

AN EPIC WITH A DIFFERENCE: A NARRATIVE STUDY OF THE TAMIL EPIC *CILAPPATIKARAM*

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ABSTRACT

The medieval period in Indian literature was a time when a number of languages developed and so did the literatures in these languages. There was a break from the ancient epic tradition of Sanskrit as several new forms evolved. This break from Sanskritisation can be observed in the literature from the South including Tamil literature. One such piece of literature to break away from the epic tradition was *Cilappatikaram* or *The Tale of an Anklet* by Ilanko Atikal. Composed in the fifth century c.e. this long narrative poem consists the use of multiple genres using both prose and poetry to convey the story of Kovalan and Kannaki. The text explores the journey of Kannaki who is the text's protagonist from the time she is married to Kovalan at the age of twelve to the point when she is apotheosised as Goddess Pattini in the end. The narrative poem not only subverts the great epic tradition of India by portraying a female protagonist but also contains a number of elements that place it closer to a novel. The paper uses the theories of novelisation propounded by Mikhail Bakhtin in his book *The Dialogic Imagination* and other modern theorists to bring out the novelistic elements in the text.

Keywords: Cilappatikaram, epic, novelisation, intertextuality, narrative.

INTRODUCTION

Literature or literary languages in South India also famously known as the Dravidian literature, has always been considered to be different from the literature of the rest of the country. The difference has largely been either linguistic or geopolitical. As the name suggests, the Dravidian literature is written in the Dravidian languages, including Kannada, Malayalam, Telugu and Tamil. Scholars also include all the works of literature produced in the South, including those written in Sanskrit. However, according to Kamil Zvelebil, there is no distinct feature of the Dravidian literature that differentiates it from the literature of the rest of the country (*The Smile of Murugan*, 1). In fact Sanskrit has been one of the major languages of South India with Kannada, Malayalam and Telugu showing considerable influence of the Sanskrit. Except for Tamil the literature of these languages can often be modelled on Sanskrit literature. K.A. Nilkanta Sastri writes about the three languages,

All these literatures owed a great deal to Sanskrit, the magic wand of whose touch alone raised each of the Dravidian languages (but here I would most definitely add:

with literary idiom... the beginnings of Kannada literature are not traceable, but a considerable volume of prose and poetry must have come into existence before the date of Nrupatunga's *Kavirajamarga* (850 A.D.), the earliest extant work on rhetoric in Kannada or beyond doubt there must have existed much-unwritten literature (in Telugu) of popular character" (*History of South India*, 340).

The beginnings of this literature can be traced back to different sources which were unique to the Dravidian South. Whereas the first text in Kannada literature is said to be Sivakoti's *Vaddaradhane* (cca 900 A.D), a narrative on the life of the Jaina Saints, the origin of Telugu literature is seen in the eleventh-century translation of *Mahabharata* by Nannya. The first traces of Malayalam literature also strongly connect with the Sanskrit language, with the poem *Unnunili Sandesan* drawing primarily from Sanskrit genres of *sandesa*¹ or *duta* poems (Zvelebil, 3). However, G.N. Devy believes that these languages have their origin in ancient classical Tamil and that they developed by breaking away from this tradition. The first to move away from the Tamil tradition was Kannada, which developed as an independent dialect in the fifth century, while Telugu branched out in the eleventh century. Similarly, Malayalam was born with the amalgamation of Tamil and Kannada in the fourteenth century ("After Amnesia", *The G.N Devy Reader*, 6).

While the above-mentioned languages have their origin in Sanskrit, the same isn't true for Tamil. "An entirely different situation prevails in Tamil literature. The earliest literature in Tamil is a model unto itself-it is unique in the sense that, in subject-matter, thought content, language and form, it is entirely and fully indigenous" (Zvelebil, 4). Tamil literature, unlike the literature of other languages, is unique in itself in the sense that it developed before the Sanskritisation of the languages took place. Tamil is India's only language with unique indigenous literary theory that includes metric, prosody, rhetoric and poetics (Zvelebil 4). Another point of difference between Tamil and other South Indian languages, according to A.K. Ramanujan, is that while, "In most Indian languages the gobbledygook is Sanskrit; in Tamil, the gobbledygook is ultra-Tamil." ("Language and Modernisation", 31) thus implying that Tamil was a classical language independent of any Sanskrit influence. Tamil became a literary language sometime around 4th century B.C. and there can be seen a considerable gap between the development of Tamil and other South Indian languages. Even though Tamil developed as a literary language before this Sanskritisation of these languages, according to scholars, it did not develop in isolation but saw an influence of the Indo-Aryan literature as well as the Dravidian influence seen in the Rigvedic hymns. Tamil, in fact, like ancient Greek, is the only language to possess both classical as well as modern features. According to A.K. Ramanujan, "Tamil, one of the two classical languages of India, is the only language of contemporary India which is recognisably continuous with the classical past" (*The Interior Landscape*,

