Chapter 6

Kannagi and Dravidian Movement

Kannagi was firmly placed as a cultural symbol in the writings of Tamil scholars. But her further placement as an icon of Tamil nationalism has to be understood in the context of politics of the Tamil region in the years before and after India's independence from colonial rule. Firstly, in the Self Respect Movement of E.V.Ramasami (EVR), there was hostility to the north as represented by the presence of Brahmins in Tamil society. There was also a sense of a distinct Tamil society. However, in the radical social ideology of EVR, there was no attempt to construct an idealized Tamil cultural past. On the contrary EVR critiqued elements of Tamil culture even as he challenged the culture of the 'north'. Secondly, when Dravida leaders like Annadurai criticized the 'north' and demanded a separate nation for the Tamils, they departed from the ideology of EVR in constructing an idealized Tamil cultural past. Their efforts were similar to the nationalist construction of a glorious cultural past at the pan Indian level. In that ideological frame, if Sita and Savitri became icons of 'Hindu' culture, it was Kannagi who occupied that space in Tamil cultural nationalism. It is her placement as an icon of Tamil culture, Tamil language, Tamil womanhood and Tamil nation which deeply impacted her representations in the plays of M.Karunanidhi and Bharatidasan.

6.1 EVR and the Radical Socio- Cultural Message of the Self Respect Movement

A significant development in Madras Presidency in the twentieth century was the emergence of the Justice Party in 1916 and the beginning of the Self Respect Movement or the "E.V.Ramasami Manadu" in 1925. EVR started the Movement with the stated purpose of bringing about radical social reform. EVR belonged to the Kannada Balija Naidu community and started his political career as a member of the Indian National Congress.
But he was soon disillusioned with the policies of the Congress which he came to reject as being led by the Brahmins and working against the interests of the lower castes in society. The Justice Party articulated the political aspirations of the non-Brahmin elites in the Presidency and the Movement agitated against the supremacy of the Brahmins in the higher echelons of society and dominance in the bureaucracy.¹ The Justice Party and the Self Respect Movement were led and run by non-Brahmin elites whose agenda was to elbow out the Brahmins from the positions of power they enjoyed in society as the highest caste and from the bureaucracy, where they outnumbered all other castes despite being a fraction of the population. Subramania Bharati observed at that time that the aim of the leaders of the so called non-Brahmin agitation was limited to obtaining bureaucratic positions. He further pointed out that the Brahmin community was only one of the thousands of caste communities in Madras Presidency which did not inter-dine or inter-marry with other caste communities. He stated categorically that there was no community called the 'non-Brahmin' community. He pointed out that while the newly emergent Shaiva vellalas criticized the Brahmins, they themselves did not make any effort to inter-dine or inter-marry with caste groups that were below them.² He was however, optimistic (erroneously as it turned out) that once India obtained independence (swarajya) social equality would automatically follow political equality.

Though not organizationally together, the Self Respect Movement could be taken ideologically as the social and cultural wing of the largely political agenda of the Justice Party. The Justice Party was successful in electoral politics until 1937 when it was defeated by the Indian National congress. In 1944, however, under the leadership of EVR, the Justice Party was reorganized as the Dravida Kazhagam. EVR made it clear that the organization would not contest elections. A rebel faction of the Justice Party survived and contested the elections of 1952. It was not very successful.

² 'Jadi Beda Vinodangal', Bharatiyar Katturaikal, pp. 428-429.
The movement led by EVR in the thirties and the Tamil Purity movement (தமிழ் புதிய வழக்கம்) of the same decades are inconceivable without the ideological rationale provided by colonial scholarship in the nineteenth. With ideas of distinctions of race and language the Self Respect Movement developed into one of the most radical and strident advocate of social reform of a most fundamental kind. For almost twenty years from 1924 when he started the publication of his paper Kudi Arasu, EVR and several of his supporters used the newspaper and pamphlets to propagate their atheist ideas and called for radical social reform. While being aggressively against the Brahmins as representatives of an 'Aryan culture' which subjugated the Dravidian people of the south, the leaders of the Movement also spoke from a rationalist position and challenged every oppression and inequality based on caste, class and gender. On most issues relating to women the Self Respect Movement, through its newspapers and pamphlets, took a position radically different from a range of opinions articulated on social and cultural issues in Madras Presidency in these years.

From its beginnings in the 1920s the Self Respect Movement was a bitter critic of the 'culture of the north'. In an essay published in Kudi Arasu in 1937 EVR articulated his fundamental premise that only someone with self respect can truly be free. The Dravidian Tamils would truly be free when they asserted their self respect and worked to end the caste system and everything else that subjugated them socially and culturally. EVR appears to have accepted the conclusions of colonial scholarship that south India was the abode of the Dravidian race and the Brahmins amongst them were the Aryans who had over a period of several centuries achieved social and cultural supremacy over the Dravidian race. In fact the demand for a separate state of Dravida Nadu in 1939 was based entirely on the premise of racial difference. However, in 1947, in a post Hitler era, he wrote," The Dravidians have a distinct origin in society; their languages are independent and belong to a separate class. The terms 'Aryan' and 'Dravidian' are not my inventions...That the Ramayana is an allegoric representation of the invading Aryans and the Domiciled Dravidians has been accepted by all historians including Pt Nehru and all reformers including Swami Vivekananda. My desire is not to perpetuate this difference but to unify the two opposing elements in society. I am not a believer in the race theory as propounded by the late Nazi leader of Germany...None can divide the south Indian people into two races by means of

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3 This 'culture' was framed as being entirely 'aryan'/Brahmin, drawing from the values of the epics of the north like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and the puranas.
4 Thanthai Periyar, Suyamariyaudai Iyakkathai Thothruviththathen, p. 14
any blood test. It is not only suicidal but reactionary. But the fundamental difference between the two different cultures, Aryan and Dravidian cannot be refuted by anyone who has closely studied the daily life, habits and customs and literature of these two distinct elements in South India.\(^5\)

EVR gave to the 'race theory' a strident twist in the early decades of the Movement. The revision in 1947 notwithstanding, he continued to be hostile to the Brahmans in the years after independence as well and set out to mark the Brahmans of Tamil society as outsiders and enemies of the Dravidians. The *smritis, dharmashastras*, and the *puranas* were rejected by him as Sanskrit texts that legitimized the hierarchical caste society that placed the Dravidian in the lower rungs of society as *sudras*. The *Puranas*, he said, were narrations of the victory of the Aryans over the Dravidians. He ridiculed the idea of heaven and hell and saw these as notions propagated by the Brahmans to maintain their control and claim of social and ritual superiority over the other castes.\(^6\) EVR insisted that if Tamil society wanted to develop into a modern society based on principles of equality, it must divest itself of all influences of the north. At a performance of the Shakuntala story by children in 1940, he said:

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மூர்த்திகள்

Our enemies, the Aryans, defeated us initially and enslaved us and now they do not want us to even think of freeing ourselves. To perform these plays based on stories from the *puranas* is to participate in their conspiracy of keeping us in slavery.\(^8\)

He and other contributors to the Movement's propaganda papers interpreted the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* as epics that narrated the story of the victory of the Aryans over the Dravidians and for that reason unworthy of veneration by the Dravidians. EVR insisted that the epics of the north were carriers of not only a caste ideology which placed the Brahmans on top of the social hierarchy but also the ideology of dominance of the north

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\(^6\) E.V. Ramasami, *Ramayana Kurippukal*, p. 1
\(^7\) Periyar, *Thamizhanai Adimaiyaakiyavai Evai?*, p. 3
\(^8\) All translations into Tamil are by me.
over the south. He attacked the main characters of the *Ramayana* as immoral. His attack on Sita was particularly virulent. He sought to drag her down from the high pedestal she occupied as a virtuous woman by insisting that she was attracted to Ravana and flirted with him. He also insisted that there was sexual contact between them with Sita’s consent.

He therefore rejected Sita as an ideal on grounds of her problematic (in his reading of the *Ramayana*) sexual morality. He further attacked the Hindu gods as incestuous and rapacious. Gods and heroes of the epics of the north, then, were not worthy of emulation.

The critique of these texts and of contemporary society was primarily born from an anti-Brahmin standpoint. But the social and religious practices in contemporary society that sought legitimacy through these texts were attacked by EVR and his followers for failing the test of rationality as well. EVR emphasized that every action that a man took in his life should be guided by self respect and rationality. Attending a Self Respect marriage in 1934, he said:

Understand that to respect a man’s rationality is the primary ideological principle of self respect. To act in accordance with customs, religious rules and shastras and against the dictates of your rational mind is against self respect.

The insistence on self respect led to the attack on the Brahmans and the yardstick of reason ensured that any ritual or social practice that was based on faith and adherence to tradition would be challenged as well. While he attacked the celebration of Diwali and Saraswati

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9 Periyar, *Ramayana Kurippugal*, p. 1
10 Ibid., p. 18
11 Ibid., pp. 22-23
12 Periyar, *Puranam*, pp. 69-73
13 *Paguththariva*, October 7, 1934, p. 3. What came to be called Self Respect Marriages eliminated the Brahmin priest as well as all vedic rituals. Such marriages were later given the stamp of legality when C.N. Annadurai became the chief Minister of the state in 1967.
poojai, he did not spare the celebration of Mariamman Pandigai in the villages either. It is from these twin ideological planks that EVR approached any issue relating to women. At the same marriage mentioned above EVR attacked the Brahmanical rituals associated with marriages as intended to enslave women and demeaning to their dignity. He said:

Marriage based on the puranas with rituals like thali, kanyadaan are intended to enslave women and underline that they are unfit to be treated as human beings.

