

Kannaki Cult in Kerala: The Growth and Development from an Epic Heroine to Mother Goddess

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Abstract

The epic women like Sita, Draupadi, Kunti, Mandodari, Gandhari etc are esteemed as the best models for Hindu womanhood. The contemporizing of our cultural past to make them a part of the present is a process which requires both awareness and analysis. This paper tries to analyze one such epic woman who had been tagged under the title 'pativrata', taking one example from the ancient Tamil epic called '*Silapatikaram*'. The long time internalized idea of women's chastity unconsciously restricts the women from freedom of choice and they are even forced to suffer the maltreatment of their men. In *Silapatikaram* Kannaki was expected to be a waiting woman for her husband while he goes in search of sensual pleasures. She has to remain a dutiful wife irrespective of Kovalan's treatment to her to get recognition in the society. Her identity as a human being lies only as the pious wife of Kovalan. Her all other identities of a daughter, mother, woman has been erased or being neglected.

Keywords: Epic, Kannaki Cult, Womanhood, Mother Goddess, Kerala.

The epic being the oldest and widely accepted form in literature renders the story of the adventures and successes of men in war. These long narratives also deal with the incarnations of gods and goddesses and their interventions in human life. The country India is popular for its wide range of epic and mythological narratives which are numbered among the fine classics in the contemporary society. The Indian epics are full of discourses on morality, etiquette and on sacredness. They instruct and direct people in their social life through beautiful stories. All these epics and mythologies, in a way, found to be teachings to women on their duties and responsibilities and on the kind of behaviour expected of them. Most of the epics are replete with accounts of women who are revered for their virtue. Women became respectable in their culture by adhering to 'pativrata dharma'. A woman is considered to be a 'pativrata' or a chaste one when she surrenders herself to her family and husband, irrespective of their treatment to her. The heroines of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are surprisingly contemporary for modern women in this respect. Women of epics are considered to be strong personalities, cherishing their autonomy and having no qualms about arguing for and securing their rights. The epic women like Sita, Draupadi, Kunti, Mandodari, Gandhari etc are esteemed as the best models for Hindu womanhood. All women are expected to model themselves like them to attain the status of a chaste woman. The contemporizing of our cultural past to make them a part of the present is a process which requires both awareness and analysis. This paper tries to analyze one such epic woman who had been tagged under the title 'pativrata', taking one example from the ancient Tamil epic called '*Silapatikaram*'.

Tamil literature has a literary tradition that is more than two thousand years old. Chronologically, Tamil literature began to take shape and find articulation around 600 BC, which approximately marked the beginning of the Sangam Age. The age derived its name from the three successive Buddhist Sangam or poetic assemblies which produced almost entire bulk of literary work of the time available to us now.¹This collection contains 2381 poems written by 473 poets; among them 102 are anonymous authors. Sangam literature is primarily secular dealing with everyday themes in the South Indian context.²The post-Sangam period (2nd century-6th century) saw many great Tamil epics being written, including *Silapatikaram*, *Manimekalai*, *Civaka Chinthamani*, *Valayapati* and *Kundalakesi*. These were written during the sunset years of the Sangam era, the period of which is still a subject of debate among the Tamil scholars. Of the five epics, two, namely *Valayapati* and *Kundalakesi* are no more available. All these epics are about the life of ancient Tamils - kings, urban traders and commoners alike, who practiced a religion with integral Vedic components and fortified with the attributes of the then emerging Jainism and Buddhism. The most popular of these epics is *Silapatikaram* or 'The Epic of the Anklet' which has a woman protagonist called Kannaki. It is presumed to be written by a Jain prince called Ilango Adikal. It was written in Muthamiz that is a mixed style comprising of iyal (narrative), isai (musical) and natakam (dramatical). The narrative poem is divided into three books as Pukar Kandom, Madurai Kandom and Vanci Kandom, named after the capital cities of three Tamil kingdoms. Each book is further divided into cantos. The three books also represent the three different moods through which the story moves: the erotic,

¹Jesudasan, C and H. Jesudasan. *A History of Tamil Literature*. Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1970

²Nayagam, X.S.T. *Tamil Culture and Civilization*. Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1970

the mythic and the heroic. The Pukar Kandom explains the marriage between Kovalan and Kannaki, their happy life after marriage, Kovalan's desire for Madhavi and his life with her. In Madurai Kandom Kannaki and Kovalan went to Madurai for a new beginning where Kovalan is unjustly killed and the curse of Kannaki reduced the city of Madurai to flames; whereas in Vanci Kandom Kannaki is raised to a heroic status.

