

The Book of Vanci

Ilanco Atikal

Tamil Literary Tradition:

Tamil is regarded as one of the major non-Sanskrit classical languages. Tamil country comprising of Chola, Chera and Pantiya empires, witnessed a wide range of literature which has been divided by the scholars in different phases of *Sangam* poetry. Though the literature produced during the first two Sangams is lost to us, books produced during the third phase of Sangam tradition throw sufficient light upon the Tamil literary tradition at large. The book called Tholkappiyam, written by Tholakappiyar codifies the structure of Tamil poetry and provides us with the critical insight needed for interpreting the texts that are available to us from the large corpus which has been lost over the time.

Akam and Puram:

These notions reflected in Tholkappiyam refer to two domains in the life of an individual. *Akam* refers to the personal domain that includes individual's personal and intensely felt emotions such as love while *puram* refers to the public domain and focuses on the aspects of valour exhibited through grand battles fought by the protagonists. *Akam*, being predominant in personal feelings, involves the informal discussions between the female friends mainly about their lovers. Most of the characters are women discussing their personal lives in dramatic monologues (speaking in a manner of addressing some unknown listener). They are not given names but are mentioned in terms of the relations that they have with each other such as sister, mother, foster mother. *Akam* domain is dominated by the presence of female characters while *puram*, representing mainly adventurous part and active public life deals with the experiences of men often glorified by the females who are some way related to them as mothers, wives or beloveds and therefore are proud of their active roles in the public domain. In the patriarchal set up of Tamil society the division of *Akam* and *Puram* also denotes classification of spheres for individuals based on their gender roles.

Besides *Akam* and *Puram*, Tholakappiyam also includes notion of *mutal*—indicating place and time. It comprises of two element *uri* and *karu*, the former highlights the relationship between the individual and the world while the latter reflects different phases of love and war. The concept of *thinai* is also mentioned in Tholkappiyam which refers to the setting in which the action takes place. The flora and fauna associated with the setting gets symbolic significance

such as kurinchi flower found in the hilly regions of south India symbolically hints at a secret meeting between lovers. *Akam* poetry contains five *thinai*s while *Puram* consists of seven of them such as Vanci (Indian Willow) representing the theme of invasion.

Cilappatikaram as a Tamil Epic:

Ilanko Atikal's Cilappatikaram written in the third Sangam era makes use of *Akam* and *Puram* poetry and adheres to Tamil classical style. It consists of 5,730 lines in *akaval* metre written in both verse and prose narratives. Verses in dramatic monologues, addressed by female friends to each other in a cheerful mood of teasing or in the melancholic mood of waiting for the arrival of lover reflect the *Akam* domain. *Puram* is evident in the description of battles fought by Dravidian kings with Aryan kings of the North when an expedition was taken from the South to the North in order to obtain a stone from Himalayas for the purpose of making Kannaki's idol in order to establish her shrine. Critics believe that the epic was composed around fifth century C.E. However, the events described in the epic are believed to have taken place around 2nd century C.E.

The Epic is divided into three books that mirror the three kingdoms namely: Chola, Pantiya and Chera. The action takes place in the capital cities of the three kingdoms Pukar(Chola) Maturai (Pantiya) and Vanci(Chera). In all there are 30 cantos--- book I, known as the 'book of Pukar' has 10 cantos, book II, the 'book of Maturai' has 13 cantos and book III, the 'book of Vanci' has 7 cantos. Chera Kingdom, where Kannaki finally takes shelter, undertakes a penance and is lifted to heaven; is held up as an ideal Kingdom that ensures dignity and justice to her by enshrining her in a temple.

The Cilappatikaram is based on the local legend which was prevalent in oral tradition for quite some time before it was selected by Atikal as a central theme for his epic. The legend has retained its currency for centuries as it has been widely disseminated and revised, rewritten, recited and adapted in many versions for theatre as well as film. Kannaki is excessively admired in the Tamil world for her qualities of beauty courage and inspiring conjugal devotion like several other deified female figures in Hindu epics and myths. She is primarily looked upon as the chaste wife, the excess of whose virtue is converted into Shakti or divine force. The character of Kannaki, as representative of Tamil womanhood has such a powerful hold on the Tamil psyche that she has come to function in the present as a highly impressive model for female conduct. In his translation of Cilappatikaram, the tale of an anklet, R. Parthasarathy says,

“Kannaki represents the ancient Tamil belief in a divine mechanism of retributive justice to those whom human law fails to protect.”

