Chapter 2

The Epic Silappatikaram

The story of Kannagi and Kovalan may have circulated in oral form for centuries before it was rendered as a narrative poem by Ilango. The presence of folk tales from the Pancatantra embedded in the Silappatikaram attest to this.\(^1\) It is also possible that several epic renditions of the story circulated simultaneously and only one amongst them, that of Ilango, has come down to us.\(^2\) We know that variants of the story continue to be performed in the folk ballad tradition to this day and these versions exist simultaneously with the epic version. Ilango’s Silappatikaram, however, is important because it is his rendition of the possibly earlier folk tale that was used as a model for subsequent renditions of the story in varied genres in later centuries. Moreover, it is his work and his story that the Dravida movement picked up in the twentieth century and presented to a new reading public as holding a mirror to ancient Tamil culture, Tamil literary genius and Tamil ideals of womanhood.

In the few centuries that divided the sangam age and Ilango, peninsular India witnessed several changes. Buddhism and Jainism had seeped into sections of the population. Similarly, deities of the north, notably Vishnu, Krishna and Indra had become part of the religious life of the people. Lesser gods like Narada and Kama had a role too. Goddesses like Lakshmi now shared space with Korraivai of the sangam era. The concept of heaven and heavenly beings who observed the lives of humans below was well established. King’s sceptre was still a symbol of his justice but he was now surrounded by astrologers and advisors. The three royal dynasties, Chola, Pandya and Chera, had emerged. They thrived on agriculture and trade. The Pandya kings are mentioned by Megasthenes and they seem to have sent ambassadors to Rome.\(^3\) Peninsular India was by now a region with several thriving cities and port towns. Kaveripumpattinam or Puhar, Vanji and Madurai were cities bustling with people and markets and have recorded history from at least the third century

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\(^1\) Parthasarathy, The Cilappatikaram, p. 321
\(^2\) Ibid., p. 318
\(^3\) R. S. Sharma, India’s Ancient Past, p. 213
B.C. While cattle breeding communities continued to thrive, several regions had come under the plough sustaining a large agricultural community. But large tracts of land were still forested; cities and kingdoms were separated by them.

The basis of social stratification was the kuti, based on lineage and hereditary occupation. Hart has suggested that the notion of the impure is indicated in some poems of the sangam. The notion of anangu or sacred or magical power pervades sangam poems. It was believed to be present in women and some objects and needed to be controlled. Some occupational groups like the Paraiyans, Tutiyans and Panans were engaged in controlling these magical forces. But the organization of society on the basis of caste may have to do with the influence of Brahmin landholdings. The story of Silappatikaram is located in this context and reflects this socio religious complexity.

Ilango Adigal makes it clear that he was composing a poem with songs, interspersed with prose:

...a poem with songs, blended with prose

He also states in the prose epilogue of the epic story that he wanted to encompass through the story, the two regions where two kinds of Tamil was spoken (தென்னை சம்பந்தம்), and where gods and humans lived a virtuous life in pursuit of ஜோதிஃ சனம் and ஜோதிஃ. The story takes the reader through the five literary landscapes (நாகதளம்) represented by the region encompassed by Kumari and Venkatam and surrounded by the sea. The story is told with songs and dance and expresses emotions that are categorized as being of the inside and outside (இந்திய பாடல்). Finally, the work is an எழுத்துமா, a story, told to express something, even as the hills are reflected in a mirror:

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4 Hart L. George and Hart Heifetz., The Four Hundred Songs of War and Wisdom, p.xvii
5 Upinder Singh, A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India, p. 424
6 Swaminatha Aiyar, Silappatikaram, p. 5
7 Parthasarathy, op cit., p. 21
Like a mirror
Reflecting the far hills

On surface the work of Ilango is a story of two individuals caught in the travails of life. The purpose of writing the story is made clear at the outset. It is to explain three truths:

To explain these truths: even kings, if they break
The law, have their necks wrung by dharma;
Great men everywhere commend
Pattini of renowned fame; and karma ever
Manifests itself, and is fulfilled.

The concept of karma, chastity of women and the conduct of the king are tied together. However, it is relevant to point out that Ilango has not used the word *karma* anywhere in his work. The word *uzvinai* is uniformly used and by the context of its use it always carries the meaning of wicked actions in the previous birth. Towards the end of the story, Kannagi is also informed that it was the wicked actions of Kovalan in his previous birth that resulted in his unjust execution.

During the course of the story- that moves from the northern city of Puhar to the city of Madurai in the south and then to the south west city of Vanchi- Ilango showed the reader the diverse socio-cultural context of the south in the time of the story. Though the story is located in the south of India, it connects with the north through regular references to the Himalayas, the Ganga and cities and kings of the north. Through references to the *Ramayana*, Vishnu, Krishna, Nala and Damayanti Ilango established that the north is part

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8 Swaminatha Aiyar, op cit., p. 589
9 Parthasarathy, op cit., p. 277
10 Swaminatha Aiyar, p. 4
11 Parthasarathy, p.21
of the cultural imagination of the literate society of the south. By linking the north to the story in the third and last section, Ilango gave the story a pan Indian spread. In fact, if the story is intended to include the puram genre in its reach, as the epilogue states it is, the battles with the kings of the north are an indispensable part of the epic.

2.1 The Story

Kannagi and Kovalan are children of two prominent merchants of Puhar. The story begins in the city of Puhar with the marriage of the two. She is married at the age of twelve to Kovalan who is sixteen. There is no indication in the epic version of the story that they had ever met before the marriage. They set up a separate home and live together for a few years. Then one day, on the day of the first performance before the King of a dancer named Matavi, Kovalan buys the garland put up for sale at the city street and begins to live with her. He lives with her for a few years and has a daughter with her. But due to a misunderstanding with Matavi, Kovalan returns to Kannagi who accepts him back without reproach. The couple decide to leave for the city of Madurai in order to restart their lives. At this point the couple has nothing but a single pair of Kannagi’s anklets. A sage Kavunti accompanies them on this journey. She leaves the couple in the care of a herdsman, Matari, in the outskirts of the city of Madurai and continues her journey. Kovalan goes into the city with Kannagi’s anklet to sell it so as to begin his occupation as a merchant. In the city he is falsely accused of the theft of the queen’s anklet by the king’s jeweller, who is himself the thief. The king orders the execution of Kovalan without verifying the claims of the goldsmith. Kannagi enters the city with the twin of her anklet. She proves the innocence of her husband before the king who immediately falls dead. The queen falls dead as well. But Kannagi goes on to burn the city of Madurai by wrenching out her left breast and flinging it on the city. She commands the god of fire to spare the Brahmans, cows, the old, children, good men and the chaste women of the city. She then reaches the Cera region where after fourteen days, the gods take her away to the heavenly world and she reunites with Kovalan. The stone for the statue of Kannagi is obtained from the Himalayas by the Cera king Senguttavan and he installs Kannagi as a goddess.
2.2 Ilango’s Choices

As is clear from the previous chapter, there were several prototypes of women available to Ilango to weave his epic story. There is, of course, the mention of a Kannagi in a puranamuru poem, the wife of the king Pekan, grieving over her abandonment by her husband for the company of another.\textsuperscript{12} The theme of a husband seeking the company of a parattai, and the consequent neglect of the wife is a recurrent, but one of several themes in sangam literature. A large body of poems in the agam genre is about love before marriage. Several poems narrate with intensity the plight of men and women pining for their beloveds and threatening extreme steps to get the attention of their chosen ones. There is an entire grammar of poetry to express the phases in the lives of lovers as they traverse from the first sight of each other, through first meeting, subsequent rendezvous, and pining for each other in separation. These correspond to the five tinais or landscapes of the region. This is what A.K.Ramanujan has called the ‘interior landscape’.\textsuperscript{13}

