

Trope of the Ideal Versus Desirable Woman-The Cilappatikāram the Tale of an Anklet

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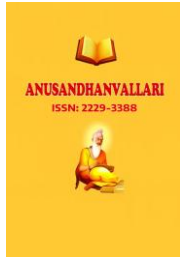
Abstract: The aim of this paper is to determine the portrayal of female characters and gender relations in Ilanko Atikal's Tamil epic Cilappatikāram. The depiction of the lead female character Kannaki in the stereotypical role of an ideal wife who transforms into a goddess when she discards her feminine self. She accomplishes this by discarding the symbols of femininity as defined by patriarchal socio-cultural forces operating in the society. This enables her in transcending the forces that were controlling her actions in the first part of the epic. The depiction of Matavi as talented but untrustworthy in the eyes of Kovalan defines the other spectrum of patriarchal forces. She is desirable, talented, someone men aspire for but on the other hand they fear her and consider her to be untrustworthy and manipulative. She is independent in many ways and hence poses a challenge to the established order. The definition of an ideal woman as represented by Kannaki is the acceptable norm. When Kannaki discards the symbols of feminism and becomes a destructive force she is also on the path of self-destruction. The raging female force has a transitional value. She is used to re-establish moral order in the society, the balance needs to be restored and she is the medium used for doing so. For her to have that power she needs to be unblemished and pious as per the acceptable moral code of the society. The two main female characters of the book represent the two types of women one in the role of an ideal wife, daughter, daughter-in-law the other an accomplished artist, a woman of independent standing in the society.

Keywords: Women in epic, patriarchy, transformation of women, stereotypes

Cilappatikāram also called Silappatikāram is a Tamil epic set somewhere between 300-900 CE. This epic has its roots in the oral tradition of storytelling and it is assumed that Ilanko Atikal the Jain monk and younger brother of Ceral king Cenkuttuvan put it in writing. The Kavyam was first printed in 1892. The composition is divided into three parts and is set in three different locations where the action takes place. The story of Kannaki starts in Pukar the Chola kingdom, in the second part it moves to Maturai the Pantiya kingdom, the concluding or third part of the epic is set in Vanchi the Chera kingdom. This epic is ranked along with more well-known Sanskrit epics-Ramayana and Mahabharata and considered to be a classic in Tamil literature. It is one of the literary masterpieces of the language.

At one level it breaks away from the tradition by portraying a female as the lead character. The main protagonist in the Tamil epic *Cilappatikāram* is a woman named Kannaki. This at deviance with the other two more popular Sanskrit epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata. In both of them the main protagonist is a male character. Ilanko foregrounds the heroin and breaks away from the epic tradition of the heroic warrior of the other two epics. As R. Parthasarathy says in the introduction of the English translation of Cilappatikāram that:

Ilanko's work is unmistakably revisionary. It does not imitate the Sanskrit epic....As a female protagonist, Kannaki disrupts the epic structure and calls it's presuppositions into question. In her grief she becomes a woman out of control and therefore dangerous. (8)



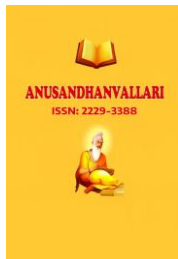
Ilanko puts Kannaki a woman of common birth at the forefront in the story. This is at variance with the epic tradition which would have made one of the three kings of noble birth as the main protagonist. The epic breaks many barriers in terms of its portrayal of women characters. Kannaki a woman belonging to the merchant family transforms into a Goddess at the end of the third book. She goes through a journey which transforms her from a devoted wife who forgives all transgressions of her husband and welcomes him back without reproach even when he abandons her for a courtesan. She transforms into a woman who in her rage marches alone into the court and confronts the king of Maturai head on. Her actions in the second part lead to the death of the king and queen and the destruction of the city of Maturai. She is portrayed as the ideal woman as defined by the patriarchal construct of the society of the time. She is good at managing her house, even though her husband abandons her for the courtesan Matavi she remains chaste and pious. She continues to fulfil her obligations as wife of Kovalan although in real sense he is no longer her husband. When he returns, she doesn't disown him. When he decides to leave the city she readily agrees to leaves with him forsaking her parents, friends and all connections of her life from birth till that point of time. These qualities of her person are what according to the legend enable her to avenge the wrongful murder of her husband. She is a morally upright and pious women who is able to transcend her human form and become a Goddess.

