



# Unraveling the Ideas of Chastity, Embodied By Kannaki in Śilappadikāram and the Changing Concept of Femininity: An Eastern Perspective

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## Abstract:

For centuries, Feminism has been a broadly examined subject across the globe. However, women faces a difficult situation as they are still need due acknowledgment in the different fields that they work. This article examines how Kannagi, the image of virtue began and gained meaning; the connection between chastity and body, its patriarchal portrayal in *Śilappadikāram*, and comprehends the problematic working of female sexuality as a patriarchy-defined society characterized framework in the select stories of Kannagi. In a nation like India with its well-established tradition and culture, women assume a crucial part in the improvement of society. Numerous women as well as women's activist authors from the nation like Toru Dutt, Kamala Das, and Arundhati Roy, had followed their western partners however the twentieth Century journalists like Mahasweta Devi, Sarojini Sahoo, C. S. Lakshmi had cut their own specialty in the field of feminism. The story from Tamil is a folklore ballad called Kovalan Katai while the story from Malayalam, is a poem by T.P. Rajeevan named Kannaki. In the event that '*Kovalan Katai*' is an oral, ancient narrative representation of the myth of Kannagi, the poem '*Kannaki*' is a modern, literacy reading. The study likewise endeavors to frame the political and social contrasts between these two accounts in their particular interpretation of the Kannagi story.

Keywords: Feminism, chastity, patriarchal, western partners, literacy reading.

## Introduction:

The lives of women have never been easy and not just in the past but in the present too. Every period brings forth a new challenge that must be dealt with. When compared to the women of the west, eastern women are raised in a different social and cultural setup. In a general sense, the Eastern world is considered a conservative and closed system with its orthodox views by the Westerners, whose system appears to be more open and less aggressive. But when reading the critical essays by Western theorists from the 17th to 21st Century, there is more focus on the emancipation of women to a greater extent than any other social cause which appears somewhat similar to narcissism, as the women of the West were

too obsessed with themselves, that they failed to recognize the importance of the equality of sexes. There is always an inner craving in women to reveal herself out of the clutches of the patriarchal community. The reason for the birth of feminism in the West is that the women tried to prove themselves and also felt that they could possibly perform better than their men folk. This had led to a different stream of literature called feminism. It was not essentially seeking freedom, but it sought autonomy of the individual who is not marginalized and seen as a woman or rather being treated as a human.

When compared to India and other South Asian countries only a handful of female writers are found in the other parts of the continent. The reason is these women face economic issues and need to support their families. Hence, they are forced to either leave their education in the middle or seek some job or expected to help their family at home. This has an adverse effect on the mind of women as they are treated like puppets by men who on the other hand enjoy vast freedom.

The present paper focuses on the position of women in the epics in the past from the Vedic period to the present century where the quest for justice and the transformation of the female heroines' changed society.

### **Kannagi, the resonance of a real character?**

Śilappadikāram begins with the marriage of Kannaki, the "noble daughter of a sovereign among merchants" to Kovalan, a similarly righteous man. The ideals of virtue close to this time, for a lady, had a lot to do with her "chastity". Kannaki is depicted as the prime "wife-material", as it were, in a real sense referenced in how "past all recognition was Kannaki's name famous for making a home". Be that as it may, as it so all the time occurs with the men in classical literature, Kovalan definitely goes gaga for Matavi, a mistress, and "under her spell" leaves Kannaki. Courtesans close to this time were the only women to be exceptionally taught, and skilled in arts and crafts traditionally reserved for men. The utilization of "under her spell" nonetheless, focuses on the relatively similar sentiments of the public itself. She is somebody who is nearly "witch-like", somebody who will "take" away the man - by "entrancing" him.

A disclosure that we could go over while perusing these sagas like Śilappadikāram and Manimekalai — we tend to think of epics as male narratives, a story that relates the excursion and change of a male legend — the legends of the western ordinance, like the Iliad and Odyssey.

An examination of how Kannagi as an image of chastity started and obtained meaning; the connection between chastity and body, its patriarchal portrayal in Śilappadikāram, and comprehension of the hazardous working of female sexuality as a male dominant society characterized the framework in the select stories of Kannagi is done in this article.

In her essay 'Professions for Women', Virginia Woolf identifies two significant obstacles which men usually have placed in the way of the female. The first of these Woolf calls 'The Angel in the House'. In Woolf's view, the image of the self-sacrificing, complainant, a pure female, which was used to confine the Victorian woman to the domestic sphere and to control her, continued to haunt the female writer into the twentieth century, urging her to "be sympathetic; be tender; flatter; deceive; use all the arts and wiles of sex. Above all, be pure". (Woolf 285) A woman's capacity to discern her own identity as an artist or for that matter, as an individual gets strictly defined by patriarchal constructions of gender-appropriate behavior. Therefore, 'The Angel in the House' becomes a symbol of the control that male/ patriarchy continues to exercise over the female psyche. Woolf explains: "Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer." (Woolf 285)

Interestingly, the image of the ‘Angel in the house’ has supreme significance in Kannagi’s life story not just because of her portrayal as an all-suffering, passive housewife, but relevant of the ways in which she tries to break free of that image ‘to find herself’. Kannagi, the heroine Śilappadikāram is hailed as the symbol of chastity in Tamil culture. As a chaste and faithful wife, Kannagi is cast in a traditional mold until Kovalan’s death, she stays behind in the background, suffering without complaint the pain and humiliation of her husband’s abandonment. With Kovalan’s death, Kannagi finds herself and rises to full stature in her encounter with the Pandya king. In the Book of Pukar, she is the young and noble wife of Kovalan; in the Book of Madurai she metamorphoses into the custodian of Justice; the Book of Vanci recognizes the power of chastity and starts worshiping her as the goddess Pattini. In Śilappadikāram, Kannagi’s transformation occurs mainly in three 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. At the same time, the character of Madhavi as the lover of Kovalan in Śilappadikāram challenges certain qualities considered to be manifestations of a chaste woman.