¹ *Sandesa* means "message" in Sanskrit, and is concerned with the transmission of a message through the intermediary of a messenger (*Duta*). The concept of transmitting a message through a messenger is ancient and well-known in literature. Kalidasa's *Meghaduta* is the best known example of this genre.

1967). Tamil literature, even today, carries the bearings of its classical past, which at times becomes difficult to deal with. The only text in Tamil literature which appears to show some Aryan or Sanskrit influence is *Tolkappiyam*² by Tolkappiyar, who is believed to have been a pupil of Agastya, a revered saint who appears in several ancient texts including the *Vedas*, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. In this text which is a masterpiece of grammar, Tolkappiyar displays his innate knowledge of Sanskrit authors as Panini and Patanjali.

FEATURES OF TAMIL LITERATURE

According to scholars, Tamil is the only Indian language which has features of both, the classical as well as the modern. As A.K. Ramanujan writes, “Tamil, one of the two classical languages of India, is the only language of contemporary India which is recognisably continuous with a classical past” (*The Interior Landscape*, 31). On the one hand, it can be said to be as classical as the ancient Greek literature, on the other it certainly continues to live up to modern writings. Being one of the ancient languages of the country, Tamil reflects the features of the people or the common folk. Unlike Sanskrit it is not the language of the Royals, Brahmins or the elite class of the society, instead it belongs to an entire social class. The heroes and heroines in Tamil literature are not royalty or people belonging to the noble class. It deals with people belonging to different strata of society and their experiences. It is the literature of the people and for the people. The hero is an ordinary man and not an incarnation of a God as is seen in ancient Sanskrit texts.

Another interesting feature to note about Tamil literature is that the poets and the writers belonged to different castes and classes of the society. As seen with ancient Sanskrit texts, the poets and writers were mostly Brahmins and performed priestly duties as they were the only people with access to learning the language during those times. But Tamil being the language of the common folks belonged to everybody writers across all classes could use it give expression to their thoughts.

These early poets, recruited from many different communities, received bardic training-there were probably different schools and traditions of this training-and became professionals; the wandering minstrels and bards travelled about in groups, often rather poor, frequently, however, very influential, and sometimes rather affluent (Zvelebil, “Smile of Murugan”, 13).

This creation of Tamil narratives by local bards and minstrels made them readily accessible to the common public, making these narratives more novelised.

When it comes to themes and subject matter, Tamil poetry deals with mainly two themes, “war and mating” (21). In accordance with this the poetry is divided into two genres, *Akam* and *Puram* poetry. The two genres, of Tamil narrative coincided with the two spheres of the characters’ life that is, personal and public. *Akam* poetry is concerned with the theme of love and pertains to the personal

² It is the oldest surviving Tamil grammar text as well as the oldest surviving lengthy work of Tamil literature.

aspect of the character while *puram* deals with the theme of war and heroism and pertains to the public life of the characters. These two together form the essence of a Tamil narrative and demonstrate the way of life. While *akam* is concerned with human emotions like lovers' union, patient waiting, anxious waiting, lovers' quarrel and separation, things that are intangible, *puram* deals with heroes and their heroism, war, kingdom and other external elements. Puram poetry deals with historical events and at times the voice of the poet is also understood to be historical unlike the *akam* poetry the voices are concerned with human emotions. However, there is an ambiguity in *puram* poetry with regard to the voice of the narrator as to whether he is a historical poet or simply a dramatized narrator. It is also noted that the characters in *akam* poetry are idealised and are not referred to by their names but simply as the hero or the heroine. While in *puram* poem the characters may be called by their names. (Norman Cutler, *Songs of Experience*, 61) The two can be said to be in opposition to one another and yet one cannot exist without the other. The two complement one another to form the chief constituent of Tamil writing. These two elements helped the poets to compose poems that were full of complex layers of meaning. According to Sally Noble, the various and non-living elements also give meaning to the different layers of *akam* and *puram* poetry. While landscapes such as mountains, forests, cultivated lands, seashore fall in the category of *akam* poetry, cattle lifting, siege of fort, pitched battle, and praise of heroes for the *puram* part of Tamil poetry.