R. Parthasarathy in his introduction to the English translation writes "Kannaki excels in keeping house, and Kovalan dotes on her." (2) She pious, devoted, has all the qualities a good wife should have as per tradition. There should ideally be no reason for Kovalan to desert his wife, she is perfect. He still gets enamoured with the courtesan Matavi and leaves Kannaki for her. Matavi is the desirable one although as per prevalent social norms Kannaki is the epitome of an ideal woman and wife.

Matavi is a very important female character in the epic. She is a courtesan by profession and a well-respected member of the society. In her depiction also there is a break from tradition. Although she is a courtesan, she is admired not only for her beauty but also her capabilities. She is an extremely talented person who is rewarded by the Chola king for her talent as a dancer, singer and poetess. Her portrayal breaks the stereotype of the conniving other woman who lures the hero away with her wiles. There is no sugar coating of the actions of Kovalan. The writer poet has not tried to portray him in a favourable light. At the same time the perception of the society towards courtesans is depicted through Kovalan's attitude towards Matavi. He distrusts her and believes her to be disloyal. He denies her the rightful chance to explain herself before abandoning her. He errs by not accepting the letter brought by Matavi's maid to him. Every person has a right to be given a fair chance to explain themselves. He becomes the judge and jury who pronounces the verdict without giving the accused a chance to prove their innocence. His attitude towards Matavi is a reflection of the common man's perception of a courtesan at that time in the Tamil society. She might be independent, admired for her talents and a desirable woman but she can never be trusted. That is possible only when a woman adheres to the rules governing the behaviour of an ideal woman as depicted through the character of Kannaki.

Matavi is assumed to be a temptress and untrustworthy as that is the social perception of a courtesan. Kovalan assumes Matavi "is in love with someone else" (3) and he leaves her and even "refuses the letter sent through her maid"(3). She is given no chance to clear the misunderstanding and "Matavi quietly endures the agony of his loss." (3) There is no respect shown by Kovalan towards either his wife or Matavi the courtesan. He thinks of her only as a dancing girl conveniently ignoring her talent and skills. She is no ordinary dancer, her skill and command over her craft has been recognised by the Cola king. He had presented her "with a garland and one thousand and eight pieces of gold."(2) She is honest and upfront in her intentions when she announces that she will marry the man who buys the necklace. She does not abandon Kovalan.

While a lot of barriers of patriarchy have been broken in the epic, these happen only when the feminine self of Kannaki first gets dissolved. She has left her parents and in-laws behind at Pukar and come to Maturai only with her husband. The taking away of her anklet by her husband in order to start a new life in Maturai, followed by his death frees her from the shackles of patriarchy. She becomes enraged and this rage frees her from the rules governing her relationship with the society. She finds her voice and all the pent up rage bursts forth, silencing



even the king of Maturai. As R. Parthasarathy puts it in his introduction, “She has no father, husband or son to live for, and under patriarchy a woman does not live for herself alone. Kannaki ritually unsexes herself.” (11). Kannaki’s first act is to hurl her anklet at the king. This is later followed by the act of ripping her breast off. The anklet

also functions as a metonymy for her sexual organ. Breaking it signifies castration. With her husband dead, she has no use for sex. This is further reinforced when she wrenches her breast, an embodiment of sexual power, off her body and hurls it at the towers of Maturai. (12)

She is able to rewrite the rules of society and find a voice only when she throws away all the symbols that mark her as a married woman. She stops identifying herself with the norms that govern the social order. She becomes an uncontrolled force of nature. Zvelebil reflecting on the symbolism of the anklet in *The Smile of Murugan* says that “The anklet, a symbol of stern chastity, turns into an instrument of vengeance.”(182-83)

The self-effacing, accommodating, forgiving, happily suffering woman in the role of a mother, daughter, sister, and wife is propagated as an ideal for all women to follow. The image of Sita and Savitri are the socially accepted stereotypes of a woman in the Indian society. The woman is elevated to the position of a goddess and worshipped in these roles.

