LIFE WRITING: MONOGRAPH SERIES

SERIES EDITOR: **G.S. JAYASREE**

THE KANNAGI CULT: TRACING HISTORY AND GENDER

Seetha Vijayakumar

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Institute of English
University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram

The Kannagi Cult:
Tracing History and Gender

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Life Writing is not always the tracing of the life of a person who is living/ has lived. Such an understanding of the genre actually opens it up for a reading of a vast range of topics which would otherwise have been ignored in its traditional framework. Life Writing is now regarded as a discourse of Culture Studies. We need to understand that 'life' in 'life writing' does not mean life of a person in history but rather the description of a narrative 'historically'. Kannagi's presence in Tamil culture is an example of how a character in tales/narratives/or the 'cultural text' becomes a point of origin for a set of historical, political as well as gendered discourses, thereby extending the possibilities of the genre called Life Writing. Kannagi's life narrative in writing opens up an array of discourses ranging from history to ritual studies. The aim of this monograph is to explore Kannagi's transformations and its further ramifications in the contemporary period in order to narrate the life of Kannagi.

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Through the prism of life...

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Life writing is not always the tracing of life of a person who is living/ has lived. If we insist on such a criterion we are in fact limiting the scope of the field by compartmentalizing it into two things: firstly, the insistence on the scientificity/ factuality of incidents in the life of a person; secondly, the dependence of a 'single' narrative mode for authenticity. In such a case we reach a situation where life writing becomes the narrative of a person in history, portrayed completely or incompletely. In order to factor in the spectrum of life writing by paralleling it with the discourse of Culture Studies, we need to understand that 'life' in Life Writing does not mean life of a person in history but rather the description of a narrative of a life 'historically'. Kannagi's presence in Tamil culture is an example of how a character in tales, narratives or the 'cultural text' becomes a point of origin for a set of historical, political as well as gender discourses, thereby enlarging the possibility of the genre called Life Writing. Kannagi's life narrative in writing or Kannagi in Life Writing opens up an array of discourses ranging from history to ritual studies. Her status and survival heavily depends on a set of cultural, religious and performance factors. What is significant about reading the cultural text of Kannagi is its absolute hybridity; that only diverse answers complete her life as a mythical persona. The spanning of the presence of Kannagi over the ages and across cultures proves one point. Kannagi

is not treated just as a mythical figure but is treated as a prominent symbol of Tamil identity and carrier of cultural values. To cite an example from our times, M. Karunanidhi installed Kannagi's statue at the Marina beach on the occasion of the second Tamil Conference in Madras. In 2001, Jayalalita as chief minister removed the statue for reasons of vastu. In 2006 Karunanidhi reinstalled the statue at its place in a gathering with much publicity. He said: "The pride and self-respect of Tamils has been redeemed." Kannagi's life narrative gets completed only through the understanding of the different strands that are woven together.

This Monograph explores Kannagi's transformations and its further ramifications in the contemporary period. The life narrative of Kannagi exists in many different versions and in many different modes and media, which is what Seymour Chatman has termed as the "transposability of the story"[1] *and most of these versions seem to involve some sort of translation or transcreation to the new setting. What is unique about these narratives collected here on Kannagi is the fact that they are in some respect similar and in some respect dissimilar. Every narrative version of the Kannagi story has been constructed keeping in accord with certain purposes and interests. The legend of Kannagi, apart from being the source of Śilappadikāram has crossed both geographical and cultural boundaries, and is found in different levels of contemporary cultural practices. A powerful thread of this mythical story is deeply rooted in the folk, ritual and literary expressions in Kerala, Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu and is sometimes seen carrying fierce political meanings in each of these geographical locations. Therefore, Kannagi's life narrative should be understood as a "sort of palimpsest"-allusion beneath allusion, legend under legend, each revealing a possible level of meaning or effect.*[2] *This is exactly what makes the narrative of Kannagi unique. This Monograph is divided into three sections in tracing the trajectory of Kannagi. First, the origin of source(s) of the Kannagi story, second, an analysis of the 'Madurai' incident which marks Kannagi's transformation from passivity to agency and third, development of the Kannagi cult and its relevance.*

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1 *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, Ithaca: N.Y., 1978

2 Lawrence Durrell, *The Big Supposer: A Dialogue with Marc Alyn*, trans. Francine Barker (New York: Grove, 174), p. 66.

The Narrative as a Cultural Palimpsest

Our lover does not offer me conjugal pleasure
After having chased away my mood of sulking
Yet, how sweet it is,
To live in a place, where we can see each other,
Though he does not rush to rid us of our suffering,
Like unto the hand that hastens
To relieve the eye of its distress.
How painful it is,
To live in the place,
Where he is not to be seen!
Near the paddy field, full of herons
And on the loft, built atop a Véṅkai tree
Thick with fiery blooms, the abode of a deity,
A lad, devoid of virtue,
Consumed the feminine charm
Of one Tirumavunni and then turned untrue;
Unable to bear the intense grief,
The poor girl plucked one of her breasts
And proved her chastity,
Before the assembly of elders.
Whatever be the disposition
Of all those who heard her case,
She could not live with a person
Whom she did not love![3]

The above poem 216 from *Narrinai*, one of the books in *Ettutokai* (Eight Anthologies) is considered the source of the composition of the Kannagi story in the *Śilappadikāram*. The speaker here talks about how her lover deserted her. Her love for the man is sincere and she feels wretched in his absence. She compares herself to *Tirumavunni* who proved her chastity and

3 *The Narrinai Four Hundred*, translated by A.Dakshinamurthy, International Institute of Tamil studies, Chennai, 2001 , p- 434, A different translation of the same poem can be found in *Narrinai* –Text and Translated by N.Kandasamy, Institut Francais de Pondichery,2008, p-154; Kamil Zvelebil in *The Smile of Murugan* mentions that the legend of a woman who tore off her breast occurs in *Narrinai* 312, p-52

lived happily with her lover, even though he initially tried to cheat her at the intervention of elders. Most importantly, it contains the reference to how "The poor girl plucked one of her breasts and proved her chastity" which clearly connects this poem with the *Maduraikandam* episode of *Śilappadikāram* where Kannagi burned the city of Madurai with her plucked breast.

The legend of Kannagi evidently existed in indigenous Tamil tradition long before the great poem was born. An older poem, *Purananuru* 278 mentions the motive; it also occurs in the *Vaisyapurana*; in the commentary to *Yapparunkalavirutti* we find a line which is part of the heroine's lament, but is not found in the widespread versions of the great epic. According to Amitacakarar's *Yapparunkalam* 1.351, there is a poem which is considered to have been composed by Pattini or Kannaki[4]. The 'Story of the Chaste Lady' is available in ballad form as *Kovalankatai* and is popularly ascribed to Pukalenti Pulavar.[5]

Brenda E.F.Beck in 'The Study of the Tamil Epic: Several Versions of *Śilappadikāram* Compared' says:

> The earliest version of the story we have, can be dated to the period between 400 and 600 A.D., probably only a few centuries after some of the events recounted actually occurred. At least ten more palm leaf versions and fourteen commentaries are available. Some 50 contemporary retellings have also appeared in print. Furthermore, there are local bards who can sing versions of the story from memory, and most south Indian drama troupes include this story in their repertoire.[6]

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, it was U.V. Swaminathaiyar who rekindled interest in the *Śilappadikāram*and its twin *Manimekalai* with his publication in 1892. The publication of *Śilappadikāram* not only popularized the story but paved the way for reaching out to more people and cultures. This does

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4 T.P.Meenakshisundaram, *A History of Tamil Language*. Poona :Post-graduate and Research Institute, 1965 p.43

5 Many folk tales are ascribed to him

6 Brenda E.f.Beck,'The study of a Tamil Epic: Several Versions of Silappadikaram Compared' , *Journal of TamilStudies*, p-1

not mean we ignore the existence of the tale in folk stories and in other media. Rather than giving a 'synopsis' of the story, an exercise which I am sure will only end up in another version, it would be better to point out how certain characters and events appear to build 'the story of Kannagi':

- A heroine-Kannagi-Wife
- A hero-Kovalan-Husband
- A dancer -Madhavi- Husband's lover
- Husband abandons wife for the lover
- Husband returns to wife after a quarrel with his lover
- An anklet - husband and wife travel to Madurai to start a new life
- Husband gets killed in Pandya court by the evil plans of a goldsmith
- Wife in rage burns the city of Madurai and leads to Pandya king's death
- Final apotheosis

These basic units are found in most of the classical as well as folk versions of the Kannagi story irrespective of cultural or geographical differences. In India, the understanding of ancient texts with an aim to appreciating its diversity was launched largely by the efforts of scholars like A.K.Ramanujan[7], Romila Thapar[8] and Paula Richman[9]. These scholars emphasized the need to explore the social and cultural diversity of each text. Barbara Herrnstein Smith rightly points out:

> There is no single basically basic story, rather, an unlimited number of other narratives. " Among narratives that can

7 Ramanujan, A. K. "Three Hundred *Ramayanas:* Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation." (originally published 1987) In *Many Rāmāyanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia,* edited by Paula Richman, pp. 22-49. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.

8 Romila Thapar, *Sakuntala* : Texts, Readings, Histories (Anthem South Asian Studies) New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2000

9 Her edited works such as *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, OUP, 1992, *Questioning Ramayanas* : *A South Asian Tradition* , University of California Press, 2000 and *Ramayana stories in Modern South India: An Anthology*. Indiana University Press, USA, 2008.

> be constructed in response to a given narrative are not only those that we commonly refer to as 'versions' of it (for example translations, adaptations, abridgments, and paraphrases) but also those retellings that we call "plot summaries," "interpretations," and sometimes, "basic stories". None of these retellings, however, is more absolutely basic than any of the others.[10]

The Kannagi story exists in many different versions and without a doubt in many different modes and media, which is what Seymour Chatman has termed the "transposability of the story"[11]. Most of these versions seem to involve some sort of translation or transcreation to the new setting. Kannagi's life narrative is significant not just as the portrayal of an all suffering, passive housewife but is also relevant in the ways in which she tries to break free of that image 'to find herself'. Kannagi's transformation occurs mainly in three different stages: 1) she is a 'chaste' and uncomplaining wife who is deserted by her husband 2) she turns into a mythical destructive force; and 3)finally, she becomes a tutelary deity whose cult is institutionalized. So to understand the total evolution of the persona of Kannagi, it is necessary to analyze the different strands, religious, social and political, in the Tamil cultural experience that reflects her physical as well as symbolic journey.

The convention of considering Sanskrit as the only literature of merit and all regional literature as secondary or derivatives from the master culture/language caused enough damage to the recognition of texts like *Śilappadikāram* in an international aesthetic platform. Jawaharlal Handoo posits that this could be due to the highly influential classical literary paradigm of Indian society, and to the ideologies it projected.[12]

Śilappadikāram is such a work of immense historical, social and cultural significance, ignored for centuries before

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10 'Narrative Versions, Narrative Theories' in *Narrative Theory* Mieke Bal(ed), Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1997

11 *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, Ithaca: N.Y., 1978

12 Jawaharlal Handoo in his review of *The Cilappatikāram of I a kō A ika : An Epic of South India. Translations from the Asian Classics* by R. Parthasarathy Source: Asian Folklore Studies, Vol. 56, No. 2 (1997), pp. 430-433

appearing in print in 1892 published by an unknown Tamil Pandit U.V.Swaminataiyar. Definitely, *Śilappadikāram* is one of the greatest epics that India has produced apart from those in Sanskrit. During the publication of *Śilappadikāram* in 1892 U.V.Swaminataiyar stated that the period of the epic may be taken as second century A.D. since the Sri Lankan ruler Gajabahu's name is seen in the text. In his study, P.T.Srinivasa Iyengar raised a doubt that the word Gajabahu could be an insertion by later copyists as there is no mention of the fact that Gajabahu was present in Vanci; the second Gajabahu built a *Vihara*[13]for his mother in the nearby forest and that was called 'Mahamangala Vihara', says Donald Obeyesekere[14]. Generally most scholars hold the classic to be composed in the very remote past of the second century A.D. and they say *Śilappadikāram* is the first among the five Tamil epics, but *Vidu Thootu*, a later work places *Ceevaka Cintamani* as the first. M.Varadarajan, a Tamil exponent, assigns *Śilappadikāram* to the third century[15] A.D. P.T. Sreenivasa Iyengar in his book *History of the Tamils* had said that *Śilappadikāram* might have been composed just before sixth century A.D.[16]Nilakanta Sastri in *A History of South India* opined that the epic might have been written between 550 and 650[17]A.D. L.D. Swamikannu Pillai in *Indian Ephemeris* Vol.I says that Kannaki legend may be as old as Gajabahu of Ceylon, but not older than the sixth or seventh century A.D[18]. S. Vaiyapuri Pillai asserts that *Śilappadikāram* belongs to the middle of the ninth century[19]. Kartigesu Sivathamby in *Drama in Ancient Tamil Country* tries to examine this claim in detail by putting those under three heads:

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13 Sanskrit and Pali term for a Buddhist monastery. It originally meant 'a secluded place in which to walk', and referred to 'dwellings' used by wandering monks.

