

THE THEMES OF CHASTITY AND JUSTICE IN SILAPPADHIKARAM

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ABSTRACT

Esteemed for its nuanced narrative, the epic, Silappadhikaram, centres on Kannagi, a female protagonist, and her journey through life and fate, culminating in her apotheosis. This makes the work notable for its feminist perspective, contrasting sharply with contemporary Sanskrit literature that primarily celebrated kings and gods. The text's uniqueness lies in its exploration of the intertwined themes of chastity and justice, particularly through a subversive female character. The narrative emphasises chastity as a potent force, capable of both protection and destruction. Kannagi's confrontation with the unjust Pandiyan king and the subsequent destruction of his city underscores the transformative power of righteous indignation. Ultimately, her apotheosis validates the virtues of chastity and justice, framing them as divine imperatives that transcend human flaws.

Keywords: Silappadhikaram, Chastity, Apotheosis, Sangam Literature, Karma, Dharma, Karpu.

Introduction

This paper delves into themes of Chastity and Justice, both individually and collectively. Chastity, or Karpu, includes purity, fidelity, domesticity, and patience, and Kannagi's unwavering loyalty and virtuous conduct exemplify it. Justice, depicted through symbols like the sceptre and parasol, underscores a king's duty to govern righteously. Kannagi's transition from private to public spheres highlights the blend of these themes, as her chastity empowers her quest for justice, subverting traditional roles.

Silappadhikaram (lit., "The tale of an Anklet") is counted among the greatest and the earliest Sangam texts; and is ascribed to Ilango Adigal, a Jain monk. It is an exceptionally composed epic, and its eminence lies because it features a female protagonist and primarily narrates her journey through the advances life and fate make her way, ultimately leading to her apotheosis. Ergo, critics often consider it a feminist text. In an age when Sanskrit literature sang praises of the Kings and the Gods, Tamil literature's spirit to extol a mere mortal female and castigate unjust royals made it stand out. Another noteworthy and intriguing attribute of this text is that its major themes are portrayed as inextricably intermeshed and are foregrounded through a subversive female character. Therefore, explaining these themes and their trajectories becomes essential to appreciate this text truly. This paper explores and analyses these themes of chastity and justice, both in isolation and as an amalgamation.

The prominence of chastity and justice themes is not difficult to trace, since these twin themes are relatively more explicit and are mentioned persistently right from the beginning of the text. The prologue to this text puts forth three vital truths of life, two of which deal with the themes of chastity and justice:

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*“We shall compose a poem, with songs,
To explain these truths: even kings, if they break
The law, have their necks wrung by dharma;
Great men everywhere commend
Pattini of renowned fame; and Karma ever
Manifests itself, and is fulfilled.”*

Moreover, despite being Silappadhikaram a trilogy, the themes of chastity and justice remain constant in all three: Puharkkandam valorises chastity as an ideal praxis, Maduraikkandam portrays an interplay of chastity and justice, and Vanchikkandam legitimises these virtues through the protagonist's apotheosis. This reiteration of the themes hints at their primary importance.

The theme of chastity has been portrayed as a blend of various ideas and nuances. The concept of Chastity/Karpu includes not only being pure, self-restraint and a virgin but also ideas like unquestioning and innocent conduct, complete fidelity and devotion to one's husband, submission to domestic chores and expectations, and patience and forbearance. It is portrayed as a woman's ideal praxis and a wife's dharma.