A.K.Ramanujan, in *A Tamil Epic: Cilapatikaram*, observes that the epic can be viewed as a story of Kannaki becoming “the eidos or the goddess of faithful wives”. Adikal was “concerned with the introduction of the new cult, the cult of worshipping of chaste woman”. They also state that “the cult has now been absorbed into Hinduism by identifying Kannaki with Bhagavathy” and it is Ilango who cultivated it as “an independent cult in Tamil Nadu”. The most important aspect of the epic is that the author strived to represent and link a number of different values and aspirations in the symbol of the goddess of chastity. Apart from the depiction of the biographies and of the orientations of the central characters, the epic is a documentation of the Hindu world view and ethos of the Tamils. The author of the epic stressed the solidarity of the Tamils by presenting the different episodes of the epic as having occurred in the three different

Tamil kingdoms. In the work *Tamil Culture and Civilization*, X.S.T. Nayagam says

The Epic of the Anklet by the prince ascetic, Ilango Adikal, is a magnificent synthesis of the Tamil culture of the period of its composition, the end of the second century AD. The poet has synthesized in this epic a description of the triple monarchy of the Tamils, their Historical greatness, their principal cities, the lives of the people of the five regions, and their characteristic, music, song and dance.

In the epic *Silapatikaram*, Kannaki is attributed with all the qualities of a perfect and good wife who never questions Kovalan's adulterous behavior. The epic portrays her as ³“Lakshmi of praiseworthy form, seated on the lotus, and her excellence is that of the faultless northern star (Arundhati)”. She is regarded as the symbol of chastity in Tamil culture. How such an ideal wife can openly express her energy after her husband's death? In Madurai Kandom Kannaki reacts violently:

⁴I curse this capital who did wrong to my beloved husband. I am not to blame... Then she twisted off her left breast with her hand, and going round the city of Madurai thrice making this vow, on deep anguish, she threw that beautiful breast whirling into the fragrant street. Before this illustrious lady who had made this vow, appeared the god of fire, with flames.

³Dikshitar, V.R, Ramachandra. *The Cilappatikaram*. Madras: South India ShaivaSikhanta Publications Society, 1978.

⁴ Adikal, Ilango. *Silapatikaram*. Tr. Sri KarthikaPeruman. Thrissur: KainurKandarenkavu, 2010.

This is the most startling and unique scene of the epic. Here is a woman who is praised for extreme devotion to her husband and for ideal forms of behavior; she deploys female energy to punish the carelessness of an unjust king. Kannaki's spiritual authority supersedes the purely temporal one of the king, notwithstanding the gender and class differences between the subject and the ruler. Until Kovalan's death, she stays in the background, suffering without complaint in her husband's neglect. With Kovalan's death, she finds her voice and rises to full stature in her encounter with the Pandya king. She exposes the hollowness of the king's justice and extracts the ultimate price from him. In the book of Pukar she is the young wife of Kovalan, in the book of Madurai, she metamorphoses into the custodian of justice; the book of Vanci recognizes the power of chastity and starts worshipping her as the goddess Pattini. Thus her life is both a physical and symbolic journey. Through her actions, Kannaki transgresses those traditional qualities of behavior attributed to women and transforms into a revengeful female. She is extolled as the epitome of chastity and is still worshipped as a goddess in different parts of the world.⁵ She is mainly worshipped as the goddess of Pattini in Sri Lanka by Sinhalese Buddhists, as Kannaki Amman by the Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus, as Mangala Madanthai in Tamil Nadu, and as Kodungallur and Attukal Bhagavathy in Kerala.