14 Donald Obeyesekere, *Outlines of CeylonHistory*. BiblioBazaar, USA. 2009,p-145

15 M.Varadarajan, *Ilango Adigal*, Sahitya Academi, New Delhi. 1967, pp.12-14

16 P.T.Sreenivasa Iyengar, *History of the Tamils*: From Earliest times to the 600 A.D. Asian Educational Services, New Delhi. 1929, P.375

17 Nilakanta Sastri , *A History of South India from Prehistoric Times to the Fall of Vijayanagar*.OUP, New Delhi. P.278

18 Vol.1,part.1,appendix-iii

19 'Ilakkiya Manimekhalai',p.138 quoted in *Kannaki worship in South India and Srilanka*, Chellan Govindan,

(1) Those which deal with the fictitious character of the epic and with the relationship claimed for the author of the work with the Chera king Senguttuvan.

(2) Those which indicate the late date of the linguistic usages found in *Śilappadikāram* and of the literary texts used by the author.

(3) Those which show the date of the events and institutions described in the work.

According to Sivathamby, *Śilappadikāram* is a post-Śańgam work, mainly because the picture of religionswe get from *Śilappadikāram* is totally different from Śańgam works. Thus, the period between third and sixth century A.D. should be assigned to *Śilappadikāram*.[20]

However, Gananath Obeyesekere assigns it to 10th to 13th centuries[21]. Political and historical dimensions of *Śilappadikāram* originate basically from the epic idea of portraying 'three kings'*(muventar)* who ruled the ancient Tamil country and belonged, respectively, to the Chola, Chera, and Pandya lineages. A.L. Basham in *The Wonder that was India*(1954) comments that *Śilappadikāram* has been ''a grim force and splendour unparalleled elsewhere in Indian literature—it is imbued with both the ferocity of the early Tamils and their stern respect for justice, and incidentally, it throws light on early Tamil political ideas."[22] The *patikam*[23]*of Śilappadikāram* gives us some hints that the story was narrated to the poet by hill kuravas who watched Kannagi's apotheosis and his role was only to write it down in a textual form. Nilakanta Sastri writes: "That the *Śilappadikāram* is best looked upon as the handling of an old popular sage which,

20 Kartigesu Sivathamby, *Drama in Ancient Tamil Country*. New Century Book House, Madras.1981, P.81

21 Gananath Obeyesekare,'Gajabahu and the Gajabahu Synchronism' *Ceylon Journal of Humanities*, Vol.1,No.1(Jan.1970)

22 A.L Basham, *The Wonder that was India:a survey of the history and culture of the Indian sub-continent before the coming of the Muslims*, Rupa, New Delhi. p.67

23 Ramachandra Dikshitar, *The Cilappatikaram*,South India Saiva Siddhanta Works Publication Society ,Madras.1978,P.85

like the *Ramāyana* of Valmiki, threw into oblivion earlier version of the story of Kovalan and Kannaki, the model of chastity."[24]

Śilappadikāram, written probably in the Post-Śańgam[25] period of Tamil literature by Ilango Atikal (Ascetic Prince), a Jain monk, is regarded as the first epic in Tamil. Ilango Atikal is thought to be the younger brother of the Chera King Senguttuvan. The epic is divided into three books (*Kantams*) and each book is in turn divided into Cantos (*katais*) with a total of 5,730 lines.[26] The first book deals with the life of the hero Kovalan and the heroine Kannagi in the city of Pukār, the capital of the Chola kingdom. Hence, it is called *Pukārkandam,* or The Book of Pukār. The second book *Maduraikandam,* or The Book of Madurai, deals with the tragic events in their life in the city of Madurai, the capital of the Pandya kingdom. The third book *Vańcikandam,* or The Book of Vańci, depicts the consecration of the shrine of Kannagi by the Chera king Senguttuvan in Vańci, the capital of the Chera kingdom. Thus, the epic depicts all the three great capitals of the Tamil land. The story moves from one part of the Tamil land to another, and ends in the Chera land, the place probably of the author of the epic.[27] The story encapsulates within its narrative the history of three kingdoms: Chera, Chola, and Pandya. More than this political angle, the story is narrated in the travel of the heroine Kannagi from Pukār to Vańci through Madurai. Hailing from the Chola capital of Pukār, Kannagi with her husband Kovalan travels to Madurai of the Pandyans and finally gets consecrated in the Chera kingdom. It is a journey connecting three great kingdoms Chera, Chola, and Pandya of South India shedding light on their geographical peculiarities, administration, trade, cultural traditions and so on.

Śilappadikāram offers a glimpse into many stages in history; the story of Kannagi happening in three kingdoms itself points to

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24 Nilakanta Sastri ,S*angam Literature: its Cults and Cultures*. Swathi Publishers.1972,p.62

25 There is no unanimity of opinion regarding either the date or the period of composition. Broadly 2-6C.A.D is considered as the possible time period.

26 R. Parthasarathy, *The Tale of an Anklet*. Columbia University Press,USA.1993,

27 Tamil tradition ascribes the composition of *Śilappadikāram* to Illango Adikal, the younger brother of the Cēra king Senguttuvan. However, there is no mention of his name in *Patirruppattu* (Ten Tens) an anthology of panegyrics on Cēra kings.

the way multiplicity is ensured. Apart from minor references here and there, the story takes us through a journey all the way from the Chola capital, Pukār, at the mouth of Kaveri through Uraiyur to Madurai and to the Chera capital Vańci. The story leads the party from Trichinopoly onwards to Madurai, and in Madurai occurs the mishap to the party in the death of Kovalan by order of the Pandya king. It is described that Kannagi left Madurai by the west gate and travelled half unconsciously along the banks of Vaigai. She proceeded up the hill which the poem names Neduvelkunram, and awaited the arrival of the divine messenger bringing Kovalan to take her away with him. *Śilappadikāram* provides details of real importance with regard to the Chera kingdom, and its capital, and is considered of greatest value in settling the question of the actual importance of Vańci.

Kannagi is regarded the epitome of chastity and ideal wifehood in Tamil culture. Nevertheless there is no single version of her story with regard to Kovalan and his lover Madhavi. Multiple versions of the story coexist in myth, literature, ritual and folktale. Some of these examples prove the fact that the story of Kannagi must have been circulating years before the publication of *Śilappadikāram* which only helped initiate a wider acceptance and spread of the text among the masses. *Thottam Pattukal* or the ritual songs from Kerala deify Kannagi as Kali and worship her with utmost devotion, while the Tamil ballad *Kovalan Katai* has all the essential qualities of a parallel representation of the Kannagi story with other versions. In fact, this version of the story seems to be the most detailed of all the available sources. *Kovalan Katai* shares a more egalitarian narrative motive and the minutest detailing of social and geographical conditions around the story. The two versions from Sri Lanka in Mullaitivu Tamil and Sinhala, depict the true diversity of the story and its flexibility to adapt to religious ethos. Kannagi as female Buddha-Pattini of the Sinhala community and the ferocious Kali of Hindu Tamil community are two different aspects of the Kannagi myth across cultures. The selected literary, theater and film readings of the mythical story from Malayalam, Tamil and Kannada show how differences of opinion can help in revitalizing the legend by adapting it to the practice of a contemporary world. At the same

time, there are strong arguments of opposition directed against certain 'moral traps' within the popular version of the story which all these writers attempt to contest through their respective works. Ultimately, we get to know that no story is *new* to any culture but is inherent and therefore needs to be rediscovered.

Jacob Pandian in 'The Goddess Kannaki: A Dominant Symbol of South Indian Tamil Society' writes:

> Despite structural changes that occurred in the following centuries the significance of the goddess remained the same; the religious theme of chastity symbolized by the goddess Kannagi has continued to be an important conceptual category for the Tamil people. Modern Tamil society is not politically autonomous and is structurally different from what it was about two thousand years ago, yet the symbol of the goddess plays a significant role in the maintenance of Tamil cultural identity.[28]

Śilappadikarām means the tale of the anklet. *Śilambu* means anklet and the epic is called *Śilappadikarām* because the story centers on the anklet worn by the heroine Kannagi. It is Kannagi's anklet, a symbol of her stern chastity that later transforms into an instrument of revenge and helps her to reclaim her subjectivity. *Śilappadikarām* is Kannagi's story, the story of her conjugal life; the story of its ups and downs and how far she travels to regain justice and clarity at the death of her husband.

The characterization of Kannagi is rooted in three phases: first is the life of a passive/ submissive house-wife which is according to the mould of conventional Tamil culture; second, growing into a social force and third, a mythical deity called Pattini/Bhagavati.

The roles women play in society and the images we have of them have developed not just from biological consciousness or societal understanding but are rather deeply rooted in the myths, legends and religions of the region. This is essentially true of Indian culture where marriage and motherhood are considered

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28 Jacob Pandian 'The Goddess Kannaki: A Dominant Symbol of South Indian Tamil Society' in *Mother Worship Theme and Variations.* James J.Preston,USA: University of North Carolina Press,P-177

mandatory for the identity formation and fulfillment of women. Simultaneously, with this restriction, we find a duality in the dominant Hindu culture or ideology. Identified with nature, on the one hand, woman is a giver of birth and protector of her children. On the other hand, she is considered evil and destructive. A popular statement characterizes the goddess in all her manifestations thus: At times of prosperity she indeed is Bhagavathy, who bestows unbounded wealth in the homes of men; and at times of misfortune, she herself becomes Bhadrakaali, the ferocious goddess of misfortune and brings about ruin.[29] These two facets of femaleness relate to this duality and perhaps provide a cultural logic for it. The Indian concept of *śakti* is a perfect illustration of how women are put into this duality by patriarchy.

Shaktism focuses upon the principle of *śakti*, the feminine energy that empowers a deity. The term is personalized into the proper noun, *śakti*, when the referent is a woman or a goddess. *Śakti* is a fluid and multivalent concept which is found in many different contexts and can be used for many different purposes. The female is first of all believed to be *Śakti* (energy/power) the energizing principle of the universe. There are those who would claim that feminism is a western ideology and that any feminist or women –oriented political movements in India must therefore be a result of 'westernization' and are thus not 'authentically' Indian. To find an answer to that argument Liddle and Joshi in their study *Daughters of Independence: Gender, Caste and Class in India* say: "The women's movement has a long history in India….The *Śakti* cults go back centuries, and the concept of *śakti* –the female power principle – was recognized thousands of years ago."[30] The concept of *śakti* is also widespread among Hindus, even among those who are not specifically Shakta in their sectarian orientation but are connected with life giving female properties. Frederique Marglin[31] has argued that in Hindu culture female is the power of

29 Jagdisvarananda, 1953, quoted in Babb, *Women in Indian society: a Reader*, Rehana Ghadially .New Delhi: Sage .1970

30 Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi in their study *Daughters of Independence: Gender, Caste and Class in India* . New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1986,p-92

31 Frédérique Apffel-Marglin. *Wives of the God-King: the rituals of the devadasis of Puri*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. 1985.p-40

life and death, a power which encompasses both auspicious and inauspicious aspects but is exclusively neither one nor the other. She further states that the auspiciousness / inauspiciousness principle, that is *śakti*, is profoundly non-hierarchical, presenting a different 'axis of value' than the hierarchical purity / impurity principle.

Śakti is also regarded as a generative power in the cosmos and, for worshippers of *śakti*, it is the force that allows men and women to accomplish their goals. These goals can range from successful procreation to finding and keeping employment, from curing illness to surviving an unpleasant marriage or a difficult journey. *Śakti* is often represented in worship among Tamils as the great goddess or her many lesser goddess manifestations. In Saivism, the predominant variant of high-culture Hindu worship among Tamils, the great Goddess is the principle energy of Siva, who is the ultimate God and who maintains universal order, sustaining all forms of existence. *Śakti* is also the consort of Siva and, as the popular saying asserts, *Siva without Śakti is a corpse*. This appears to be a paradox: the consort of Siva must be submissive to him, but without his consort, Siva is without power. As *Śakti*, the power or energy of the universe, the goddess provides a motivating force for the passive inactive male: without the *śakti* of his goddess, no male god can act. This female generative force is fundamental to all action, to all being in the Hindu universe. The goddess, as *Śakti*, as Devi, as the Amman of South India or as one of her more concrete manifestations, such as Durgā, Kāli, Pārvatī or Lakshmī, provides a backdrop that is fundamental to understanding Hindu women, their status, roles and powers. Among the Tamils, women are *Śakti* for their male kin and, in their appropriate behavior towards their mates, they find the capacity to generate the force that creates and maintains families. If such submission results in suffering, this suffering gives women spiritual power and when necessary, strengthens them with the capacity to take rebellious action. Margaret Egnor in "On the Meaning of *Śakti* to Women in Tamilnadu" elaborates:

> *Śakti* does not refer to all kinds of power. In Tamil Nadu, it seems to be confined primarily to two areas: one, that of spiritual power; the other, that of generative power…the

> generative quality of *śakti* appears in what is perhaps the most common example people use to explain it, that of the earth. It is said that the earth is one *śakti*, but it blossoms forth in many forms, and so the goddess has many forms, but in essence she is one.[32]

Women are credited with the *Śakti* to control and alter the course of events in order to save their husbands from death and to provide their families with wealth, health and prosperity. Some say that the power of the married woman is so great, in fact, that no being, animate or inanimate, human or divine, can match it. Related to *śakti* is another concept – Sumangali, the auspicious state of being married. The married woman is the only woman accorded unconditional auspiciousness and her power alone is conceived to be basically benevolent in effect.

