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Lakshmi Holmstrom's *Kannagi* : A Feminist Perspective**Dr. Mythili Mukund***Maharshi Dayanand College, Mumbai (MS), India***ABSTRACT**

The present paper attempts an in-depth analysis of Ilango Adigal's *Silappadikaram* from feminist perspective. The epic was originally written in Tamil and now has been translated into English as *Kannagi* by Lakshmi Holmstrom. The poem vividly presents the life styles of Tamil people of the time in all their forms: the sophisticated urban life, the small peasant villages, the village people and also the forest tribes. The poem presents *Kannagi* as a very relevant figure in the world today who can be considered as the global symbol of justice and of dignity of the individual.

Key Words: *Kannagi*, Epic poem, feminism, individuality.

This paper is an attempt to look at the translation of Ilango Adigal's *Silappadikaram*, a Tamil epic, into English as *Kannagi* written by Lakshmi Holmstrom from a feminist perspective.

The story of Kovalan and *Kannagi* is one of the oldest legends of the Tamil country. The earliest Tamil poetry called 'Sangam Poetry' has been collected into eight anthologies and 'Silappadikaram' was composed by Ilango Adigal, younger brother of Chera Chenguttavan and a possible date for the composition of 'Silappadikaram' could be 500 A.D.

The Tamil country that Ilango wants the readers to imagine is of the sangam age. Its limits were the Venkadam hills in the north and Kumari in the south. It is divided into three ancient kingdoms - Chola, Pandiya and Chera with their capitals - Puhar, Madurai and Vanji respectively.

One of the interesting features of 'Silappadikaram' is the vivid account it gives of the variety of life styles in the Tamil country, the sophisticated urban life within the ancient walled cities, the small peasant villages outside, the village people and the forest tribes.

The story illustrates three truths: that kings who deviate from the path of righteousness will cause their own destruction; that chastity and steadfastness are admired by the truly great; and that all of us must necessarily bear the consequences of the past deeds.

It is named after Kannagi's anklet which symbolizes both hope and destruction in the poem. It is realistic in its careful delineation of its characters and their motives. The story of Kovalan, Kannagi and Madhavi may be an illustration of the working of fate; Kannagi begins as a conventional character and ends as a goddess. Ilango must have been unusual both for a Jain and an ascetic, for the theme of chaste and rebellious wife is above all a celebration of human love.

In retelling this story Lakshmi Holmstrom has followed the text of 'Silappadikaram' very closely and has made no major changes though it is a free adaptation. She has shortened some descriptions and didactic passages but has not tampered with the legends and supernatural events which are essential to the atmosphere of the story. 'Kannagi' is a creative modern version of Ilango's Tamil classic 'Silappadikaram'- the tragic tale of Kovalan and Kannagi.

The two merchants of Puhar, Masattuvan and Manaykan arranged the marriage between their children Kovalan and Kannagi respectively. While Kovalan was described as 'a dark skinned, finely featured youth who bore himself proudly and spoke well', Kannagi was shown as 'a

girl with skin like beaten gold, a quiet girl with a rare self possession.' It clearly reveals how even the colour of the bridegroom is crucial and how women are being stereotyped.

From the beginning though she was needed into the mould she looked as 'solemn and remote as a small goddess' around the fire during their wedding. Kovalan compared her to 'the peacock for her grace and movement and parrot for her pretty speech'. Living in a patriarchal society, Kannagi got married at the age of twelve and she knew that Kovalan's parents looked to her to maintain the traditions and honour of her family. Therefore she maintained a busy life, observing fast days and feast days, receiving friends and relatives, giving alms to the poor and feeding wandering merchants. After three years they shifted to a separate mansion which was built by Masattuvan.

In the dancers' street in Puhar, some years after their marriage, a young girl Madhavi got ready for her first public dance performance. Her mother Chitrapati boasted of being the descendents of the celestial Urvashi herself. She made her daughter Madhavi learn dance through various masters. She also educated her, tutored her in how to dress and conduct herself and also to converse intelligently and wittily. Sometimes she made her write poems to set themes. Madhavi worked very hard and then started with a 'natural gift for dancing and quick witted intelligence'. She looked strikingly beautiful with perfect features, which was lit with vivacity and laughter.