Ilango chose to bypass the kalavuiyal phase of love completely and began his epic story with the marriage of Kannagi and Kovalan. However, Ilango referred to Kannagi as Kadalal while introducing her in the epic. Later, when they are married he referred to the married couple as ‘kadalar’.\textsuperscript{14} Otherwise, there are no verses describing their meeting before the marriage. I would suggest that this is an important shift in the traditions of poetry from sangam times. Another shift is the mention of the ages of Kannagi and Kovalan as twelve and sixteen respectively. As I indicated in the previous chapter, the women and men of agam poetry are mature adults who decide for themselves the course of their love lives. There is no mention of the ages of kilatti and kilavan in the Tholkappiyam either. By making Kannagi twelve in the epic Ilango introduced the tradition of a virgin heroin. It could be argued that this was because of the future apotheosis of Kannagi.\textsuperscript{15} But since the entire epic hinges on the karpu of the heroin, her virginity at the time of her

\textsuperscript{12} Hart, The Four Hundred Songs of War and Wisdom, Puram 144, 145
\textsuperscript{13} Ramanujan, The Interior Landscape
\textsuperscript{14} Swaminatha Aiyar, Silappatikaram, p.36, line 61
\textsuperscript{15} Incidentally, in some narrations of the Ramayana, Rama and Sita see each other before their marriage. They were divines reborn as humans. But Kannagi was a common woman who apotheosized as a goddess. In view of her future status perhaps, ironically, Ilango denied her some normal activities of a common woman.
marriage adds a new dimension to the notion of *karpu* itself. If it had the meaning of ‘good conduct learned’ during the *sangam*, drawing from the word *kal* etymologically, *karpu* now begins to have a meaning closer to ‘chastity’. Incidentally, in several folk traditions, Kannagi remains a virgin even after her marriage to Kovalan and her power to burn the city of Madurai draws from her status as a virgin. However, that is not the case with Kannagi of the epic. Ilango vividly described her physical union with Kovalan in the second canto itself.

There were also, in the *puram* tradition, the prototypes of women grieving for their husbands and sons who lost their lives in battle. Ilango opted to ignore these images of women as well. Since he presented Kannagi and Kovalan as being from the merchant community war and heroic death is precluded. He included the *puram* tradition of poetry through the third section of his work which is on war. But even here he excluded women altogether except to include the queen of the Chera country in a non-battlefield context.

There is also in the *sangam* tradition, images of mothers young and old. Children as a source of happiness and fulfilment in life occur as a theme in some verses. There are of course the images of women, mothers of warriors, who take pride in the lives and heroic deaths of their sons in battle. Even the *Kural* has verses extolling the virtues of motherhood. But Ilango opted to keep Kannagi childless. He thus retained the focus on the wife, her power as a chaste woman, the king and his duty to do justice.

The *Tholkappiyam* details the structure of poetry but does not set the rules for the great narrative poem. In fact there is no mention of a long poem in the sense of an epic in the work. However, a later work, *Tantiyalankaram*, sets the rules for such a poem. Several characteristics of the narrative poem as stated in this work are found in the *Silappatikaram*. It begins with an invocation to God, its characters live out three of the four ends of human life and there are descriptions of nature in the work. It also deals with lovers’ quarrel and sexual love. These are all characteristics of a narrative poem detailed by the *Tantiyalankaram*. But this work is usually dated to the twelfth century. So, clearly, Ilango was not following any established grammar for narrative poem when he wrote the epic.

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16 Parthasarathy, op cit., p. 329
The epic does not have a hero of ‘incomparable greatness’.\textsuperscript{17} R. Parthasarathy has argued that, "Kovalan and Kannagi are depicted as idealized types rather than as individuals. This is in keeping with the conventions of the great narrative poem which stipulates heroes and heroines of incomparable greatness."\textsuperscript{18} I would suggest that Kannagi fits the idealized type but Kovalan does not. Kannagi can be compared to Savitri and Gandhari of the Mahabharata, as Parthasarathy does, but Kovalan does not fit an idealized type of a hero at all who can be compared to Rama, Krishna, Yudhishtira or Arjun. This might have been intentional. Ilango subverted tradition when he created Kannagi, a woman, as the protagonist of his epic. Her power came from her following the code of conduct laid down for a chaste woman/wife. The characteristics of the husband, whether or not he was worthy of this devotion was immaterial. Along with the idea of Karpu, this was another shift that the epic makes. Regardless of the characteristics of the husband a wife is expected to live a life of fidelity.

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. In investing the chaste woman with sacred power however, Ilango followed in the tradition of the earlier Tamil works. Several poems of the sangam speak of the woman as having sacred power. As George Hart has argued the woman acquired this sacred power anangu through conduct that was restrained in every aspect of behaviour. The sacred power rested in certain parts of a woman's body too.\textsuperscript{19} Ancient texts refer to a woman's breasts as having sacred power.\textsuperscript{20} Ilango developed the character of Kannagi within this tradition. Kannagi has sacred power by virtue of her karpu and she burns the city of Maturai with her breast.

But while her fidelity to her husband was crucial to her sacred power there was little that was sacred in the man. In investing the husband with divinity in the eyes of the wife, Ilango followed the idea introduced in the ethical work of Thiruvalluvar, the Thirukkural. It is Valluvar, whose work is conventionally dated to late sangam, who composed couplets which made the husband divine in the eyes of the wife and attributed supernatural powers

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., p.304
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid. p. 238
to a wife who worshipped her husband. Ilango continued this tradition when he composed the lines:

It is true that even the gods adore her
Who adores no god but her husband. A jewel
Among the women of the earth, Kannagi became
A goddess and a guest of the women of heaven. 

It could be argued that these verses of Ilango were more to emphasize the importance of fidelity in the wife and that they should not be taken literally. But the need to emphasize the quality in such superlative terms is in itself a reflection of the expectations from the wife and highlights the heightened expectations from women in society. Ilango followed Valluvar and it is clear that the social values that Valluvar represented, particularly with regard to women, are reiterated in the epic. In fact the notion of karpu is one of the cornerstones of the epic. It is made clear at the outset of the work that the story would establish three truths and the commendation of a virtuous woman is one of them.

It is made further clear that much depended on women being women of karpu. Prosperity of the people, the coming of the rains and the uprightness of the king’s sceptre depended on the existence of women who took the vow of fidelity to their husbands. In the epic the sage Kavunti says as much:

\[21\] Swaminatha Aiyar, op.cit., p. 508
\[22\] Parthasarathy, p.206
...A goddess, she has taken
The vow of faithfulness essential to women
Devoted to their husbands. We have seen
No shining goddess but her. Don’t you know
The old saying that in a land where women
Are virtuous, the rains never fail, prosperity
Never declines, and the triumphs of the king
Of this vast world never diminish?²⁴

The epic otherwise follows the rules laid down in the *Tholkappiyam*. Most of the characters that feature in the classic tradition of poetry are in the epic. *Silappatikaram* combines within itself two clearly demarcated forms of ancient Tamil poetry-akam and puram. As detailed in the first chapter this binary represents the inner world and the outer world respectively. They also represent the binary of love and war. In the agam tradition of poetic work, the hero, the heroin, the friend of the heroin (*thozhi*), the friend of the hero, mother and foster mother of the heroin and the *parattai* are the main characters. These feature in the epic as well except for the foster mother. Similarly, the king is the main character in puram poems and war is the main action. In the epic the King is the main focus in the last section of the epic and he undertakes a campaign to the north to subdue the kings there in fierce battles. The processes involved in consecrating a stone for the worship of a hero are detailed in *Tholkappiyam*.