Holly Baker Reynolds in "The Auspicious Married Woman" says:

> The ideal woman in Tamil Nadu is the Cumaňkali, literally "she who is auspicious." This auspiciousness is predicted on two factors: possession of a husband and of children. The former is more auspicious than the latter. A Cumaňkali is, in short, a married woman and mother. However, "Cumaňkali" refers not only to the biological or social status, but also and more importantly, to a particular mode of female being characterized by beneficient and benevolent uses of power. What is so striking about the state of Cumaňkali is that it depends not on woman's own status as female, but on woman in relation to others, particularly husband and children. Since it is derivative, it is a precarious state, and its dependence on others indicates that by nature a woman is something less than beneficent.[33]

In Indian systems of thought, the powers of a chaste woman have no equal. Most critically these are powers that are bound: they are powers that are built upon a culturally perceived morality, they are powers of order. The benevolent woman and benevolent

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32 Quoted in *The powers of Tamil Women.* Susan Snow Wardley. USA: Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University, 1991,P-22

33 Ibid, p-38

goddess are those who maintain order and who are themselves regulated. The *Nallatankāl* story has the following lines:

> *if I were a chaste woman,*
> *Then it should catch fire and burn*
> *if I be a noble woman,*
> *it should burn*
> *it should boil the gruel and appease the*
> *children's hunger."*
> *While the chaste woman spoke, the wood,*
> *Catching fire, burned….*[34]

So it can be assumed that chastity is closely allied with nobility. One becomes a noble (*perumai*) woman by holding fast to the inner quality of womanhood, by having love and devotion for one's husband and by following one's dharma. Note further that *perumai* in motherhood is natural: mothers are by definition noble; but wives can attain nobility only through their own actions of chasteness and submission. Moreover, marriage is an austerity. The greater the austerity—the self control of women, including their submission to men – the greater their resulting power. The primary powers of the chaste woman derive from her self-control and her submission and *tapas*, that is, from her nobility. Hence through marriage, through being bound and binding oneself, women's powers increase and develop, until they are much greater than those of the virgin. The ideal women are those who do not attempt to break the bonds of control drawn by patriarchy. Moreover the salvation and happiness of women revolve around their virtue and chastity as daughters, wives and widows.

A woman who is seen to disregard authority is considered capable of seeking or usurping divine (male) power, and is considered being carnal in her nature. In consequence, woman, her sexuality, and her reproductive function must be controlled by man. This is to be achieved through the institution of marriage and through the cult of motherhood, which confine woman to

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34 Holly Baker Reynolds.*To keep the Tăli strong": Women's rituals in Tamilnad, India, Volume 1*. University of Wisconsin--Madison, 1978, P-157

the home, under the authority and protection of her husband, the male, defined by God as the worker and the breadwinner. Both sexes become acculturised to accept the patriarchal fictions of female inferiority and degradation as real and natural. Enshrined in sacred literature, the validity of these tenets, and thereby the validity of the *status quo* they support, almost resist questioning. Moreover, the two extreme images may exist in tension with each other, so that woman is represented not simply as angel or witch, but as a composite figure, in which superficial perfection disguises the 'real' nature beneath. This, as we have seen, tends to be a version of one of the two stereotypes, the angel or the witch, neither of which reflects reality, and neither of which promotes female interests. However, the former may prove deceptive since it is not overtly antifeminist and even appears to exalt the importance of woman. These themes are not relegated merely to laws in ancient Sanskrit texts. They continually reappear in later Sanskrit and vernacular writings as well as in oral traditions.

If we analyse the case of Tamil culture, we observe some strong images that have persisted in the Tamil memory regarding women. These images are both strong and repetitive in nature and so they still linger in the memory of the culture. C.S. Lakshmi identifies[35] the existence of three such dominant images that have become part of Tamil language and literary conventions; they are Nallathangal of the 18th century folk legend, Kannagi of the epic *Śilappadikāram* and the *Purananuru* mother who sends the son to the battlefield. Though the qualities of these images are similar, each image is evoked for different purposes at different times. The three images are not exclusive of one another. Rather they merge into one another. The humiliated woman seeking death by jumping into a well with her children is the most prominent image of the Nallathangal legend. The name of Nallathangal is a symbol of the suffering woman. In the legend, she opens closed doors by swearing by the purity of her marital status. Nallathangal's misery is seen as a just punishment for disobeying her husband and venturing out alone to go to her brother's place

35 C.S. Lakshmi . 'Bodies Called Women: Some Thoughts on Gender', Ethnicity and Nation, EPW, Vol. 32, No. 46 (Nov. 15-21, 1997), pp. 2953-2962

against her husband's wishes. In the legend she rises from the dead only to blame herself for her stupidity. The second example Lakshmi cites is from the great epic *Śilappadikāram* which also contains the seeds of Tamil culture. Epic heroine Kannagi is seeking justice for a grievance that her husband gets beheaded for a theft he has not committed. It is royal injustice that Kannagi seeks to avenge. Kannagi has become the symbol of not only the woman with righteous anger but also the Pattini symbol. The image of the virtuous anger of a woman turning into fire to burn an entire city is overwhelmingly powerful. The valorous mother of *Purananuru*, whose uterus is the 'lair of tigers' and who sends her son to the battlefield and who swears she would cut off her breasts that gave them suck if she finds them dead in the battlefield wounded in the back, is another dominant image. Lakshmi also reminds us of the fact that these popular images of valorous mothers are associated only with sons and not with any valorous daughters. These images stressing married life and motherhood as the only meaningful, virtuous one, apart from stressing home and nurturing, also perceived women only in relation to a man.

It is important to foreground the imaging of the chaste wife in Tamil culture/ tradition with a discussion of the notion of *karpu*, which can broadly be translated as 'chastity'. The term *karpu* does not just connote chastity but is, in fact, a broader term which takes into its sweep virtually all the qualities 'good' women are supposed to possess, aside from the imperative virtue of chastity such as service (to one's husband), the spirit of loyalty, self-sacrifice and modesty in bearing. There is no English word which can adequately bring out the full connotations of the Tamil word *karpu*. It is not merely wifely chastity and faithfulness; although it is the most important element in its connotation. The stereotyping of women in Tamil society has largely revolved around this notion of *karpu*. It is believed that from her innate *karpu* comes the 'power' of the woman, whether she is an unmarried girl or a married woman. The power of *karpu* was to be both feared and respected because it could be both boon-giving as well as extremely destructive, if threatened. *Akam* poetry deals with love from the point of view of

pre-marital love or *kaḷavu* and post-marital love or *kaṛpu*.[36] *Kaṛpu* refers to chastity for all practical purposes. The root word-'kal' which if used as a noun denotes stone, the symbol of strength and solidarity; if used as a verb denotes learning. Whatever meaning is assigned to the derived term *karpu*, if we trace the origin and the usage it dates back to the Sangam era. The earliest reference so far available denotes a system of marriage. According to *Tolkappiyam*(a grammatical work with sections dating from the fifth century BCE to the third century CE), *kaḷavu* and *kaṛpu* are two types of marriages. *Karpu* is an important cultural signifier for the Tamils. The other reference occurs in *Kalottokai*. The term does not refer to a form of marriage but denotes a quality of human mind. The one thing common to both the references is that they do not isolate the women folk as the sole possessor of the attribute. *Patirruppattu* also has such references common to both men and women. In other words it was and still is believed that chastity is essential only for women and only the chaste are qualified to be called women.

The Sangam (chronologically placed between the third century BCE and the third century CE) text *Tolkappiyam* has an entire section titled *karpiyal*, meaning 'The grammar of chastity.'[37]The fearful aspect of *karpu* connects it with another recurrent term in early Tamil literature, namely, *aṇaṇku*. The coupling of the term *aṇaṇku* with chastity or *karpu* lends a more nuanced understanding of chastity by connecting it with the nature of female sexuality. In Dravidian cultures, the spiritual power of women was linked to both the fear of pollution (through menstrual blood, and so on) and the male fear of female sexuality. It is likely that the ancient Tamils defined female sexual power as *aṇaṇku*, a force to be simultaneously feared and worshipped. In his influential but controversial essay "Woman and the Sacred in Ancient Tamilnad" George L Hart mentions the king and the woman as dual focus of the sacred through an analysis of sources[38] in early Tamil. In this essay he discusses at length the

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36 Meenakshisundaran. p.4

37 Tolkāppiyar, Tolkāppiyam: The Earliest Extant Tamil Grammar. P. S. Subrahmanya Sastri , Mysore: Institute of Oriental Research, 1930 ,230-424

38 Especially *Akam* and *Puram* poems

connection between the role of woman and the origin and nature of divinity for the early Tamils. Mentioning some contexts like when women were menstruous or when they had recently given birth, he makes the conclusion that women in ancient Tamilnad were strongly tabooed.

Hart quotes an example[39] from *Akananuru* 26, where the wife complains:

Can I be angry
at him
whose city
has lovely prosperous fields
where girls play
gathering as festival ornaments
dark flowers with white fish-bone stems
fallen from dense clusters
of round-thorned mulli?
Friend,
there were times
when at night
he would say in ecstasy,
"Pressing my chest hard,
do not stop embracing me
with your black nipples,"
as they resembled iron rings
on the tusks of an elephant
who attacks great doors.
And when I said,
"Enough,"
he would not listen.
In such manner
would he celebrate these breasts .

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39 Hart quotes from *Akananuru* . There are several poems which describe the husband's avoiding the embrace of his wife while she is nursing their child.George L. Hart, III, 'Woman and the Sacred in Ancient Tamilnad': *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Feb., 1973), pp. 233-250

But now
when I wanted to embrace closely
his fine-colored ornamented chest
fragrant with sandal
with these sweet breasts
covered with spots
and sore,
pendulous with milk
for our son,
he feared some sweet milk
might fall on him.

In the early Tamil society, clandestine love between a male and female was neither rare nor prohibited. As a matter of fact, having looked down upon seeking sensual pleasures from a courtesan or a prostitute, the elders would certainly have done well not to decry even natural budding love or affection between the youngsters in society[40]. Such love and even its logical consummation called 'kalavu maṇam' or stolen love and marriage by Tamil poets was a settled feature of the social group. Correspondingly, the open type of marriage and post-marital love was called *karpu* - a word which has become synonymous with chastity in Tamil language. This does not mean that the consummation of clandestine love was unchaste, but that the elders felt the danger of it going off the rails sometimes. Similarly, in *Ainkurunuru*(65), the heroine says to her husband, "Do not embrace my body which has given birth to our son-your chest might be spoiled." Both of the taboos mentioned in the poems concern women at unclean/impure times of their lives. From this fact Hart infers that women were thought to possess a latent sacred power which at certain times become dangerous so that they had to be tabooed. If this inference is correct, it is to be expected that elsewhere the sacred power of women will actually be mentioned and such is in fact the case. The chief source of such power was a woman's chastity (*karpu*), a virtue as important then as it is now in South India. *Purananuru* 198 speaks of a woman's chastity "which has a god (*katavul*)," while *Kuruntokai* 252 and

40 kurinji, 21-22

Akananuru 184 mention "chastity (which has the nature of) a god." In *Akananuru* 73, the friend describes the heroine as having "chastity full of afflicting sacred power (*aṇaṅku uṟu kaṟpu*) as she suffers while her husband is away, and in *Akananuru* 198, the hero exclaims, "She was no fine woman with complete chastity, but a goddess (*cūṟ makaḷ, cūṟ* meaning demon and *makal* meaning woman) who lives in the spring full of soft flowers." *Purananuru* 196 describes the bard's wife as being "a tender girl with a shining face and chastity which (knows) only modesty (*nān alatu illāk karpu*)," *Purananuru* 249 speaks of "chastity which is restrained (*aṭaṅkiya*)," and *Purananuru* 361 says that the king's wives are "women of chastity increased by patience, with sharp teeth which their tongues fear if they talk loudly." *Purananuru* 166 speaks of the wife of an orthodox Brahmin as one who has "chastity hard to get, which banishes all harshness (*maam*), with a small forehead, large wide loins, few words, and much hair, who fits exactly her husband's state." In *Kuṟuntokai* 252, the heroine's friend scolds her saying, "(When he returned from his harlot), you, without changing your sweet expression, served him, you with your divine chastity," to which the heroine replies, "Good men are ashamed when praised to their face-how could they bear abuse?" Chastity was also conceived of as an almost tangible quality in the woman who possessed it, producing domestic peace and light. *Kuṟuntokai* 336 speaks of a woman's "chastity which shines in her house." Several times a woman's chastity is evoked by the star Arundhati. In *Akananuru* 16, for example, the heroine describes how the harlot embraced her son on the street, and then says with irony, "How could I not love her, lord, thinking her like the mother of your son, who resembles the goddess of chastity full of power in the sky?" Another element of chastity besides this restraint of speech and conduct is that the woman is often described as being attractive and fertile, with large loins and breasts.[41] Any woman who had come of age and was sexually appealing was thought to be filled with a sacred power to afflict men. This power was thought to reside in her breasts and to a lesser extent in her loins or any other part of her body which made her especially attractive. It has been seen that in *Akananuru* 7, the girl who has

41 *Purananuru*, 166, 361

reached puberty is forbidden to go into the city because it has "attacking gods" (*tākku aṇańku*) for her. The sacred nature of a woman's breasts is also described in other poems. In *Akananuru* 161, the friend describes how the heroine weeps "so coldness spreads on her finely rising young breasts, vexing because a god (*aṇańku*) is there," and *Akananuru* I77 speaks of "breasts with *aṇańku*." In *Akananuru* 220, the breasts of the heroine are said to be "as hard for anyone to see as the well-guarded high post . . . of the sacrifice completed by him with an axe ... at Cellūr."

