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Righteous Anger as Political Trauma in Silappadikaram

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ABSTRACT

Righteous anger as a form of political trauma is clearly illustrated in *Silappadikaram* through the actions of *Kannaki*. The wrongful execution of *Kovalan* at the hand of the *Pandya* king reveals the fragility of political power and argue that a ruler's legitimacy depends on justice rather than on power alone. This paper examines key episodes in *Silappadikaram* to investigate the relationship between righteous anger and political trauma. The anger of *Kannaki*, guided by moral principles and reinforced by divine sanction, acts to restore justice and hold the state accountable. By focusing her actions solely on the guilty, she demonstrates that ethically guided violence can correct systemic failures without harming the innocent. The epic suggests that political trauma emerges not only from acts of injustice but also from the intervention of supernatural forces that serve to uphold moral order. Ultimately, *Silappadikaram* emphasizes that fairness is the foundation of authentic legitimacy and that a morally upright person can exercise agency outside of institutional authority.

Keywords: righteous anger, political trauma, justice, *Kannaki*, *Silappadikaram*

Introduction

Silappadikaram (சிலப்பதிகாரம்) was composed during the Sangam period by Ilango Adigal. It is one of the five major epics of traditional Tamil literature, it stands out from the others as a piece of secular literature that emphasizes social justice, moral principles, and human experience. By referencing the sun, moon, river Kaveri, and port city of Puhar, the epic also depicting a worldview that is aware of the natural order and reveals a close bond between humans and the natural world. Its story reflects the political climate of ancient South India and covers the three main Tamil dynasties: the Cholas, the Pandyas, and the Cheras.



The story begins in Kaveripumpattinam, the Chola Kingdom's capital, where Kannaki and Kovalan, children of two prominent merchant families, are married and begin their life together in comfort. Their peace is disrupted when Kovalan becomes involved with Madhavi, a celebrated courtesan, and eventually spends all his wealth on her. A moment of doubt during a festival leads him to reflect on his actions and return to Kannaki with regret.

The epic revolves around Kovalan, Kannaki, and Madhavi. Kovalan eventually spends all of his money on Madhavi, a famous courtesan, when he begins seeing her. He experiences a moment of hesitation during a festival, which makes him think about himself and sadly go back to Kannaki. In order to start again, they make the decision to leave the house and sell Kannaki's anklet to Kovalan for selling to start a new business and their fresh life. The Pandya monarch orders Kovalan's unjust execution after falsely accusing him of stealing the queen's anklet. This injustice incites Kannaki's righteous rage, which she uses to curse the state and convert it into ash.

This research explores the relationship between Kannaki's righteous anger and political trauma, that her rage transforms personal suffering into moral and political justice while revealing how the violation of *aram* produces political trauma.

Tamil Ethical Framework: *Aram* as the Foundation of Political Justice

According to traditional Tamil philosophy, political authority can merely legitimate when the ruler upholds *aram*, the principle that fairness is not only a personal virtue, but the foundation upon which power must stand. As articulated in the *Tirukkural*, *aram* is one of the text's three pillars: moral conduct, righteousness, and lawful behavior for both the individual and society. The other two pillars; porul (governance) and Inbam (love), are subordinate to *aram*, which functions as the bedrock of all moral order. (Ananthanathan 2).

According to this framework, the king's role is not to establish law, yet to embody and protect it. As the *Tirukkural* commands: "The king shall not fail in *aram* and shall abolish *maram* (unrighteousness)" [TK 384]. The interpretation of *aram* is the responsibility of priests and purohitas, and he has no power to change it. The king serves merely as a representative of a supra-human moral principle. (Ananthanathan 4)

Silappadikaram challenges this framework specifically. When the Pandya king executes the innocent Kovalan on the basis of an unexamined accusation, he does not only commit a judicial error; he shatters the moral contract upon which his sovereignty rests. The *Tirukkural* warns: "The country of the king who does not daily examine into the wrong done and distribute justice, will daily fall to ruin" [TK 553]. Madurai is destroyed as a result of Kannaki's righteous rage at that violation.

Political authority in Tamil perception is never self-sustaining, as *Silappadikaram* explains. A king who violates *aram* not only loses his moral stature but also causes political order and popular faith to fall apart.

The Wrongful Execution of Kovalan

The king's failure stems from his will, not from ignorance. When the goldsmith makes his charge, the king doesn't look into it, call any witnesses, or ask for any proof. All he does is give his men the command to murder and get the anklet. This is the epitome of judicial failure: a single man with everything to conceal using the sovereign authority of life and death.

The setting in which this failure takes place is what makes it much more devastating. The king is involved in a dispute with the queen at the time of judgment, which has already damaged his emotional condition and

halted his ability to think. The monarch acts on the goldsmith's assertion that "the thief used neither crow-bar nor auger" (Adigal 225), which involves supernatural belief rather than any factual foundation. Justice is not served by the verdict. It is a regal authority disguised as impulse.