This meant that EVR would find nothing venerable in the present or in the past that did not stand the test of rationality. His critique of the north and of the 'Aryan culture' did not lead to a veneration of an assumed glorious Tamil past. EVR did selectively refer to a past Tamil culture but only to condemn contemporary practices. For instance, when he critiqued temples and idol worship as impositions of the Aryan culture on an assumed rational Tamil culture, he asserted that ancient Tamils did not worship images. Even a text like the Tholkappiyam which was presumed to be influenced by Aryan culture, he said, does not mention the worship of images or temples.

He was no 'devotee' of the Tamil language either. At a conference in Coimbatore in 1939 he declared: "I do not have any devotion for Tamil, either as mother tongue or as the language of the nation. I am not attached to it because it is a classical language, or because it is an ancient language, or because it was the language spoken by Shiva, or the language bestowed upon us by Agastya...Such an attachment and devotion is foolish. I only have attachment to things that have qualities that have utility. I do not praise something just because it is my language or my land or my religion or because it is something ancient."

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14 Kudi Arasu, October 20, 1929, p. 7
15 Ibid.
16 Periyar, Thamizhanai Adimaiyaakiyavai E vai?, P.6
17 Ibid.
18 Quoted in Ramaswamy, Passions of the Tongue, p. 235
His irreverence towards the language which enjoyed intense devotion continued for decades. So much so that when an International Tamil Conference was organized in 1968, he declared Tamil "is a barbarian language" and that the money spent for the development of Tamil was a waste.19

EVR was a bitter critic of Tamil society as well. Even as he held the Aryan culture responsible for several of the ills of contemporary Tamil society, he did not hesitate to criticize what was perceived as quintessentially Tamil culture. In several articles in his newspaper *Kudi Arasu*, EVR and several other contributors to the paper attacked the prevailing unequal gender relations in society. He even challenged the venerated Valluvar and his ideas on *karpu*.20 He insisted that if Valluvar had been a woman he would not have had such opinions on *karpu*.21 He might have even wanted to burn the *Kural* as a mark of irreverence towards it.22 He was further convinced that every text belonged to a particular age when it was composed and fulfilled the needs of a society at that time. Society was a dynamic organism and all social customs and traditions are products of a particular time and do not have validity for all time. No text, therefore, no matter how venerated, can be taken to be valid and applicable for all times. In the same foreword to the collection of his articles in 1940, he explained his articles on *karpu* in the anthology and expressed this argument with his characteristic irreverence:

These articles were written with the intention to show that texts are written by a class of people to suit the needs of a particular time. Social norms cannot be true for all time and for all people.

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19 *The Mail*, January 2, 1968, p. 1
22 Sarala Rajagopalan, *Puratchik Kavizharum Pennayum*, p. 26
23 Periyar, *Penn Yen Adimai Aanal*, pp. 6-7
His stand on the issue of karpu was, as a consequence, radically different from anyone writing in these years. For instance he challenged the concept of karpu and questioned the social demand that it should be a necessary code of conduct for women. In the foreword to the same anthology of articles on women published in 1940, he dismissed karpu as the reason for the unequal gender relations that prevailed in society and for the enslavement of women:

...உருவவாசராள் தண்டு தான் வாசராள் பாத்தேசனைத்து மாவுஸ்தம்ப அகர (அகர) கொள்ளாமை வாராளையும் நேர்ந்தோளையும், முனைந்துசெய்து பாத்தேசனை அண்மன்னங்களும் வாராளரும் வாஷ்டராளியும், உருவவாசராள் தண்டு குறிப்பிட்டு குறிப்பிட்டு என்று கூறிவிளக்குக்கொண்டனர். உருவவாசராள் குறிப்பிட்டும் பாத்தேசனைக்கும் குறிப்பிட்டும் பாத்தேசனையும் வாஷ்டராளியும், பாத்தேசனையும் வாஷ்டராளியும் அகர வாளிகளின் வாஷ்டராளியும், பாத்தேசனையும் வாஷ்டராளியும் அகர வாளிகளின் வாஷ்டராளியும், பாத்தேசனையும் வாஷ்டராளியும் அகர வாளிகளின் வாஷ்டராளியும். 24

*The insistence of karpu for women alone is the prime reason for the enslavement of women. If men and women had the same freedoms, the aim of karpu will change and the same rules and norms will prevail for men and women.*

Through the 1930s EVR ridiculed notions of heaven and hell as well and the idea that god punished those who engaged in acts of sin. He turned the argument against those who held these ideas by asking them to leave the task of punishment to the gods. On the issue of karpu and the punishments that entailed transgressions he said at a conference in 1935:

...உருவவாசராள் தண்டு தான் வாசராள் பாத்தேசனைத்து மாவுஸ்தம்ப அகர கொள்ளாமை வாராளையும் நேர்ந்தோளையும், முனைந்துசெய்து பாத்தேசனை அண்மன்னங்களும் வாராளரும் வாஷ்டராளியும். உருவவாசராள் குறிப்பிட்டு குறிப்பிட்டு என்று கூறிவிளக்குக்கொண்டனர். உருவவாசராள் குறிப்பிட்டும் பாத்தேசனையும் வாஷ்டராளியும், பாத்தேசனையும் வாஷ்டராளியும் அகர வாளிகளின் வாஷ்டராளியும், பாத்தேசனையும் வாஷ்டராளியும் அகர வாளிகளின் வாஷ்டராளியும், பாத்தேசனையும் வாஷ்டராளியும் அகர வாளிகளின் வாஷ்டராளியும். 25

*Nobody needs to worry about karpu. Women's karpu is not pawned to men. It is a matter concerning the individual. Whatever punishment awaits one who has lost it concerns that person and no one else.*

In one stroke he thus challenged not only the power men assumed over women, he challenged the religious strictures that legitimised such power. He allowed for the

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24 Ibid.
autonomy of the woman in matters concerning her life in a way that no one else did in these years.

EVR's iconoclastic zeal emboldened several of the contributors to the newspaper *Kudi Arasu*. For instance, a contributor K. Natarajan was not embarrassed to assert the sexual needs of women and their right to fulfill them as they pleased. He made bold to ask in 1932:

If men cannot control their sexual needs, how can women do so? If men can fulfill their needs in any way they pleased, why should women not do so?

It was in these years, as discussed in the previous chapter that the epic *Silappatikaram* and Kannagi as its protagonist were being elevated as symbols of a glorious Tamil culture within which Kannagi came to symbolize *karpu* and by extension all of Tamil womanhood. It is important to notice that EVR never refers to 'Tamil women' as a separate category that must live by a set of rules drawing from an ancient past. He never presented them with an ideal that they much emulate. It is not surprising therefore that he did not appreciate the epic *Silappatikaram* either. He described it as a story ‘which began in prostitution, grew in ‘chastity’ and ended up in foolishness and superstition’.

The primacy EVR gave to individual rights and an individual's autonomy in decision making on issues relating to his/her life determined the stand he would take on issues relating to women. At the same conference in 1935 where he had to speak on whether or not women should be given rights, he declared:

...உணவினர்கள் தன்னாலையும் நாள்வாய்வுகளும் மறு வடிவில் அலங்கற்றும் பல்வேறு பலரும் தொகுதிகளிலும் வரும் நிலையில்... இவ்வாறையில் நான் கூறியேன்கிறேன். அந்தப் பார்வையின் முக்கியத்துவம் என்பது எனவும் அதற்கு சுட்டுமிக்கும் நிலைகளாலே கணிக்கப்பட்டது.

26 *Kudi Arasu*, August 28, 1932, p.15
Every woman should ready herself for a vocation. She should choose a husband for herself when she is mature. If this is done, you don’t have to organize conference like these and discuss whether or not women should be given freedom. They will get it themselves.

This unrelenting insistence on individual rights, an individual’s autonomy in all matters and the equality of the sexes led EVR to take extremely radical positions on matters relating to women and society. For instance he wrote on a woman’s right to have several husbands in 1931 on the ground that these were matters of personal choice and no one had the right to interfere. He said:

I firmly believe that just as men live with two wives, women should be able to live with two husbands. These are individual choices and no one should have the right to interfere.

It was common in these years for men to contribute articles to newspapers and journals on issues relating to women. These writings were mostly on what a woman should do, what she should aspire to become and what the purpose of her life in the society was. EVR always struck a different note on any issue. On the issue of widow remarriage when debate raged in newspapers and journals on whether or not widowed women should be 'allowed' to marry and writers quoted from the shastras to give an air of authority to their opinions EVR said:

28 Kudi Arasu, November 3, 1935, p. 13
29 Kudi Arasu, September 13, 1931, p. 11
I do not understand what right men have to decide whether or not a widow should marry. When widows are getting pregnant, killing their unwanted infants, being forced into prostitution due to circumstances, is it not foolish to discuss whether the shastras permit widow marriage? Whether a widow feels the desire for a man or whether she needs a man in her life or not, is this not the only issue?