V. S. Rajam[42] in her article titled "Aṇańku: A Notion Semantically Reduced to Signify Female Sacred Power" demonstrates that *aṇaṇku* in ancient Tamil society was far more than a 'dangerous sacred force' and that the term has suffered a semantic change over time. In other words and more importantly, how valid is the assumption that images of sacred femaleness are prevalent in the earliest Tamil literature, and if *aṇaṇku* were the earliest Tamil term for such sacred femaleness, how should one interpret it in ancient literary contexts that do not concern women? Or, if "sacred femaleness" is just one of the many significances of the term *aṇaṇku*, what are *aṇaṇku*'s other significances? Broadly speaking, these texts use the term as a noun as well as a verb. Specifically, one can discern eight clear patterns in which these texts employ the term.

One of these patterns, for example, is "the 'X has *aṇaṇku*' Pattern."[43] That is, we come across contexts where an entity (X) like a human being, some part of a human being's body, an action performed by a human being, some quality of a human being, a supernatural being, certain things associated with a supernatural being, an animal or its body-part, an object, a place, or certain tradition is described as "having" *aṇaṇku*.As typical of any ancient text, some of the contexts in which the term *aṇaṇku* occurs are obscure and do not lend themselves to a clear-cut interpretation. For instance, in one context, the "tradition" (*marapu*) associated with a king's royal seat is said as "having" *aṇaṇku: aṇaṇku uṭai*

42 V. S. Rajam, 'A Notion Semantically Reduced to Signify Female Sacred Power'. Journal of the American Oriental Society, Vol. 106, No. 2 (Apr. - Jun., 1986), pp. 257-272

43 ibid

marapiṉ kattil. The rest of the poem does not help in interpreting *aṇaṇku*. One of the commentators interprets *aṇaṇku* here as "godliness" or "god-like quality" (*teyvatlaṇmai*). Given that "godliness" is the interpretation of *aṇaṇku*, we find another context where hill tribesmen decide to pray to a god that "the mountain has been with *aṇaṇku*" or more literally, "the mountain stood with *aṇaṇku*": *anankotu ninratu ralai*, and therefore, "may it receive some rain": *(malai) vān kolka.* The context seems to indicate that the hill tribesmen were worried that the mountain was suffering an affliction and believed that the situation could be rectified by rain. Can we apply the interpretation "godliness" to *aṇaṇku* in this context? If we did, we would be implying that "godliness" in ancient Tamil society was considered a quality that had to be rectified. Or, we must redefine our current understanding of the concept of "godliness." Another context provides a situation which indicates that *aṇaṇku* was not an unsought quality that had to be rectified. Here, a hero says to his lover "Wear these bright red leaves so that your beautiful breasts acquire *aṇaṇku*[44]" *Regardless of its interpretation, here the term aṇaṇku* cannot signify some undesired state of being. In a totally different context, the term *aṇaṇku* is used to refer to the strength of an animal called āli[45] and this context raises the question whether "godliness" is the intended significance of *aṇaṇku*. Thus, these examples of various contexts alert us to the fact that the term *aṇaṇku* does not lend itself to a single interpretation. We find through textual evidence that *aṇaṇku* in ancient Tamil society was not necessarily inherent or immanent in particular locations: it could be acquired.[46]

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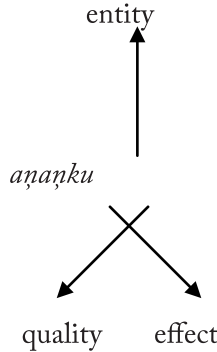
44 Narrinai 9

45 18, appendix

46 Hart has proposed that *aṇaṇku* "inhered" in many places. Speaking of *ananku* , Zvelebil (Zvelebil 1981, p. 23) says that "this power was so independent of the places, objects, and persons in which it was believed to inhere that it could precede or survive them."



(Source: V.S.Rajam, *Aṇaṇku*: Female Sacred Power, p. 260)

Thus, *aṇaṇku* in ancient Tamil texts signifies a multi-dimensional concept as this diagram shows. Rajam strongly counters Hart's interpretation of *aṇaṇku* as "a dangerous sacred force," and explains that it does not reflect the full breadth of *aṇaṇku*'s usage, and obscures many of its subtleties.

> However, the concept signified by *aṇaṇku* is very rich and therefore, its contextual interpretation becomes crucial at least as far as the earliest Tamil poems are concerned. Some of the possible interpretations of the term *aṇaṇku* used as a noun are: charm, sexuality, stunning beauty, distress, affliction, love-sickness, undefeatable strength, spectacle, supernatural phenomenon, divinity or supernatural being. As a verb, the term yields at least five interpretations: to afflict, to cause distress, to charm, to defeat, or to excel.[47]

Hart refers to the Kannagi story in support of the theory that a woman's *aṇaṇku* was unleashed at the time of her husband's death. Hart says, "it was common in South India to erect stones to satis, women who cremated themselves upon the death of their husbands," and in a footnote he refers to Kannagi as an example: "for example, in the *Śilappadikāram*, a stone is brought from the Himalayas and erected to Kannagi."[48]But we should be aware of

47 V.S.Rajam, 'Aṇaṇku: Female Sacred Power', Journal of the American Oriental Society, Vol. 106, No. 2 (Apr. - Jun., 1986), pp. 257-272, P-261

48 'Some Related Literary Conventions in Tamil and Indo-Aryan and Their Significance' George L. Hart, III Source: Journal of the American Oriental Society, Vol. 94, No. 2 (Apr. - Jun., 1974), pp. 157-167, p. 42

the fact that Kannagi did not die with her husband when he was unjustly executed; neither did she jump into her husband's funeral pyre. In fact, in the epic, she does not die like other human beings. Her husband, flanked by other celestials, descends from the skies and takes her with him to the skies. The question then is: "Does Kannagi qualify to be referred to as a sati?" Second, there is no explicit textual reference to substantiate the argument that at the time of her husband's death, Kannagi's "dangerous sacred force" was unleashed. One can perhaps interpret Kannagi's *aṇaṇku* as a build-up of repressed emotions; it was Kannagi's long-ranged built-up and repressed emotions that burst out at the time of her husband's unjust death, and not just any sacred power. It could also be interpreted as a sense of social justice arising out of anger at the sight of sheer injustice by the Pantiyan king. In fact Kannagi ventures out of the inert and idealistic concept of 'sacred' wife which she was indulging in in the first part of the epic with the presence/absence of Kovalan.

Interestingly enough, the term *aṇaṇku* is never used when the author of the *Śilappadikāram* describes how the enraged Kannagi flings her left breast at the city of Madurai as a consequence of which the city caught fire. Hart, perhaps, was influenced by Brenda Beck's analysis of Kannagi's story. Brenda Beck, in her analysis of Kannagi's story observes that Kannagi controls some "terrific power" which "she unleashes in the form of a great fire" when her husband is unjustly executed.[49] Hart, connecting himself to Beck's theory of Kannagi's "terrific power"[50], says: "As a chaste, young woman, Kannagi is filled with *aṇaṇku* even while her husband is alive; but her power is in control. When he is killed, it goes out of control and is able to cause the city to be consumed[51]...." While Beck holds Kannagi responsible for controlling her "terrific power" and releasing it at her own will, Hart portrays Kannagi as practically without will and actually "powerless", acting without self awareness. Unlike in Beck's analysis, in Hart's portrayal,

49 Brenda E.f.Beck, 'The study of a Tamil Epic: Several Versions of Silappadikaram Compared' , Journal of Tamil studies,1972, p. 24

50 Beck does not label that power as aṇaṇku with his notion of aṇaṇku as a "dangerous sacred force."

51 Hart 1975, p. 106

Kannagi does not unleash her *aṇaṇku*; the *aṇaṇku* goes out of control. lt is perhaps this tangential approach to Kannagi's story that has colored Hart's study of ancient Tamil women, especially the widows, widow self-immolation, widow's asceticism, etc. Consequently, he views widow self-immolation as a course of action to control the widow's *aṇaṇku* that goes out of control. He seems to stretch this approach also to explain the war sacrifices performed by victorious kings in ancient Tamil society.[52] First, the traditional commentators on Tamil poetry are at fault for having been carried away by one specific usage of the term *aṇaṇku* as referring to a female deity or celestial woman.

In the *Śilappadikāram*, *aṇaṇku* is used in five different contexts: it refers to (a) the cub of the animal known as āḷi, (b) source of distress, (c) divine words preached by Buddhist preachers, (d) divine women, and (e) trance. Thus, *Śilappadikāram* provides an interesting reference (āḷi) showing that the concept of *aṇaṇku* as a celestial female had not become a well-established convention even at that period. The whole question of whether the apotheosis of *karpu* is the key note of *Śilappadikarām* which facilitates the transformation of the heroine from a passive house wife to the guardian of an active social role gets a new dimension with the act of plucking her breast to destroy a city.

History or legend can show no more striking examples of the virtuous wife of this description than Kannagi, the heroine of *Śilappadikarām*. At the beginning of their married life, Kannagi was being praised by all, including her husband, for her unsurpassed beauty and good qualities. In fact, some of the most rapturous words of love and admiration ever sung in verse are those which Kovalan is said to have addressed to Kannagi in the *Śilappadikarām*. Such a wife is abandoned and made to suffer cruel agony for a long time. It is very important to examine the reason for such behaviour, whether it is a sense of subjectivity or stoical indifference that lies at the bottom of this attitude. Can we say that it is her *karpu*, her sense of wifely duty that makes her so patient, so forbearing and uncomplaining, although her heart is sore and although she keenly feels her disability, through

52 Hart 1976, p. 321 and Hart 1979, p. 12.

her husband's separation, to perform her duties as a housewife? When after months of the most callous desertion her husband comes back to her, she greets him with a smile, with scarcely a sign of anger or even displeasure on her face. When Kovalan approaches her saying that he is ashamed to have rendered himself penniless through squandering away his wealth on a false courtesan, thinking that his regret was due to his inability to pay Madhavi further, she offers him her anklet. Such an image describes Kannagi doing her duty inexorably as the *Karpudai mangai* or the virtuous wife. Kovalan accepts the anklet but not for paying for Madhavi as Kannagi thought but as a potential capital wherewith to start a new life in a new place. Accordingly he suggests leaving Kaveri pum-pattinam that very night to go on a long journey by foot to far-off Madurai in the Pandiyan kingdom. But here is a husband who behaves in the most wicked and callous manner possible towards his loving wife, and yet she accompanies him most readily on an exceedingly arduous and vexatious journey with the prospect at the end of it being no more than a precarious existence. Can anyone imagine a woman doing all this for such a husband? Most of the scholars regard this as an expression of *karpu*, animating her whole being. In several places of the narrative, Kannagi herself says this in no uncertain terms. When Kovalan after bitterly accusing himself for his past conduct, asks her how she brought herself to accompany him to Madurai so readily, she replies:

> I hid from your revered mother and your highly reputed father, much esteemed by the king, my sorrow at not having you before; but they knew it and were full of affection for me and spoke loving words. In spite of my pretended smile, my emaciated body made them know my inner anxiety at which they were highly grieved. Though you deviated from the right path, because I kept to the path of rectitude, I volunteered to come along with you.[53]

The entire discussion on the twin notions of *karpu* and *aṇaṇku*, which broadly covers Tamil notions of female sexuality,

53 Ramachandra Dikshitar, *The Cilappatikaram*,South India Saiva Siddhanta Works Publication Society ,Madras, 1978. P-256

becomes relevant because the two concepts get connected to Kannagi. Kannagi, who is hailed in texts as *Karpukkarasi*, literally "the queen of chastity," is regarded as an outstanding example from the Tamil epic tradition of the power of chastity and female spirituality. "The moment the Lord of Vaikai saw the dust on her (Kannagi's) body, her dark hair hanging loose, her tears, and the matchless anklet anklet in her hand he was overwhelmed."[54] These associations contribute to the sense of an undercurrent of fierce energy in Kannagi, heightened and contained by her chastity and constant control, *aṇaṇku/karpu*. Within this association of Kannagi with *karpu/aṇaṇku* as factors that helped her to face ill nature from her husband, we should also be aware of the nature of her chastity. In canto XXI The Great Wrath *Vancina Malai* Kannagi praises the seven women of chastity. Kannagi's chastity is chastity germinated from sexuality under control, taking strict roads of the ideal housewife. Her portrayal shows that she herself wished to be part of the drawn rules of chaste women as Kannagi speaks.