Kingship was seen in ancient Indian political theory as the embodiment of virtue and cosmic order, with the monarch serving as a symbol of the divine, the righteous, and the just and being primarily responsible for the well-being of his subjects (Chandran 1). This concept is directly betrayed by the actions of the Pandya ruler. The *Tirukkural* states: "That king will be esteemed a God among men, who performs his own duties, and protects his subjects" [TK 388]. Executing innocent people is a destructive act rather than a protective one. Additionally, the monarch undermines the legitimacy that underpins his kingdom by destroying Kovalan.

When seen from a contemporary perspective, the king's actions amount to what is now known as extrajudicial killing, which is the use of deadly governmental authority without due process, proof, or accountability. It takes more than just an innocent life. It breaks the confidence between the sovereign and the subject and reveals the state as a violent apparatus rather than a defender of justice.

This is not a mistake in procedure. A ruler's complete transgression of *aram*, the moral basis that, according to Tamil political theory, is the only source from which legitimate power may originate, is what causes a structural collapse. Madurai burns as a result of Kannaki's righteous rage, which is generated out of this collapse.

Righteous Anger of Kannaki

When Kannaki finds out that Kovalan has been put to death, her body is first broken by sadness and then filled with rage. She weeps until she faints, and when she rises, what drives her is no longer sorrow alone. "The air expelled from my lungs surpasses the air driven into the fire from below" (Adigal 239). This is not ordinary grief. What Kannaki experiences is what Shay describes as moral injury, the feeling that what is right has been betrayed (Rothenberg 15), both personally and by the very institution that should have protected it. The state did not merely take her husband. It violated the moral order she believed in, and righteous rage results from that transgression. The gatekeeper first perceives Kannaki as being similar to powerful deities like Mahisasuramardani, Camundi, or Kali, as seen in "...nor even is she, the Kali of the jungle..." (Adigal 248). According to Tamil religion, Kali is linked to destructive strength and rage. This analogy highlights Kannaki's extreme indignation by depicting her external appearance as representing heavenly wrath.

Personal fury is not the same as righteous anger. It arises not just from wounded pride or personal suffering, but also from the breaking of *aram* itself. Because the root of Kannaki's rage is general rather than personal, the king violated a rule that regulates society as a whole, not just her marriage, it has moral justification. This is what turns her rage into something that the universe can understand.

She turns to face the people, the gods, and the world's order and demands an explanation: "...through the wrong committed by the Pandyan, whose sceptre swerved from the righteous path?" (Adigal 241). The sceptre, symbol of sovereign authority, has bent. Moreover, the cosmos responds: the sun itself declares Kovalan innocent and foretells that the city will burn (Adigal 241). The moral order that the monarch has betrayed, more than any court, confirms his innocence.

When Kannaki enters the royal court, she is no longer a grieving widow, she is an accuser. Her repeated challenges, "Are there women here?", "Are there good people here?", "Is there a god?" (Adigal 249) are an indictment of society, morality, and heaven itself. The king insists: "it is not injustice to put a thief to death" (Adigal 249). He cannot see that his certainty, unsupported by evidence, is the very definition of injustice.

Kannaki's own hands provide the evidence. A diamond smacks the king's cheek as she tears apart her anklet (Adigal 249). Pearls were on the queen's anklets. Rubies were in Kannaki's possession. The concept of abstract truth does not exist. It is crushing, tactile, and indisputable. Jürgen Habermas's idea of law as a mediator between facts and norms may be used to understand this moment: normatively, justice has not been done; factually, an innocent man has been executed (Arnold 30). Closing that gap and reestablishing the norm is Kannaki, not the court or the king.

Therefore, her rage is not a political mask for a personal emotion. According to Boltanski and Lévenot, it is a completely justified conduct, one whose validity stems from a universal moral principle that goes beyond self-interest. Additionally, Haran and Mary contend that it is an act of bravery, the guts to oppose what goes against *aram* (11). Hochschild's framework also confirms that emotional experiences may be identified as suitable to their circumstances; when injustice is something that everyone can comprehend, the rage it causes has communal weight rather than simply individual weight (Prieur). "Justice, being violated, destroys; justice, being preserved, preserves" (Chandran 1) is how the Manusmriti clearly states the stakes.

Boltanski and Lévenot refer to what Kannaki does in court as "de-singularization," which is the conversion of a private injury into a public claim and a singular wrong into a universal moral demand. In her hands, justice is no longer an impersonal concept. It is what keeps society together, and when the monarch destroys it, she acts as a restorative force. According to Tirukkural couplet 29, "The anger of the righteous cannot be endured even for a moment."

