



From Mortal Woman to Divine Justice: The Cultural and Ethical Significance of Kannagi in Silappadikaram

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ABSTRACT

One of the great classical Tamil epics that embodies the moral and cultural norms of early Tamil society is the *Silappadikaram*, known to have been written by Ilango Adigal. It is a tragic story of the wrongful murder of Kannagi's husband, Kovalan, by the Pandyan king, an event that becomes the starting point of the epic. This paper will discuss how Kannagi transformed from a faithful wife into a symbol of justice and morality. Initially shown as a patient and faithful woman who tries to endure betrayal by her husband and social hardships, Kannagi becomes a speaker of truth and soon after Kovalan is unjustly killed. Her fight with the king reveals the ineffectiveness of royal justice and ultimately leads to the destruction of Madurai, a symbol of the triumph of morality. This paper focuses on the idea of 'Aram'(moral righteousness) and its fundamental place in constructing the narrative and moral structure of the epic.

Moreover, this paper discusses the cultural significance of Kannagi, who goes beyond the literary tradition and becomes the image of divine justice and feminine power in Tamil cultural memory.

Keywords: *Silappadikaram*, Kannagi, 'Aram', Tamil Epic, Divine Justice.

Introduction

Tamil literature of the classical period provides a vast source of ethical thought, cultural and social philosophy. The *Silappadikaram* is one of its most famous works, and it holds a special place among those that combine personal tragedy and moral inquiry on a grand scale. The epic poem, traditionally known as the Ilango Adigal, is not just a literary work, but a profound commentary on the problem of justice, governance and human conduct (Swelebil 112).



Kannagi is the central character in this story, and the transformation of a quiet and faithful wife into an agent of divine punishment is the moral focus of the text. Her experience is the result of the conflict between individual suffering and social righteousness, and a way to see how personal virtue can act in contrast to and reverse institutional failure. The epic's interaction with 'Aram', or moral righteousness, makes it part of a larger philosophical context of moral responsibility to political power (Shulman 67).

This article argues that Kannagi's transformation is not only a development of the story but also a moral statement. The epic breaks down traditional gender roles and criticizes the limits of the ruler's power through her actions. The aim of this article is to determine Kannagi's character as a figure of discourse on justice, gender and divinity by analyzing 'Aram', which shows that *Silappadikaram* is a text that is relevant to contemporary society.

Research Problem

Although much has been said about *Silappadikaram*, the moral aspects of the Kannagi transformation, especially when considering the concept of 'Aram', have not been explored. While much research has discussed her existential aspect as a model of purity, very little has been done to discuss her moral authority as operative in the process of redefining justice in the story.

This raises important questions: How does Kannagi's transformation disrupt patriarchal and political systems of power? How does her adherence to aram make her morally superior to the king? How does her quest make her problematic for classical accounts of femininity?

The answers to these questions will enable one to gain a deeper understanding of the moral structure of the epic and its contribution to the modern context of justice and gender.

Research Objectives

1. To examine critically the change of Kannagi in the narrative pattern of *Silappadikaram*.
2. To analyze the importance of 'Aram' as one of the ethical principles of the epic.
3. To examine how in the confrontation with the king, Kannagi criticizes the authority of the royal.
4. To explore the cultural and religious meaning of Kannagi in other places than the work.

Research Methodology

This study will use a qualitative textual analysis of *Silappadikaram*, but mostly based on a translation of the text by R. Parthasarathy in English. Interpretive analysis is applied together with close reading to define the main themes and ethical constructs in the text.

The contextualization of the epic within the Tamil literary and cultural traditions is done using secondary sources, such as works by Kamil Zvelebil, David Shulman, and A. K. Ramanujan. The 'Aram' concept is used as the main analytical tool and allows exploring the issues of morality and justice in a subtle way. Also, the feminist literary theory guides the discussion of Kannagi as a female transformation agent.



Narrative Structure and Moral Landscape

Silappadikaram is structured into three major sections, *Puhar*, *Madurai* and *Vanji*, each representing a different socio-cultural environment. The movement between these areas represents not only geographical change but also the development of morality. The story begins in *Puhar*, a place that brings fortune and happiness to the people, and Kovalan begins his downfall with the courtly Madhavi (Ilango Adigal 45).

Madura is a place that is transformed into a realm of political power and judicial accountability. But it is here that the greatest injustice is found and it reveals the weakness of institutional systems. According to Shulman, the epic creates a separate world, where kingship can only be meaningful in the sense that it must agree with moral truth (72).