Kannagi's Transformation

The cult of the invincibility of *karpu* and its 'God' given power to destroy the offender was supreme in the Tamil land - completely believed in by men and women. The standard set for *karpu*, as we have seen, is well-nigh impossible for ordinary human beings to attain. Any woman coming up to this ideal must be near perfection and therefore of an order higher than the normal human beings. No wonder, then, that a chaste woman was held in the highest esteem and awe and looked upon as a goddess on earth. Moreover, it may well be that a society which allowed a measure of self- indulgence and license to its menfolk, as ancient Tamil society seems to have done, was perhaps more likely , by contrast, to venerate and idealize feminine virtue than one in which self-restraint was practiced as much by men as by women. So strongly believed is the husband's superior status and the wife's responsibility to serve and obey him that despite

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54 Ramachandra Dikshitar, *The Cilappatikaram*,South India Saiva Siddhanta Works Publication Society ,Madras.1978, P-292

whatever the moral failures of a particular husband the wives are still considered to owe him absolute respect and submission. The superior rank and power of the husband is emphasised on and in part maintained as a code for conduct that centers on formalised rank-wise interactions between the husband and the wife. Observance of such respectful behaviour in these interactions is absolutely essential to the respectability of both the husband and wife. This formulation of the duties of the wife has parallels in much of the textual tradition known to the Tamils. We have no doubt that a more readily available model is followed by the Tamil epic *Śilappadikarām* where the heroine Kannagi is the ideal wife.

Chastity is the primary concern of many of the texts as it is in the nature of Tamil culture.Tamil literature calls this heroism of the virtuous wife *marak-karpu* (heroic *karpu*) to distinguish it from the meek and submissive type which it designates as *arak-karpu* (dharmic *karpu*). Kannagi is considered a classic example of both kinds of *karpu*. From a meek, shrinking, soft spoken woman, she is transformed into an avenging fury. The very *karpu* which made her so meek and gentle, so submissive and yielding, and so forgiving and uncomplaining hitherto, now when her husband is unjustly slain, makes her ferocious and more alert to her individual rights. Kannagi, a poor, helpless, unknown woman in an unknown country, dared arraign the highest of that country.

As the meek, submissive, patient wife of Kovalan, she illustrated *arak-karpu* in the earlier part of her life; and when her husband was unjustly sentenced to death she showed the world the heroic heights to which she could rise and thus exemplified *marak-karpu* also in her person. This is the reason why while there were ever so many examples in the land of virtuous wives laying down their lives for their deceased husbands, the Tamils chose Kannagi as the deity of virtuous wifehood, and built temples for her all over the land. Her worship spread even to Sri Lanka where its king Gajabahu is said to have built her a temple. The ancient Tamils rated the virtuous female as high as a goddess; for them she was the only visible goddess. In addition to such virtue, absolute fidelity in thought, word or deed, absolute devotion, absolute deference and regard, absolute submission and self

effacement on the part of the wife towards her husband were also required. To such an ideal wife, her husband is the very breath of her life, and is as inseparable in death as in life i.e, she cannot survive her husband; she must die with him.

At the same time, transgressing these fixed boundaries is what sets Kannagi apart from the common images of chaste women in terms of a gendered perception. We clearly notice the transformation of Kannagi from a woman whose sexuality is being 'controlled' in the first phase of her life while her husband was alive, and in the second phase into a totally 'uncontrolled'/ free, performing body when injustice befell Kovalan. Parthasarathy states:

> The epic world is dominated by patriarchy whose sexual fears it reflects. Patriarchy regards female sexuality as a threat to its power and attempts to contain it. Repressed for centuries by patriarchy, women were forced into silence while struggling to use a discourse that was inadequate to express reality fully. Women's voices have gone unheard, for historically they were excluded from participating in the cultural dialogue that shapes reality.[55]

As a female protagonist, Kannagi disrupts the epic structure and calls its presuppositions into question. Viewed in this light The Book of Vanci is probably an elaborate rite of propitiation to appease the wrath of Kannagi and to invoke her blessing as the goddess Paţţini. *Śilappadikarām*'s basic nature is not a eulogy of the three kings, but surely a eulogy of Kannagi as a chaste woman.

As mentioned earlier, the icon of the goddess Kannagi looms large in the consciousness of modern Tamils, as it was part of the life world of ancient people. Kannagi represents Tamil notions of chastity and spirituality. She also serves as a metaphor to conceptualize the Tamil heritage of justice and the ideals of Tamil linguistic and cultural purity. For that reason she is identified as the goddess of chastity (*pattini teivam*) and as the queen of chastity (*karpu-arasi*). In rare cases, Kannagi is worshipped as

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55 R.Parthasarathy, *Cilappatikaram of Ilanko Atikal (The Tale of an Anklet): An Epic of South India*New York: Columbia University Press, 1993,p-10

a manifestation of the mother goddess and as the goddess of faithful wives; but she is primarily a deity who has great social relevance because her attributes reflect cherished Tamil social ideals. Often her image is used consciously in the secular arenas of ethnicity and politics. For example, the then chief minister M. Karunanidhi installed Kannagi's statue at the Marina beach on the occasion of the second Tamil conference in Madras. In 2001, Jayalalita as chief minister removed the statue for reasons of *vastu* which she thought might restrict her from coming back to power again. In 2006 Karunanidhi reinstalled the statue at its place in a function of much publicity. On that occasion he said: "the pride and self-respect of Tamils had been redeemed." All these instances point to the way in which literature/myth gets politicized, made use of for redefining political and social equations. Jesudasan and Jesudasan point out that Ilango Adigal cultivated "the cult of the worship of chaste women…as an independent cult of Tamilnad."[56] The reality of Tamil justice and ethnicity were portrayed through Kannagi's experiences as a chaste woman. The ancient Tamils conceived of chastity as an entity in itself that had sacred or mystical attributes when associated with women because they were chaste. Thus, the equation of female spirituality in association with chastity constituted a religious concept. Through Kannagi's life and experiences, the religious category of chastity was validated for the Tamil people.

The relationship between female spirituality and chastity was fully manifested in the life of Kannagi; she was the embodiment of Tamil virtues and the essence of chaste womanhood. But her experiences also demonstrated the validity of chastity in the context of Tamil justice and ethnicity: being a chaste woman, she had the power to render justice, and such justice was conceptualized as an attribute of Tamil ethnicity. Her image accordingly became a metaphor to explain justice and ethnicity in association with chastity. In the experimental domain of political and legal authority, Kannagi drew upon her spirituality, the source of which was chastity, declared the innocence of her husband, and caused the burning of a city. The justice she sought to materialize

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56 C.Jesudasan and Hephzibah Jesudasan. *Tamil literature.* Madras: Y.M.C.A. Pub. House, 1961,p.94

was an idealized conception of the Tamils. Her challenge to the erring Pandiya king, whether it was proper for him to remain a king - he had made grievous mistake of ordering the death of an innocent man - was repudiation of political authority that had lost its moral and legal base. Her personal quest for justice thus became identified with a Tamil quest. It is the image of Kannagi, however, that enables the religious category of chastity to have ethnic and political referents and thus it expands into a larger semantic model for the Tamil people as a whole. The dominant symbol of Kannagi incorporates several themes associated with different domains of cultural experience, such as politics and ethnicity, and serves to mediate between conceptions of identity and sociopolitical realities.[57] The most fundamental principle involved in the symbol of Kannagi is that it enables believers to associate chastity with politics and ethnicity. Through Kannagi's life and experiences the Tamil religious theme of relating chastity and female spirituality has become a meaningful concept for organizing political and ethnic experiences. The goddess represents female chastity and spirituality, but functions as a dominant symbol to orient the Tamils to their heritage of justice and to sustain linguistic and cultural purity.

Tamil cultural revivalists perceive a correspondence between the threat to Tamil language and the chastity of womanhood. It is significant that the Tamil term for rape means "the destroying of chastity."[58] A raped woman is devoid of any sacred power. The revivalist ideology indicates that Tamil culture and language were "violated" by the Brahmans and that it is necessary to redeem their chastity. The duty of the Tamils, according to this ideology, is to punish the destroyers of female chastity. Any reference to chastity has at once several meanings: it can be the chastity of one's own mother, wife, or sister, or that of Tamil womanhood, but it can also be the chastity of language and culture; defending the chastity of language and culture is tantamount to defending one's own mother, wife, or sister, or that of Tamil womanhood in general.

57 James J.Preston, Mother worship: Theme and Variations. University of North Carolina Press,1983. P-185

58 Hart in JAOS, 32 , no.2 (1973): 233-250 'Woman and the sacred in Ancient Tamilnad'

The symbol of Kannagi also provides the Tamils with a meaningful theory of familial, ethnic and political experiences, relating these different experiential domains to the concept of chastity. A.K Ramanujan notes that Kannagi is "the eidos or archetype, worshipped as the Goddess of Faithful Wives in Tamil Nadu and Ceylon."[59]A striking reinforcement of the epic text is clearly seen in the portrayal of Kannagi's character. She embodies a classical ideal: she is the perfect woman, chaste, devoted, and entirely controlled. Indeed, the idealization of Kannagi appears capable indefinitely of widening its scope according to the demands of context when justice is denied. Kannagi represents an ideal of serenity and is viewed as a representative of both women in general and of the goddess Pattini with whom she is identified.

One most of the relevant arguments seen in the text from gender perspective is the sentence uttered by matrons worshipping - "Losing her husband, whose chest shone with a beautiful garland, this lady won her victory with her *anklet*. Is this war waged by her *breast* unjust?"[60] - which reiterates the importance of symbols both in cultural contexts and how those can be explicated as a tool within feminism or just as a symbolic/mythic reference. What is the real motive behind Kannagi's action of plucking her breast? If it is a symbolic gesture, then how does one understand/theorise it from a gender/feminist point of view? This gesture of Kannagi is of immense potential mainly because of two reasons. Firstly, in the epic *Śilappadikarām,* Kannagi is attributed with all the qualities of a 'perfect' and faithful wife who did not dare question Kovalan's adulterous behaviour. The epic portrays her as "Lakshmi of praiseworthy form, seated on the lotus, and her excellence is that of the faultless northern star (Arundhati)."[61]Secondly, as an ideal wife openly expressing her sexual energy after her husband's death, at the most critical moment of her life. It is true that one rarely comes across such instances anywhere else in literature or culture.

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59 Jacob Pandian .P-179 in James J.Preston, *Mother worship: Theme and Variations*. University of North Carolina Press,1983. P-185

60 Ramachandra Dikshitar, *The Cilappatikaram*,South India Saiva Siddhanta Works Publication Society ,Madras.1978P-304-305

61 Ibid, P.88

Historically, women's breasts have been viewed in both maternal and erotic terms. Breasts have traditionally mattered in popular and symbolic language as signifiers of sexuality or maternity. During the twentieth century, the importance of the maternal body to Psychoanalysis was manifest in the image of the phallic mother, a grown woman with breasts and a penis, who was represented according to psychoanalytic doctrine as the archetypal object of desire. In the 1920s British psychoanalyst Melanie Klein revised the Freudian emphasis on the phallus through her development of object-relations theory, identifying the mother as the central figure in the oedipal drama, and arguing that infants of both sexes identify most intensely with the prototypical object of the maternal breast. Klein theorized that the infant directs feelings of gratification and love towards the 'good' breast and destructive impulses towards the frustrating 'bad' breast and concluded that the deprivation of the breast, rather than the mother's lack of a penis, was the most fundamental cause of child's turning to the father. Breast milk is considered one of the aspects that could constitute part of conceptualizing the breast as a site of knowledge, or seat of thought. The French feminist psychoanalyst Hélène Cixous signifies the breast in terms of a continually replenishing source of creativity which acknowledges 'maternal debt' – the gift of maternity that can never be repaid and which the symbolic order struggles to acknowledge. Cixous's use of breasts as symbols of nurturing and generosity is yoked with writing and thinking, so that mothering and theorizing are corporeally constituted through breast-milk. This imperative to write is urgent, and for Cixous, 'writing is precisely the very possibility of change' and must be marked by the body which writes it, the body through which writing is produced. So according to Cixous, what we write about (our) breasts is shaped by our 'breasted experience' (Young) and will in turn affect the meanings we can attach to that experience.[62] But Cixous operates mainly on the level of language.

