagis in the two thousand years since her time as representatives of this quality of Kannagi alone!¹²⁵

In the varied representations of Kannagi in the folk and textual traditions the city of Madurai burns through an action of Kannagi. Her curse, her breast or water droplets from her hair cause the fire. In the story as narrated by Bharatidasan and Karunanidhi, even this is taken out of her hands. In the narration of the former the people of the city of Madurai burn it down when the king executes Kovalan unjustly and in the case of the latter the fire starts by accident.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 145-146

¹²⁰ Ibid. 146

¹²¹ M.P.Sivagnanam, *Silappatikara Aayvurai*, p. 62

¹²² M.P.Sivagnanam, *Silappatikara Thiranaivau*, p. 155

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ M.P.Sivagnanam, *Silappatikara Thiranivu*, p. 53

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 55

Sivagnanam's defence of Kovalan was similar to the ones provided by most writers at this time. However, he differed from them when he asserted that the epic was a text that warned the men of the world about the consequences that would follow if they strayed from the path of *karpū*. He asserted that the epic emphasized the importance of *karpū* for men as well.¹²⁶

The act of burning the city that Sivagnanam attributed to extreme sorrow was approached differently by M.R.P.Gurusaami. Writing in the early fifties Gurusaami held that the practice of depriving women of the home some knowledge of music and dance and making these art forms objects of merchandize in the homes of prostitutes was primarily responsible for the burning of Madurai. So long as such restrictions continued, more and more cities would burn. The destruction of the city represented the anger of women against a social order. Since the king was the maker of that order Kannagi directed her anger on his city:

குல மகளிர்க்கு வேண்டாதது என ஒதுக்கிய கலை-விலை மகளிர்க்கே உரியது என விதித்த கலை என்ன செய்தது? மதுரையை எரித்தது. குல ஒழுக்கத்துக்கு முரண்பட்டதாயும் விலைக்குரிய வாணிகப்பொருளாயும் கலை உள்ளவரையிலே கோவலரும் கண்ணகியரும் மாதவியரும் திரும்பத் திரும்ப வருவர்; ஒரு மதுரை யன்று; மதுரைகள் பற்பல எரியும். பெண்ணுலகின் நெஞ்செரிச்சல் கொளுத்துகின்றது சமூக அமைப்பை. அந்த காலத்து சமூகத்துக்கு அமைப்பாளன் அரசன். ஆகலின், கோன்நகர் சீறினாள் கண்ணகி.¹²⁷

Incidentally Gurusaami omitted to mention in his essay that Kannagi burnt the city with her breast. It was her words that had the power to burn.¹²⁸

Gurusaami was clearly reading back into history contemporary concerns about the relationship between art and the world of courtesans and prostitutes. Men with power over wealth had divided women into those of the home and those for art. This was an insult to womanhood. He regretted that in his time when there was debate about reform such practices had not ended.¹²⁹ *Silappatikaram* in this reading was not only a reflection of a society that existed several centuries ago but a didactic text that indicated what an ideal society should be. Like several of his contemporaries Gurusaami saw the epic as a luminous ornament on the feet of the mother goddess of Tamil (தமிழன்னை) which told of the way of the Tamil people

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 51

¹²⁷ M.R.P.Gurusaami, *Silappatikara Cheidi*, pp. 33-34

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 46

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 23

(தமிழினம்).¹³⁰ The primary lesson that it carried was that if the king strayed from the path of righteousness the virtue of women, a virtue that caused the rains, cannot be sustained.¹³¹

Analyzing the character of Kannagi, Gurusami referred to her as the pinnacle of virtue. But she had a flaw. Like his contemporaries Varadarajan and Margabandhu Sarma, Gurusami held Kannagi responsible for her desertion by Kovalan. While Kovalan and Kannagi were happy in the years that they were together and nothing untoward seemed to have happened during that time, Kovalan still left her. This was because while she was not a slave of Kovalan and had rights *visa-a-vie* him she did not engage in ஊடல். Kannagi treated her husband as a god and not as a human being. By not engaging in ஊடல் Kannagi failed to keep her love fresh. This was a flaw not a fault, Gurusami pleaded. If a Matavi had not entered their lives some other woman would have certainly intervened.¹³²

Silappatikaram in the writings of the twentieth century symbolized Tamil culture and a glorious Tamil past. Kannagi in this cultural representation was a crucial cog as a symbol not only of the ideal of Tamil womanhood but Tamil culture itself. *Karpu* defined not only Kannagi but Matavi as well. Through their writings the Tamil scholars in these decades added more layers to the qualities of Kannagi and to some extent Matavi as well even as the essential core remained *karpu*. While delineating the qualities of Kannagi, these writers rehabilitated Kovalan as well as a man who was driven by his love of the arts, and in the understanding of Margabandhu Sarma, by passion. He was not as yet a protector of Tamil culture as he would be in the hands of Karunanidhi. But these writers collectively succeeded in rescuing him from the ignominy of being branded as a man swayed entirely by the pleasures of the flesh.

Ancient texts have their uses. They help to connect the past and the present. But the nature of the connections established in rewriting an ancient text is determined by the purpose for which it is being revived and who is taking the initiative to do so. In the case of *Silappatikaram*, certain themes were emphasized over others in every new narration. The concept of justice and the role of the ruler in imparting justice was an important theme in many of the narratives as it was in the epic by Ilango. That an ordinary woman, a stranger to a city, could challenge the king and win a case on behalf of her husband, however, was an

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 18

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 15

¹³² Ibid., pp. 24-31

idea that had an added resonance in the colonial context of the early nineteenth century when concepts of citizenship and justice were becoming important. But it was in relation to women that the text became a very powerful tool. Kannagi was presented as a being of the second century even as she was recreated to appeal to different sections of Tamil literate society in the twentieth century with the quality of *karpu* that marked her.