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²³ Swaminatha Aiyar, p.394
²⁴ Parthasarathy, p.156
²⁵ *Tolkappiyam*, Murugan, verse 1009
Erecting the stone thus sculptured;
Bestowing honours right in accord with tradition;
And praise and worship extended to the stone.26

In the epic the prologue has this verse:

,...the choice
Of a stone; removing it; the lustration;
The dedication of the memorial stone; the benediction;
And the granting of a favour by the goddess.28

It is evident that Ilango followed established traditions in the consecration of the stone for Kannagi except that there is no mention of the stone being inscribed. Instead the figure of Kannagi is sculpted out of the stone and installed for worship.

There is a dual focus of the sacred in ancient Tamil literature—the king and woman.29 Kannagi represents the inner world of family and love. In the final confrontation with the King however, her power proves decisive. George L. Hart analysed the importance of the terms anangu and karpu for an understanding of the nature of women’s power in ancient Tamil society. Women were thought to have a latent sacred power (anangu).30 V.S.Rajam questioned Hart’s use of this term to mean exclusively woman’s sacred power.31 However, it cannot be disputed that anangu was used to convey this meaning as well. This sacred power took a malefic form during certain times, like during menstruation and after childbirth.32 The chief source of a woman’s sacred power is her chastity (karpu). As we saw in the earlier chapter, ancient Tamil texts like Puranamuru, Kuruntogai and Agananuru refer to a woman’s karpu as god (kadavul).33 Ancient texts also refer to a

26 Ibid.
27 Swaminatha Aiyar, Padigam, lines 84-85,
28 Parthasarathy, p.22
29 George L. Hart III, ‘Woman and the Sacred in Ancient Tamilnad’, op cit., p 233
30 Ibid., p. 236.
32 Hart, ibid., p.236
33 Ibid., p.237
woman’s breasts as having sacred power. Kannagi’s breasts are an important element in her portrayal.

In the entire text there is no squeamishness about the female body. Parts of the body of the various women in the story are vividly described. Breasts, narrow waist and private parts are referred to repeatedly. Breasts in particular symbolize sexuality and beauty. There are vivid descriptions of the female body in the epic. (Incidentally, the male body is never described.) It is relevant to note this for two reasons. One, no twentieth century narration of the story incorporated the physicality of the work of Ilango. Secondly, within the movement led by EVR, it is the physicality in the representations of Rama and Sita in the *Ramayana* that would be severely criticized. In the *Silappatikaram* Kovalan describes the beauty of Kannagi in the second canto of the epic when the two meet on their wedding night. He describes her face, her smell and her walk in glowing terms. (Kannagi does not speak at all in this canto). He compares her waist to Indra’s thunderbolt:

\[
\text{Indra bestowed on you} \\
\text{His thunderbolt that secures the immortal gods,} \\
\text{When it became your waist.}\]

He says her breasts need no adornment:

\[
\text{Flourishes of sandalwood paste} \\
\text{Embellish your faultless breasts.} \\
\text{Why embellish them with a string of pearls?}\]

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34 Ibid., p.238  
35 Swaminatha Aiyar, p. 44  
36 Parthasarathy, p.31  
37 Swaminatha Aiyar, p. 45
Ilango used similar language in his descriptions of Matavi. He concentrated on Matavi’s proficiency in dance when he introduced her. However, he described her state when she becomes Kovalan’s lover:

Undone was her red,
Coral girdle that blazed over her mound
Of love, and the fine garment unwound
From her waist.⁴⁰

In the same canto, Ilango contrasted the state of Kannagi thus:

No girdle
Blazed over her mound of love wound
In a soft, white garment. No vermillion
Rouge was painted on her breasts.⁴²

There are several references to women of the city as well, painting their breasts with sandalwood paste. These descriptions of the female body, particularly the breasts, are devices used to indicate the state of the woman’s mind. But they may also be a reference to the power they could have, preparing the reader for the powerful use of one of them by Kannagi.

³⁸ Parthasarathy, pp.31-32
³⁹ Swaminatha Aiyar, p. 124
⁴⁰ Parthasarathy., p. 42
⁴¹ Swaminatha Aiyar, p.125
⁴² Parthasarathy., p.43
Again, as in the case of the concept of karpu, Ilango Adigal developed the character of Kannagi within a tradition where a woman's breasts were considered to have sacred power. Kannagi had sacred power by virtue of her karpu and she burnt the city of Madurai with her breast.  

2.3 Religious context

Conventionally, Silappatikaram is taken to be the work of Ilango, the ascetic younger brother of the Cera king Senguttuvan. The Prologue and the last canto of the epic indicate as much. He is supposed to have been a Jain. Jain traditions and customs are referred to frequently in the work. However, other gods and goddesses, religious traditions and beliefs are mentioned as frequently. Korrvavai, the goddess of victory, Shiva and Murugan, divines of an earlier era, share space now with Vishnu and Krishna. Mythic stories of the north like the Ramayana had clearly seeped into peninsular India by this time and so we have references to Rama, a veena playing Narada and Indra of a thousand eyes. In fact, writing in the context of ‘oral residue’ in the epic Parthasarathy has suggested that ‘Kovalan’ derives from the Sanskrit word ‘Gopalan’, guardian of the cow. Superstitions, belief in omens and the efficacy of sacrifices thrive amongst some sections of the people. There is vivid description of a human sacrifice as well. Cities have their guardian deities. Fire takes the form of a Brahman. There is scope for the miraculous as well. Humans become jackals when cursed and return to their original selves after some time. The text refers to several temples. Clearly, in the intervening centuries between the early sangam and the epic, peninsular India had witnessed tremendous changes in the area of religious belief. The coexistence of these older and newer religious beliefs makes the terrain of the south a mosaic of several traditions.

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43 The god of fire appears in the guise of a brahman when Kannagi throws her breast on the street of Madurai. We can surmise that her breast had the power to burn, as most commentators have done.

44 Parthasarathy, p.320

45 Swaminatha Aiyar, p. 141
This eclectic and inclusive religious life of the region is reflected in the lives of Kannagi and Kovalan as well. They are presented as following the path shown by Jain ascetics. Kavunti recognizes them to be followers of Jain traditions. Historically, Jainism spread rapidly and deeply amongst the merchant communities of certain parts of India. So, it is not unusual that this couple of this community should be followers of the ascetics of the Jain tradition. However, Kannagi and Kovalan are married by a Brahmin and they perform the ritual of going around the sacred fire:

\[
\text{Around the ceremonial fire, walked} \\
\text{Kovalan observing the holy rites} \\
\text{The venerable priest solemnized.}^{48}
\]

Later, Kannagi’s friend Devanti tells her that she had failed to keep a vow for her husband in her previous birth:

\[
\text{In a previous birth} \\
\text{You had failed to keep a vow on his behalf.}^{50}
\]

She then tells her that women who desire togetherness with their husbands in this world pray at the temple of Kama at the seaside grove where the river Kaveri meets the sea:

\[
\text{Women}^{51}
\]

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46 Swaminatha Aiyar, p.255, lines 46-48
47 Swaminatha Aiyar, p.36
48 Parthasarathy, p. 27
49 Swaminatha Aiyar, p.242
50 Parthasarathy, p. 91
51 Swaminatha Aiyar, p. 243
Who bathe on their steps and worship at the temple
Of Kama nearby will enjoy this world
Together with their husbands.\textsuperscript{52}

When Kannagi and Kovalan leave the city of Pukar they worship at the sacred places belonging to all the three major religious traditions. They go round the temple of Manivannan, the seven Buddhist viharas built by Indra, where superhuman beings circle the air and explain the holy words of the Buddha. They then visit the moonstone seat built by the arhat householders:

\begin{quote}
After going round
The temple of Manivannan reclining in a state
Of yogic trance on the fair, glistening serpent,
They moved on, and went by the seven Buddhist temples
Built by Indra. Superhuman beings moved
In the air, and carefully explained the holy words
Of the Buddha who had sat in the comely, radiant shade
Of the green-leaved bo tree, its five branches
Spread high. They worshiped and went round
The bright moonstone seat built
By all the Jaina householders for the convenience
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{52} Pathasarathy, p. 91
\textsuperscript{53} Swaminatha Aiyar, pp. 252-253
Of sages...  