The poet idolises these ideas through various comparisons and through the traits embodied by the protagonist. For instance, the poet compares Kannagi, the protagonist, to Arundhati three times, who is hailed as the epitome of chastity and likened to the stable Northern star (Alcor) that complements its companion, the Vashishtha star (Mizar). This reflects that women should harbour unwavering fidelity and complement their partners through thick and thin. Furthermore, lines 110-111 in Canto 2 - “And beyond all praise was Kannagi's name renowned for making a home”, suggest that women who commit themselves to their Agam domains or private spheres are worthy of reverence. Also, Kovalan's aaru viru (song) in Canto 7 valorises Kaveri's patience, forbearance and unquestioning conduct. His song implicitly instructs women to be patient and tolerant towards a husband who has strayed, for it is a wife's patient and chaste behaviour on which a husband's prosperity depends. We witness that Kannagi abides by such social expectations by accepting Kovalan despite his infidelity with Madhavi, the courtesan.

Similarly, the idea of justice is portrayed through various symbols and nuances. Madhavi's aaru viru (song) in canto 7 idolises good governance, fame and compassion of a king and implicitly points towards the exemplary conduct of a husband. Moreover, the text frequently employs various symbols of justice and kingship, such as a sceptre, parasol, bell, etc. Each symbol delineates a trait and duty which a righteous king is expected to embody— the sceptre stands for justice; as long as a king's rule is just, the sceptre remains upright; the parasol signifies the king's protection of his subjects; the bell acts as a medium through which the subjects can ask for the king's attention. Thus, ensuring justice, civil rights, and good governance is a king's dharma. The tale also hinges on the primary importance of evidence and de règle procedure to give an unbiased ruling and justice. Both Kovalan in his past life and the Pandiyan king fail to do so and ultimately face the consequences of their karma through their undignified deaths. Here, karma works as a mechanism that brings justice through their deaths. This establishes the coalition of inevitable karma and justice. Karma is a mechanism of justice since it rewards or penalises depending on how a person fares in life.

Furthermore, Kovalan's execution sets the wheels in motion for the protagonist's subversion. This brings forth the blend of themes of chastity and justice. Kannagi transcends from the Agam (private) domain to the Puram (public) domain, thus imbibing and fusing the traits of the two spheres. This transcendence is fuelled by her chastity, desperation to protect Kovalan's integrity, and her drive to unveil the follies of an unjust king and establish justice. Interestingly, the Agam sphere praxis is at odds with her desire for retribution and justice, but justice could not have been imparted without this subversion. This is the paradox of her subversion.

The interplay of chastity and justice, resulting from subversion, reveals itself through various dimensions. Among them, the most salient is the reflection of chastity as a source of power, a power so fierce that one can wield it both as a protective and destructive force. The protagonist draws the same might from her Karpu (power of chastity) to fuel her vengeance against the erring Pandiyan king and to impart justice. When she confronts the king, she holds nothing back. She calls the king “impetuous” and breaks her anklet of gems in his face to protect Kovalan's innocence. She delivers the verdict of his adharma by exposing the superficiality of his reign and failed justice. She acts as a counter-hegemonic force as her virtues and might surpass the authority of an unjust regime. From here on, her power takes the shape of a destructive force. She forges her chastity into a shield and her anklet into a weapon to

bring down the entire realm of the unjust. The very anklet that acted as a catalyst in Kovalan's execution becomes the weapon that Kannagi wields against the king, leading to his death. This is another paradox. Here the anklet can also be seen as an instrument of retributive justice, since it is the anklet that Kannagi employs as evidence to deliver justice. Her anklet becomes her insignia and reflects her entire being; it symbolises everything she stands for. She is the paradigm of chastity and femininity, an agent of retributive justice, a force that is both protective and destructive, and so is the anklet. She takes on a king and an entire complicit structure single-handedly in her sheer will and power within her chastity. Eric Miller says, "In my hometown, New York City, we have a pessimistic saying: You cannot fight City Hall, but Kannagi proved that you can fight City Hall". Moreover, her quest for justice does not end with the king's death; she punishes the city too, since the entire immoral structure has failed her and the righteous. The envoi to canto 20 rightly deduces that – "Dharma itself will become the God of death to those who do evil." (78)

It is interesting to note that it is not just the protagonist who wields such power. It is interesting to note that not only the protagonist wields such power, but the seven chaste women of Puhar are also revered for their chastity and virtues. Their extreme dedication in guarding their chastity and their husbands particularly earn them veneration. They, too, draw strength from their Karpus, like Kannagi. It is also believed that a chaste woman can cause the skies to shower in times of severe distress. Therefore, the power of chastity can ensure protection, reign in the forces of nature and evil deeds, and bring destruction.