Another interesting fact to note about Tamil classical literature is that it is not the literature of the elite or the upper-class society like Sanskrit was believed to be, nor were the protagonists of the tales from royal families. This was another point of difference between Tamil and Sanskrit epics. While heroes of Sanskrit epics belonged to royal families and were often men and women of divine stature, in the Tamil literary world the tales dealt with ordinary folks, the men and women did not pertain to a particular social class but were ordinary people. In this way Zvelebil considers Tamil poetry to be very democratic. This is an interesting fact to note as it further novelises the Tamil narratives. The more lifelike and relatable the characters are, the more novelised a narrative tends to be. However, he calls this democratism to be exaggerated since in Tamil poetry, especially love poems the characters are primarily types. There is always a friend who only listens to the hero whine about his love for the heroine, but this friend is not mentioned by his name. There are several such archetypal characters who are not referred to by their names but are simply known as the hero's friend, the heroine's mother and so on. The protagonists though not royalty may belong to the aristocratic class.

The Tamil hero was very close to the land, the economic basis of his existence, though he himself did probably no manual work in the fields; he did not live in huge castles, but in villages in big houses called *manai*, and only occasionally in small fortresses (Zvelebi, *The Smile of Murugan*, 15).

This is seen in *Cilappatikaram* or *The Tale of an Anklet* by Ilango Atikal where the hero Kovalan is described as being of a noble birth. His father has immense wealth, so much so that even the king of the state looks up to him as the

chief. Kovalan is not of royal blood and still is greatly revered by the people of his town. Hence the narrative poem by Atikal can be taken up to further elaborate the narrative features and novelisation of Tamil narratives in the medieval period.

CILAPPATIKARAM OR THE TALE OF AN ANKLET: AN EPIC WITH A DIFFERENCE

Ianko Atikal's *Cilappatikaram* translated into English as *The Tale of an Anklet*, first published in the year 1994, is considered to be a Tamil narrative of epic proportions and was composed at the time when religious literature was on the rise. An important text of Buddhist literature, the story of *Cilappatikaram* was widely popular in oral tradition as a result of which the poet "could afford to be irritatingly allusive and terse in important and terse lingers lovingly over interesting descriptions (Basham n.p.) However, according to scholars like Kamil Zvelebil and K.A. Nilkanta Sastri, the text could not have been composed earlier than the fifth century B.C. In the words of Sastri "In the field of general literature, the three most outstanding works are by Jaina and Buddhist authors. The *Silappadikaram*³ is an unusual gem, though its authorship and date are not free from besetting doubts" (362). The narrative structure of Tamil medieval narratives as such as can be associated with modern novel forms. Even though the narratives tend to follow the theories of poetics and rhetorics mentioned in the *Tolkappiyam*, there are also elements which can be found in the theories of narrative given by modern western theorists. In the preface to his translation of the poem R. Parthasarthy, refers to it as a "great epic poem that India has produced in a language other than Sanskrit" (xvii, 1993). According to Parthasarthy, *Cilappatiakaram*, "tells the story (Ta. Atikaram< Skt. adhikarah) of the events centered around the anklet (Ta. Cilappu, cilampu). Since the anklet is one of the insignia of the goddess Pattini, the title establishes the sacred character of the story; the heroine Kannaki's apotheosis into the goddess" (1).

The epic deals with the story of the two lovers Kovalan and Kannaki and is divided into three cantos or sections each of them named after a city of Tamil Nadu. The first canto the "Book of Pukar", is set in the Chola kingdom and deals with the development of the love story of Kovalam and Kannaki. It is full of human passions and sets the stage for the tragedy in the second canto. The second canto, the "Book of Maturai" is dedicated to the Pandya kingdom, where the lovers' tragedy takes place. The third canto, or the "Book of Vanci" takes place in the Chera kingdom, where Kannaki is apotheosised into a Goddess. Some scholars are of the opinion that the third book does not add much from the point of view of the narrative of the tale. They believe that the first two books form a complete whole in themselves and the third canto does not help much in developing the narrative. But when seen from the point of view of Indian aesthetic theories, it forms an important part of the narrative as it deals with Kannagi becoming the object of deification. Kamil Zvelebil states, "The poem has three dominant phases, like a three-fold classical music composition, each of the phases set in one of the capitals of the

³ The Spelling is used interchangeably by the various scholars and critics. For the purpose of the study the spelling *Cilappatikaram* is used, as has been done by R. Parthasarthy in his translation.

three Tamil kingdoms” (176). R. Parthasarathy notes: “The three books represent the three distinct phases through which the narrative moves – the erotic, the mythic and the heroic” (6).