Similarly, when there was a call for laws against prostitution on grounds of immorality and legislators debated in the Madras Council for a ban on prostitution for those reasons, EVR redefined the meaning of prostitution itself by saying:

What prostitutes do and what men who chase several women with the intention of sex is the same.

He further blamed the men and their arrogance for the prostitution that prevailed amongst women. He also blamed the society for being lax with men when imposing rules of sexual behaviour.

30 Kudi Arasu, October 10, 1929, p. 12
31 Kudi Arasu, May 29, 1932, p. 10
The first reason for prostitution is the arrogance of men. It is because there is insistence on karpum for women and not for men that so many women have to engage in prostitution. If men did not buy, there would be no woman selling.

He was a staunch supporter of gender equality and argued for equal rights for women, including their right to control over childbirth. He was perhaps alone in demanding a woman’s control over childbirth for her own freedom and dignity at a time when birth control was being recommended on grounds of excess population, women’s health or family economy.

But not everyone could approach issues relating to women with the same rigorous rationality as EVR could. While he evidently deeply influenced several men and women of his time, not all of them could meet his exacting standards of rationality when approaching any issue. Some of them got caught up in concepts like karpum and 'Tamil culture' and were unwilling to discard them with the ease with which EVR could. Caught between an anti-Aryan stand and the notions of what ancient Tamil culture was, some of the contributors to Kudi Arasu argued in contradictory ways on issues of karpum. For instance a regular contributor to Kudi Arasu through the thirties was Saami Chidambaranar. Unlike EVR, he wrote often about Tamil culture when he discussed issues relating to women. He was not willing to dismiss the ideas of Valluvar as irrelevant to modern times as EVR felt free to do. On the issue of karpum he was convinced that the couplets relating to the issue in the Kural that were demeaning to women had been written by Valluvar to satisfy the vedic priests (தேவாண்) of that time. The reasoning he offered was that the couplets occur in the chapter titled "நூறுகளும் நுட்பகங்களும்" which, he said clearly indicated equality of men and women. The couplets on karpum were incongruous in that chapter according to Chidambaranar. He said:
The word partner (thunaivar) means there is equality. If we compare Valluvar's couplets on partnership in marriage and the concept of karpu, it is clear that there is no link. We can know that it was to please the vedic men that Valluvar introduced the concept of karpu in the chapter on partnership in life.

But perhaps fearing that this might lead to the conclusion that ancient Tamils were more lax in matters of sexual morality, he quickly explained that ancient Tamils were, unlike the Aryans, stricter in matters of karpu! The confusion in his mind is illustrated by this long quote from the same article:

"ஓனை" வருவம் முனைவுற்றுரு புலவரவரை மன்னாரை எனும் தமிழர்களின் காலங்களில் பயன்படுத்தப்பட்டது. எனினும் வருவாய் வாக்கிட்டிக்கொண்டு இல்லாது பல்வேறு வடிவங்களில் பயன்படுத்தப்பட்டது. பொதுவாக வாக்கிட்டிக்கொண்டு இல்லாது பல்வேறு வடிவங்களில் பயன்படுத்தப்பட்டது. இவ்வாறு வாக்கிட்டிக்கொண்டு மூன்று வடிவங்களில் பயன்படுத்தப்பட்டது. இவ்வெளிய வாக்கிட்டிக்கொண்டு மூன்று வடிவங்களில் பயன்படுத்தப்பட்டது. இவ்வாறு வாக்கிட்டிக்கொண்டு மூன்று வடிவங்களில் பயன்படுத்தப்பட்டது. இவ்வெளிய வாக்கிட்டிக்கொண்டு மூன்று வடிவங்களில் பயன்படுத்தப்பட்டது. இவ்வாறு வாக்கிட்டிக்கொண்டு மூன்று வடிவங்களில் பயன்படுத்தப்பட்டது. இவ்வெளிய வாக்கிட்டிக்கொண்டு மூன்று வடிவங்களில் பயன்படுத்தப்பட்டது. இவ்வாறு வாக்கிட்டிக்கொண்டு மூன்று வடிவங்களில் பயன்படுத்தப்பட்டது. இவ்வெளிய வாக்கிட்டிக்கொண்டு மூன்று வடிவங்களில் பயன்படுத்தப்பட்டது. இவ்வாறு வாக்கிட்டிக்கொண்டு மூன்று வடிவங்களில் பயன்படுத்தப்பட்டது. இவ்வெளிய வாக்கிட்டிக்கொண்டு மூன்று வடிவங்களில் பயன்படுத்தப்பட்டது.

On the issue of karpu the Tamils were stricter than the Aryans. According to Aryan principles, a woman would be taken to have lost karpu only if she had physical relations with a man other than her husband. They may desire another man or woman; they may

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34 Kudi Arasu, December 8, 1929, p. 8
35 Ibid., p. 9
speak to each other, they may touch each other. No harm comes to karpu as a result. For instance, Sita was touched and taken away by Ravana, and Draupadi desired Karna. But for Tamils if a man other than the husband desired a woman, karpu is lost. Women suffered a lot as a result in later times.

...karpu should be for men and women...

Chidambaranar managed to achieve several things in this article—he attacked the 'Aryans' as immoral, retained a 'Tamil past' as more protective of women's sexual morality and called for equality of men and women in matters of sexual morality in contemporary times. Let us compare his hesitation in condemning a 'Tamil past' with EVR's engagement with a supposed 'Tamil past' as reflected in Tamil texts. In the Kudi Arasu of June 8, 1930 EVR wrote:

When defining karpu, think what an ancient Tamil text has said and how much it indicates slavery. If a man other than the husband desired a woman, karpu is lost. That is if she had been a woman of karpu, no man could have thought of her. Think how unjust this is.

As is apparent, EVR's ideas originated not only from a hatred of the north, racial concepts of Aryan and Dravidian but also from a desire for a world that would be free from all kinds of inequalities and oppression. In his world, this would be a society free from inequalities based on race and gender. He was not looking to retrieve a putative Tamil cultural past. But, as noticed above, not everyone in the Movement was willing to discard the entire idea of a pristine, glorious Tamil past if it vitiated against the contemporary ideas of gender equality and rationality. Even within the Movement the notion of karpu was not rejected by all and continued to be a touchstone for the idea of not only Tamil culture but Tamil...
womanhood. In fact as the movement moved into the 1940s women came to be addressed in conferences as 'mothers' and 'sisters' rather than as 'friends' as was the case before.  

The nature of the critique of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* by EVR and others in the movement, wherein they rejected Sita and Draupati as sexually immoral, perhaps inadvertently had within it the rationale for the elevation of Kannagi as the ideal for all Tamil women to emulate. In portraying Kannagi as a symbol of chastity, EVR's followers would ignore his critique of Valluvar and notions of *karpu* and instead would follow in the footsteps of Valluvar in making the husband worthy of worship by the wife. EVR's hostility to the north as the region of the Aryans would be retained as a powerful political slogan. In other words the social radicalism of EVR that called for gender equality would be bypassed and in the ideology of Tamil cultural nationalism that would be crafted in the fifties and sixties for very definite political ends, Tamil women would be expected to subsume their aspirations for equality and freedom within it and agree to be framed within the notion of 'Tamil woman'.

### 6.2 Compulsions of Party Politics and Reworking Dravida Ideology

This covert rejection of the transformative stridency of EVR through silence and the retention of his antipathy to Brahmans has to be understood in the light of political developments in Madras Presidency in the years just before and after 1947 and the nature of Tamil society itself. The formation of the Dravida Kazhagam (DK) in 1944 marked the arrival, for the first time, of a cadre based social organization devoted to radical social transformation which continued to have the ouster of the Brahmans in the region from positions of political power and bureaucratic dominance as its prime objective. Under the leadership of EVR this new organization continued to call for a separate independent Dravida Nadu in opposition to the independent India that the Indian National Congress was agitating for. EVR made it clear that he wanted to bring about social transformation through propaganda. He also made it clear that he would not contest elections. He

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remained an atheist in his beliefs to the end of his life and declared from public platforms that there was no god. In the fifties he launched a virulent attack on what he termed as North Indian gods. The idols of Rama and Ganesh were stoned and desecrated in other ways during this campaign.

However, there may have been several members in the DK who were interested in entering the electoral fray. Matters came to a head in 1949 when EVR, at the age of 72 married a woman of 26 named Maniammai. This angered several in the DK who saw the act as a betrayal of everything that EVR had fought for until then. They broke away and formed a new organization called the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) under the leadership of C.N. Annadurai. M. Karunanidhi was part of this breakaway group. DMK was a political party from the very beginning even though they were officially recognized as a political party by the Election Commission only in 1962. They supported some candidates in the elections of 1952 but fielded their own candidates in the elections of 1957 as independents. By this time a congress man Kamaraj, a non Brahman, had become the Chief Minister of the newly formed Madras state. In the elections of 1957, EVR supported Kamaraj even though he was of the Congress. He explained that since Kamaraj was doing everything for the uplift of Tamils and was himself not a Brahman, he was no longer hostile to the Congress. The departure of the DMK then, from the radical social programme of EVR must be understood in the context of compulsions of electoral politics and the realities of Tamil society at that time.