In this way, the narrative form itself supports the essence of the monastery as a direction for the moral repair of a reader's moral deviation.

Kannagi as the Ideal Wife: Virtue and Endurance

In the first chapters of the epic, Kannagi is described as the perfect womanhood. Her steadfast devotion to Kovalan despite his betrayal shows the cultural demands that the Tamil culture imposed on women in the ancient times. At the moment Kovalan comes back after his waste of riches, he is not rebuked by Kannagi but rather presents her anklet which can be used to reconstruct their life (Ilango Adigal 89).

Such an act can be regarded as a symbol of forgiveness as well as moral strength. According to Zvelebil, the patience of Kannagi is not passive submission but kind of moral strength which is based on 'Aram' (119). Her silence, then, cannot be described as weakness but as a part of being committed to moral values.

Her personality during this phase is the moral opposite to the impulsiveness of Kovalan and it once again supports the notion that her is morally stable.

The Crisis of Justice: Kovalan's Execution

The killing of Kovalan is the moral crisis of the epic. Accused of stealing the queen's anklet, Kovalan is condemned without proper investigation. The king's decision reflects a failure of न्याय (justice) and a breach of 'Aram', as it disregards the principles of fairness and truth (Ilango Adigal 123).

Parthasarathy notes that this moment "exposes the vulnerability of human institutions when divorced from ethical responsibility" (xvii). The king's authority, rather than ensuring justice, becomes the instrument of injustice.

This event marks a turning point not only in the narrative but also in Kannagi's character, catalyzing her transformation into an agent of moral intervention.

Kannagi's Transformation: Voice of Truth and Justice

Kannagi's entry into the royal court is one of the most powerful moments in *Silappadikaram*. Breaking her silence, she confronts the king with unwavering conviction. By presenting her anklet and revealing its contents, she exposes the truth and dismantles the false accusation (Ilango Adigal 128).

Kannagi breaks open her anklet before the Pandya King to prove Kovaan's innocence in one of the most dramatic scenes of the epic. As the text states, "She broke the anklet; rubies poured forth" (*Silappadikaram, Madurai Kandam*).

The disclosure that Kannagi's anklet comprised rubies, whereas the queen's anklet consisted of pearls, highlights the inadequacy of royal discernment and substantiates truth via tangible evidence.

Kannagi boldly declares, "My husband was no thief" (*Silappadikaram, Madurai Kandam*), directly confronting the king's injustice. This moment marks her transformation from a silent and suffering wife into a powerful voice of justice and ethical truth.

Her declaration, often paraphrased as a demand for justice, transforms her into a moral authority. As Ramanujan suggests, Kannagi becomes "a figure who speaks truth to power, embodying a moral force that transcends social hierarchy" (201).

This transformation is significant because it redefines the boundaries of feminine agency. Kannagi no longer operates within the confines of domesticity but enters the public sphere as a force of justice.

Aram and Ethical Retribution

The concept of 'Aram' reaches its fullest expression in Kannagi's curse upon Madurai. Her anger, though intense, is framed as a righteous response to injustice. Unlike personal vengeance, her actions are aligned with moral law, seeking to restore balance (Shulman 84).

Rather than uncontrolled rage, Kannagi's anger can be understood as ethical anger. Kannagi's wrath emerges as the king fails to uphold justice and wrongfully executes her innocent husband. Hence *Silappadikaram* presents anger as morally legitimate when it arises to defend truth and righteousness. Kannagi transforms personal grief into a moral force directed against injustice declaring, "If I am a true and chaste wife, I shall destroy Madurai" (*Silappadikaram, Madurai Kandam*). She curses Madurai not out of selfish motives of revenge but to restore 'Aram'.

The destruction of Madurai can thus be interpreted as an act of ethical retribution. It signifies the consequences of violating aram, reinforcing the idea that moral order ultimately prevails over human error.

Zvelebil argues that Kannagi's rage is "sacralized," transforming her from a grieving widow into a divine agent (121). This transformation underscores the epic's assertion that justice is not merely a human construct but a cosmic principle.



Critique of Kingship and Political Authority

Silappadikaram presents a nuanced critique of kingship. The Pandya king's failure is not portrayed as individual weakness alone but as a systemic flaw in governance. His inability to uphold justice undermines the legitimacy of his rule.