Lyle et al. says that:

All cultural values have central convictions by which members of a culture define what is desirable or undesirable, good or bad, beautiful or ugly, right or wrong. Values are abstract evaluations expressing broad preferences, while norms apply to specific situations.

This cultural construct is evident in the portrayal of both Kannaki as well as Matavi. The former has been attributed with the power and ability to avenge her husband’s death and bring death destruction to an entire city as she is a pious and devoted wife. The apotheosis is possible as she adheres to the rules ascribed to be deemed a pious woman. At this stage the trope of the ideal wife who in spite of his indiscretions is still worrying about his safety. She has a dream about a misfortune striking Kovalan, is worried about him, and takes him back without reproach when he come back. He is penniless due to his own actions, no misfortune has struck him. The two female protagonists have had the misfortune of being abandoned by him. In order to portray Kannaki as a devout wife she not shown portraying or exuding any negative thoughts about her husband. She is not depicted as a normal woman who will be livid and angry when her husband leaves her for a courtesan. Had this been done it would have made her human and made the transition to becoming goddess like due to her piety problematic. There is only one instance where, “Kannaki, for the first and only time, reproaches him and speaks her heart out about the pain her indiscretion has caused her.” (3)

There is the abandonment of a third female figure, Manimekalai, his daughter from Matavi. The child is without her father and has to be brought up by the mother alone. This has a bearing on the way her life turns out as she grows up.

The unifying aspect of the three phases of the narrative from erotic to heroic to mythic is the piety of the lead female figure of Kannaki. She transforms from the archetype of a docile and timid wife to an avenging raging woman with no concerns and consequences. She has been able to discard her former self in the same way as she has given up her place of birth and marriage. The traditional patriarchal reference point for her changes. This enables a change of her perception of her capabilities. Till now she has been following the people in her life and defining herself through them. When she is left alone in the world she also is liberated from the limitations put on her. That is what leads to her transformation into a strong force that destroys anyone or anything she believes has wronged her. The king and his kingdom are blown into dust by her fierce raging feminine energy that has been wronged. The innocence that was a by-product of her sheltered upbringing in a structure that is designed to produce females to serve the male dominated society is replaced by this uncontrollable feminine energy that can annihilate anything that stands in its way.

As Simone de Beauvoir puts it:

One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine. Only the intervention of someone else can establish an individual as an Other. (293)

The character of Matavi is portrayed as a persona with incomparable beauty who is not only enchanting but also an accomplished artist who has attained mastery over dance, music and poetry. This has been possible due to relentless practice and hard work put in by her over many years. On one hand like any artist she is respected for her skills and rewarded for the same. On the other hand her accomplishments make her a misfit to the construct of an ideal woman as represented by Kannaki. Her very strength becomes her biggest problem. She is also transformed in the course of the epic and becomes a Buddhist nun. This happens because in her present form she poses a challenge to the established patriarchal social order of the day. A male like Kovalan can desire her but never accept her. She poses a challenge to his social construct of the masculine self. This is the primary reason for him mistrusting and misunderstanding her without making even a cursory effort to know the truth. He needs to escape her presence as he feels his traditional role as a primary defining force in the relationship between a man and a woman is being challenged. Hence he leaves her to save his identity as the dominant partner in a male female relationship. The identity of Kannaki is also redefined to conform to the accepted norms when she is shown to renounce the world and become a recluse after adopting Buddhism. The patriarchal social order gets restored through this transformation.

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