Anger is a structural diagnostic for Kannaki. It shows that when individuals in positions of authority break the law, the state completely loses its legitimacy. Instead of anarchy, justice takes over in a way that the powerful never expected.

Righteous Anger as Political Trauma

Although it began as a reaction to personal injustice, Kannaki's righteous rage is not limited to the emotional space. Rather, it evolves into a more comprehensive criticism of political power, exposing the effects of unfair governance. Her growing rage not only represents Kovalan's pain but also the breakup of a political and moral system that ought to have guaranteed justice.

Thus, it is possible to see the king's unlawful death of Kovalan as an example of extrajudicial killing, which represents the use of official authority outside the bounds of justice. This act discourages opposition by instilling fear in the public and showing the state's authority (Rothenberg 19) caused political trauma. According to Puram tradition, "The world does not exist because of rice or water, but because of the king" (Puram 186). When a monarch fails, Kannaki's moral underpinning completely crumbles. This collapse goes beyond individual loss to what refers to as the "assumptive universe" it gives a sense of justice and stability to her (Harris 3). The reality that the world as it ought to be no longer exists forces Kannaki and people in

Madurai to face this reality causes political grief, which arises from the Pandian king, which is supposed to protect justice, turns into the cause of injustice (Harris 6).

In this way, trauma and Kannaki's rage become inseparable. She sorrows not just Kovalan's passing but also the demise of a moral cosmos. People who are forced to live in a warped reality imposed by unfair power experience political trauma as a result of this state (Edkins 10). Despite not being directly accountable for the king's choice, the Madurai people's silence nevertheless contributes to this violent system. Their quiet is an internalization of governmental power rather than a sign of peace. However, their acknowledgement that Kannaki's rage is warranted raises the possibility of moral harm. According to Jonathan Shay, moral harm results from a betrayal of "what's right," (15), causing severe moral and mental suffering.

When the truth is eventually revealed, the monarch doesn't need to be punished externally. "Am I a ruler — I who have listened to the words of a goldsmith? It is I who am the thief" (Adigal 249). According to the epic, "that dharma will become the god of death..." (Adigal 250). It is *aram*, the moral code he chooses to break, that destroys him rather than Kannaki.

As seen in *Silappadikaram*, therefore, Kannaki's anger stems from both the moral power that challenges, exposes, and eventually outlives the authority accountable for it as well as the political trauma caused by the state.

Political Critique of *Silappadikaram*

The actions of the Pandya king are a prime example of judicial incompetence. A goldsmith's accusation and an order to kill, no investigation, no proof. "The protection of the subjects of the southern kingdom has failed in my hands for the first time" (Adigal 249) is his own admission of what his deeds had previously demonstrated. This is not a reflection of an exception by a ruler. It is a sovereign admitting that the agreement between the king and the subjects has been violated.

The cosmic order is impacted by that collapse. The gods' departure from Madurai, "Since we know beforehand that this city is to be consumed by fire..." (Adigal 254), signifies the retreat of moral order from a city whose king has committed suicide. "The righteous sceptre and the white umbrella falling" was a dream the queen had already had (Adigal 246). A sceptre that deviates from justice does not just let its citizens down. It proclaims its own demise.

However, the devastation that Kannaki unleashes is not random. She spares the children, the elderly, the cow, the Brahmins, and the good. Her fire is judgment rather than chaos. Madurai's burning represents retaliation, karma, and the annihilation of a political system that had lost its legitimacy.

Kannaki is more than just a mistreated lady looking for retribution. She is the very definition of *aram*. When the king deserts justice, a moral force emerges to take his place. Her deed shows that when a country's ruler has unmade justice, even one person, armed only with a broken anklet and righteous rage, can unmake the kingdom.

Conclusion

This research clearly shows how complex ancient Tamil literature addresses issues of justice, legitimacy, and the moral bounds of authority over generations. A deep connection between political trauma and righteous rage is shown by *Silappadikaram*: when the state becomes the cause of injustice, it does not silence its subjects but transforms suffering into moral resistance. The people of Madurai are compelled to absorb their

sorrow in secret as a result of the king's unfair death of Kovalan, which shatters the moral basis of society and causes political trauma that spreads from Kannaki. However, it is precisely this trauma that turns Kannaki's sorrow into righteous rage, a morally acceptable energy accepted by both human and heavenly power. Her transformation from a woman to a goddess of justice symbolizes both the restoration of moral order but also the collapse of unjust rule.

As a result, *Silappadikaram* suggests that righteous rage resulting from political trauma is more than just an emotional outburst; rather, it is the force that reveals systemic injustice and eventually overthrows the ruling class. When unjust authority pushes unwavering morality to its breaking point, it becomes a political force unto itself.

Silappadikaram leaves us with a truth that has not aged: when human justice fails, moral justice does not. Political power without righteousness is not power; it is fragility in disguise.

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