Each book of the epic poem is further divided into a number of cantos written both in prose as well as verse. Apart from the cantos, the book also contains five song cycles (“The Lovesong of the Seaside Grove”, “The Song and Dance of the Hunters”, “The Round Dance of the Herdswomen”, “The Round Dance of the Hill Dwellers” and “The Benediction”), that are used as a commentary on the events of the poem. Although often referred to as an epic by the scholars of Tamil literature, *Cilappatikaram* is unlike any other epic written in Sanskrit. Sanskrit epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are religious epics, while *Cilappatikaram* is a secular or social epic where the protagonists do not have a divine stature and are essentially humans. The only divine reference in the narrative is in the third book, “The Book of Vanci” when Kannaki is apotheosised into Goddess Pattini.

The story of the epic as has been mentioned, is primarily about Kannaki, who is married to Kovalan at the tender age of twelve is described as having the beauty equivalent to that of a goddess: *Kannaki, who was twelve years/ Old, and loved by Kovalan. She was blessed/ With virtues. So women adored and praised her: “She is Lakshmi herself, goddess/ Of peerless beauty that rose from the Lotus,/ And chaste and immaculate Arundhati”* (25-26, Atikal, Parthasarathy, 1993).

Similarly, Kovalan is described in the following words: *Kovalan,/ Only sixteen years old, had already shrunk/ The Earth. Over and over again, in voices/ Seasoned by music, with faces luminous/ As the Moon, women confide among themselves: “He is the god of love himself,/ The incomparable Murukan”* (26).

The two set up their home in the kingdom of Pukar and live happily for a few years, with Kovalan showering all his love on Kannaki and Kannaki being a devoted wife to him. However, their happiness is short-lived as they think about the brevity of human joy: *Like snakes coupled in the heat of passion,/ Or Kama And Rati smothered in each/ Other’s arms, so Kovalan and Kannaki/ Lived in happiness past speaking,/ Spent themselves in every pleasure, thinking: “We live on earth but a few days”* (33).

As can be inferred from the above lines, there is a foreshadowing of the tragedy about to take place in their lives. Kovalan soon meets Matavi, a renowned dancer and courtesan and falls in love with her beauty. Such is her beauty that Atikal describes her as a descendant of the heavenly nymphs: *From the exalted line/ Of heavenly nymphs was Matavi descended,/ A woman of flawless birth, of broad shoulders,/ And curly hair, spilling pollen, she was/ Noted for her style of great distinction* (34).

She had studied and perfected the art of dancing and singing, so much so that even the Chola king was impressed with her talent and presented her with a garland. Matavi puts up this garland for sale with an announcement that she would choose the person who purchased the garland to be her husband. From here on begins the tragedy in the life of Kannaki as Kovalan buys the garland and moves into her house to live with her, leaving a heartbroken Kannaki behind: *He entered Matavi’s residence: came/ Under her spell the instant he took her in his arms./*

He forgot himself, and wished never to part from her,/ Forgot his own blameless and noble wife and home (40).

However, Kovalan's love for Matavi does not last long and after a misunderstanding between the two, he returns home to his wife. Kannaki accepts him back into her house, and they decide to move to the kingdom of Maturai to set up a new life. On their way, they are joined by Kavunti, a Jaina monk, who keeps them company and comforts them on their long and arduous journey to Maturai. On reaching Maturai, Kovalan takes Kannaki's anklet which is studded with rubies and diamonds, to the market with the thought of selling it and using the money earned as capital for a new trade. Little does he know that it is this anklet which will bring him his misfortune ultimately leading to his death. At the market, the goldsmith having stolen the queen's anklet sees Kovalan as an opportunity to save himself. He asks Kovalan to wait near his hut and hurries to the palace to report to the king. Meanwhile, the king is on his way to meet the queen after a quarrel and instead of asking his men to bring Kovalan to the court for a trial, he orders them to execute him: *...an ill-bred lout in a frenzy hurled/ The bright sword in his hand at Kovalan./ It cut him across. The blood that spurted/ From his wound rushed in tide over Mother Earth/ Who rolled in great agony. The king's sceptre/ Turned crooked. Struck/ By his inevitable karma, Kovalan fell (168).* Thus, Kovalan is murdered by the scheming goldsmith and the king's men.