The lay of the anklet is based on a story which must have been readily available since it has obviously been current in Tamil India at that time and in fact has been alive until today. The poet, Ilanko Atikal, Prince-Ascetic mentioned in the preamble (Prologue) and summarized the theme of the epic. The prologue also contains the inventory of headings of each of the thirty cantos. At the end of the last canto Ilanko introduces himself in the first person from which, it is not improbable that he indeed belonged to the royal Chera family but obviously to a later age than his famous ancestor Cenkuttuvan. Critics opine that a date around A.D. 450 would be most appropriate for the writing of epic. The name of the writer seems to have evolved from the popular epithets used by his contemporaries for addressing him. Ilanko refers to ‘the younger one’ while Atikal refers to a ‘Jaina ascetic’. The story goes like this---

A very young couple from Pukar, the capital of the great sea port of the Chola empire; Kovalan, a 16 year old son of a rich merchant and Kannaki aged 12 lead happy and quiet life but then Kovalan abandons his wife for Matavi, the lovely sophisticated dancer at the king’s court. She gives birth to a girl called Manimekalai. On account of a silly but fateful quarrel and the end of the great National Indra festival, the lovers part though Matavi does not believe that this is their final separation. Kannaki welcomes her husband back. Kovalan, who had lost all his money and had ruined his career, accepts his wife anklet *cilampu* to raise some money on which he wants to start a new life. They travel to Maturai the capital of Pantiya empire accompanied by a nun who gives them much comfort on their strenuous journey to Maturai through the forest. Kovalan entrusts his wife to the care of the shepherds and rushes away to the city to find a jeweler. The royal goldsmith, who had stolen the queen's anklet seizes this opportunity and accuses Kovalan before the king for the theft. In order to please his jealous Queen, the king commands his immediate execution without investigating the matter properly. A drunken soldier murders Kovalan. Later Kannaki proves her husband's innocence by the symbolic act of bursting open her other anklet which reveals to the king the rubies inside instead of the pearls contained in the anklet of the queen. The shocked king is killed by remorse and the queen swoons and dies, too. Kannaki’s wrath turns now upon the city; twisting off her lovely breast and hurling it onto the city, she sets fire to Maturai, and the capital goes up in flames, Kannaki breaks her bangles and leaves the city. She turns to the West to the land of the Cheras where she spends fourteen days in

the mountains, performing penance. A divine chariot appears in which Gods along with the chief God Indra accompanied by Kovalan come to take Kannaki to heaven. The miraculous incident is witnessed by the Kuravas, the hill folks of Chera kingdom residing in the Red Mountains. They then report the miracle to the Chera King Cenkuttuvan who leads an expedition to the Himalayas to bring a stone for carving Kannaki's image. Northern kings are defeated by the Tamils and a stone image is brought to the south on their heads and shoulders. A temple in the honour of Kannaki-Pattini is built in Vanci, the Chera capital, and its consecration is witnessed by many rulers such as Gajabahu of Ceylon. Kannaki, now the patron-goddess of wifely loyalty and chastity graces the temple with her presence.

One of the greatest merits of the poem is the treatment of guilt and evil: Cilappatikaram is not a story of schematic figures, of faultless heroes, and of demonic villains. Nobody is entirely bad and no one is entirely to be blamed for the human tragedy. Kannaki who is clearly good from the beginning to the end undergoes a tremendous change from an innocent obedient silent child to a heroine of the magnitude of Greek tragedy. Fate is omnipresent in the poem, but there appears to be an inner tension between the conception of fate, of *dharmik* and *karmic* interpretation of events and between free and passionate actions; she finally succeed in compelling the forces of fate to give up. Kannaki is set into a significant contrast with Matavi: a naïve, reticent unsophisticated upper middle class girl, in contrast with a literate, cultured, witty, brilliant artiste. The Cilampu, the anklet, is deeply symbolic in more than one sense as in the beginning when she was happy Kannaki wore a pair of anklets; once her husband deserted her and went to live with Matavi, she no longer wore any anklets. The anklet offered to Kovalan after his return home became the instrumental cause of his death; finally, it is the anklet which broke open, helped in proving Kovalan's innocence--- a symbol of truth which is ultimately always revealed! At the end of the poem, Kannaki, united with Kovalan in heaven again wears both her anklets.