This new political party continued the demand for secession from the newly formed Indian Union till the early 1960s. Through the fifties, DMK demanded a separate Dravida Nadu along with the Dravida Kazhagam on grounds of race, language and a distinct cultural identity. The political and socio-cultural massage of the new Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam was defined by the grammar of nationalism. The elements that usually go into the making of self identity include pride in language, the making of a glorious cultural past and the notion of 'traditional values'. In the context of the Indian national movement, the colonial

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38 The demand for secession was formally dropped in the 1960 session of the DMK. But this session was not attended by C.N. Annadurai. In his first speech in the Rajya Sabha in 1962 Annadurai demanded a separate state. The demand was finally abandoned altogether only after the Sino-Indian war of 1962.

39 These elements are variables and nationalisms in the twentieth century worked with different sets of elements. If it was race and language in Tamil nationalism, it could be religion as it happened in the movement for Pakistan. As E.J. Hobsbawm has said the criteria are fuzzy as cloud shapes might
government was the 'other'. Through the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century several nationalist thinkers framed 'Indian culture' within an assumed 'tradition'. As Partha Chatterjee has argued, women in this nationalist ideology occupied the inner world of the inviolate home. Women's chastity in the conceptualization of home, domesticity and political subjection had a "real and stated, not merely symbolic, political value." The Bengali nationalist drew heavily from the Sanskrit shastras when he extolled the virtue of sati as a practice and wrote extensively to glorify the widow who immolated herself.

Ironically, Tamil cultural nationalism replicated these ideological presumptions even as it projected its cause as being in opposition to everything that the North stood for. This development in the sub-nationalism of the DMK drew its ideological inspiration from ancient Tamil literature. Language, race and a culture that flowed from the Tamil language were the cornerstones of this nationalism. The DMK also fleshed out the ideology of nationalism in these years. Their demand for secession was on the basis of having a distinct and distinguished language, a history untouched by any influence of the North for several centuries and a culture that was marked by values that did not flow from any Sanskrit texts but from its own Tamil literary works like the Kural, the poems of the sangam and the epics. This theme was very similar to the cultural nationalism within the spectrum of Indian nationalist opinion in the last decades of the nineteenth and the early decades of the twentieth century within which existing abuses were attributed to 'Muslim misrule'. The ideology of the Dravida Movement attributed the abuses of contemporary Tamil society to

be to a traveler but useful for propagandist or programmatic purpose. See Nations and Nationalism since 1780, p. 6. Benedict Anderson would perhaps agree that Tamil nationalism was 'conceived in language'. See Anderson, Imagined Communities, p. 145.

Partha Chatterjee, 'The Nation and its Women' in Ranajit Guha (ed.), A Subaltern Studies Reader, p. 242. Tanika Sarkar makes the point with reference to Bengal that the Bengali male saw the home as the last bastion of freedom. The woman in this home then, had to be kept protected from the invasive and erosive influence of the colonial state. See 'Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Domesticity and Nationalism in Nineteenth Century Bengal' in Tanika Sarkar, Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion, and Cultural Nationalism, p. 36. Dipesh Chakrabarty has shown that the idea of the 'new woman' was written into the techniques of the self that nationalism evolved. See Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'The Difference-Deferral of a Colonial Modernity: Public Debates on Domesticity in British Bengal' in David Arnold, David Hardiman (eds.), Subaltern Studies VIII, p. 58.

Tanika Sarkar, op.cit, p. 41.
Ibid., pp. 42-43
Sumit Sarkar & Tanika Sarkar (ed.), Women and Social Reform in Modern India, Vol. 1, p.10
the influences of the North represented by the Brahmins. There was further irony in the fact that as in the case of strident Indian nationalism which glorified traditional women 'as the last refuge of a threatened indigenous culture', Dravidian movement came to rely on Athimanthi, Auva and most definitively on Kannagi as symbolizing indigenous unsullied Tamil culture.

This nationalist ideology can be best understood through the writings of C.N. Annadurai. He was a prolific writer and used the newspapers of the party for the propagation of his ideas. He asserted even before the formation of the DMK that the struggle that he and his followers engaged in was a race struggle (இருவுலக் தமிழ்). He pointed to the Brahmins as Aryans. He was so sure of the primacy of race for the demand for a separate state that he actually claimed that the demand for Pakistan by the Muslims was on grounds of race and religion. So he asserted, amazingly, that the Muslims were Dravidas as well!

They are Aryans—we are Dravidians! The same research has established the truth that Muslims are Dravidas by race and Islam is their religion.

This is not surprising since, as Renan said "Getting its history wrong is part of being a nation." The retrieval of a glorious Tamil past was part of the socio political aims of Annadurai. Just as Indian nationalism had taken pride in a glorious past and a reframed history to draw inspiration in its struggle against a colonial present, the Dravidian movement led by Annadurai harped on a glorious Tamil past and called for freedom from the Aryans. Far from testing the past on the touchstone of rationality as EVR had done, Annadurai delved into this past selectively to project an unsullied Tamil culture. 'Dravida race' in this ideology had a distinct culture which had remained untouched by the culture of the 'Aryans' for thousands of years. In his Aariya Mayai Annadurai narrated the history of the Dravida race up to 600 A.D. and asserted that until 400 A.D. the ways of the north had

44 Ibid. p. 11
45 Arinjar Anna, Aariya Mayai, p.29.
46 Ernest Renan quoted in E.J. Hobasbawm, Nations and Nationalism Since 1780, p.12
47 This is not to suggest that EVR was always 'rational'. The race theory and the insistence that the language of the Brahmins in Tamil Nadu was Sanskrit rather than Tamil are cases in point.
not influenced the Tamils.  

Significantly, in this little booklet Annadurai critiqued 'Aryan culture'-their gods and goddesses, the notion of heaven and the non egalitarian society based on caste that it represented. But he did not ridicule the concept of karpu as EVR had done. He called for the rejection of the 'Aryan way' because the ancient 'Tamil way' was based on equality and self respect:

Tamil was mentioned with pride as the originator of all the languages of the south. The speakers of the language had a distinct culture. *Silappatikaram* was an important article of culture in this construct of a Tamil past. While the ideology of race was borrowed from colonial scholarship, pride in a cultural past came from *sangam* literature and the epics, particularly *Silappatikaram*. In this Dravidian and Tamil nationalist ideology, *Silappatikaram* was not only an epic. It was historically true. Far from rejecting the epic as seeped in superstition and prostitution as EVR had done, Annadurai alluded to the *Silappatikaram* whenever he wanted to illustrate the culture of the Tamils. For example he anticipated a day when the Tamils would realize their glorious past and that day the Aryans would accept their defeat in this way:

The day the Tamils reach this state, that day the Aryans shall realise that the inheritors of the Cheran who had Kanakan and Vijayan carry stones on their heads have become Tamils again and shall grin chastised!

The detailed information on warfare in the *Silappatikaram* was recalled with pride and presented as an illustration of a glorious cultural past of the Dravidian race:

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48 Ibid., p. 19
49 Ibid., p. 51
50 In linguistic nationalism, language itself is a 'cultural artifact'. E.J.Hobsbawm, op.cit., p. 111
51 Anna, *Aariya Mayai*, p. 54
52 Ibid., p. 10
Those who read the Silappatikaram shall know this. In those days the Dravidas did not live like the Aryans and their duplicitious ways. They lived with courage and with distinction.

Similarly, Annadurai compared the tradition of renunciation in the Aryan and Dravidian cultures by alluding to Ilango and found his way more admirable. The epic was the repository of information about a forgotten past and the source of a culture that contemporary Tamils could be proud of. In one of his articles contributed to Dravida Nadu in 1955, Annadurai presented language as the source of culture. He said:

A language that is ours, a culture that is of that language, a state that protects that culture—there is evidence for this...

Annadurai called for support from his readers for the protection of தமிழ் மொழி, தமிழ் வல்லுணர் and தமிழகம். (Tamil language, Tamil culture and Tamilakam)

Even as Annadurai presented Silappatikaram as an important element in what constituted a glorious cultural past of the Tamils, he deviated further from the strident rationalism of EVR by asserting his theism. As early as 1955 he narrated his conversation with Vinoba Bhave in one of his articles in the Dravida Nadu wherein he had expressed his wish to adopt the idea of ஒரு பிரிவுக்காக ஒரு பிரிவுள்ள வேலை (one community, one god) of the Nayanar poet Thirumoolar in the Dravida Nadu that he hoped to achieve. Even before this time, probably when the split with the Dravida Kazhagam had not happened, he had declared:

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53 Ibid., p. 27
54 C.N Annadurai, Thambikku Annavin Kadiithangal, Part I, pp. 152-156
55 Ibid., p. 181
56 Ibid., p. 184
57 Annadurai, Thambikku Annavin Kadiithangal, Part III, p. 124
We need only one god, a formless god!