People also revered Puhar for its just kings, as evident in Canto 20. Interestingly, the protagonist, the seven chaste women and the Chola kings share the same kingdom as inhabitants. Therefore, it can also be inferred that though the notion of chastity and justice are put on a pedestal in all three kingdoms, it is the Chola kingdom that is seen as a yardstick of chastity and justice.

Another facet that the amalgamation of chastity and justice exhibits is the contest between the notions of kingship and chastity. Intriguingly, these notions share both a nexus and a disjunction. One can notice that Kannagi's confrontation with the Pandiyan King contrasts the values they harbour individually. She counters the authority of a king; this reveals a contestation between kingship and chastity. She becomes a champion and a 'messiah' when she fights against injustice instead of dying on her husband's pyre and revamps to bring down the entire complicit structure for the public good. Her rise as a reformer valorises chastity as an overriding virtue in context with righteousness and just order. Herein, one can also notice a nexus; chastity can aid kingship in ensuring an egalitarian and just society. As mentioned earlier, people believed that the presence of chaste women ensured timely rains and good governance. This brings us to an inference that chastity and kingship are interdependent authorities; a just king should safeguard women, while the power of chastity would ensure that a king follows a righteous path.

One can also notice that the protagonist has repeated comparisons and interactions with the divine; this foretells her apotheosis and, to some degree, defies her way ahead of her formal apotheosis. Her heroism and righteousness leave the gods no choice but to aid her cause, either fated or not. These interventions and, ultimately, her apotheosis by the Chera king legitimises the virtues of chastity and justice that she upholds. Here, her chastity stands valorised, and kingship gets humanised. Also, she becomes a divine agent of justice and dharma. R. Parthasarathy fittingly says: "Kannagi represents a Tamil belief in a divine mechanism of retributive justice to those whom human law fails to protect."

The text explicitly discusses the ideas of chastity and justice and presents a vivid interplay of these themes, both in isolation and in an amalgam, with the themes of karma and dharma. It hinges on the symbolic journey of a dynamic protagonist whose virtues are reiterated throughout the three books. Kannagi transcends from a passive homemaker to an active reformer; this subversion enables the readers to view the epic from an extra dimension and helps them better comprehend the significance of the themes of chastity and justice. The poet entwines these concepts of chastity and justice to put forth the idea of chastity as a source of power, not impotence. Her apotheosis reasserts the idea that chastity, sincere devotion, just conduct, and righteousness are rewarding and revered by both the man and the Divine.

Conclusion

Silappadhikaram stands as a monumental work in Tamil literature, not only for its literary excellence but also for its profound thematic exploration of chastity and justice through the lens of its female protagonist, Kannagi. In a period where literature predominantly celebrated divine and royal male figures, this epic's focus on a mortal woman's journey and her ultimate deification is revolutionary.

Kannagi's transformation from a devoted wife to a powerful agent of retributive justice challenges traditional gender roles and extols the virtues of feminine strength and moral integrity. Her story underscores the intertwined nature of chastity and justice, demonstrating that true power lies in righteousness and unwavering virtue. By weaving these themes with symbols of kingship and governance, the text critiques the societal and judicial failures of the time, advocating for a just and egalitarian order. Kannagi's eventual apotheosis not only reaffirms her virtues but also elevates her to divine status, underscoring the belief that moral purity and just conduct are paramount. *Silappadhikaram*, thus, is not merely an epic but a timeless testament to the enduring power of virtue and the quest for justice, resonating deeply with readers across ages.

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