Kannaki learns of her husband's murder through a stranger and rushes to the spot to see him lying in a pool of blood. Enraged at the injustice done to Kovalan, she reaches the palace demanding justice for her husband's murder. The king tries to defend himself by calling Kovalan a thief and reminding her that it is his duty as a king to kill a thief. Kannaki then proves Kovalan's innocence by breaking open her anklet which contained gems while the queen's anklet was embedded with pearls. The king realises that he had made a horrible mistake by murdering an innocent man:

"Am I king? I listened to the words of a goldsmith!/ I alone am thief! Through my error/ I have failed to protect the people/ Of the southern kingdom. Let my life crumble in the dust."/ He fell down in a swoon (189).

The king falls to the ground and dies of his guilt. The queen, on seeing the king lying dead on the ground, dies of shock. However, Kannaki's wrath is not yet over. In her rage, she cuts off her left breast and hurls it at the city and orders the god of fire: *"Brahmans, good men, cows, chaste women,/ The old and the children – spare these. Go/ After the wicked."/ Fire and smoke smothered the city/ Of Maturai of the king with the lofty chariot (194).* Thus the whole city goes up in flames destroying with it all the evil that dwelled in it.

The goddess of Maturai appears before Kannaki and tries to calm her down by giving her an explanation for Kovalan's death. According to the goddess, Kovalan was a spy of king Vasu in his previous birth and went by the name Bharata. On one occasion, he mistook a merchant for a thief and beheaded him. The merchant's wife then cursed Kovalan and it was as a result of that curse that Kovalan had to face a similar situation and similarly lose his life. The goddess then

goes on to tell Kannaki that after fourteen days she would be able to join her husband in heaven. On hearing this Kannaki leaves Maturai and travels to the Cheral kingdom, reaching Netuval Hill, where Indra's chariot awaits to take her to heaven to unite her with her husband.

This is where the second book comes to an end and the scholars of the text believe with the union of Kovalan and Kannaki the narrative can be said to be complete. However, the third book or the book of Vanci is important as it is in this book that Kannaki is apotheosised into goddess Pattini and on the advice of his queen, the king of Vanci decided that Kannaki should be worshipped as a goddess and that a memorial stone taken from the Himalayas with a picture of Kannaki should be installed in her name. He travelled to the Himalayas to bring the stone and install it in his kingdom, *With the help/ Of brahmans, royal priests, astrologers,/ And expert sculptors, a shrine was dedicated/ To that revered woman and built/ According to established rules so that wise men/ May approve it. The image of Pattini was installed/ In it, engraved by skilled hands on the stone/ Brought from the slopes of the Himalaya, the home/ Of the gods after prayers to Siva who resides there./ She was adorned with precious ornaments/ Exquisitely crafted and worshiped with flowers./ Images of the guardian deity stood/ At the entrance to the temple. The lion among kings,/ Who had extended his rule over the northeren countries,/ Performed the dedication and ordered: "Worship/ The goddess every day with offerings and festivities"* (257).

The third book also brings to conclusion the story of Matavi when the brahman by the name of Matalan informs the king that "Matavi has entered a Buddhist nunnery and taken a holy vow" (Introduction, 5).

The epic is a tale of chastity and kingship with the central character Kannagi being the symbol of chastity. As the name suggests, the story revolves around the events related to an anklet. In Tamil culture, an anklet is of great importance as it is a symbol of Goddess Pattini, and hence, it confirms the sacred element of the story. The poet weaves a tale of love and valour interwoven together, ultimately leading to the deification of Kannagi, the central character, into Goddess Pattini of Tamil Nadu. The *Cilappatikaram* is to the Tamil what the *Illiad* was to the Greeks: a masterpiece of Tamil literature.