Her dance performance was arranged and nobody consulted her for anything. Though she looked delightful and happy, she subverted from within the community. She resisted giving public performance but then she had to accept her lot, as she had to live in the dancers' community. She could overcome her nervousness and began to dance, 'forgetting her mother, the audience and the king, everything except the music and dance'.

After her faultless performance she was considered as the most promising of Puhar's dancers. She was no longer 'the daughter and pupil for whom every choice was made by others'. With an awareness and understanding of her capacities, she tried to assert herself with her head held high. Kovalan who usually attended all the music and dance performances of Puhar was so much arrested and bewitched by her beauty and wit that he bought her wreath for thousand gold coins as was the custom and seemed to have forgotten his home and Kannagi.

Kannagi was bewildered and realized with a shock that she and her husband had grown much apart. As an ideal Hindu woman she meekly accepted her lot which, she was told, was determined by her acts in the last birth. She felt very hurt but 'she said nothing'. As Indira Mahindra says, "The symbols of married women - bangles, a red dot on the forehead, red powder in the parting of the hair, khol in the eyes, colourful clothes, jewellery, spicy food - all these are meant to be symbols of happiness, whatever the treatment she may get from her

husband and his family". But Kannagi did not wear flowers or jewellery. Even when Kovalan's parents visited her she remained silent because she did not want to be in some way 'disloyal to Kovalan'. She remained very meek, docile and patient.

In the meantime Madhavi's house was rearranged to suit her own tastes and became a lively centre for artists, musicians and poets. Kovalan was amazed at Madhavi's great gift for enjoying everything. When they had a daughter, the naming ceremony was celebrated and he spent lavishly. Madhavi continued to be radiantly happy both in her private life with Kovalan and her growing daughter Manimekalai and also in her public performances. Even the finest of musicians considered it an honour to accompany her due to her mastery in dance and popularity. Since Kovalan used to spend lavishly, his ancestral property started dwindling away.

In Puhar, Indra festival had been celebrated with great pomp. Madhavi found Kovalan in a strange and sullen mood, without taking part in the merry making. She did not know that he had joined a small group of people gathered around a Jain nun who was preaching the value of a life of restraint and discipline. She made a special effort 'to beautify herself for him'.

With great reluctance Kovalan accompanied Madhavi to the seashore for the festival where he sang songs which seemed to describe a cruel, heartless but beautiful fisher girl with eyes as sharp as arrowheads who drew men after her to their destruction. She took the lute from him and

sang as if in answer. Her theme was that of a lonely and forsaken fisher girl lamenting for her absent lover. Madhavi wanted to assure Kovalan that she would keep faith in him whatever he might choose to think. But he misunderstood her thinking that she had lost her heart to someone else and was trying to wrap her deceit. He left her house all of a sudden.

When she sent a garland with a message through her servant Vasanta Malai, Kovalan says, "Yes, she gives quite a convincing performance. But you see, I know by now that it is all a game to her. She is after all an actress". She was completely marginalized in spite of her being so affectionate towards Kovalan. Even though Madhavi was educated, skillful and intelligent, she was always considered as the 'other' in the community for no fault of hers. Even the women of her community envied her as she had a relationship with the richest pearl merchant of Puhar.

After listening to the preaching of the nun he changed his mind, left Madhavi in wilderness, joined Kannagi and went to Madurai with just her anklets with a hope to start a business. It was Kavundi, the nun who accompanied them to Madurai and helped them a lot. Unfortunately when Kovalan went to sell the anklet, he was misunderstood by the king due to the cunningness of the goldsmith who had stolen one of the queen's anklets and was killed by the king's soldiers.

Kannagi could hardly believe it. She cried out saying: "O What shall I do now?... How can I consent to bear it all humbly and

meekly? Am I to be as abject and useless as those widows who can only make terrible vows at their husbands' funeral pyres? He loved and he is dead. How am I to live a half life without him, making futile pilgrimages to holy rivers?" Then as if divinely inspired, her face, blazing with anger, proceeded to Pandiya's palace. She was no more a submissive and meek woman as she was before. When she broke open her anklet king Nedunjezhayan understood that it was filled with rubies whereas Koperundevi's anklets were filled with pearls. He stared aghast and collapsed immediately and with him the queen also died.