On their way to the city of Madurai, they meet a Brahman (theethiram purindon) who describes in great detail the attributes and appearances of Vishnu and Shiva. At the border of the two cities they rest at the temple of the goddess of the forest people, Aiyai. She is described as one who demands the sacrifice of young men. At this temple they are witness to the ritual performances of the forest people. The oracle there points to Kannagi and predicts her illustrious future:

This is the Konku lady,
The woman from the Kutaku hills, the beauty
From the south Tamil country, the sprout
Of her former penance. A peerless gem
Is she that will light up the entire world
As its brightest jewel.

When a young rake together with his whore teases Kannagi and Kovalan in the presence of the sage Kavunti, she turns them into jackals:

"Since these two seem
To insult my girl who looks like a wreath
Of flowers, they shall become old jackals

54 Parthasarathy, p. 93
55 Swaminatha Aiyar, p.313
56 Parthasarathy, p. 121
57 Swaminatha Aiyar, p. 264
In a thorny forest."\(^{58}\)

Later she relents and blesses them with return to human form after a year:

"They... will wander, suffering
Pain, for twelve months in the forest...
In this way
They will get back their original forms."\(^{60}\)

A shadowy creature at a lake takes the form of a Vasantamalai and tries to seduce Kovalan:

A wood nymph smitten with love
Said to herself: "He is the gracious lover
I have pined for." Taking the form
Of Vasantamalai, she fell at his feet\(^{62}\)

Cities have their protective deities too who appear in human form and grieve with the humans. When Kannagi throws her breast on the street of Madurai, fire takes the form of a Brahman and asks her who he should spare:

Before Kannaki, who had cursed, appeared Agni
The god of fire, in the guise of a brahman.

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\(^{58}\) Parthasarathy, p. 104
\(^{59}\) Swaminatha Aiyar, p. 264

\(^{60}\) Parthasarathy, p. 105
\(^{61}\) Swaminatha Aiyar, p.296
\(^{62}\) Parthasarathy, p. 116
\(^{63}\) Swaminatha Aiyar, p.487
Blue in color, with a red tuft and milkwhite teeth.  

The presiding deity of the city (புதுக்கோட்டை பெருநகரம் சிவன்) appears before her and speaks to her. And, finally, Indra showers flowers on Kannagi and takes her away to the heavenly world:

இந்தியனுக்கு குன்று சிலம்பராயில் வந்தது
அனை செம்பரின் வந்தது சிலம்பராயில்
அவ்வாறன் அனையர் வந்தவையுள்ளார்
செம்பரில் வந்தது சிலம்பராயில் வந்தவையுள்ளார்
அவ்வாறன் இருக்கும் சாரராருக்கு வந்தவையுள்ளார்.  

Indra,

Lord of the immortals, with other gods
Thought that day to be right for worship,
Praised the glorious name of this revered woman,
Rained unfading flowers upon her, and adored her.
In a heavenly chariot, by the side of Kovalan
Slain in the royal city, Kannaki, her hair
Thick as a forest, ascended the heaven.  

In the light of the raging debate that would be centred on the issue of Brahmins and the influence of northern religious traditions on the society and religious practices in the south, it is important to pause and dwell on the issue here. In the epic, as noted above, not only are there religious practices, deities and sacred places that can be categorized as of northern origin, there are a few Brahmins who are important links in the story. The words used to describe a Brahmin are varied. Parthasarathy has translated அரையோன் (araiyon), ஆன்னான் (anthanan) and தெத்திரம் புரின்போன் (theethiram purindon) as Brahmin. There are references to the area where the Brahmins reside (araiyor irukkai) (அரையோன்

64 Parthasarathy, p. 193
65 Swaminatha Aiyar, pp. 507-508
66 Parthasarathy, p. 206
Matalan...the first

Among brahmans, versed in the four Vedas, and filled
With goodness...

Clearly, கருணாபால்பாடும் is 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 (காரணையானதும் மனலும் கருணாபால்பாடும்), 70 or கல் வெளி கோணா. 71 Kannagi, Kovalan and Kavunti 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.

That society was stratified is well attested in the literature of the sangam itself. In fact George Hart has argued that caste may have been a practice of the south as indicated in some of the poems of Puranamuru. 72 It is possible to argue that the poems referred to by Hart do not indicate a caste society. But they certainly indicate that some sections of the society, like the drummers for instance, were considered of low social standing. By the time we come to the epic, however, there are references to the four varnas (பிரார்த்தனைகள் கூட்டும்). 73 The last in this clearly stratified society are referred to as அகமண்சல் in the epic. 74

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67 Swaminatha Aiyar, p.138
68 Swaminatha Aiyar, p.387
69 Parthasarathy, p. 150
70 Swaminatha Aiyar, p.260
71 Swaminatha Aiyar, p.335
72 Hart, The Four Hundred Poems of War and Wisdom, p. xvii
73 Swaminatha Aiyar, p. 182
74 Ibid., p.259
2.4 Social Location of Kannagi

Unlike epic heroines of the north like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, Kannagi is not born of a royal family. But she is no commoner. Kovalan and she are children of two of the wealthiest merchants of Puhar:

...they
Were highborn, and like their fathers, heirs to untold
Riches.\textsuperscript{75}

Kannagi is also aware of her social position. When addressing the king, after the execution of her husband, she introduces herself as the wife of Kovalan, the son of the distinguished merchant Masattuvan of the renowned city of Puhar. That she and her husband are no commoners without means or distinction is recognized by people around her. When the sage Kavunti meets them for the first time she immediately recognizes them as being from a distinguished family. That she is not used to a hard life is also noticed. Observing the delicate nature of Kannagi, Kavunti expresses doubts about Kannagi's ability to walk to Madurai. Later, when Kavunti speaks about the couple to the herdswoman Madari, she says that if any merchant of Madurai knew of Kovalan, they would consider it their good fortune to receive the couple as their guests.

This detail of the wealth and social standing of Kannagi and Kovalan is important in the light of the couple losing them during the course of the story. The wealth they lose is not that acquired by Kovalan. Soon after their marriage they are given a separate house and enough wealth to start their lives and for Kovalan to start his occupation as a merchant. But his association with the dancer Matavi results in the loss of not only his wealth but also the jewellery of Kannagi. So, when Kannagi reaches the court of the Pandya King, she is the grieving widow of an impoverished merchant who was unknown to the city of Madurai.