The objective of this paper is largely twofold; to analyze how Kannagi as a symbol of chastity originated and acquired meaning; the relationship between chastity and body, its patriarchal representation Śilappadikāram and to understand the problematic working of female sexuality as a patriarchy-defined system in the select narratives of Kannagi. The narrative from Tamil is a folklore ballad called Kovalan Katai and the narrative from Malayalam, is a poem by T. P. Rajeevan titled Kannaki. If Kovalan Katai is an oral, ancient narrative representation of the myth of Kannagi, the poem Kannaki is a modern, literary rereading. The Paper also attempts to outline the political and cultural differences between these two narratives in their respective interpretation of the Kannagi story.

### **Body Wrapped in Chastity: The Patriarchal Trap**

A man is supposed to have such qualities as braveness, virility, and masculinity, and a woman is meant to have motherhood and chastity. While in our culture the “masculine” values comprise sexual potency, the “feminine” values deny or repress sexuality. We are taught to be like Kannagi — a woman who patiently waits for her husband; prays for his prompt return from his lover Matāvi. But it is improper to accept the patriarchal agenda that Kannagi got her fierce energy from containing chastity and unvarying control of sexuality. The portrayal of Kannagi is totally made by following those stereotypical rules acceptable to patriarchy; therefore her image is under patriarchy’s most vicious circle. Such a rationalist elucidation of the Kannagi myth both ends up in a distorted understanding of the role of patriarchy and also overlooks the implication of subjectivity in the lives of women.

Kannagi’s transformation is the consequence or evolution of her controlled sexuality just because her expression of anger against the unjust killing of her husband does not stop at the death of the king. She further uses her body – her breasts to censure the kingdom and transgress those limitations set by society. 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.

Chastity is also the major reason why Kannaki was rewarded. The eight women are not rewarded for their loyalty at heart, but for the lengths they'd go to protect the societal notions of an “ideal” wife. Kannaki is probably raised to the status of a god only because she was chaste. The story would have taken a completely different path if, at any moment, Kannaki deviated from this ideal. Women are again hidden away, or told to hide away, they compromise and they put up with what’s given to them in

marriage-going as far as to rip their own “monkey face” off so that no one lusts after them. And yet, this monkey face must be taken off in front of the husband, the face is not “ideal”.

In this sphere, the question that looms is what consequence does the women like Matavi in Śilappadikāram faces. She is smart and intelligent and by no means a chaste woman. She grieves for Kovalan’s absence but she doesn’t get hung up on it. Not only is it important for the sake of the plot, but it also makes her a mistress more than a courtesan. She isn’t as “equal”, she doesn’t get a say in what is given out to her either. And yet, even if she were to rip off her breasts, it’s not certain that she’d have become a goddess. So, she chooses a “silent resignation”.

Kannaki on the other hand ripped off her breast. This also makes the reader question if the results would have been the same without this action. In Śilappadikāram, her token of “femininity” is taken away, she is all the more fearsome when this happens. And yet again, we see that the woman is rewarded when she is chaste when she chooses to throw away her femininity. She doesn’t need it anymore, it seems. Even though Kovalan is gone, she must remain loyal. Again, it conveys us back to the commencement of Śilappadikāram. “Only chastity is rewarded, none of the loyalty”.

Michel Foucault observes in *The History of Sexuality* that sexuality must not be seen as a drive but “as an especially dense transfer point for relations of power”. It is the various power structures that define various relationships in a patriarchal society including the man-woman relationship. In various perspectives through patriarchy works, myth plays the most significant role as the communicator of values and morals. The myth of Kannagi is not free from the clutches of a male-dominated system in its projection as well as the proliferation of images i.e. good/bad woman, controlling sexuality, and assigning goddesses. Kannagi’s life is both a physical and symbolic journey. Till a particular point in life she disguises herself under the shade of patriarchy, but, presently Kannagi transgresses those traditional qualities of behavior attributed to women and transforms into a revengeful female; full of power and glory. On the other hand, Śilappadikāram keeps silent on the life of Madhavi; it’s never told from her perspective at all. Kannagi and Madhavi are portrayed as opposites, one as the ‘legally wedded wife’ and the other as an ‘illegal concubine’. Kovalan Katai partially offers a different picture and zooms into the psychology of Kovalan and Madhavi. Kannaki on the other hand attempts to recreate the character of Kannagi with a view to redefine her portrayal in myth and effectively uses that as a powerful tool to voice against the wicked sexualization of the female body. This paper clearly moves from sexualization to agency, initiating a counter-narrative by a woman who lost her breast. In conclusion, the notion of sexuality as a defined essence operates in a masked fashion both in constructing women’s lives and in women constructing themselves. Any attempt to critique patriarchy and uplift women should definitely begin with addressing and dismantling those false representations.

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