Cilappatikaram maybe justifiably viewed as national Tamil epic as it emphasizes upon the all important theme of the unity of the three Tamil speaking areas against the North. The occasion for confrontation is planning of an expedition to obtain the stone that they unanimously wanted to use for carving Kannaki's idol. At the same time these Dravidian kings also wanted to do justice with the Brahmins who were suffering under the unjust rules of Aryan kings. Cenkuttuvan claims that those kings in the North did not adhere to Dharma and did not do their duty towards the subjects. In this context, the theme of kingship and duties of an ideal king are

mentioned in the epic. The importance of four Vedas and our great Indian tradition is also explored at this point.

Besides exploring the character of Kannaki who is famous for her virtues and chastity, or that of Cenkuttuvan who is famous for his valour, invincible power and ideal kingship; the epic revolves round certain ideas and patterns that get more prominence than the characters. The Jaina doctrine of *Karma* the idea of non-violence, notions of the duties of the householder and of the king, the formulation of justice and its correlation to governance, righteousness and civil rights along with the concepts of chastity and ideal kingship are central to the structure and form of the Epic.

What are the central concerns of the Epic Cilappatikaram?

The Epic centres on the twin notions of kingship and Chastity. *Karpu*, the Tamil word for chastity is in fact a broader term which takes into its sweep virtually all the qualities that women are supposed to possess such as: service to one's husband, the spirit of loyalty and self sacrifice, modesty in bearing etc. From these notions of womanhood in a patriarchal set up, we can clearly gauge the status of a woman who is deified but only on the successful completion of the conditions put before her by her male counterparts. She is in a way denied a personality and freedom as the women deviating from the code are termed as immoral and are stigmatized. A renowned critic, Hart, opined that apart from the imperative virtue of chastity *Karpu* consisted of a sort of asceticism, the restraining of all impulses that were in anyway immodest. The stereotyping of women in Tamil society has largely revolved around this notion of *Karpu*. It is believed that innate power of a woman comes from her *Karpu* whether she is an unmarried girl or a married woman. The power of *Karpu* was to be both feared and revered because it could be both boon-giving as well as extremely destructive if threatened.

The celebration of Kannaki's *Karpu* takes place even today in the Pattini Kottam where a major festival consisting of dance and drama is held in honour of her in the month of Panguni which falls between 15 March and 15 April.

Kannaki is regarded as the Queen of chastity and stands as an outstanding example of the power of female spirituality found in Tamil Epic tradition. Description of Kannaki is both dramatic and awe-inspiring, especially the depiction of her blazing with rage at the unjust killing of her husband. She confronts the Pantiya king with the truth and fire in her eyes. The lady, who had accepted her truant husband back without uttering a single complaint, leaves her meekness when

it comes to asking for justice for him. In her rage she burns down the entire city of Maturai and makes the king and the queen die of repentance. Kannaki who was always confined to the domain of Akam comes out of it and enters the domain of action that is: Puram. This gesture takes her to the status of a Goddess even though she was born in a common stock.

Presence of the Legend in Sri-Lanka:

The legend of Kannaki is equally popular across the sea in Sri Lanka there Tamil population is very large. There it took a curious twist as in this folk version it is believed that Kannaki, by the power of her chastity had brought the slain Kovalan back to life and when on regaining consciousness he uttered the name of the courtesan Matavi she got furious and in her disgust she turned into a five headed snake. Kannaki has many temples dedicated to her in Sri Lanka where she is visualized in form of five hooded snake.

In Sri Lanka Sinhala Buddhists welcome her into their home as pattini, for most part unaware that she is a deity they share with the Tamil Hindu community. She is also the only female deity to claim a place of honour in the Theravada pantheon. Hailed as one of the four guardian deities of Sri Lanka, Pattini is the focus of night long rituals and revelries in the gammaduwa or village hall. Colourful altars pay tribute--wreathed in incense, these bear offerings of fruit and flowers and are exquisitely bedecked in woven coconut fronds. Rituals are staged to banish diseases and retain the prosperity and fertility of village fields.