In the Indian context also breasts are regarded as the most visible sign of a woman's femininity, the signal of her sexuality,

62 Helene Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa'. Journal: *Signs*, vol. 1 no. 4 Summer 1976,p- 879

but with a difference. In many *akam* poems, a woman's body is represented in the most explicit manner—the smell or texture of her hair, the shape of her breast, her brow, her mound of love or black snake pubis, her leaf-skirts, the conch shell bangles, her teeth like rice sprouts, her skin like young mango leaf, her great shoulders, and red-streaked eyes, and in one poem even the taste of her saliva- yet a woman is never described in more than one or two details in each poem. Man's appearance on the other hand, is depicted more through what he has and about his glittering bangles and ornaments; we also hear of his bright spear, his horses, chariots, garlands, ankle-bands, sometimes even his chest enlarged by the drawing of bows. A man is blessed when his spouse's chastity is supreme and this virtue is also considered both ornamental and as his magical shield against disaster: as effective as his own "upright scepter" (*cenkol*).

It is significant that in the *akam* poems, rarely is the woman seen as the mature mother of a grown man, as she is in the *puram*. As in other heroic milieus, women bards, and poems in women's voices, enlist filial and familial feeling in the course of war- especially that most compelling of personal feelings, a mother's pride (or shame) about her son. In *Akam* 161, the tōḷi(female companion), describes how the heroine weeps so that cool drops wet her finely shaped young breasts where light coloured spots spread ,vexing because anańku is there (*aṇaṇku eṇa uṛutta*).[63] The connection between sexual maturity and the use of the word aṇaṇku, a term which basically indicates a 'sacred power' which was considered to be dangerous , and could be manifested , invoked or driven away, but which was not always malevolent, is of vital importance for the concept of the nityasumangali. This aspect of the dangerous, oppressive nature of sexuality is well illustrated by *Kuruntokai* 337: "the buds her breasts have blossomed, her soft thick hair falls from her head. The compact rows of her white teeth are full, since she has lost her baby teeth, and a few spots

63 K.V.Zvelebil,in Acta Orientalia 40 (1979) p.168-169; also p.192: the investigation of the term *ananku* in the meaning of 'sacred power' by Zvelebil was inspired by the critical reading of George L. Hart's important and controversial book *The Poems of Ancient Tamil,* university of California Press, 1975' The concept of *Ananku* as sacred power was first discussed by Hart in JAOS, 32 , no.2 (1973): 233-250 'Woman and the sacred in Ancient Tamilnad'

have appeared on her body. I know her, and therefore she afflicts me. She herself is not aware of it…"[64]

The theme of female breasts as the seat of divine power is found throughout South Indian literature. This power is especially effective in the case of a chaste woman. In *Śilappadikarām* the transformation of the heroine Kannagi is indeed striking: from a young and sweet natured bride, she changes into an almost demonic avenger of the death sentence that was passed upon her innocent husband. She transforms through the power of chastity that has accumulated in her. She turns her left breast into a fiery missile by twisting it off, and hurling it onto the city of Madurai, and setting fire to the entire city. This power that lies dormant in the female serves the cause of justice in the case of chaste behavior. R. Parthasarathy says, "This is further reinforced when she wrenches her breast, an embodiment of sexual power, off her body and hurls it at the towers of Madurai."[65]

Kannagi's plucking of her breast to burn the city of Madurai is one of the most startling and unique scenes from any ancient text or mythology. Here we have a woman who, praised for extreme devotion to her husband and ideal forms of behaviour, at some point of her life uses her female energy to question the mistakes of an unjust king. The code of chastity in *Śilappadikāram* demonstrates that Kannagi is subordinate and subservient to Kovalan both emotionally and physically, but it also provides a chance for alteration of inner power into material action. On the one hand, Kannagi's depiction reinforces the popular convention that chaste woman is to be respected; there is no anger like that of a righteous woman. A chaste woman is the guardian of morals, and her inner heat becomes the fiery wrath of justice inflicted against transgressors of the moral order. But at the same time such a conclusion demands women to be 'loyal' to husbands irrespective of their insensitive behaviour. In an article titled "The Romance of Patriarchy: Ideology, Subjectivity, and Postmodern Feminist Cultural Theory", Teresa L. Ebert says, "Patriarchy is

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64 Saskia C.Kersenboom,*Nityasumangali:Devadasi Tradition in South India.* New Delhi:Motilal Banarsidas , 1987.p7

65 R.Parthasarathy, *Cilappatikaram of Ilanko Atikal (The Tale of an Anklet): An Epic of South India*New York: Columbia University Press, 1993P-12

the organization and division of all practices and signification in culture in terms of gender and the privileging of one gender over the other, giving males control over female sexuality, fertility, and labor."[66]

Closely related to this concept is the ancient and ever repeating image of 'waiting woman'. More than anything else the good wife is one who knows how to wait - wait for love, wait to be needed, wait to be seen, wait to be recognised, wait to be accepted. The waiting woman has been the dominant image of songs, stories and anecdotes. It is this waiting woman who holds conversations with caged parrots at home talking of her love for her lord a popular example.

In her short story titled "Muditheyyam Urayunnu"[67], the Malayalam writer Sara Joseph uses hair as a feminist tool to undermine certain patriarchal equations of female behaviour. In most cultures, the combing and displaying of hair, as suggested by the legends of alluring mermaids who sit on rocks singing and combing their beautiful hair constitute a sexual exhibition. And the more abundant the hair, the more potent the sexual invitation implied by its display. Folk, literary, and psychoanalytic traditions agree that the luxuriance of the hair is an index of vigorous sexuality, even of wantonness.[68] Milton's Eve is another duplicitous descendant of Venus, whose "wanton" and "disheveled" golden ringlets suggest her sinister potential. In Indian custom we are familiar with many practices where women have to shave their heads especially at the death of her husband. The ritual in primitive societies requiring brides to surrender their hair, the Orthodox Jewish tradition of shaving a bride's head, and the Roman Catholic nun's coif are all manifestations of this sexual symbolism-and of the fear and fascination with hair that this symbolism evokes.[69] Sigmund Freud was quite interested in

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66 Teresa L. Ebert.'The Romance of Patriarchy: Ideology, Subjectivity, and Postmodern Feminist Cultural Theory' Cultural critique 10, fall 1988,P-19

67 Hair-Theyyam in Frenzy

68 Charles Berg, *The unconscious significance of hair*, USA, Allen & Unwin,1951 p-26-30 and Havelock Ellis. Erotic Symbolism. Vol. 5 of his *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*. Philadelphia: Davis, 1920.p-194

69 Wendy Cooper. *Hair, Sex, Society, Symbolism*. New York:Stein, 1971.P-67

the idea of cutting hair, and he linked this act to sexual power relations. He believed that other parts of the body could act as stand-ins for the genitalia—for Freud, who considered the hair of Medusa to be displaced pubic hair, the shaving of a head was tantamount to castration.[70]

But psychoanalytic ideas cannot wholly explain the fascination with women's hair in literature and in other arts like painting. The hair is not simply the outward sign of the woman's inner self; it becomes, rather, in itself something vital, independent and energetic. In stories like Rapunzel and in many more the golden hair of the princess is the center and source of value. Likewise in *Śilappadikāram* as well we observe a tradition steeped in the portrayal of the beauty of female hair. We find so many references- Kovalan praises Kannagi's hair "O my girl of dark and flowing hair!", "cloud like locks of dark hair" and in the scene which describes Kannagi in wild fury "the moment the Lord of Vaikai saw the dust on her (Kannagi's) body, her dark hair hanging loose, her tears, and the matchless anklet in her hand he was overwhelmed."[71]

Anklets are an important part of women's adornment in the Indian culture though they have also been found in other ancient cultures of Egypt and Middle East. Anklets are a part of ornamentation and have great spiritual and social significance. In the beginning of the text, Kannagi's anklet is just an ornament that adds to her beauty and femaleness in the traditionally appropriate way. But from *Madurai Kanda* onwards it is Kannagi's anklet that takes the story forward, albeit to a journey that ends in Kovalan's death. The anklet becomes the sole cause of the Kannagi-Kovalan reunion and also an icon of woman's sense of honesty and justice. As a symbol, the anklet has many resonances. In folklore, it is considered to be an effective symbol of protection against evil spirits. Taking away a person's anklet signifies robbing that person of connections, strength and dignity. At the same time, losing or breaking the anklet symbolizes calamity. About the breaking of

70 Sigmund Freud, 'Medusa's Head'. in *The Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, James Strachey, 24 vols(London, 1955), pp. 273-274

71 Ramachandra Dikshitar.*The Cilappatikaram*,South India Saiva Siddhanta Works Publication Society ,Madras.1978, P-292

the anklet R.Parthasarathy says: "A symbol of Kannagi, the anklet is in a metonymic relation to her, and functions as an extension of her personality. She releases her sexual energy that had so far been contained by the anklets on her person. It also functions as a metonymy for her sexual organ. Breaking it signifies castration."[72]

Rita M.Gross in her article "Is the Goddess a Feminist?" says:-

> This could mean that goddesses are not feminists, but are the creation of patriarchal males, and serve their needs. Some would even argue that the goddesses function to help maintain patriarchy by feeding women divine images of either decent goddesses who are submissively married or frighteningly out of control unmarried goddesses. The message would be clear: since independence makes females blood-thirsty and dangerous, women will imitate Sita rather than Kali.[73]

What feminists like Rita have been attracted to in some Hindu goddesses are viewing them as potential liberating symbols. The traditional imagery of the Indian goddesses, abstracted from the Hindu social context and considered in the light of what certain western feminists choose to see could appear compelling, provocative and inspiring. These goddesses provide something that is unavailable in the western repertoire of images- strong willed, creative, and powerful females who are auspicious and beneficent. In *Śilappadikarām* too such a liberating sense of virtue is observable, which describes an ethic which takes its energy and character from Kannagi's sexuality, but which directs practically all aspects of her actions. When placed in a feminist framework what is Kannagi's importance?

Kannagi moves away from the biologically romanticised notion of a woman's bodily functions to an active feminine identity, while her breast/body functions as the locale for social role playing. She is someone who fights for her individual rights and is conscious

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72 R.Parthasarathy, *Cilappatikaram of Ilanko Atikal (The Tale of an Anklet): An Epic of South India*New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, P-11

73 Rita M.Gross 'Is the Goddess a Feminist?' inAlf Hiltebeitel and Kathleen M. Erndl(ed), Is the goddess a feminist?: the politics of South Asian goddesses,USA: Sheffield Academic Press, p-107

of her social role, which is to be appreciated more than anything. The idea of Kannagi as an eloquent and stubborn woman who argued for justice is the evidence of her social awareness. She made the king understand his fault of killing an innocent person. Kannagi highlights king's guilt. The King lamented: "Am I a ruler – I who have listened to the words of a goldsmith! It is I who am the thief? The protection of the subjects of the southern kingdom has failed in my hands for the first time. Let me depart from this life."[74] Usually those women who exercised their sexuality outside of the bounds of marriage were subject to highly intense and public shame by patriarchy. But the belief that Kannagi expressed herself for questioning Kovalan's murderers turned her into a goddess rather than a whore.

Kannagi is an independent female force capable of multiplying into a plethora of female forms like the placid house wife, ferocious custodian of justice and the all powerful, omniscient goddess. We can identify two prominent symbols, both functioning as an extension of Kannagi's personality in the epic tale: breasts and anklets. Usually, the jingling anklet of a beautiful woman is associated with amorous experiences or fancies. It is one of the celebrated stereotypical symbols in our literature and culture. But here, anklet adds to her physical beauty while breasts are symbolic of her "femaleness" both biologically and psychologically. She recreates them into terrible instruments of vengeance against the king for his unjust execution of Kovalan. As breasts are seen as the symbol of female power, the act of destroying it symbolizes both a woman's greater control over her body and socio-political participation. Both breaking the anklet and plucking her breast signifies confident execution of the female role/power. This is the depiction of a female figure in symbolic and conceptual context, representing feminine fertility and inner strength. Perhaps, Kannagi is the only epic heroine/female character with such an intriguing multilayered identity. She should be perceived as a submissive/faithful wife who encompasses and transgresses those gender-marked boundaries through physical, emotional and spiritual action. The layers such as an ideal wife, a revengeful

74 Ramachandra Dikshitar, *The Cilappatikaram*,South India Saiva Siddhanta Works Publication Society ,Madras.1978,p.247

social being and a ubiquitous deity of the land could definitively be understood from a possible gender conscious perspective. Her's is definitely a radical journey from being passive to exploring one's 'female' subjectivity, towards an absolute symbolic/mythical abstraction.