This was when he ridiculed what he called Aryan gods and goddesses in exactly the way EVR had done for over two decades. This theistic ideology of ‘One God’ was a shift from the resolute atheism of EVR. EVR would probably have asked why anyone needed a god at all. While this may have been the personal belief of Anmadurai, his adoption of it as a DMK slogan can be explained only in the light of the reality of Tamil society at this time. South Indian society, like most of India, was and remains to this day deeply religious. A mosaic of religious beliefs and practices thrive side by side. Every village has an amman who enjoys regular worship through the year. Even though some of these had been appropriated into the pan Indian Shakti cult (Kannagi herself is an example of such assimilation), several are autochthonous. There was also a thriving Saiva Siddhanta Movement which was at one point led by stalwarts like Maraimalai Adigal. It was a powerful movement which claimed Shaivism as the indigenous religion of the Dravida people and even claimed that Tamil had a divine origin in Shiva. In fact, at one point Maraimalai Adigal had dismissed the Self Respect Movement as nothing more than a mischief of the Vaishnavites. Even though an attempt was made to iron out the differences between Maraimalai Adigal and EVR, fissures remained. There were several Vaishnava temples that dotted the religious landscape of south India and enjoyed the devotion of thousands and not all the adherents can be said to be Brahmins. Through the eighteenth century several communities had turned to some form of Islam and large parts of south India was dotted with pir centres of Muslim devotion. There were several of them in the Tamil region itself. Several churches enjoyed the loyalty of new adherents as well. In this scenario even if a political party called for the elimination of Aryan gods and goddesses as being alien to the Tamils, there would still be Dravidian deities, Shiva and the goddesses, Islamic centres and churches of various denominations of Christianity to contend with. What is more, a slogan of atheism would alienate the Muslims completely. However, even the poorest and the most illiterate in the society can relate to the idea of ‘One God’ and the idea of a formless god would appeal to the Muslims. But the notion of

58 Anna, Aariya Mayai, p. 32
59 Ibid., pp.31-32
60 A.R. Venkatachalapathy, Dravida Iyakkamum Velalarum, p. 22
61 Susan Bayly, Saints, Goddesses and Kings, p.26
'no god' would be rejected by most people. A party that aspired to go to the people for votes and that hoped to come to power could not have had atheism as a slogan.

The ideology of race and language also served to hide the deep fissures within the so-called 'non-Brahmin' community. This came to the fore on the issue of fair representation of members of all communities in the bureaucracy. One of the main grievances of the Justice Party was that the Brahmin community which was just three percent of the population managed to hold more than half the bureaucratic positions available to Indians in the British government. When the Justice Party came to power in 1920 a communal quota system was introduced. However, by the 1930s it became clear that the system exposed the divisions within the non-Brahmins. The observations of Subramania Bharati about the Justice Party and their claim that they represented 'non-Brahmin' community came true soon enough. C.Basudev, a Balija Naidu and a member of the Justice Party complained to A.Y.G.Campbell, the British bureaucrat responsible for the working of the communal quota system, that privileged groups like 'Reddis, Vellalas and Malayalis' monopolized the subordinate civil service. He demanded that a separate quota for 'backward Hindus' be established.62 In 1934, the Justice Party Chief Raja of Bobbili himself asked for further division within the category of 'non-Brahmin' on the basis of language since the speakers of Malayalam were slicing off a large portion of jobs since they came within the category of 'non-Brahmin'.63 These demands could never be met and when C.Rajagopalachari became the Chief Minister in the latter half of the 1930s, he continued the system as introduced by the Justice Party.

If Annadurai departed from EVR in his veneration of Tamil as a source of Tamil culture and retention of the notion of god, Bharatidasan remained an atheist all his life. But in his portrayal of an ancient Tamil culture and Tamil as a source of that culture he was one with Annadurai. Unlike EVR he also revered the Kural as embodying the ethical values and culture of ancient Tamils and desired that contemporary Tamils should not only learn the Kural but also live by it.64 While he, like Annadurai, spoke of women as being equal with men, his portrayal of them in his works clearly fits in with the ideal of 'equal but not same'. Even though he had taken the pseudonym of Bharatidasan (the name given him by his parents was Subburattina) as a mark of respect and admiration of Subramania Bharati, it is

62 Eugene F. Irschick, Tamil Revivalism in the 1930s, p. 73
63 Ibid., p. 76
64 Sarla Rajagoplan, op. cit.
ironical that his opinions about women were more in line with the ideas of Thiru Vi Ka. While Bharati envisioned a woman who would be educated as well as any man and who would be an equal to the best minds of the world, Bharatidasan confined her to a more limiting ‘Tamil woman’ paradigm. Equally important is the flavour of the works of Bharati wherein he saw the world with compassion and saw the divine in everything. His quest was for freedom for all humanity and a struggle for that freedom with courage and fearlessness. Bharatidasan’s vision was not only limited to an imagined community that spoke a language and could claim a past, it was also premised on hatred of a caste community, the brahmins, in Tamil society. His ideas are well reflected in one of his works மகாராண்டிய மக்கள் which was published soon after independence.

மகாராண்டிய மக்கள், first published in 1948, is a vivid description in verse of Tamil family life and reflects his vision for the Tamils. That the description is of a family in modern times is indicated by the reference to photography. In this idyllic world of Tamil men and women there are no Brahmins, gods, temples or rituals. That the picture perfect depiction of family life drew inspiration from ancient Tamil literature is indicated by frequent references to Valluvar’s Kural and Purananuru. In this world, children (both boys and girls) go to school. But there is no indication that they learn anything other than ancient Tamil literature. In fact, the granddaughter of the family goes to a school that teaches pure Tamil (தமிழ் மொழியின் புரேக்கப் பொருள்). While the women are educated, the purpose of a woman’s life is to be a good wife and a good mother. The very purpose of love and the design of the universe are in a woman becoming a mother:

அனைவரும் இறைவன் செய்து வரையாளர்

மூலம் கூடைக்கு காண்க நாரிய்கோச்சை.  

I shall see the fulfilment of love

The purpose of the universe, I shall see.

We can hear here an echo of Thiru Vi Ka and his ideas in Pennin Perumai. Regardless of where these men were in the political spectrum of regional politics they seem to have been

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65 Bharatidasan, Kudumba Vilakku, p. 92
66 Ibid., p. 7, 89, 90
67 Ibi., p. 7,
68 Ibid., p. 94
69 Ibid., p. 58
in agreement as to what a woman should or should not do and be and regardless of whether she is framed as 'Indian woman' or as 'Tamil woman'. The woman cooks for the family and takes care of the home and children while the men of the family engage in work to generate wealth. In பரதிதசனு நிறுறிய Bharatidasan's woman is nurtured to become a Tamil woman of karpu as indicated by the lullaby that is sung to a baby girl. It runs like this:

Are you not Athimanthi

The queen of karpu

Who rescued her husband?

This is a transparent attempt to replace the popular Savitri with a Tamil woman Athimanthi who occurs often in the poems of Akanamur. The lullaby goes on to refer to women poets like Auvai and Narkakkai. In this Tamil society there is a self conscious assertion of 'Tamilness' if I may coin a term. On the occasion of the naming of a new born baby an old man says:

Child of Tamil

Should have a Tamil name.

70 Ibid., p. 74
71 Ibid., p. 68
Far from rejecting Valluvar's dictums on women and how they should conduct themselves, this follower of EVR's atheistic ideas used *Kural* to illustrate the ideal woman. An old woman in குரால் மூலம், asserts that she had followed the dictums of Valluvar:

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Bharatidasan stated further that the way to a long life is in having a virtuous mother, education, a righteous life and a good wife:

Such a wife has several qualities, giving her life for her husband is only one of them:

The purpose of a woman's life is to make the life of a man better. But there is something a man has to do to ensure that she continues to be a source of solace for him. He should not make her his slave or write against her for she is motherhood itself:

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72 Ibid., p. 106
73 Ibid., p. 115
74 Ibid.
This is in keeping with the writings on women and ideal wife in these years, wherein several writers described the virtues of a good wife and having one such as a blessing for a man. It is relevant to remember at this point that Bharatidasan wrote this work at a time when women had already obtained the right to vote, the right to sit in legislative assemblies and several of them were coming out of Universities as graduates. Dr Muthulakshmi Reddy had already become one of the foremost doctors of the city of Madras and become the first woman legislator of the Madras Legislative Council. It is clear that Bharatidasan had imbibed the ideas of EVR only when they related to Brahmans and racial ideas about Aryans and Dravidians. EVR's insistence on treating the woman as a human being with all the rights and privileges of a human being with complete autonomy over her life and her person were completely lost on Bharatidasan. In the light of his writings the nature of his narration of the Silappatikaram becomes comprehensible. The 'Aryan' as represented by the Brahman was the enemy whose religion, language and culture stood in the way of the realization of a Tamil society in the future, a reflection of which could be found in ancient Tamil literature. The 'Tamil woman' in this scenario was subsumed within 'Tamil culture' as mother and wife, living her life within the code of karpu.