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., p.42
\textsuperscript{76} Parthasarathy, p. 29
Ilango chipped away at the social standing of Kannagi in other ways too. He isolated Kannagi in every way before she reaches the palace of the king of Madurai. At that moment, even though she is aware of herself as the wife of the son of a wealthy merchant of Puhar, to the King of Madurai she is no more than an aggrieved woman standing before him seeking justice. She had nothing but the power of a chaste wife which derived from the nature of her life up to that point and she had justice, on her side. If the same event had happened in Puhar, it would not have had the same impact. There, she would have been surrounded by her family. Her power would have derived from her social position as the wife, daughter and daughter-in-law of wealthy merchants. Her power deriving from her karpu would have been one of her several qualities and not her only source. In fact, the tragedy could not have happened in Puhar at all where they were well known. It is the anonymity of Kovalan that rendered him so vulnerable to the machinations of the goldsmith. The king orders his execution in an offhand manner, however unjustifiable, because he was referred to as a thief-without name, family affiliations and social standing. So, Ilango shifting the couple from the familiar city of Puhar to the unfamiliar city of Madurai served the purpose of Kannagi depending on her karpu alone. The final confrontation was between a woman of karpu and a king’s justice.

As noted earlier, karpu is expected to bestow sacred power. Kannagi is portrayed as a woman of exceptional karpu. The sacred power acquired through karpu made it possible for Kannagi to burn down the city of Madurai. But it is equally important to note that this supernatural power that she possessed had no role to play when she proved the innocence of her husband. That was pure evidence which was available at hand. Ilango did not introduce a divine voice to testify to the veracity of Kannagi’s claims. He also did not allow any miraculous event to interfere with the process of Kannagi proving the innocence of her husband. The incident in the Mahabharata of the disrobing of Draupati in the court of Dritarashtra is comparable for the difference. There, Sri Krishna provides endless streams of cloth to protect her from being disrobed. Divine miracle comes to the rescue of Draupati. But in the Silappatikaram the issue was justice. Justice then, as conceptualised by Ilango, depended on verifiable evidence. In fact, anyone with the same proof could have established the innocence of Kovalan. However, to avenge the wrong done to her, a wrong which cannot be reversed, Kannagi needed the power of her karpu. She burns down the
city with her breast, a task only a woman of karpu with exceptional spiritual and sacred power could have performed.

2.5 The Political Context of the Story

The story moves through three regions of peninsular India, traditionally referred to as the Tamil region. Later day commentators have argued that Silappatikaram should be seen as a text that unites Tamilagam. This reading of the epic might satisfy the desire for a unified Tamil political region in the twentieth century or even in contemporary times. But by the end of the eighteenth century, if not under the Vijayanagar Empire, the individual identities of the three regions ruled by three ruling dynasties had been lost. Much of peninsular India formed the Madras presidency under the British by 1785. Later, in an independent India, the leaders of the Dravida Kazhagam under C.N.Anadurai dreamt of a separate Tamil nation. Reading the epic as hinting at a unified Tamil region fit in well with their political ambitions for themselves and for the Tamil region. But such readings are always problematic. For instance the 'Tamilagam' of the epic now included vast regions where Tamil was spoken no more. Also, as we shall see in the next chapter, other narratives of the story yield to other kinds of imaginings of regions. For instance the folk narrative Kovalan Kadai of Nirmala Devi maps the Kerala region as sacred and unified.

The events of the story do happen in the three political regions of ancient Tamilagam. In fact the author sang praises of all the three kings of the three regions at the end of each of the three sections of the story. The nature of the praise is similar too. They are praised for their virtues and their prowess. The happiness of their subjects is described in almost similar verses:

\begin{quote}
\text{\textit{தெய்வம் காவல்து கூறுவது தீர்க்க}}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{77} See chapter III.
Of the endless joy of its subjects; of the abundance
Of food...

...of the endless joy of its subjects;
Of the abundance of food...

In the coda or katturai that follows each section there is a reference to the coming of the gods:
Of the coming of the gods

The story brings together in one sweep all the three kings of the three traditional dynasties of ancient Tamil region, the Chola, Pandiya and the Chera, during the course of its narration. It is important to remember that the author intended to write a story that covered the five thinaï of Tamil literature, the five landscapes that correspond to five categories of human emotions: marudam, palai, karinchi, mullai and neydal. It covered the regions that had peoples that spoke chenthamizh and kodunthamizh and lived their lives in accordance with the rules of virtue, and to find wealth and love. The author says as much in the final Katturai of the epic:

It comprises the five landscapes of pure and impure Tamil

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78 Swaminatha Aiyar, pp 265 and 508
79 Parthasarathy, p. 105
80 Swaminatha Aiyar, p.588
81 Parthasarathy, p. 275
82 Swaminatha Aiyar, pp. 265, 508 and 588
83 Parthasarathy, pp. 105, 207, 275
84 Swaminatha Aiyar, p. 589
Where live gods and humans following their duty
And practicing virtue, wealth, and love.\(^{85}\)

But to read the text as an attempt at political unification would be incorrect. In fact, in a political context when the kings of the three ruling families were constantly at war, the story could be read as an attempt on the part of the author to show the Pandya king in poor light as compared to the Chola and Chera. The Chola king does not play a role at all but his rule and his lineage is referred to favourably as are those of the Pandya and the Cera. It is in Madurai, the most prosperous city of the Pandya region that Kannagi meets with her tragedy. The Pandya king Nedunchezhiyan is himself responsible for it. What is more, it is his swerving from the path of justice that causes the tragedy. The unjust and irrevocable execution of Kovalan leads to the burning of the city of Madurai by Kannagi. The king’s actions are explained as being the result of his actions in his past life, which is consistent with one of the themes of the epic. But the tragedy occurred in the city of Madurai, the seat of his power and this is significant. He is referred to as ‘उद्यमित्तम’ twice in the last canto.\(^{86}\) Parthasarathy translated the word as ‘contemptible person’\(^{87}\) and ‘wretched man’.\(^{88}\) His action results in the city having to be ritually purified through fire. He is rehabilitated somewhat towards the end when it is mentioned that he is amongst the gods. In contrast the Cera king is shown as the one recognizing Kannagi as a woman of Karpur and worthy of worship. He is the hero of the puram section of the epic. He goes to war and defeats kings in the north. He acquires the stone for the statue of Kannagi and ritually installs her in his region as a goddess. The epic therefore, can also be read as a reflection of contemporary political conflicts.

2.6 The Characters

Unlike epics generally and epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata in particular, there are very few characters in the Silappatikaram. Other than the three main characters,

\(^{85}\) Parthasarathy, p. 277
\(^{86}\) Swaminatha Aiyar, p.570, 572
\(^{87}\) Parthasarathy, op. Cit., p. 258
\(^{88}\) Ibid., p. 260
Kannagi, Kovalan and Matavi, there is no character that has a presence throughout the story. Even the two kings of the Pandya and Chera region have important but limited roles. In subsequent renderings of the story it is the three main characters that undergo varied changes. Even though the most dramatic changes in representation happen in the case of Kannagi, Kovalan and Matavi are presented differently too. To understand these varied representations over time, it is important to appreciate the way the three characters are presented in the epic. More often than not it is against the depictions of these three personalities in the epic that subsequent changes would be made. Changing attitudes to prostitution, monogamy and gender relations in general would be reflected through the varied ways in which these three would be depicted. In other words, historical change would reflect in the representations of the main characters.

Unlike most epics of the world, the man is not the protagonist of the epic Silappatikaram. Equally significantly, the hero Kovalan plays a vital but limited role in the story. He is not shown to have admirable qualities either. In fact, he is full of faults and that is the point. As suggested earlier, the karpu of Kannagi is not dependent on what kind of man Kovalan is. Ilango focused on the power of the woman acquired through a life of karpu. In the epic the presentation of his character as being flawed enhances the lustre in the character of Kannagi. However, this very important detail would be lost in subsequent renderings of the story in the twentieth century. For various reasons that we shall look at in later chapters, subtle changes would be made in the story to show Kovalan in better light than as he is in the epic. The attempts to gloss the various faults of Kovalan in the twentieth century would be ridden with difficulties that would be hard to overcome.