Deification of Kannagi: A Performance in Trance

The cult of the goddess Kannagi[75] is quite widespread among the people of Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka, which even today has a large population of devotees. Unfortunately, the cult today has died out in South India or has been assimilated into Kāli/Bhagavati[76] cult or other cults of mother goddess. Whatever be the case, it is true that goddess is an object of worship and this worship must be understood in its historico- socio-cultural context. The immediate origin[77] of a full length narrative of Kannagi worship is associated with the Tamil epic *Śilappadikāram* where the Chera monarch Senguttuvan is attributed building a *nattukal* (memorial stone) at his capital Vanji for the virtuous woman of the epic Kannagi.

According to various stories, it was the present day Kodungallur where the Chera king Senguttuvan, consecrated the

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75 The goddess Kannagi appears as Pattini in Sri Lanka and is regarded as one of the most popular deities among the Buddhists and the Hindus of the east and west coast of Sri Lanka. Although Kannagi cult is assimilated into the dominant Bhagavati cult at Kodungallur, I retain 'goddess Kannagi' as a starting of discussion.

76 The term 'Bhagavati' refers in Kerala to various forms of the Hindu goddess- Devi. Interestingly, it can both indicate the benevolent forms like-Lakshmi, Saraswati or even the ferocious Kāli. The many ritual traditions associated with the worship of Bhagavati reflect Kerala's eclectic historical and social development. Bhagavati is important to Malayalis not only as legendary protectress, but as a deity of the land. Thousands of temples dedicated to Bhagavati grace the landscape of Kerala, forming the daily worship for most Hindu Malayalis. For communities dwelling in the hills, she is the spirit of the mountains; for lowland agriculturists, she is the paddy and the earth from which it grows; for toddy-tappers, the graceful coconut palm is her form. She is essentially life itself, and as integral participants in the natural world, human beings can easily invoke, contain and experience her presence through the myriad ritual arts offered as devotions during annual temple festivals.(Sarah Caldwell, *Oh Terrifying Mother: Sexuality, Violence and Worship of the Goddess Kali*, Oxford University Press, 2001)

77 Even though there exists numerous oral/performance versions of the Kannagi-Kovalan story, for an easy understanding of historical factors, I am terming *Śilappadikāram* as a moment of textual origin here.

heroine Kannagi. Based on an analysis of the materials contained in the Sangam literature, scholars in those days had arrived at the conclusion that the Chera kingdom was situated on the West coast and identified its capital, Vanji, with the modern Kodungallur.

Kodungallur Bhagavati is one of the predominant deities of Kerala. She encompasses divine personalities ranging from the benign to the ferocious Kāli and is also seen assimilated into local village goddesses associated with fever diseases. This dichotomy of the goddess being benevolent/malevolent is derived respectively from intimacy and horror in human psyche. Erich Neumann says, …springs from the most intimate personal experience, form an experience that is eternally human, and even when it is projected into the ends of heaven and earth, it preserves its closeness to the central personal phenomena of feminine life. The malevolent aspect appears in a projective ring of symbols, which he says,… originates rather in inner experience, and the anguish, horror and fear of danger that the myth signifies and which cannot be derived from any actual and evident attributes of women.[78]

Scholars such as Kosambi suggested that rituals resorted to as a means of controlling these potent forces, and used by village people even today, had their origins in early cults which date from the early centuries BC. Kosambi noted sites such as trees, sacred groves and stone, 'which have shown remarkable continuity as sacred centers and often provided a greater historical continuity both in object and ritual than many written texts.[79] The principal deity appealed to by most Indian rural communities over the centuries has been the goddess.

We get ample references to mountain dwelling groups who became possessed in frenzied oracular dances were integral parts of the ancient cults of Koţţavai and Murugan in Tamil literature. Vivid scenes of sacrifice /bloodshed drawing heavily on metaphors of forest beasts abound in Sangam literature. Blood

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78 Erich Neumann .*The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype*, New York, 1965. P-147

79 Kosambi,D.D. *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History*.Bombay: Popular Book Depot, 1956, p-58

and spiritual possession are essential signs of the cyclic landscape portrayed in many Tamil texts. Sarah Caldwell in "Margins at the Center: Tracing Kāli through Time, Space and Cultur" attaches a direct link between the Tamil concept of *aṇaṅku* and the dramatic or ritualistic possession performances which are still an important part of South Indian goddess worship. She says that the malevolent female power that manifests as violent and sexual energy in a massive way influenced contemporary rituals like *teyyam*, Bharani or other rituals where spirit performances are seen.

Scholars agree in the opinion that Kāli derives in part from the ancient Tamil deity Koţţavai, a warrior goddess who delights in the blood of battle. That Koţţavai is clearly an antecedent of Bhadrakāli in Kerala is demonstrated in her iconography in ancient Sangam literature: wearing a necklace of liger teeth, riding a tiger, and shouting in victory, the goddess comes to the battlefield to kill enemies, eat their flesh, and drink their blood. Devotees of the ancient war goddess Koţţavai included female dancers who accompanied male warriors to battle singing, dancing and drumming. These sacred females had "the basic function of direct contact with the ambivalent power of the divine."[80] The female court bards are called *viṛalis* and *pātiṇis*. They were considered to channel supernatural forces such that they were said to have power over rain. The *viṛalis* accompanied the king and his male bards at celebrations of victory in battle, dancing the wild victory dance behind the king's chariot. We find similarities in the ritual roles[81] of the *viṛalis* and the velichappatu mar at Kodungallur. The historical shift which has occurred over the past two thousand years in Kerala altered the tradition of indigenous concept of female power and its celebration. Over the time, Sanskritic and Brahmanical values predominated, women were marginalized from the rituals of power, while their embodied feminine potency was co-opted and imitated by male ritual specialists.

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80 Saskia Kersenboom-Story, *Nityasumangali* : *Devadasi Tradition in South India*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987, p.14

81 Another example is the mention about Matanki" a female who performs simultaneously three actions: *vāl*, *vīci*, singing the praise of Murugan and thirdly beating drum".

In the Sanskritic tradition, the goddess is designated Bhagavati. Bhagavati's ferocious feminine form at Kodungallur is equally terrifying, as designated by the name *Bhadrakāli*. Devotees are scared of Kāli, her naked and intoxicated appearance-dark, bloodstained, and disheveled-dancing on the prostrate body of Shiva, with her tongue lolling out, wearing nothing except a garland of human heads around her neck, a girdle of severed human hands around her waist, and infant corpses as earrings. Yet, strangely enough, the devotee sees in this macabre picture an impossible beauty and a mother. Apart from the historical connection, the epic Kannagi and Kodungallur Bhagavati, is to be juxtaposed to get a better picture of some of the 'ritual' reasons that get enacted in the Bharani performance. Both Kannagi and Kāli in their respective mythical space show apparent contradictions. First and foremost their existence as a female is based on and sustained through the paradoxical virgin/wife-mother axis. What constitutes is an interesting redefinition of the concepts of 'virgin' and 'wife' that takes us to a common ground of the question of female sexuality. In a very conventional sense, Kannagi's conjugal relationship with Kovalan is unfruitful not just because she doesn't have a child by him, but of his untimely death causing widowhood. The unappeasable fury of Kannagi is the result of her unquenchable sexuality. Kāli too symbolizes the paradoxical dyads: passivity/aggressiveness; tradition/unconventionality; beautiful/grotesque; tender/terrifying. As the symbol of femininity, Kāli may be read in two ways: as serving patriarchal purposes and emerging from male fear of female sexuality; or as a genuine feminine self-assertion and power, a mother who is not afraid of stepping out of the conventions of motherhood to express herself-her rage and her needs. But the point to be emphasized is that Kāli always signifies more than the feminine.[82] The following depiction of salvation by David Kinsley echoes just this possibility: "To accept one's mortality," he says, "is to be able to act superfluously, to let go, to be able to sing, dance, and shout. To win Kāli's boon is to become childlike, to

82 Vrinda Dalmiya ,' Loving Paradoxes: A Feminist Reclamation of the Goddess Kali' Hypatia, Vol. 15, No. 1,2000, pp. 125-150

be flexible, open, and naive like a child."[83] These considerations lead us to the fact that at Kodungallur ambivalent power of the goddess is evocated through bloodshed, sexuality and possession performance.

There is another aspect that rightly points to the transformation of Kannagi into Bhagavati or Kāli cult and the celebration of pollution by the *velichappatumar*. Within elite Hinduism Kāli's status as a goddess is somehow at the margins of worship. Her worship is normally associated with people of lower castes, those live in the lower strata of society. Kāli's embodiment of the fundamental, bipolar opposites that ground human existence is a familiar theme in the study of the fierce Goddess. This grounding in the deepest aspects of the human existence has led to a common scholarly characterization of Kāli as "marginal", a symbol of what is furthest from the ordinary, acceptable social world. Her iconography and worship have been portrayed as "extreme" in their violence and eroticism. David Kinsley in an essay entitled "Blood and Death out of Place" emphasizes Kāli's presentation in the Hindu tradition as terrible, offensive, destructive, awful and dangerous. Kāli also has a long history of association with criminals and murderous thugs. Kingsley rightly asserts that Kāli "is almost always associated with blood and death," and goes on to state that "within the civilized order of Hinduism" blood, death, and Kāli herself are supreme anomalies. Disruptive to all carefully build up structures of Brahmanical Hinduism, Kāli seems to represent chaos, lack of control, pollution, and disorder- that is the ultimate danger of danger threatening to undercut high caste values. This traditional characterization of Kāli as representative of disorder draws on numerous images of marginality: the social marginality or the anti-sociality; the physical marginality of blood and death in a system that emphasizes bodily purity and integrity; the geographic marginality of the goddess's haunts which include cremation grounds, battlefields, boarder lands and inhospitable regions; and the philosophical marginality of a deity who exists mainly as a theoretical corrective to an overly ordered and patterned picture of reality.[84]

83 David Kinsley. *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the HinduReligiousTradition,* Berkely:University of California Press, 1975, p-145

84 Sarah Caldwell,*Oh Terrifying Mother: Sexuality, Violence and Worship of the Goddess Kali*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001 2005 p.250

Any analysis of Kodungallur Bharani could not be completed without an understanding of the nature of songs sung by the *velichappatumar* on the occasion of the ritual. These songs called 'Bharani paattu' or 'poora paattu' describe sexual associations in a candid manner. About the origin and practice of these songs during Bharani, a variety of stories are prevalent. A version is associated with Kali's ambivalent relationship with Siva. **S**he is presented both as his consort and daughter, and often plays the role of inciting him to dangerous activity than to be controlled by him. The feminine picture of Kāli after the killing of Darika is terrifying, A naked and intoxicated female-dark, bloodstained, and disheveled-dancing on the prostrate body of Shiva, her husband, with her tongue lolling out, wearing nothing except a garland of human heads around her neck, a girdle of severed human hands around her waist, and infant corpses as earrings. To appease Kali, it is believed *bhutas* used obscene songs, dance and sacrifice. It is said that *velichappatumar* engage in singing such songs of overt sexuality both to remind and give pleasure to her of own sexuality. Such an explanation for singing on sexuality of the goddess is applicable to Kannagi whose conjugal life with Kovalan was unsatisfactory; her fury after the death of Kovalan was uncontrollable. Caldwell gives another explanation that Bhadrakāli is modeled on a virgin female, who suffers from unfulfilled desire for sex and procreation, whose lack of fulfillment is one source of anger, and who requires the blood-sacrifice of a male to cool and satisfy her 'thirst'.[85] Another version is connected to the repression of Jainism or Buddhism or cruelty against lower castes by upper castes Brahmin community. It said that, obscene songs are sung with the intension of driving away these 'polluting' people. Yet another legend says that it to ward off diseases like small pox that Bharani is celebrated each year. The main aim of the songs is to invoke the goddess and the *velichappatumar* begin narrating songs about Bhagavati's sexuality. In the process they dance and begin to undergo possession. At this point the possession is mild and apparently controlled. During the ritual performance, the *velichappatu* engages in wounding with the

85 Sarah Caldwell, *Oh Terrifying Mother: Sexuality, Violence and Worship of the Goddess Kali*, Oxford University Press, 2001,p-167

sickle with the accompaniment of Bharani songs. These ritual actions are aimed at the specific result, of improving health, ensuring fertility and most importantly, getting the blessing of the Bhagavati.

The ritual Bharani is a way of understanding the sacredly profane . Human beings engage in rituals mainly because it enables them to mediate and balance interactions with multifarious nonhuman forces that inhabit the physical and spiritual worlds. Ritual allows practitioners to harness such power in order to (a) translate it to human proportion and render it accessible to human cognition and (b) effect a transformation from one state of being into another. Ritual transformations are typically embraced for the benefit of a community, but also may be used to advance the interests of an individual. Along with these basic features, Bharani ventures to break into the walls of ruthless social norms as form of 'violent' critique, interestingly using the same props that this society denigrates. Of all the rituals at Kodungallur temple, the one that has close connection with the life narrative of Kannagi is the ritual called Bharani.