6.3 Tamil Culture and Kannagi in the Plays of Karunanidhi and Bharatidasan

The nature of the plays on the Silappatikaram story that were written by Karunanidhi and Bharatidasan were thus the culmination of two definite streams of socio cultural and political movements of the previous several decades in the Tamil region. Even though both the writers were deeply influenced by the ideas of EVR, their works departed from his ideological legacy in significant ways. As mentioned above, EVR had already rejected the epic Silappatikaram for various reasons. His ideas on karpu were so stridently different as

75 Ibid., p.116
to challenge the venerated Valluvar himself. Yet, Bharatidasan and Karunanidhi not only chose to write plays on the *Silappatikaram*, they eulogized and reiterated the concept of *karpum* as conceptualized by Valluvar. In this they followed in the footsteps of the numerous scholars on Tamil literature who commented on the epic. But in their conceptualization of the north as the land of the racially different Aryans and in painting Brahmins as alien to Tamil society, they followed EVR. In this process they made the story into an aggressive text (in the case of Bharatidasan, as I show below, virulently so) against the Aryans even as they retained it as a symbol of Tamil culture.

The elevation of *Silappatikaram* and of Kannagi as symbols of Tamil culture by the Dravidian parties as reflected in the writings of Annadurai, Karunanidhi and Bharatidasan has to be understood in this political context. The ownership, with pride, of *Silappatikaram*, by the proponents of the Dravid Movement, despite the rejection of *karpum* as a concept and of the epic as a symbol of a glorious Tamil past by the revered EVR, and despite its apparent unsuitability as a vehicle for the ideas of the movement can be understood only in the context of the socio political atmosphere of Tamil Nadu in these decades. The supernatural and the fantastic were edited out of the life of Kannagi before she became an icon for the Dravidian movement. Kannagi was appropriated because she is the heroine of a Tamil epic and she was projected as an icon for standing up for justice as an ordinary but chaste woman before a mighty king. The epic as narrated by Ilango was thus suitably modified and used by the ideologues of the Dravidian Movement as a medium for the propagation of their ideas. The idea of a Tamil culture, as distinct from the culture of the north, was never abandoned as a political slogan. As we shall see, the detailing of this Tamil culture had consequences for the idea of gender equality which was one of the contributions of the Self Respect Movement led by a strident EVR.

Ilango Adigal's epic, suitably modified, fit in well with the socio political agenda of the Dravida Parties, in a way that *Manimelalai, Kundalakesi, Valayapati* or the *Jeevikachintamani*, the other major epics of the Tamil language, did not. The female protagonist in *Manimekalai* successfully dodges her prince suitor to become a Buddhist nun and in *Kundalakesi* she pushes her husband off a mountain. These are not images of women fit to become icons of Tamil culture. Not much is known about the plot of *Valayapati* and *Jeevikachintamani* focuses on Jain philosophy. They are all also much more religious in content in a way that *Silappatikaram* is not. Even if we deleted the
religious from the *Silappatikaram* there is still a powerful human story to be told. The same cannot be said of *Manimekalai* and *Jeevikachintamani*. *Silappatikaram* is suited to carrying a political message for two other reasons as well. Ilango located the story in the traditional three kingdoms of *Tamilagam*, the Chola, Pandiya and Cera and the last section of the work, the book of Vanci, deals entirely with the march of the Cera king Senguttuvan on the north to teach a lesson to the northern kings. This structure of the work is a neat fit with the political position of the Dravida parties with their innate distrust and hostility to the ‘north’. ‘North’ however, did not mean Andhra or Karnataka but the Hindi speaking areas further north. Also, it allowed for a social conservatism on issues of gender which anyone claiming to be following in the footsteps of EVR would be embarrassed by. In other words, regressive ideas about women, their place in society and unequal gender relations were sought to be legitimized through the narration of the ancient Tamil story of Kannagi and Kovalan even as the epic became a vehicle for ideas of racial hostility and Tamil pride.

However, the way the epic was presented by Bharatidasan and Karunanidhi is an indication of an ambivalent engagement with a past which could neither be celebrated nor rejected in its totality. Hence, a selective use of the past as reflected in the epic. The story of *Silappatikaram* could be molded to convey ideas of anti Brahmanism and pride in a Tamil cultural past unsullied by the north. But, as I shall try to show, construction of this glorious Tamil cultural past through narration of the *Silappatikaram* story involved retention of certain ideas inherent in the epic and at the same time by the introduction of others that the epic as narrated by Ilango was innocent of. It also involved the deletion of events and concepts that are crucial in the epic. We can understand this through the works of these two important ideologues of the Dravidian Movement. In 1968, M.Karunanidhi wrote the story of the epic as a play which was later made into a film. Six years earlier, Bharatidasan rendered the story in verse.

Since the publication of the full text of the epic in 1892, as discussed in Chapter V, several writers had presented the story to a new readership of the printed world as plays and poems. But the works of Karunanidhi and Bharatidasan are significant because if the former was a political leader who used his skills in Tamil language to propagate political

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76 Karunanidhi M., *Silappatikaram-Nataka Kappiyam*
77 Bharatidasan, *Kannagi Puratchi Kappiyam*.
and social ideas, the latter was an acknowledged proponent of the strident rationalist movement. When Karunanidhi published the play he was the minister for Public Works in the first DMK government in the State. Bharatidasan on the other hand was briefly in the Pondicherry Legislative Assembly but made his name mainly as a prolific Tamil poet. He was a staunch follower of EVR and like him was an atheist to the end. While both conveyed the Dravidian party ideology through the narrative, there were, as we shall see presently, differences in the manner in which these ideas were conveyed. Bharatidasan presented his verse narrative interspersed with comments and explanatory notes. These are as important for an understanding of his socio political ideas as the narration of the story. He presented the epic as a narrative of a Tamil past which his contemporaries could be proud of. It is taken as reflective of a utopian past and, consistent with the requirements of nationalist ideology, as "description of reality".\textsuperscript{78} He also used it to highlight the differences between the supposed ‘Tamil culture’ and an alien ‘Aryan culture’.\textsuperscript{79} For Karunanidhi’s play, C.N.Annadurai wrote the forward. He asserted that through the epic Ilango has presented “the pulse of the good and righteous life that ancient Tamils lived.”\textsuperscript{80} Karunanidhi reiterated in the prologue that, “Silappatikaram is not only an emotional story; it is also a book of Tamil History.”\textsuperscript{81}

The imprint of the socio political ideas is evident in their plays. It can be best understood through an examination of, firstly, how they dealt with the presence of Brahmins in the epic. It is important to remember that Tamil scholars who looked at the epic as reflective of ‘Tamil culture’ did not address the issue of the presence of Brahmins in the epic and the political implications it entailed in the charged atmosphere of the politics of the twentieth century. Secondly, the two playwrights constructed a pristine Tamil past through the narrative and went farther than any of the essayists until then in doing so. Lastly, and most importantly, the representation of the character of Kannagi is most illustrative of the deviation from the position of EVR on gender relations.

\textsuperscript{78} Romila Thapar, \textit{Sakuntala}, p. 258
\textsuperscript{79} Noble in her Ph D dissertation submitted to the University of Chicago titled, “The Tamil Story of the Anklet: Classical and Contemporary Tellings of \textit{Silappatikaram}” has compared and analyzed these two works. However, the emphasis is not on Kannaki.
\textsuperscript{80} Karunanidhi, \textit{Silappatikaram-Natika Kappiyam}, p. 5. All translations from the original Tamil works of Bharathidasan and Karunanidhi are by me.
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., p.12
6.3.1 Brahmans in the *Silappatikaram*

In the epic the Brahmin is a presence like many other categories of people. In the inclusive world that Ilango described Brahmins co-exist with Jains and Buddhists. It is noteworthy that in the epic no individual or group of people is either ridiculed or vilified. Words used to describe a Brahmin are varied. Parthasarathy has translated அருட்பிள்ளை, அருட்கொண்டு and கூர்த்தம் பிள்ளையார் as Brahmin. There are references to the area where the Brahmins reside (அருட்பிள்ளை மலை).\(^{32}\) Brahmins are messengers who carry news or letters for Kovalan from Matavi. கூர்த்தம் is used to describe an ascetic Matalan, who brings news of Matavi to Kovalan. He also informs the king that Kavunti and Matari who were responsible for the protection of Kannagi have taken their own lives for having failed to do so. He is described thus:

\[\text{மாடலன்...the first} \]
\[\text{Among brahmans, versed in the four Vedas, and filled} \]
\[\text{With goodness, arrived there.}^{84}\]

Clearly, ஓருட்பிள்ளை is a reference to the four Vedas and Parthasarathy translated it as such. There are descriptions of sacrificial fires lit by the Brahmins and the smoke that emanated from them (நாசத்பூர்வை மலை மலர்வை),\(^{35}\) or கூர்த்தம் பிள்ளை.\(^{36}\) Kannagi, Kovalan and Kaunti meet a Brahmin on their way to Madurai, as they do a Jain ascetic. Matavi sends a letter for Kovalan in the hands of a Brahman Kausikan. The protagonist Kannagi is married to Kovalan by a Brahmin according to vedic rituals:

\[\text{மகந்து பதிகாக மலையோடு மலர்வை} \]