Though Kovalan is supposed to be the hero, the author in his unique style has elevated the two women characters, Kannaki and Madhavi to the highest status in the eyes of the society for ever. Kannaki's exaltation as the Goddess of chastity remains unquestionable, the repentance and renunciation of Madhavi, after realizing her mistakes made her equally noble and virtuous. The moral that comes out is that it is one's actions, and not birth, which is important. It is believed that the story of Kannaki must have been prevalent years before *Silapatikaram* was written and people must have been very familiar with this legend. The legend reiterates the worship of PattiniDeivam (Goddess of Chastity). The motif behind women tearing their breast (Kannaki tears one of her breasts and invokes fire which destroys the city of Madurai) have been found in two works which is dated earlier to *Silapatikaram*. There is great divide among scholars and historians regarding this. Some scholars believe that *Silapatikaram* was written around 170-250 AD. Other linguists argue that the *Silapatikaram* in current version could not have been written earlier than 5-6th century since the language is much different than that used in Sangam Literature (which dated between 100BC to 250 AD). *Silapatikaram* also quotes some didactic literature such as *Thirukural* and *Palamolinanuru* (which are dated around 4 -6 AD). Some scholars claim that *Silapatikaram* may have been written by many authors and the initial version could have happened as early as Sangam age. The reason for such claim is that out of three books of *Silapatikaram*, the story of Kannaki and Kovalan ends in the first two books itself and third book gives more insights into Chera Senkutuvar's conquest of north rather than the story of Kannaki and Kovalan. But the language (diction and style) used in all three books are similar and accepted by most linguists as the work of a single author. Besides, the first two books give insights into relationship between Kovalan, Kannaki and Madhavi. Also each book is based on one of the capitals of the three great kings of Tamil Nadu. Hence the books must have been written by the same author. *Patirrupattu* which chronicles the lives

⁵Battacharya, Narendranath. *The Indian Mother Goddess*. Bombay: Manohar Publishers and Distributors, 1999.

of 10 generations of Chera Kings have no mention of Ilango Adikal the supposed Chera prince who gave up his throne to become a saint. He is neither mentioned as son of Imayavaramban or brother of Senkutuvan. Hence it is safe to accept the theory that *Silapatikaram* was written around 5th- 6th century AD, while the original events happened much earlier.

Now the question here is how this ancient Tamil epic heroine Kannaki acquired the goddess status and worshiped as the incarnation of Goddess Parvathy in the present century Kerala? This transformation of Kannaki is fascinating to look into. This paper would probe into this aspect of Kannaki and the goddess worship in Kerala. Goddess worship has been an integral part of the religious lives of the Hindu women. They adulate, believe and even identify themselves in their goddess. Kerala is famous for goddess worship tradition. From the Vedic periods onwards woman is considered to be someone who should be respected and adored. It might be from this started the adoration of nature, earth, trees, rivers etc. as female. During the Sangam period when the epic *Silapatikaram* was believed to be written Kodungallur, then Vanci, was a major Buddhist centre. The Chera King and his people followed Buddhism advocates female worship. This also contributes to the rise of Kannaki to the goddess status.

The ancient vedic order divided the society on occupational basis in to four classes namely Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras. The first two classes are the elite classes who hold priesthood and power respectively. The last two classes engage themselves in trade and other menial jobs. Kannaki springs from a Vaisya community which is beneath the Kshatriya community according to this caste hierarchy. Kannaki's father Manikkan was one of those merchants who had amassed a big fortune. In Kerala Kannaki is believed to be an incarnation of Parvathy and raised to the upper class. Thus Kannaki attains dual upliftment as in firstly, from the status of a vaisya to the Brahmin and secondly from the status of a woman to a goddess. What contributes to her this new status? It's none other than the quality of being a Pativrata or a chaste wife to her husband Kovalan. Kannaki remains faithful and obedient to her husband even after he leaves her for a dancer. She receives him when he comes back from the dancer losing all the wealth in her. She serves him as a dutiful wife without blaming him for his behaviour. And finally she takes revenge on the Pandya king for murdering her innocent husband. All these gained her the name of pativrata and the Goddess status.