2.6.1 Kovalan

Kovalan is introduced in the first canto, along with Kannagi, as the son of a rich merchant of Puhar. He is sixteen and admired by the women of the city for his good looks. When the parents of Kannagi and Kovalan marry them, Kovalan is presented as a lover of beauty in the way he describes Kannagi. However, in the very next canto, he chooses to buy the garland put up for sale by Matavi and later reaches her bed chamber. He forgets his home and his blameless wife immediately.
Kovalan bought the garland -
Matavi with wide, lotus eyes. With the hunchback
He entered Matavi’s residence: came
Under her spell the instant he took her in his arms.
He forgot himself, and wished never to part from her,
Forgot his own blameless and noble wife, and home. 90

The event of his buying the garland from the maid Kooni (a hunchback) would be glossed in the subsequent renderings of the story. So, it is important to remember that Ilango presented the entire event - of Kovalan buying the garland, reaching the bedchamber of Matavi and forgetting his wife and home-in a matter of fact way. In fact this dramatic event which impacts the lives of all the three main characters and decides the course of their lives and the story was narrated in precisely ten lines. Ilango did not present an apology for Kovalan leaving Kannagi or for his living with Matavi for several years. A recurrent theme in the epic is the concept of karma or the idea that one has to pay for one’s wicked actions in past lives. Ilango referred to this several times during the course of the story. He referred to it when Kovalan leaves the city of Puhar with Kannagi and travels to Madurai. But he did not refer to this when Kovalan buys Matavi’s garland and decides to live with her abandoning his wife. Kovalan’s action therefore can be seen as a flaw in his character.

The next major event in Kovalan’s life- his leaving Matavi and later the city of Puhar for Madurai with Kannagi-is also presented in a way that does not show him as a man of steadfast character. He misunderstands a song sung by Matavi. He suspects her of having her mind on another man and leaves her. What is more, he refuses to accept the letter Matavi sends for him and refers to her contemptuously as a ‘dancing girl’. This, about a

89 Swaminatha Aiyar, p.77
90 Parthasarathy, p.40
woman he had lived with for several years and fathered a child with. Nor was this a lovers’ quarrel that would end soon. Again, this impulsive decision on the part of Kovalan is a reflection of a weak character. He could be steadfast in love neither to his wife nor to Matavi. He leaves the city the same night with his wife. It is at the moment of his decision to leave the city of Puhar for Madurai that Ilango referred to ‘uzhvinai’ or karma coming to fruition. By this time Kovalan had lost all the wealth that his parents had given him. In fact, even the jewellery of Kannagi was lost and she had nothing but her anklets. On the way to Madurai he does realise he made a mistake in understanding Matavi but by then it is too late. He is already on his way to meet his tragic end.

Ilango broke with literary tradition when he had Kannagi go with Kovalan to Madurai. As mentioned in the previous chapter, women were not to accompany their husbands when they travelled out to earn wealth. Kovalan asks Kannagi to go with him and she does. Their departure, however, helps to separate them from all that was familiar in their lives. The isolation of the couple in the city of Madurai was a necessary background to the tragedy that would soon befall them. By this time they are without wealth. Their being strangers in the new city renders them socially faceless as well. Kovalan thus becomes responsible, not only for the horrific events in his life, but for what would transpire in Kannagi’s life as well.

2.6.2 Matavi

It is equally important to understand the character of Matavi if we consider the agitated debates that would revolve around the cultural practice of nautch in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Her character would be reworked repeatedly through the plays of the twentieth century as well, reflecting society’s ambiguous and constantly changing attitude to women who took to dance as an occupation. In a colonial context this ambiguity would be seen in sharper hues in the changing social attitude to monogamy as well. In the epic however, Matavi is introduced to us on the day of her first public performance before the king. We are told of her distinctive ancestry. She is of the lineage of Indra’s son and a ‘mahanāa māla[māti]’ or the daughter of a heavenly nymph.91 Following commentators,

91 Sakuntala is given a similar ancestry. Thapar suggested this may be to disguise her social origin. Romila Thapar, Sakuntala, p. 39
Parthasarathy identified the nymph as Urvasi. This ancestry, however, places Matavi above the ordinary. But it is not birth alone that distinguishes her. She is a master of her art too. Both these qualities mark her as a woman of distinction and it is narrated succinctly in just a couple of lines thus:

...and from that exalted line
Of heavenly nymphs was Matavi descended.
A woman of flawless birth, of broad shoulders,
And curly hair, spilling pollen, she was
Noted for her style of great distinction.\(^{93}\)

Thus Ilango put her at par with Kannagi and Kovalan in wealth and lineage.

Much of the third canto in which she is introduced is a detailed description of not only her superlative performance but also a detailed essay on music, rhythm, musical instruments and the grammar of dance. The description clearly establishes that the first performance of a dancer before the king is a highly ritualized event. Every step she takes is in accordance with convention. As tradition demanded the king rewards her with one thousand and eight gold coins and a garland of leaves and flowers. She sends her maid Kooni with the garland to the street the rich men of Puhar frequent. She says that the man who buys the garland for one thousand eight gold pieces would have her.\(^{94}\) Parthasarathy said that according to custom a courtesan is expected to take a lover.\(^{95}\) Kovalan buys the garland and becomes her lover.

The event of Kovalan buying Matavi’s garland would come for a lot of comment and debate in the twentieth century. Increasing intolerance of the practice of ‘nautch’ in a colonial context and an attempt to show Kovalan in a sympathetic light would motivate

\(^{92}\) Swaminatha Aiyar, p.56
\(^{93}\) Parthasarathy, p.34
\(^{94}\) Parthasarathy refers to Kovalan as ‘husband’ here which is inappropriate. He reaches her home and bedchamber as lover and/or patron. P.40
\(^{95}\) Parthasarathy, p.308
playwrights and social critiques alike to look upon the event afresh. It is important to look at the event closely. As mentioned earlier the entire event was narrated in ten lines by Ilango. However, the words used to convey the establishment of the relationship and the nature of the ensuing intimacy allows for varied readings. The four lines that narrate the event of Matavi sending her maid Kooni with the garland to the street the elite of the city of Puhar frequent are:

Parthasarathy translated the lines as:

This garland Matavi
Put in the hands of her doe-eyed maid,
A hunchback, asked her to wait in the street
Where the elite of the town walked about, and offer it
For sale, thus:

"a thousand and eight pieces
Of the most excellent gold is this garland worth.
Who buys the garland becomes the husband
Of our vinelike girl."  

The use of the word ‘husband’ probably derives from the subsequent four lines which narrate the event of Kovalan reaching the bedchamber of Matavi:

Kovalan bought the garland-
Matavi with wide, lotus eyes. With the hunchback,

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96 Swaminatha Aiyar, Silappatikaram, p.77
97 Parthasarathy, pp. 39-40
98 Swaminatha Aiyar, p 77
He entered Matavi's residence... 99

It is also possible that Parthasarathy followed U.V. Swaminatha Aiyar’s commentary on the lines where he referred to Kovalan as ‘மெடவில் மார்வல்லாராரா அரவிட்டு’ 100. But this does not seem to be correct. If ‘மெடவில்’ is marriage and ‘மார்வல்லாரா அரவிட்டு’ means the groom, there was no marriage ceremony involved. Probably Swaminatha Aiyar, and following him Parthasarathy, took the word ‘மார்வல்லாரா அரவிட்டு’ to be suggestive of a marriage and therefore the reference to Kovalan as ‘husband’ in the translation. But the word ‘மார்வல்லாரா அரவிட்டு’ was most likely used by Ilango to indicate that the room Kovalan entered would serve an intimate purpose. He could have used the word ‘palli’ to indicate a bedroom. By using ‘மார்வல்லாரா அரவிட்டு’ in this situation Ilango hinted at the first union of the lovers and their sharing a longstanding relationship as a husband and wife would. Also, there is no word that suggests ‘husband’ in the text. It seems most appropriate to call them lovers. Matavi takes a lover as custom dictated that she did.