The colonial discourse on race and language impacted the self perception of the literate Tamil society in significant ways. The cornerstones of a Tamil past and a Tamil culture were laid in these years. The uniqueness and antiquity of Tamil language was emphasized and a major attempt was made to etch the characteristics of those who could be called Tamil. The epics were useful in this endeavour. Kannagi, Kovalan and Matavi were elevated as archetypes of Tamil men and women. Against the sexual permissiveness of Tamil society that *sangam* poetry indicated, the qualities of these characters better fit the needs of the twentieth century.

Matavi, the dancer par excellence had to find redemption not by her art but through *karpu*. The placement of Matavi in the community of prostitutes posed a problem for the essayists of more contemporary times who analysed the epic from within the 'Tamil society' frame. In the epic Ilango had endowed Matavi with a celestial lineage. She was further distinguished by her beauty and her proficiency as a dancer. He had placed her at par with the distinguished Kovalan and Kannagi. Further, she does not take another lover when Kovalan deserts her and chooses to become a monk after his death. But in the social atmosphere of early twentieth century when a vigorous campaign was being conducted to end prostitution, Matavi's location in the epic as a prostitute in a **Tamil** society who enjoyed the attention of Kovalan put the writers in a quandary. Unlike a Nagai C. Gopalakrishna Pillai or a Panchapakesa Ayyar, who could approach the issue as a social problem which could be resolved by training all women in dance and music, writers like Varadarajan saw the profession as a blot on the fair name of **Tamil** society in an age gone by. But the solution offered was the same-which was that all women should be made proficient in the arts. Matavi fit the metaphor of a lotus that bloomed in a muddy pond and her *karpu* was praised as being equal to that of Kannagi. In some cases she was even placed a notch above Kannagi because she could attract and retain the attention of Kovalan with her art and because despite being from the community of prostitutes she remained true to him. The contrast with Kovalan is sharp. He was not a man of *karpu* but he was redeemed by his love of music and dance. But Matavi, the dancer and musician par excellence, had to be a woman of *karpu* as well to be respectable and to be accepted.

Writers who worked within the frame of Tamil culture and traditions had to make the most vigorous attempts to rehabilitate Kovalan amongst the new and self conscious reading public of the twentieth century. He could not be a child of fate as he was in the epic. The casual manner in which he establishes a relationship with Matavi when he had Kannagi, the now emerging icon of Tamil culture waiting at home, did not befit the role of the ideal Tamil man that he was now called upon to portray. Twentieth century Tamil society was not comfortable with the idea that the hero of the epic they looked upon with pride would enter the home of a prostitute for pleasure. Something more than the attractions of the flesh, something higher in the hierarchy of the pleasurable alone could justify his actions and redeem him in the eyes of contemporary Tamil society. If Matavi's art was not sufficient to find her a place in the esteem of Tamil society, it was her art and his love of the arts that allowed Kovalan to be elevated as a true son of Tamil society. From the epic to the work of Karunanidhi, Kovalan transformed from a weak minded but good hearted hero of the epic to the protector of Tamil culture and traditions in Karunanidhi's play. But in the **Tamil** culture frame, he was first and foremost a lover of the arts. He was first the slave of Matavi's art and then he fell for her. In the process of the rehabilitation of Kovalan, several authors pointed out the short comings of Kannagi. In this interpretation it was not enough that she was a woman of *karpū*. To retain her husband she had to know music and may be even dance. She did not engage in *உள்ளூர்*, one author asserted. That was an art Matavi knew only too well. She was not passionate and did not show any interest in marital relations, another author asserted. Again this was assumed to be a quality that a woman like Matavi would know. All these excuses were meant to evoke sympathy in the mind of the reader for Kovalan. But Kannagi's qualities or lack of them got highlighted in the process. Women then, in these years were presented with an impossible situation. They were slotted as either virtuous wives or as prostitutes. Yet, each had to be more like the other. Matavi was honourable because she was like a wife. Kannagi would have retained Kovalan had she been more like Matavi.

In the case of Kannagi most writers emphasized that her qualities as a housewife was exemplary. All of them acknowledged that her uncomplaining fidelity to her husband was praiseworthy and fit for emulation. Many writers pointed out that Kannagi of the epic did not complain about the woman who enjoyed the attention and affections of her husband even though in the literary convention detailed in *Tholkappiyam* she was permitted to do so. This quality elevated her even further in the esteem of the twentieth century scholars. They insisted that her fight for justice was a fight of a **Tamil** woman. She spoke to restore the

illustrious traditions of justice of **Tamil** kings. Her quest had to be for a value outside of herself. Therefore, none of the writers pointed out that her anger at the death of her husband emanated not only from the unjust execution but from her awareness of her own innocence as well. Ilango had Kannagi say repeatedly that she was innocent. Twentieth century writers omitted to mention this. That her struggle for justice for her husband should be contaminated by her desire for justice for herself as well was not acceptable to those who wrote to highlight Tamil culture and the virtues of a Tamil woman. Unadulterated selflessness in a woman was a virtue desired in all women in these years in the literate middle class context where opinion was being created and consumed. In many cases this Tamil Kannagi would not even tear off her breast in anger to burn the city of Madurai. This again reflected the twentieth century prudishness of an emerging self conscious middle class society. Kannagi had to be content with her words accorded the same potency. Her *karpu* and the power she could derive from it could not be allowed to become so powerful as to cross the bounds of modesty that was now defined by a twentieth century middle class society.

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