The concept of 'Liminality' as applied by both Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner are equally important in understanding the complete ritual meaning and motif of *bharani*. As developed by van Gennep the term is used to "refer to in-between situations and conditions that are characterized by the dislocation of established structures, the reversal of hierarchies, and uncertainty regarding the continuity of tradition and future outcomes."[86] Although initially developed as a means to analyze the middle stage in ritual passages, it is "now considered by some to be a master concept in the social and political sciences writ large". Liminality represents a stripping down of structural status and so our conceptualising of it is usually focused more on our interpretation of nature rather than culture as the dominating feature of *liminal* experience. By entering into the ritual space of bharani, velichappatu u performs in a 'peculiar way', hyphening himself from both the upper caste/lower caste social status-quo. Through this image of peculiar 'other' the velichappatu carries

86 Arnold Van-Gennep. *The Rites Of Passage*. London: Routledge, 1960.p-55

forward powerful symbols of preservation and resistance. Before coming to the Kodungallur temple, he was called by caste names, names which associate him with a particular way of life regarded as 'tribal/ lower caste/inferior'. But while going through the ritual 'catharsis' of *kāutheendal* they are at the threshold or enjoying liminality and by doing so puts pressure on the social structure. As Turner calls it is 'anti-structure', the bottom up struggle for change. Bharani is a ritual model where social norms are under question and we should understand it as a means to understand the panorama of a counter culture and the experience of individuals at counter cultural protests.

Liminal subjects are "neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial."[87] The aim of the *velichappatumar* is to perform their way of worshipping the goddess but in turn they are critiquing the arrangement of positions or statuses in society. They are voicing a strong opposition to structure, behaving the 'incomprehensible' according to certain privileged standards of society. According to Turner what is brought out in liminality what he calls *communitas*, a term he adopted with a different meaning from Paul Goodman. It would be illustrated that the *communitas* as used by Turner is absent at Kodungallur because of two major reasons:- firstly during Bharani, only 'lower castes' are performing at the temple ; secondly, it is a rallying cry for an equal space, an equal participation in serving the deity.

For Turner, 'anti-structure' produces social action and cooperation which he calls *communitas*[88], meaning all positive aspects of community and togetherness. *Communitas* is marked by individual freedom, ignoring structure and promoting spontaneity. At Kodungallur, such an 'equal participation' is unavailable, as the upper caste Brahmins consider Bharani and the presence of the lower caste in large numbers as an act of pollution. Therefore,

87 Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure.*USA: Rutgers.1969, p- 95

88 Closely related to Turner's concept of anti-structure/*communitas* is Mikhail Bakhtin's theorizing of the carnival's subversive facets. Of carnival, Bakhtin wrote that it celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. [1984:10]

Brahmin ritual specialists stay away from the days of lower caste worship. After '*kaavu theendal*' temple is closed for seven days and these are the days for 'mourning' the 'disaster' occurred on the purity of the temple. In fact, normal rituals to the Bhagavati are restored only after a month of re-establishment and during this period all acts of recreation and enjoyment are strictly prohibited. All these acts of compensation and revamping demonstrate the lack of an equivalent, all encompassing religious atmosphere which in turn reflects on the diseased social structure.

According to caste hierarchy, untouchables were supposed to be at *oru theendapaadu akale* meaning 'at an appropriate distance'. If the "liminal," in Turner's writing, is the others' conception of chaos, it is simultaneously their uneasiness of a non cultural substratum of human existence: "naked, un accommodated man," dominated by bio psychical rather than rational ideation and by the organic imperatives of the body. To be considered polluting or act in a polluting way from a Tantric perspective is a form of empowerment. Devotees take part in a ritual counter-structure in which an alternate view of the goddess defines the reality. Their offering of themselves by blood or vow gives them the benefit of the goddess's sakti and protection and appears to be subjugation to her. Perhaps the enactment of pollution preserves this power and subjugation at the level of social structure and revitalizes the devotees during the festival.[89]

The particular emancipator and transformative effects of such rituals have been figured variously in anthropology, literary studies, and social history. On the one hand, the subversive nature of Bharani objectifies and in so doing deconstructs the quotidian structure of the society and prompts a reconsideration of the way we perceive, order of things in general. It is our preconceived notions about purity that is in trouble, what we consider '*theendal*' or polluting. Bharani projects that mirror towards society where all those it wanted to suppress as 'polluting' takes shape itself as the object of ridicule and thus instigates the possibility for critical perspectives on that culture. In the festival of Bharani,

89 J.M.Gentes, 'Scandalizing Goddess at Kodungallur'. http://nirc.nanzan-u.ac.jp/publications/afs/pdf/a918.pdf, 1992, p.309

the veliccapptumar deemphasizes caste level and sect *per se* and deals with beliefs about the nature of the goddess and the ritual interaction with her. Opponents of the festival activities object vehemently to the style and substance of the worship, to the use of obscene lyrics, the chaotic dancing, and the self-mutilation that the devotees say the goddess needs and wants.

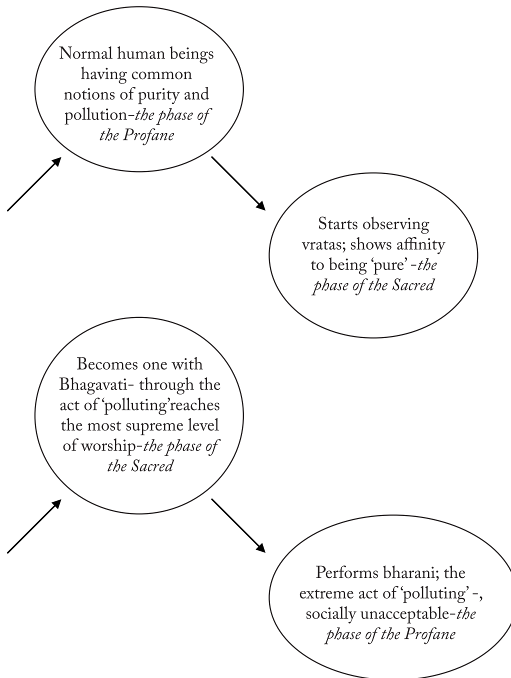
The Bharani demonstrates the blurring of lines between the sacred/profane[90].Claude Lévi-Strauss in *The Savage Mind*, 1962 underlines that the sacrificial rite establishes a relation between two polar terms in which at the starting point (sacred-profane) there exists no relation whatsoever. The sacrifice, the sacrificial rite achieves the binding of both polar terms through a series of successive identifications that give sense to the process itself. The ritual is then the form of the cultural expression that manifests the juxtaposition of those two realities we have named sacred and profane. The evolving of Bharani as a ritual extravaganza also has its transformation through the blurring lines of sacred and profane. Interestingly Bharani's complete circle is evolved out of a chain of processes that switch from the axis of sacred to the axis of profane. *Velichappatu*'s ritual transformation gets completed only in the course of journeying the various levels of the sacred-profane. In the beginning he is a normal social being[91], bound by societal rules-which I would like to call as the *velichappatu*'s phase of the profane. Later we he prepares for the Bharani festival, the *velichappatu* abstain from certain forms of 'pollution' popular among the social order. Here his activities are on the large part is in conformity with the upper caste Hindu pollution codes. This abstention from pollutants he believes will prepare him to perform the most respectful form of worship-the sacredly profane act of Bharani. Bharani both presents and symbolizes the 'profane' in its most pristine form because all

90 Mainly on the basic level, there are two major ways of defining these two terms. One is the idea of referring the concrete world as profane; the supernatural world as sacred. Second, the 'cultured' behaviour of a particular sect is considered as sacred; the opposite as 'primitive'/uncultured'. It is in this second sense that I mostly used these terms.

91 To call velichappatu a 'social being' in the beginning stage doesn't mean to denote that he 'changes' into something 'un-societal' in the phases to come. This is a peripheral distinction while applying sacred-profane.

those elements classified as profane, for example frenzied body movements, blood, obscene songs. At the shrine what they observe the five elements known as 'panchamakara' the 'five Ms': madya (wine), mamsa (meat), matsya (fish), mudra (rice or grain), and maithuna(Sanskrit for "union" and coition). Going through the profane or celebrating the body accompanied by blood and ritual obscenity takes devotees to the supernatural plane where they become one with the Bhagavati. Performing the goddess and achieving her blessing is the supreme act of worship and devotion. Velichappatumar return to their places taking not only blessing but the goddess herself in them.

Phases of Purity and Pollution (Sacred and Profane) in the Ritual Transformation of the Velichappatumar



The shrine is ritually polluted with blood sacrifice, filth, obscenity and possession. The goddess is here, as the priest indicated is in unequivocally fierce mood, and is symbolically

linked with the menstruating virgin. The angry mood of Kodungallur Bhagavati, it is believed, can be alleviated with vast quantities of blood and obscenity. The rituals at Bharani indicate that it is indeed anger, heat, and sexual desire which dominate the fierce mood of the lowland goddess. And this state is in turn a metaphor for the earth in the hot dry months of the summer season, when Bharani is celebrated.

The concepts of sacred (purity) and profane (pollution) pose an intriguing puzzle for cultural anthropologists. Beginning at the end of the nineteenth century, numerous anthropologists have examined the rituals that various societies developed to mark the boundaries between what they regarded as pure and what they regarded as impure. Those boundaries most often involve sexuality, food, hygiene, and other familiar activities. Anthropologists are intrigued by the cultural divisions between purity and pollution because they help to explain other cultural phenomena, human ecology, and the source "of the most deeply held of cultural beliefs" that "arouse powerful feelings of veneration and disgust for those who hold them."[92]

The standard treatment is Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. Her study of numerous "primitive" cultures led her to see two ways in which the idea of pollution operates as a response to violations of societal boundaries. First, characterizing something as pollution seeks to influence the behavior of others. Second, the label of pollution can defend general views of the social order. In either instance, "[a] polluting person is always in the wrong."[93] Douglas explains, pollution beliefs are designed to enforce boundaries which certain things or people should not cross. Pollution, according to Douglas, is about boundaries. Pollution beliefs reinforce the social boundaries established by a society by designating which things are allowed in which places. So, famously, Douglas describes

92 Andrew S. Buckser, Purity and Pollution, in 3 ENCYCLOPEDIA OF CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY 1045 (David Levinson & Melvin Ember eds., 1996)*supra* note 127, at 1046

93 Mary Douglas. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo.* London: Routledge, 1966. p.114

dirt as "matter out of place."[94] Each society establishes pollution beliefs to reinforce boundaries. The process of establishing these boundaries demonstrates that the very idea of pollution is socially constructed. Neil Evernden explains that "in any society, we find ideas about pollution being used as a means of social control." This is exactly what we see at Kodungallur; both in calling a set of ritual practices by a particular section of people as an en-route to pollution and in tagging them as 'uncouth' or 'uncivilized'. 'Lower caste's' pollution solely depends on the notion of upper caste Brahmin, it is Brahmins or other so called higher castes who categorize Bharani as 'pollution', because for them somebody is violating the boundaries drawn by them. That means presence of certain 'threatening' or 'undesirable people' gives rise to an additional set of pollution beliefs. Douglas refers to "caste pollution," a term which is especially common – but not unique to – Hindu societies. Mary Douglas describes "dirt" – the source of many pollution beliefs – as "matter out of place." Many of these pollutants cluster around concerns about sexuality, bodily fluids, death, violence, food, and undesirable people. Sexuality is an especially prominent source of pollution beliefs. The treatment of certain aspects of sexuality as pollution is often accompanied by the view that bodily fluids are polluting. "All bodily emissions, even blood or pus from a wound, are sources of impurity," according to Douglas's description of the beliefs of Brahmins. Others, for example, those concerning the propriety of eating venison or fish are subject to local variation. The eating beef and domestic pork and drinking alcohol are other popular pollutants.

The presence of the lower caste body, songs expressing sexuality, trance and blood are regarded as the foremost units of pollution of the Bharani festival. The atmosphere of Bharani is full of exhilaration and devotion. It seems that the festival is guided by the principle of 'heat and noise'; heat because it is conducted in the hottest of months April-May and the rhythmic dancing and singing fills the temple premises with clamour. Bharani is a ritual performance in trance. The state of trance is an instrument of ritualistic and religious importance as it provides the basis of

94 Ibid, p-36

experiencing the sacred or the supernatural. The ritual procession of Bharani includes moving the body in rhythm, singing songs with explicit sexual narration, intentionally nicking the skin on the forehead to induce bleeding as well as the more common practice of rhythmically beating bamboo sticks. The most direct communication with bhagavati is gained through possession-trance ritual. It can be seen that at Kodungallur the intersection of gender with caste builds a curious dialectic of beliefs and practices within the ritualized domain of the worship of a historical figure and an 'imagined' deity. The historical as well as ritual features associated with the Bhagavati temple at Kodungallur validate *Śilappadikāram*'s claim of building an abode of worship for Kannagi/Pattini. It is significant to understand the nature of the deity and its cult, with special focus on the worship pattern at Kodungallur, as well as the ritual the significance of *Bharani* at Kodungallur in determining its connection with *Śilappadikāram*.

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