\(^{32}\) Swaminatha Iyer, *Silappatikaram*, p.138
\(^{33}\) Ibid., p.387
\(^{34}\) Parthasarathy, op. cit., p.150
\(^{35}\) Swaminatha Iyer, Ibid., p.260
\(^{36}\) Ibid., p.335
Around the ceremonial fire, walked
Kovalan, observing the holy rites

The venerable priest solemnized.\textsuperscript{88}

While Bharatidasan and Karunanidhi could not pretend that Brahmins were not part of Tamil society as described by Ilango in the epic, they dealt with this presence in different ways. At the outset, Bharatidasan underlined the way of the Tamils as \textit{aram}, a word that conceptualizes a way of life, a righteous way that Tamils supposedly lived by. The Aryan or the Brahmin then is one who did not live by this code of conduct. Therefore, Brahmins would be those of unrighteous behavior: \textit{குட்டரு, தமிழின் துருக்கை}.\textsuperscript{89} He described Brahmins/Aryan variously as cowardly\textsuperscript{90}, as living a false life\textsuperscript{91} and as liars.\textsuperscript{92} He stated that Brahmins were kept removed from the general population in the outskirts of cities because of their unrighteous lifestyle.\textsuperscript{93} At one point during their journey to Maturai, Kovalan leaves Kannagi and the sage Kavunti in a fenced in protected space away from the gaze of Brahmins. The point Bharatidasan made by introducing this in his narration is that Brahmins are untrustworthy and women should be protected from them.\textsuperscript{94} In the epic there is a brief conversation between a grieving Kannagi and her friend Tevanti wherein the friend suggests that Kannagi should take a dip in the sacred lakes of the Sun and the Moon to receive the blessings of the gods. Kannagi says, “It does not make me proud”.\textsuperscript{95} But Bharatidasan used this occasion to embark on a tirade against the Brahmins and has Kannagi say, “are you, seeing me vulnerable, imposing your false ways on me?”\textsuperscript{96} In the epic a Brahmin Kausikan brings a letter for Kovalan from Matavi. He takes a letter from Kovalan and leaves. Bharatidasan narrated the event and described the departure of the

\textsuperscript{87} ibid., p.36  
\textsuperscript{88} Parthasarathy, ibi., p.27  
\textsuperscript{89} Bharatidasan, \textit{Kannagi Puratchi Kappiyam}, p.74  
\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., p.51  
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., p.63  
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., p. 74  
\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., p. 76  
\textsuperscript{95} Parthasarathy, p. 91  
\textsuperscript{96} Bharatidasan, \textit{Kannagi Puratchi Kappiyam}, p. 65
Brahmin as “முயல் சூழ்வாளன்”97. It is impossible to translate this into English. It is like ‘good riddance’. He also associated Brahmins with bad omens and cause of misfortunes. At one point the sage kavunti tells Kovalan that he has nightmares because they are in a place where Brahmins reside.98 The sage as portrayed by llango would never utter an unkind word about anyone. By attributing such sentiments to her, Bharatidasan brought her down from the revered position she enjoyed in the hands of llango.

Since there is a vivid description in the epic of Kovalan and Kannagi being married by the Brahmin according to vedic rituals, Bharatidasan asserted that this was because the wedding was not a Tamil wedding. Tamil wedding is when the hearts of a girl and boy come together and the consent of the fathers is irrelevant:

When the hearts of the girl and boy unite,
It is a state of marriage.
What does the consent of fathers do with it?100

Reflecting the radical ideas of the Self Respect Movement that were sensitive to gender relations, he questioned the concept of a girl being handed over to a man in marriage:

Is a girl an object to be handed over by a father?

However, in the story as narrated by Bharatidasan the father of Kovalan pleads that he desired to see his son married and had ordered his son to marry a girl named Kannagi and he had consented. Since such a marriage is conducted only by an Aryan, he had called him to conduct the wedding. Bharatidasan lampooned the Brahmin priest in this episode as a

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97 Ibid. p. 78
98 Ibid., p.87
99 Ibid., p. 9
100 The translations into English from the Tamil works of Bharatidasan and Karunanidhi are by me.
101 Ibid
greedy man who could barely speak proper Tamil. The elders consent to the marriage but suggest that it should not be entirely Aryan since that might lead to bad consequences:

Let not all (rituals) be Aryan,
bad events will follow.

Throughout the narration Bharatidasan displayed a virulent hostility to the Aryans/Brahmins. However, the social and political ideology of the Dravidian Movement was defined by such hostility. By 1962, when Bharatidasan produced his work, Madras state had witnessed the most aggressive attacks on the Brahmins of the state. A movement attacking the images of gods and goddesses identified as those worshipped by the Brahmins and presented as symbols of Tamil degradation swept the state in the early 50s. It is possible to see that Bharatidasan used the epic to subvert the prevailing caste relations. Brahmins presided over a world of social hierarchy where sections of the population were condemned to eke out a living at the outskirts of society. Notions of pollution and purity rendered large sections of the population as social outcasts. Bharatidasan overturned this world through the narration of the story of Kannagi and Kovalan where he made the Brahmin the outcaste, unfit for social interaction. But in the process he imprinted the epic with emotions of hostility and hatred which the epic of Ilango is free from.

Karunanidhi engaged with the issue of Brahmins in ancient Tamil society as reflected in the epic by deleting them out of existence altogether. He did not mention either Matalan or kausikan, the messengers in the epic. In the way he narrated the story of Silappatikaram, he acknowledged their presence only on two occasions, once by allusion and the second time to highlight the superior rational culture of the Tamils as compared to the culture of the Brahmins. He introduced Kannagi and Kovalan as a married couple in the story but alluded to their marriage conducted the Aryan way through a reference to it by Kannagi when she expresses her apprehension that she might lose the happiness of her life. There is a subtle suggestion hear that a marriage so conducted is not immune to the vagaries of human life. In the second case, Kovalan intervenes in a dispute in a Brahmin couple where

\[102\] Ibid., p.12
the husband resolves to leave his wife. Kovalan reasons with the Brahmin, who exclaims, "...good explanation...one this Brahmin did not understand." To this Kovalan replies, "Tamil marai has accustomed us to this" 103. Tamil marai is the Tamil way. In other words, rationality comes naturally to a Tamilian.

6.3.2 The Pristine Tamil Culture

Having dealt with the issue of the presence of Brahmins in ancient Tamil society the two writers detailed the nature of this society in their own unique ways. This entailed deleting out of Tamil society, as portrayed by the epic, all references to anything that could be seen as an indication of the influence of the north and its culture. An important event in the story is the Indra festival, an occasion when citizens of the city of Pukar went to the seaside for some fun and frolic. It is during this festival that Kovalan and Matavi parted ways. Bharatidasan referred to this festival but as Kaveri festival or an occasion to celebrate the river Kaveri. Karunanidhi however, made Indra a Tamilian 104 and a Tamil king 105. Similarly, while Bharatidasan omitted to mention the dance of the tribal women in the presence of Kannagi, a dance in praise (amongst other gods and goddesses) of Krishna and Vishnu 106, Karunanidhi referred to the dance as simply the dance of the tribal people. 107 In the epic the Cera king Senguttuvan embarks on a military campaign to the north for the purposes of defeating the northern kings Kanaka and Vijaya and to get a stone from the Himalayas to carve out a statue of Kannagi from. The two northern kings are made to carry the stone on their heads. The stone is also consecrated in the river Ganga. Thus in the epic, the cultural connections between the north and the south are retained even in a context of political conflict. Both Karunanidhi and Bharatidasan referred to this event but while the latter mentioned the consecration of the stone in the Ganga without comment, the former did not refer to it at all. But the stone for the statue coming from the Himalaya Mountain was explained as a mark of victory of the Tamil forces over the forces of the

103 Karunanidhi, Silappatikaram Nataka Kappiyam, p. 30
104 இராம வி வீட வரும நாயாய்மையும், ibid p. 25
105 கானக பார்க்க விஸ்கொ, ibid, p. 53
106 Parthasarathy, pp.177-178
107 தேசுக்குக் கிளோமானு, op cit., p. 75
north. Karunanidhi further added “these rocks are inscribed by the courageous Tamils.”

Bharatidasan explained that even though the rocks of the mountains in the south are more mature, they are protected by the Tamils and there is more merit in getting a stone after a display of the might of the south over the north.

So, while the north and its culture are either erased or vilified, the two authors paint a picture of a Tamil culture where the men are courageous, honest and honorable and the women are chaste. In the context of the early twentieth century when middle class societies across India were struggling to ‘reform’ social and religious practices that could be called ‘backward’ or ‘primitive’, the cohabitation of a Tamil hero with a prostitute, and his neglect of a chaste wife like Kannagi was unacceptable. Apologies and justifications for the actions of Kovalan began almost as soon as the epic was published and most commentators of the epic throughout the century gave varied explanations for the actions of Kovalan. As early as 1904, V.Kanakasabhai wrote, “Kovilan who was an accomplished musician, and passionately fond. of music, was charmed by her performance and wished to make the acquaintance of the young actress. In a fit of enthusiastic admiration for the sweet songstress who ravished his ears, he purchased the prize necklace which was offered for sale...” Kovalan is later “dazzled” by her beauty and was “unable to quit her society.”