Ilango presented Matavi as a woman of wealth. She wears jewels of diamonds, rubies and emeralds. Every part of her body is bejewelled. She travels to the seashore through the streets of Puhar in a palanquin. She has several maids to do her bidding. For all this, there is no discussion or even a mention of any jewellery or fine clothes or wealth in general in the conversation between Matavi and Kovalan. We get to know by suggestion alone that Kovalan loses all his wealth during his long years with Matavi. Amazingly, we do not see Kovalan and Matavi together at all except on the day they go to the seashore. This is also the day they separate, never to meet again. Matavi is not presented as an acquisitive and greedy woman. On the contrary she tries to get Kovalan back by sending a letter to him when he leaves her. She believes that he would return to her. She sends a letter to Kovalan in the hands of her friend Vasantamalai. Kovalan refuses to accept it and sends her back with an insult that Matavi is only a ‘dancing girl’ or ‘ஞானே இல்லே’. But Matavi still believes that he would return, if not in the evening, then in the morning:

99 Parthasarathy, p. 40
100 Swaminatha Aiyar, p. 77. Swaminatha Aiyar’s notes to lines 164-169
"...If he doesn't come this evening"

spoke Matavi

of the wide eyes, lovely like flowers,

"We shall surely see him in the morning."\(^{102}\)

Kovalan is a pauper when he leaves Matavi. It is a pauperised Kovalan that Matavi wants back with her. She does not give up on Kovalan when he sends back her letter without reading it. On his way to Madurai, he is met by Kausikan with another letter from her. Kausikan informs Kovalan that she had taken to bed after his departure and she had referred to Kovalan as being as dear to her as her eyes (கணவதை கைதையாகத்தானே). In the letter she asks for his forgiveness for her indiscreet words, asks him why he left Puhar without informing his parents and wants to know how she is to be blamed for his actions (மேல் புஹாரை வந்தானே). Matavi is completely absent from the story after this point. We hear of her, however, through the Brahmin, Matalan. When she hears of the fate that befell Kovalan, she enters a Buddhist nunnery:

\[...\]

\[...\]

Her hair, wreathed in flowers,

She removed, and entered a Buddhist nunnery

And was taught the holy word.\(^{104}\)

She also expresses her wish that her daughter should be spared the life of a courtesan. Later, she decides to remove her daughter’s braids and sends her to a Buddhist nunnery.

\(^{101}\) Ibid., p.227

\(^{102}\) Parthasarathy, p. 87

\(^{103}\) Swaminatha Aiyar, p. 548

\(^{104}\) Parthasarathy, p. 242
2.6.3 Kannagi

In the Silappatikaram, Kannagi does not speak often. In a story where the protagonist is the woman and who brings the story to its final violent denouement, the woman barely speaks. She is delicate, sensitive to heat and harsh conditions. She is shy. She lives a life of fidelity to her husband—even a husband who goes astray. Kannagi remains in the background all the time that Kovalan lives with Matavi. She speaks for the first time in Canto 9 of the first book of the epic when her friend Devanti blesses her that her husband should return to her. (The story is divided into three books of ten, thirteen and seven Cantos respectively.) She speaks again in the same Canto when she offers her anklet to Kovalan. She then speaks in Canto 16, when Kovalan expresses regret for what he had done and the misery he had brought upon himself and her, and then asks her why she followed him to Madurai when he asked her to. Her reply is telling. She refers to the pain he caused his parents. She reproaches him for his actions and then says:

meyeN apahay majavekkiyam kanniN
E££££kS££££i£££££i££££<££££105

"...as for me, I have lived
A blameless life. Therefore, I got up and followed you."

That is, she had lived her life as she was expected to. Her following Kovalan to Madurai was within the framework of what is expected of a dutiful wife. We must note that she never refers to Matavi.

Kannagi becomes eloquent from the eighteenth Canto onwards, that is, from the time that she hears of her husband’s execution and to her final exit from the city. Her earlier reticence was necessary to sharpen the contrast when she speaks before the King. When she hears of the death of her husband, Kannagi addresses the herdswomen first, then the citizens of Madurai and then lastly she speaks before the king. Grief is often an important moment chosen by writers to express feelings that may otherwise remain dormant in

105 Swaminatha Aiyar, p. 417
106 Parthasarathy, p. 163.
characters they create. On hearing of the death of her husband Kovalan, Kannagi's first reaction is rage. She then faints and recovers a few times. When she speaks finally, what she says is a challenge to destiny,

“Like the unhappy women who keep painful vows
After their dear husbands vanished in the pyre,
Must I suffer and be ruined
Because I lost my husband through the fault
Of a king despised by his own people?”
Like the unhappy women who lost their husbands
With chests resplendent with fragrant wreaths,
And went and bathed in holy rivers,
Must I suffer and be ruined...”

When she picks up the twin of her anklet she addresses the virtuous women of the city and insists that her husband is not a thief. Later when she sees the body of her husband she laments that she has lost her husband through the actions of an unjust king. She says repeatedly that people would say that she is suffering for her past sins. She then vows not to hold her husband, “till the wrath that burns” in her is appeased.

Kannagi reaches the king’s presence and introduces herself as a citizen of Puhar. After speaking of the fame of the kings of Puhar, she refers to her husband as the son of a merchant of Puhar. Then she says that he had come to Madurai for a living and was murdered. Lastly, she says she is his wife. She proves the innocence of her husband by

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107 Swaminatha Aiyar, p. 460
108 Parthasarathy, p.180
breaking open the twin of the anklet Kovalan had brought into the city. She then addresses the queen thus:

"Consort of the great king! A slave am I
Of cruel karma. By nature I am innocent.
You will see that whoever harms another
In the morning will find himself harmed
By the afternoon."

It is to be noted that she mentions her own innocence as well. She then narrates the stories of the virtuous women of Puhar and says:

"If I too am truly a virtuous woman, forbearing
I will not be, but bring ruin on Maturai and the king.
The force of my vengeance you will see."

She then walks out of the palace and once again addressing the citizens of the city, reiterates her own innocence thus:

"...I curse this city. Its king erred"

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109 Swaminatha Aiyar, p. 483
110 Parthasarathy, p. 191
111 Swaminatha Aiyar, p. 486
112 Parthasarathy, p. 193
113 Swaminatha Aiyar, p. 487
In killing the man I loved. Blameless am I!\textsuperscript{114}

She wrenches out her left breast and goes round the city of Madurai thrice before flinging it on the street. The god of fire appears before her in the guise of a Brahman and informs her that he was told to burn the city the day she was wronged. He asks her who he should spare. She asks him to spare the Brahmans, good men, cows, chaste women, the old and the children. She then leaves the city.