Kannagi does not possess any political authority however her moral integrity gives her greater legitimacy than the King which proves that true justice does not belong to the throne by default, but to the individual who upholds 'Aram'. Kannagi becomes the embodiment of ethical justice via her acts of fearlessly speaking the truth, presenting evidence and exposing injustice. She accuses the King telling "O King, you killed an innocent man without inquiry" (*Silappadikaram, Madurai Kandam*), showcasing how moral authority can challenge and even surpass political power. The statement "The sceptre of the Pandya has bent" (*Silappadikaram, Madurai Kandam*) further symbolizes the downfall of unjust kingship before the power of truth.

Kannagi's challenge to the king disrupts the hierarchical order, demonstrating that moral authority can supersede political power. As Shulman notes, "the epic relocates sovereignty from the throne to the realm of ethical truth" (90).

This critique remains relevant, highlighting the timeless tension between authority and accountability.

Deification and Cultural Memory

Following the destruction of Madurai, Kannagi transcends her human identity and is deified. She becomes an object of worship, revered as a Goddess of justice and chastity. The transformation of Kannagi reaches its highest point when she surpasses human suffering and enters the dominion of divinity. As the epic suggests, "She who was a woman became a Goddess" (*Silappadikaram, Vanchi Kandam*). Her deification symbolizes the victory of 'Aram', moral courage, and ethical truth. Kannagi not only becomes merely a literary heroine through this transformation but lasting cultural symbol of justice, feminine power and divine righteousness. This transformation reflects her integration into Tamil cultural and religious traditions.

Her worship in various parts of South India and Sri Lanka indicates the enduring impact of her story. As Ramanujan observes, Kannagi's narrative "moves from text to ritual, from literature to lived culture" (205).

This cultural afterlife reinforces her significance as a symbol of moral power and resilience.

Gender, Agency, and Feminist Interpretation

From a feminist perspective, Kannagi's character challenges traditional representations of women in classical literature. While she initially conforms to societal expectations, her later actions disrupt these norms by asserting her agency.

Her transformation illustrates that feminine virtue and strength are not mutually exclusive. Instead, they coexist in a dynamic interplay that redefines power. As contemporary scholars argue, Kannagi represents a model of "ethical feminism," where justice and morality form the basis of empowerment.



Symbolism of the Anklet (Silambu) and Material Justice

One of the most powerful symbols in *Silappadikaram* is the anklet (*Silambu*) itself, which serves as both a narrative device and a representation of truth. The entire tragedy unfolds due to the mistaken identity of Kannagi's anklet, which is falsely equated with that of the queen. This confusion reflects not merely a material error but a deeper epistemological failure—the inability of authority to distinguish truth from appearance.

Kannagi's act of breaking open the anklet in the royal court is symbolically charged.

This scene is one of the climax moments of Tamil epic literature. As Kannagi shatters the anklet and “rubies poured forth” (*Silappadikaram, Madurai Kandam*), truth is revealed to everyone in the entire court. This revelation which unfolds in a dramatic twist emphasizes justice depends on truth alone, not upon the royal decree. The destruction of false accusation and emergence of moral justice both are altogether symbolized by the broken anklet. Kannagi's anklet becomes the instrument through which she establishes the innocence of her husband, challenges patriarchal authority and transforms herself into a figure of divine justice.

The revelation that her anklet contains rubies, whereas the queen's anklet contains pearls, becomes irrefutable proof of Kovalan's innocence (Ilango Adigal 128). This moment signifies the triumph of material truth over institutional falsehood. As Parthasarathy notes, “the anklet is not just an ornament but a container of truth that exposes injustice” (xix).

Furthermore, the anklet represents the intersection of gender and property. As an object owned and controlled by Kannagi, it becomes the means through which she asserts her agency. In a society where women's voices are often marginalized, the anklet functions as a material extension of Kannagi's authority. It allows her to enter the male-dominated space of the court and challenge the king's decision with undeniable evidence.

Thus, the *Silambu* operates on multiple levels economic, symbolic, and ethical reinforcing the central theme that truth, though suppressed, ultimately reveals itself.

Urban Space and Moral Geography

The cities depicted in *Silappadikaram* Puhar, Madurai, and Vanji are not merely geographical settings but moral landscapes that reflect the ethical conditions of society. Each city embodies a distinct set of values and contributes to the narrative's progression from disorder to restoration.