From a traditional Hindu wife, she was transformed into a goddess and called on the god of fire to burn the city. She said "Spare the priests and all virtuous men. Spare faithful women, old people, children and cows, but do not on any account spare the wicked". The fire raged and enveloped the whole city until everything was in ruin. The other deities of Madurai pleaded to her and when she calmed down, the fire had also abated. It was said that after fourteen days Kovalan descended upon her and she went with him to the other world.

Throughout the book she had been depicted as a submissive conventional wife but suddenly in the end, she turned out to be a goddess. Even though she became a rebel and fought for justice, she was also regarded as the 'other' by making her a goddess. As the Tamil novelist Siva Shankari says, "As long as Kannagi accepted her position patiently, the patriarchal society acknowledged her as one among them. But

the moment she became a rebel, they could not do anything but to glorify her as a goddess and considered her as the 'other' of all the chaste women of the Tamil country". The twentieth century Tamil poet Vairamuthu points out that both Kannagi and Madhavi were considered as the 'other' in their own communities. Kannagi who was very conventional turned out to be a Goddess whereas Madhavi who was a rebel initially became a Buddhist nun.

The events related to Kannagi have high influence in the traditions and culture of Tamil Nadu and Kerala. Kannagi or Kannagi Amman is eulogized as the epitome of chastity and is still worshipped as goddess. She is praised for her extreme devotion to her husband in spite of his adulterous behaviour. She is worshipped as goddess Pathini in Sri Lanka by the Sinhalese Buddhists, Kannagi Amman by the Sri Lanka Tamil Hindus and as Kodungallur Bhagvathy and Attukal Bhagvathy in South Indian state of Kerala.

It must be noted that Kannagi is also viewed as a brave woman who could demand justice directly from the king and even dared to call him 'unenlightened king'. The point here is that while she was behaving in a non-interfering manner with her domestic problems, she was no meek woman that would brook injustice in the rule of the law.

The central identity of the protagonist is that of a married woman. Because she is a good married woman who forgives her husband and is chaste, she becomes powerful. Her grief - that of losing

her husband - also gives her the moral right to burn down a city. It is interesting to note that the epic never talks of the couple having a child, because epics tend to source women's power to chastity - motherhood being a venerated state gives them the benefit of virtue. Besides, anger in a mother is read as being an extension of protective maternal instinct, as opposed to the denial of femininity. Kannagi never seeks justice for herself within the sacred relationship. She does not question it. Her rage is justified not only because of the injustice of killing a man for a crime he did not commit, it is more so the injustice of having widowed her.

Kannagi has been criticized as being foolish to fight on behalf of her husband who had done her injustice. It is one of the mysteries of life that many a woman continues to love her man despite his failings. Vairamuthu, a very popular Tamil poet, in his first book on poems 'Vaigarai Megangal' has written that the reason for Kovalan leaving Kannagi is because the latter does not know how to keep her husband to herself.

A well known column writer Gnani wrote in 'Anandha Vikatan', a Tamil magazine that Kannagi is just a teddy bear doll. Strangely he made his comments just a day before the reinstallation of the statue of Kannagi. People were shocked and copies of the magazines were burnt in protest.

Eric Miller's work on "Tamil Nadu's Silappadhikaram, Epic of the Ankle Bracelet; Ancient Story and Modern Identity" is extremely interesting and insightful. He travelled through Tamil Nadu

taking pretty much the same route that Kannagi had travelled, reflecting on contemporary identity in Tamil Nadu. His conversations with people along the route gave him a clearer perspective on why the story of Kannagi appeals to the psyche and is seen as the representative of the culture. The political leaders of the world should know the story of Kannagi and how the Pandiyan king punished himself when he realized he had made a mistake. Eric Miller says, "In my home town, New York city, we have a pessimistic saying: 'You cannot fight

City Hall'. But Kannagi proved that you can fight City Hall, and this is the core of the story. That one person - with no money, in a place that was not native to her, with no family in sight – could go before the highest civic authority, and speak, and win her case - that is great."

Kannagi is a very relevant figure in the world today and she is the global symbol of justice and of the dignity of the individual. Definitely she is not a teddy bear doll.

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