It is also significant that the writers of the twentieth century, particularly those who wrote within the paradigm of a glorious ancient Tamil culture, found it appealing that Kovalan should be ashamed for his actions. Kanakasabhai for instance, has Kovilan to say that he was ashamed of himself. In a prose narration of the story in 1940, A.S.Panchapakesa Ayyar wrote, “He (Kovalan) was carried away by Madhavi’s skill and charm and felt himself regretting that Kannagi knew neither song nor dance.” Another writer suggested in 1958 that Kovalan was a lover of the arts and wished to live a life that was close to the arts. He goes on to suggest that Kannagi did not understand the life that Kovalan desired to live.

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108 Karunanidhi, Silappatikaram Nataka Kappiyam, p. 89
109 Bharatidasan, Kannaki Puratchi Kappiyam., p. 186
110 Kanakasabhai, The Tamils Eighteen Hundred Years Ago, p. 142
111 Ibid.
112 Ibid. p. 147
113 Panchapakesa Ayyar, Kovalan and Kannaki, p. 10. See pp. 151-152 above.
114 M. Shanmugam, Silappatikarakatturaigal, p. 55, p.57. Translations from Tamil are by me.
Karunanidhi lost no opportunity to portray Kovalan as an ideal man, a male replica of the female ideal Kannagi. But in doing so he departed from an important element of the structure of the story that Ilango narrated in his epic. In the epic Kannagi is the protagonist. The characteristics of the husband, whether or not he was worthy of her devotion was immaterial. This emphasis in the epic, on the conduct of the wife, unrelated to the nature and conduct of the husband, is an important element in the depiction of the woman. Karunanidhi however, found an apology for Kovalan’s association with Matavi, the dancer.\textsuperscript{115}

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 a wife\textsuperscript{116}. Secondly, he had Kovalan witness the dance of Matavi and describes their being attracted to each other at first sight.\textsuperscript{117} What is more he pays for the garland after Matavi garlands him.\textsuperscript{118} 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.\textsuperscript{119} 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.

\textsuperscript{115} See page 81 above.
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., pp. 25-26
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., p. 37
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., p. 38
6.3.3 Gender Relations and Kannagi

In the light of the ideological traditions of the Self Respect Movement the issue of gender is the most problematic in the way Kannagi was elevated as a symbol of Tamil culture and as icon of Tamil womanhood for all Tamil women to emulate. Not all of the followers of EVR were ready for a social revolution that would include a revolution in gender relations as well. Both Bharatidasan and Karunanidhi held steadfast to the concept of karpu in their narration of the epic *Silappatikaram*. In their hands the Brahmin characters are either absent or vilified. Kovalan is transformed from a man tossed around by *karma* and his own weaknesses to a lover of the arts and protector of Tamil women and culture. But Kannagi remains what she was in the hands of Ilango Adigal. What is more, in Karunanidhi’s narration of the story, it is she who encourages her husband to save Matavi from the fate of ending up with an old Greek merchant. She also asks him to go to Matavi to explain why he cannot be with her and thus becomes responsible for the two meeting and then ending up as lovers. Her behavior towards her husband is lauded as being consistent with Tamil culture by Karunanidhi. When Kovalan returns to Kannagi, he says:

Jewel amongst women! ... *You protect the home and the way of the Tamils*...  

If we consider the virulent attack on the concept of karpu that EVR had sustained in his newspaper *Kudi Arasu*, the unquestioning retention of the concept by both Karunanidhi and Bharatidasan in their plays is the most telling testimony to the social conservatism that they now espoused. In contrast to the call for gender equality that EVR insisted on, these playwrights underline gender inequality and position the woman as subservient to the man in society. Not only did Bharatidasan refer to Kannagi repeatedly as a woman of karpu,

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120 Ibid., p. 61
mother of karpu even\textsuperscript{121}, he just fell short of calling Kovalan a god. Instead, he insisted, for a woman the husband is everything.\textsuperscript{122} However, elsewhere he referred to women of Pukar waking up and worshipping their husbands:

\begin{quote}
When the Sun rises,
Young women rise
Worshipping their husbands
\end{quote}

In a similar way Karunanidhi has Kannagi touch the feet of Kovalan and there is a reference to Valluvar's adage:

\begin{quote}
V.V.S.Aiyer translated this verse as:

\textit{Behold the woman who worshippeth not other Gods but worshippeth her husband even as she riseth from bed: the rain-cloud obeyeth her commands.}\textsuperscript{125}
\end{quote}

Kannagi falls at the feet of Kovalan again when he returns to her after his misunderstanding with Matavi.\textsuperscript{126} Nowhere in the epic of Ilango does Kannagi fall at the feet of Kovalan. Interestingly, Karunanidhi even has Matavi and Kannagi refer to each other warmly.\textsuperscript{127}

\begin{thebibliography}
\bibitem{121} Bharatidasan, \textit{Kannaki Puratchi Kappiyam}, p. 174
\bibitem{122} Ibid., p. 65
\bibitem{123} Ibid., pp.67-68
\bibitem{124} Kural, verse 55, Bharatidasan, \textit{Silappatikaram Nataka Kappiyam}, p. 36
\bibitem{125} Aiyar, \textit{The Kural}, p.15
\bibitem{126} Karunanishi, \textit{Silappatikaram Nataka Kappiyam}, op cit., p.61
\bibitem{127} Ibid., pp. 53, 61. By the time Karunanidhi wrote his play, it was illegal to take another wife while the one wife was alive except with the consent of the wife. Karunanidhi had remarried while his wife was alive and Kanimozhi was born on January 1, 1968, the year the play was published.
\end{thebibliography}
There is another irony in the way Kannagi was presented by the ideologues of the Dravida Movement. In the work of Ilango, Kannagi acquires supernatural powers, power enough to burn down a city, because of the way she lived - patient, forgiving and chaste. What is more she would not only go to the heavenly world with her husband, she would be worshipped as a goddess by the mortals on this earth. That would be her reward for living the life of a chaste woman. However, Bharatidasan and Karunanidhi rewrote the epic with a different purpose. The idea was to showcase Tamil culture, one in which Kovalan has to be blameless and Kannagi has to be chaste and forgiving. From the rationalist atheist position Kannagi cannot have supernatural powers and she cannot become a goddess. In this ideal society that the two authors portrayed she is denied even that which is promised in the story as narrated by Ilango or even in all the folk renderings of the story. Her apotheosis is an essential aspect of the story. In their works a statue is made but only to 'speak the story of chastity'. Karunanidhi referred to the statue briefly but has Matavi place her daughter Manimekalai at its feet. He used the statue and its installation to advocate harmonious relations between the wives of the man Kovalan.

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.

So, then, for Tamil women to live a virtuous life is to do so for its own sake or in the name of Tamil culture. By the time the statue of Kannagi was placed on Marina Beach front, she was what Ilango wanted her to be - chaste, forgiving and patient. She would be an icon of Tamil culture, Tamil womanhood and Tamil identity, but as framed by the Dravida ideology, she would be without the power to burn down a city and she would not be worshipped as a goddess.

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128 Bharatidasan, *Kannaki Puratchi Kappiyam*. P. 178
Conclusion

I began my enquiry into the epic *Silappatikaram* and the varied representations of its central character Kannagi in diverse narratives across time with a view to understand how the text and the character change in each representation. From the epic of Ilango in the early centuries of the current era to the plays of Karunanidhi and Bharatidasan in the latter half of the twentieth century, Kannagi transformed from a silent, patient woman who burnt down a city with her breast, to a vocal but still patient and suffering wife in the plays of Bharatidasan and Karunanidhi in the twentieth century. Every new narration of the story reflects something of a changed society and the needs of the class that received the narrative. If she articulated social reform concerns in one narrative, she became a symbol for Tamil culture in many others. She also emerged as one of the icons of Tamil nationalism during the same time. Every portrayal of Kannagi was tailored to fit each immediate requirement depending on who narrated the story, to what end and for which audience/readership.

Kannagi's journey from the epic to the plays in the latter half of the twentieth century was not a linear one. Kannagi was placed in multiple locations during the course of the twentieth century and for centuries before that to serve diverse ends in the cultural landscape of Tamil society. Ilango drew heavily from existing literary conventions and social norms when he etched the character of Kannagi. The grieving wife of Pekan who was named Kannagi and several women of *sangam* poetry who threatened to tear off their breasts in grief or in anger coalesced in the Kannagi of Ilango's epic. Ilango rejected even as he selected the characteristics that his Kannagi would have. While she would be chaste and draw power from this quality, she would not be like Korravai who demanded human sacrifice. She would also not engage in sexual activity before marriage as several women of *sangam* poetry did. Ilango was probably inspired by a story in the folk tradition. But his Kannagi was more like the ideal of a wife etched by Valluvar in his *Kural*. She also had the kind of supernatural powers that Valluvar had asserted a chaste wife would have. Ilango created a work fit for the elite society of his time. It would appeal to more than the merchant community that the protagonists belonged to. This was a society that had high expectations from its kings and its women. Ilango's *Silappatikaram* reflected these