Puhar, the port city, is associated with wealth, pleasure, and moral laxity. It is here that Kovalan's relationship with Madhavi leads to his downfall, symbolizing the dangers of excess and desire (Zvelebil 115). The city's vibrancy masks an underlying instability, suggesting that material prosperity alone cannot sustain ethical balance.

Madurai, in contrast, represents political authority and judicial responsibility. However, the wrongful execution of Kovalan exposes the fragility of this system. The city, which should uphold justice, becomes the site of its greatest violation. As Shulman observes, “Madurai's destruction is not accidental but a direct consequence of its ethical failure” (88).



Vanji, the final setting, symbolizes restoration and renewal. It marks the reintegration of moral order and the recognition of Kannagi's divine status. The movement across these cities thus mirrors the ethical journey of the narrative, emphasizing the interconnectedness of space and morality.

Ritual, Memory, and the Afterlife of Kannagi

Kannagi's transformation does not end with the narrative but extends into ritual practice and cultural memory. Her deification leads to the establishment of temples and festivals dedicated to her, particularly in Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka. This transition from literary character to religious figure highlights the permeability between text and tradition.

In Sri Lanka, Kannagi is often identified with Pattini, a Goddess associated with chastity and protection. Rituals performed in her honor emphasize healing, justice, and communal well-being. This cultural adaptation demonstrates the flexibility of her narrative, allowing it to resonate across different contexts while retaining its core ethical message.

Ramanujan's observation that "stories in Indian traditions do not end; they transform into rituals and beliefs" is particularly relevant here (207). Kannagi's story becomes a living tradition, continually reinterpreted and re-enacted.

Moreover, her worship reflects a collective acknowledgment of moral justice as a divine principle. By elevating Kannagi to the status of a Goddess, the community affirms the enduring power of *aram* and its role in shaping social and spiritual life.

Comparative Perspective: Kannagi and Other Epic Heroines

Kannagi's character can also be better understood through comparison with other female figures in classical literature. Unlike Sita in the Ramayana or Draupadi in the Mahabharata, Kannagi directly confronts authority and enacts justice herself.

Sita, for instance, embodies patience and endurance but remains largely within the framework of obedience. Draupadi, while more assertive, relies on divine intervention and male allies to secure justice. Kannagi, however, operates independently, using her moral authority to challenge and overturn the king's decision.

This distinction highlights the uniqueness of Kannagi's role. As Zvelebil notes, she is "one of the few figures in Indian epic tradition who single-handedly enforces justice" (123). Her autonomy sets her apart, making her a particularly powerful symbol of feminine agency.

At the same time, her actions are not framed as rebellion but as a restoration of moral order. This balance between assertion and righteousness allows her character to transcend cultural boundaries and remain relevant across time.

Ethics, Emotion, and the Politics of Anger

A crucial aspect of Kannagi's transformation is her expression of anger. In many traditional contexts, female anger is viewed as disruptive or inappropriate. However, *Silappadikaram* reconfigures anger as a legitimate and necessary response to injustice.

Kannagi's anger is not impulsive but deeply ethical. It emerges from a clear recognition of wrongdoing and is directed toward restoring justice. As Shulman argues, her rage is "not destructive in essence but corrective in purpose" (92).

This reframing of anger challenges conventional gender norms and expands the emotional repertoire available to female characters. It suggests that emotions, when aligned with *aram*, can become powerful instruments of ethical action.

Furthermore, Kannagi's anger has political implications. By holding the king accountable, she exposes the limitations of authority and asserts the primacy of moral law. Her actions demonstrate that justice is not the exclusive domain of rulers but a shared responsibility that transcends hierarchy.

Conclusion

The story of Kannagi in *Silappadikaram* continues to resonate because it operates on multiple levels literary, ethical, cultural, and political. Her transformation is not a simple narrative arc but a profound exploration of how individuals can confront and redefine systems of power through moral conviction.

By foregrounding 'Aram' as the ultimate standard of justice, the epic challenges the legitimacy of authority that fails to uphold ethical principles. Kannagi's journey illustrates that true power lies not in position but in righteousness, a message that remains deeply relevant in contemporary contexts.

Her enduring presence in cultural memory, ritual practice, and scholarly discourse underscores her significance as a timeless symbol of justice. In a world where questions of accountability and ethical governance continue to arise, Kannagi's voice firm, uncompromising, and rooted in truth serves as a powerful reminder of the transformative potential of moral courage.

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