It is important to note that the king had punished himself the moment he realized he had done an injustice in ordering the execution of Kovalan. Then why does Kannagi burn the city? It is clear from her words that while she admired the women who took vows and those who visited sacred rivers when widowed, she did not intend to be so forbearing. She had avenged the injustice to her husband. But where was justice for her? Her repeated plea that she was innocent is very important. In his introduction to the translation of the epic, R.Parthasarathy says that “Abandoned women, such as Kannagi have the power to strike terror in the hearts of men and therefore dreaded.”\textsuperscript{115} But Kannagi was not an abandoned woman when her husband Kovalan was executed. It is not as an abandoned woman that she burnt the city of Madurai, but as a woman whose dreams of a fulfilling life were thwarted for no fault of hers. She had no harsh words when Kovalan abandoned her for Matavi. She had a smile when he returned to her. She could now look forward to a life of marital bliss. She had resolved a personal crisis by forgiving her wayward husband. But Kovalan’s unjust execution is irrevocable. Her anger acquires ferocity because she had lived as she was expected to live-loyal to her husband, patient, uncomplaining and forgiving. Yet she lost her husband through the fault of a king. No punishment to the King can restore her husband to her. It was this finality that invited her wrath and led to her wreaking vengeance on the entire city of Madurai. It is at the moment of her desire for vengeance that she says, “If I too am truly a virtuous woman”.

Her use of her breast to burn the city is also significant. Breasts symbolize sexuality and motherhood.\textsuperscript{116} It has been suggested that by wrenching out one of them from her body Kannagi underlined their superfluity after the death of her husband.\textsuperscript{117} Parthasarathy also

\textsuperscript{114} Parthasarathy, p. 193
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., p. 14
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., p. 11
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., p. 12
says that Kannagi breaking the anklet in the court of the king was like castration.\textsuperscript{118} C.S.Lakshmi says her wrenching out her breast is the ‘ultimate disfigurement’ and ‘a masochistic gesture of inflicting punishment upon herself’.\textsuperscript{119} The gesture was more than an indication of anger or symbolic of motherhood and sexuality. Breasts are also symbolic of womanhood. By pulling out one of them violently, Kannagi was also rejecting the life that she had to live because she was a woman. It was a life that gave her nothing, not even what is promised by patriarchy. Her husband left her for another and finally, the king whose duty it was to be just and who must protect all, executed her husband. If she punished herself by that violent act, she also punished the entire city of Madurai. The city symbolized for her injustice and personal tragedy, a socio-political order that failed her. She later regrets the violence she had been responsible for. Kannagi's last words are to herself, "O! I am a great sinner."\textsuperscript{120}

Ilango Adigal portrayed Kannagi as extremely delicate and sensitive to heat. There are numerous references to her foot sores, and exhaustion due to heat.\textsuperscript{121} Ilango did not refer to the feet of her co-travellers, Kovalan and Kavunti. Her delicate disposition is also a matter for repeated comment. Her feet are so tender, like lotus, they can't bear the pebbles on the ground.\textsuperscript{122} She is also of fearful disposition. She would be frightened of otters.\textsuperscript{123} When a man makes a snide remark about Kannagi and Kovalan, she is hurt to the quick.\textsuperscript{124} When a village soothsayer points her out in a crowd, Kannagi hides behind her husband. Through such a portrayal of Kannagi, Ilango kept the reader unprepared for the shock of the intensity of the transformed Kannagi. Such a woman then confronts the King himself, argues eloquently about the duties of a king, about injustice done to her and burns down the city itself. She was, all the time, fire herself.

\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., p. 12
\textsuperscript{119} C.S.Lakshmi, ‘Mother, Mother-Community and Mother-Politics in Tamil Nadu’, in Economic and Political Weekly, 1990 p. ws.73. Incidentally, C.S.Lakshmi was wrong in stating that Kovalan had not consummated the marriage. It is clear from the text that this was not so. However, in some folk renderings of the story, Kannagi’s marriage remains unconsummated.
\textsuperscript{120} Parthasarathy, p. 206
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid.,95,96,119,130
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid.,p.121,130
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., p.96
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., p.104
It is significant that Kannagi nowhere refers to Matavi. Even when she reproaches Kovalan for his conduct she doesn’t mention Matavi by name or allusion. It is the sage Kavunti who mentions to Kovalan how he had strayed from the path shown by the wise and brought sorrow upon himself.\textsuperscript{125} The only instance of a harsh word used for Matavi is when Kovalan refuses to accept the message sent to him by Matavi through her maid Vasantamalai, and refers to Matavi as ‘only a dancing girl’.\textsuperscript{126} These are clearly, in the context in which they are uttered in the epic, words of a jealous lover. Courtesans were clearly part of the social world the epic describes. They were accomplished dancers and the first performance of a dancer is an elaborate ceremony. In fact Matavi is introduced to the reader on the day of her first performance, which is before the king. The detailed description is a clear indication that dancing and the community of dancers are an integral part of the society. There is no adverse comment on their sexual morality either. Even when Kavunti admonishes Kovalan, she refers to men ‘who regard women and food as their sole pleasure’ in general not to dancing girls in particular.\textsuperscript{127}

Finally, I would refer to Kannagi’s response when she first hears of Kovalan’s execution. She had lived the life of a virtuous wife, as she was expected to in a patriarchal society. She was patient, and uncomplaining and loyal. She now expected to live a life of fulfilment with her husband. In this she is thwarted by the King himself. She laments, “Must I suffer?”, “Must I give up fame in this life, cry my heart out and be ruined, through the fault of the Pantiyen”.\textsuperscript{128} She appeals to the good herdswomen to look at her and then she appeals to the Sun who is witness to all that happens in the world. When she picks up the twin anklet she again appeals to the virtuous women of the city. Her personal tragedy is on public display. The citizens of the city are called to witness and they commiserate with her in her sorrow and pronounce the injustice meted out to her.\textsuperscript{129} When she finally curses the city she says that she is blameless and that if she is a virtuous woman she shall wreak vengeance on the city of Madurai. So she does by using her breast as a torch. She leaves the burning city after ordering the god of fire to protect five categories of life, the old, and the good, cows, Brahmans and children. She exits the territory of the Pandya king and reaches that of the Cera king Senguttuvan.

\textsuperscript{125} Ibid., p.141
\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., p.86
\textsuperscript{127} Ibid., p.141
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., p.180
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., pp.182-183
2.7 The Apotheosis

The third book of Ilango’s epic is entirely devoted to the *puram* element of Tamil poetry, the outside and war. When the Cera king is informed about Kannagi and the circumstances of her reaching his region, he asks his queen who is more worthy of worship, the Pandya queen Kopperundevi who died the moment her husband died or Kannagi who burnt a city with the power of her virtue? The queen declares that he should honour the woman who came to his land even though the Pandya queen’s action was commendable and she should enjoy the joys of heaven. This section then details Senguttuvan’s war on the kings of the north, the acquisition of a stone from the Himalayas for the statue of Kannagi, the consecration of the stone in the Ganges and finally the installation and worship of Kannagi as a goddess in Cera region. This part of the story would also be narrated differently in the twentieth century.

Kannagi of the epic was defined by two extremes. The two extremes are divided by the event of the unjust execution of her husband, Kovalan. Before the event, inaction defines her. She is delicate, fearful, shy and reticent. She takes the neglect of her and the faithlessness of her husband in her stride and follows him to another city when he asks her to. After the event, however, she comes to her own and takes the initiative to not only challenge the king but also to wreak vengeance on the city of Madurai by burning it down.

In the familial world that Ilango described, the roles of men and women are separate. A virtuous woman is an ideal and Kannagi is one. She is rewarded in the end, in this world and in the next. In this world she is worshipped as a goddess and she finds eternal life in the heavenly world with her husband. In the twentieth century, she would shed some of her qualities and attainments and acquire new ones as a symbol of Tamil culture and as an icon of Tamil womanhood.