After the tragedy of Madurai, the courage she exhibited was most wonderful. She did not seem to be like a common house wife who would get on her husband's funeral pyre and get burnt to death, nor did she want to wander about —like a pious widow. This she declared frankly exhibiting her hostility to common-place customs. She tore off her breast and after burning down the city, walked all the way to Chera kingdom, thus showing her immense strength which took shape from her chastity. Through her actions she stands on top of all these epic women. She refuses to accept the stereotypical lives of Indian women after her husband's death. When Kannaki is told of Kovalan's death, she is devastated, and she decides that she is confronted with the need to make a quick choice: either to step into the role of a grieving widow and accept passively what happened, or to rebel against this obvious injustice. While here her independence is still a function of her devotion to her husband, nevertheless she emerges as a remarkably strong individual; she rejects the role of

the docile widow and refuses to surrender and condone the violence done to her husband. Thus she proves to be an ideal wife who suffers for and with her husband, whatever he does; she never thinks of herself as separable from him.

It is not just her rebellion and cries for justice that gain approval, but also her submission to social and religious expectations. The very idea of 'being Kannaki' is to be surrendered before the larger and eternal realities of the way things are. Kannaki turns her anklet into a terrible instrument of vengeance: it becomes a noose around the king's neck, and Kannaki becomes his executioner. Kannaki represents the ancient belief in a divine mechanism of retributive justice for those whom human laws fail to protect. *Silapatikaram* constitutes a literary reworking and crystallization of a prevalent south Indian myth of the goddess, especially in her local embodiment in Madurai.

The mother metaphor is invoked sometimes as a yardstick of measure, sometimes as goal, sometimes as a touchstone and sometimes as a tool of punishment. The worshipping of Kannaki continues till date as a chaste woman. Women believe her to be the destroyer of all evils that may happen in their lives and imbibe the idea of chastity. Thus the worshipping of mother goddess itself reiterates the idea of a chaste woman.

Thus the worship of mother goddess has been used as an instrument by the patriarchy to affirm their superiority over women. What I would argue is that in the outer level the mother goddess worship gives the idea of worshipping women and her inner nature. But on a deeper level it has been a tool for the patriarchal forces to affirm their autonomy over women. The long time internalized idea of women's chastity unconsciously restricts the women from freedom of choice and they are even forced to suffer the maltreatment of their men. In *Silapatikaram* Kannaki was expected to be a waiting woman for her husband while he goes in search of sensual pleasures. She has to remain a dutiful wife irrespective of Kovalan's treatment to her to get recognition in the society. Her identity as a human being lies only as the pious wife of Kovalan. Her all other identities of a daughter, mother, woman has been erased or being neglected. Would she have been a goddess if she resisted Kovalan's going out with Madhavi? Would she have been a Goddess if she refuses to accept Kovalan when he returns to her after losing all the wealth in a dancer? Never. So it is a wise manipulation of patriarchy to control their women folk and to live a life of their own. The other epic women Sita, Draupadi, Kunti, Mandodari, Gandhari etc. who were praised for their chastity are also the women who were chained by the patriarchal forces in the name of chastity. Sita is a woman of endurance who followed her husband like a shadow in all his bad times finally to be thrown out of the country accused of having illicit relation with Ravana. Draupadi is a woman who has to live with five husbands and however powerful all of them are she has been ill treated by the Kauravas and led a life of beggar. Kunti is the woman of Pandavas in the epic *Mahabharata* suffered all the maltreatments from her husband's family. Gandhari, another woman from *Mahabharata* has to shut her eyes forever one she married a king who is blind. Mandodari from the epic *Ramayana* is the wife of Ravana who obeyed her husband irrespective of his bad character. All these women had suffered greatly during their lives from the family and from the society and been praised as chaste women for their suffering. Kannaki's story is also not a different one. Thus it shows that the praising of woman as chaste and worshipping her as goddess are a part of patriarchal ideology to restrict the women.

But one strand of the third world feminists argue for a return to spirituality and mother goddess worship as a source of feminist power. Though the later strands of feminists denied this idea of revivalism this thought existed for a time.⁶The proponents of this feminism argue that the Amman goddesses from Hinduism can become role models for women. They treat spirituality as a way of self-empowerment. They argue that the spiritualized feminism has a larger role as it works with ethnic communities and entire localities. It links the women's experience with both the community and natural surroundings. Here woman remains the cornerstone of community formation and spirituality becomes an instrument of this kind of native feminism.

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