Feminine strength on the backdrop of patriarchal society:

The heroine's power converted into a great fire and used to destroy evildoers rests on an inner purity termed *Karpu* or chastity that refers to wifely royalty. This terrific power is Central to all versions of the Kannaki saga. Ilanko represents Kannaki as a Paragon of virtue. She is an ideal wife, a pious householder; she is patient, silent and chaste. She pines away after Kovalan's desertion of her but never complains about his infidelity. She receives him back with love without seeking any clarification. She is compared to the star Arundhati for her steadfastness and conjugal chastity. Ilanko represents Matavi as an artiste, a clever and accomplished dancer possessing admirable range of knowledge concerning music, musical instruments and dance in its multiple forms: classical, folk as well as masquerade. She is a sensitive woman who graciously withdraws when Kovalan walks away although she pines for him. The inventory of items of jewelry mentioned in a splendid catalogue indicates her aesthetic taste. Atikal gives elaborate information about ancient Tamilnadu's accomplishments in the field of music, dance,

costumes, jewelry, accessories and court practices, system of royal patronage and position of women through his depiction of Matavi.

Concept of an ideal king as the protector of all and the preserver of justice:

Kannaki's interrogation of Pantiya king reveals the notions of ideal kingship propagated through the epic. She tells the king that a king is accountable to his subjects and cannot swerve from the path of Dharma. She challenges the king and proves in the open court that her husband was not a thief. She also asserts that she has come from Pukar where kings like Shivi who according to a myth had parted with his own body-flesh to save a dove; were renowned for being just. With simmering eyes and heavy heart, holding up a single anklet in her hand is termed fiercer than Kali, Chamundi or Durga. The interaction between her and the king reveals democratic aspects of the socio-political set-up of the society. The retribution of the crime committed towards Kannaki happens on the mythical plane as the king dies of guilt and the queen soon follows her husband. Kannaki has a choice: whether to end her life after the demise of her husband or to live and take revenge. She chooses the second option and curses the city of Madurai by wrenching off her left breast and flinging it on the city's streets to burn them down. She proclaims to Agni to go after the wicked. Her chastity becomes her armor and her demand for justice makes an inspiring assertion of the power of the socially disempowered, silenced sector of society in the overpowering patriarchal set up. The goddess of Maturai explains the reason behind Kovalan's death to Kannaki which was an outcome of the crime committed by him in his previous birth when he had murdered a merchant called Cankman. The curse of his widow upon Kovalan's head had brought in sorrow for both Kannaki and Kovalan. **Ilanko thus fuses myth with notions of justice and Karma to foreground traditional Tamil valorization of Karpū.** A popular saying in Tamil attributes unfailing rainfall in a place, to the presence of chaste women or just King who would ensure women's protection and chaste women on earth keep king's scepter upright. Thus it is a mutual responsibility. It is this alliance between the sacred power of Kannaki and the Chera King Cenkuttuvan that forms the focus in the third section of the epic known as 'The Book of Vanci.'

What makes Cilappatikaram different from other epics?

- It is based on the life of a female protagonist, Kannaki and depicts her as a powerful person questioning the King in the royal court of a country where she is a foreigner. She

was a lady leading a life of a common woman in a patriarchal set up and her action of challenging the king is an admirable stance on this backdrop.

- Epics usually deal with the lives and careers of Gods, demigods or royal personages. Kannaki and Kovalan belong to the merchant class and their being a protagonist of an epic is rather unusual, considering the contemporary tradition of Atikal.
- Most of the Indian epics laud the virtues and valour of the Aryan race while this epic favours the Dravidians and in fact depicts the Aryans as villains who disrespected Vedas and did not protect the Brahmins. The expedition planned by Cenkuttuvan in order to obtain a stone for carving Kannaki's image had one more purpose which was to reinstate Dharma in the Northern parts of the country where it was said that Brahmins were deterred from performing their sacrificial rituals.
- In most of the Pan-Indian epics we find predominance of Hinduism and the value system taught in the Upanishads is seen to be reflected in the literary works. Cilppatikaram, being written by a Jain Monk, bears strong imprints of Jainism as well as Buddhist philosophy. The Karma theory explored in the epic and the values such as non-violence, adherence to vegetarian diet are evocative of the said influences.
- Epics are usually written in verse form, but there are prose narratives intermingled with the verse in Atikal's Cilappatikaram. There is element of drama also in it as different characters get engaged in dialogues with one another.