NOVELISTIC FEATURES IN *CILAPPATIKARAM*

An epic by definition, is a long poem that revolves around the life of a hero, usually of divine stature and his exploits, and narrates the story with grandeur and splendour. A similar motif runs throughout these epics, whether they are Sanskrit or Greek—the hero in most of these epics is either a king or a prince and the events of the epic take place around his life. Whether it is the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* or even Homer's *Illiad*, the action is centred in the courts of kings and an event leading the King to a journey through forests resulting in war. *Cilappatikaram* also draws on these epics and shares some features with its Sanskrit and Greek counterparts. Brenda Beck, in her book *The Three Twins* (1982), identifies the following four characteristics of an epic:

1. Indian epics are commonly built around a set of brothers... several brothers often share a single, overall identity.

2. Indian epic traditions seem largely unique in their lack of focus on father-and-son struggles... it would not be accurate to say that there are no oedipal antagonists in Indian epics, but such rivalries are certainly suppressed to a faint smolder.

3. Indian epics have a close association with ritual performances. The Mahabharata is usually recited in temples or at festival gatherings.

4. The Indian epic currently appears unique in the way heroes and heroines are regularly divinized at their death... Epic heroes, in India, are viewed as gods that have come to earth (18-20).

However, when considered from the above point of view *Cilappatikaram* shares none of the above features of the Indian epic. The only feature that makes *Cilappatikaram* an epic in this sense is its length. It is one of the longest poems of Tamil literature containing 5,730 lines which make it a poem of epic proportions. Beck further states that *Cilappatikaram*: "is thought to have developed in a milieu relatively independent of northern, Brahmanical literary influences... None of the characteristic structural bonds between brothers, between brother and sister, or are evident here. Even the parents of the main characters play a very minor role in this story" (20).

In complete contrast to the epics culminating in war between brothers or enemies, *Cilappatikaram* is essentially a love story of Kovalan and Kannaki and Kovalan's infidelity with Matavi. According to Kamil Zvelebil *Cilappatikaram* is ...primarily a story of human proportions, of human love and passion, jealousies, infidelity charity and forgiveness, so human in fact, that the *deus ex machine* appears more or less casually and as a non-essential factor, or is rather forced to appear by the logic of human passions and actions. It is Kannaki, the woman, the human heroine, who alone matters to the poet; it is Kannaki, who-backed by the sympathy of the entire people of Maturai-performs her duty and avenges the death of her husband; it is she who at one moment doubts the very existence of God, and who finally conquers and overthrows the law of *karma*, she who enforces gods and fate to capitulate" ("The Smile of Murugan", 173-174).

The poem is also not entirely composed in verse like other epics but contains a mix of both epic and verse, making it more novelised in form and structure, thus making it what may be termed by scholars as an epic with a difference. The character in the narrative also makes it more novelised. As mentioned earlier the characters in the epics are Kings and royals. The protagonist is always a King or a prince, usually a reincarnation of a god (Rama was the reincarnation of Lord Vishnu in the *Ramayana*), and the women characters mostly play the role of a damsel in distress who need to be saved from the clutches of the villain (Rama had to fight Ravana in a battle and rescue Sita who had been abducted by the latter). However, the characters in this narrative are ordinary human beings belonging to the merchant class with no divine attributes, with the protagonist being Kannaki. Thus, the characters in this narrative are closer to life and more relatable than the classical epics. "The *Cilappatikaram*, therefore, represents a bold departure from

the epic tradition as we understand it” (Parthasarthy, *The Tale of an Anklet*, 9). It is this familiarity that lends the narrative its novelistic characteristic. According to Bakhtin while epic thrives on the vector of distance, the novel lies in a zone of familiarity. The characters in *Cilappatikaram* are nearer yet at a distance. The readers can identify themselves with these characters, and at the same time they also hold them in reverence. While Kannaki is essentially a scorned widow out for revenge for her husband’s murder she is also held in veneration and is praised by people as Goddess Pattini.

Another point of subversion from the classical epic in *Cilappatikaram* is that the protagonist, Kannaki, is a female. As has been observed, the protagonist in classical epics is essentially a man – in the *Ramayana* the protagonist is Rama, in the *Mahabharata* it is Yudhishtira and in the *Iliad* it is Achilles. “By making a woman protagonist, Ilanko rewrites the epic tradition by subverting its essentially androcentric bias” (Parthasarthy, 8). Hillary P. Dannenberg in *Frontiers of Narratives*, observes:

Rachel Blau DuPlessis (1985) differentiates between the female protagonist as “hero,” in which she is an independent agent in her own “quest plot,” and as “heroine,” in which she is constrained within a love plot; Andrea Gutenberg (2000) undertakes a comprehensive survey of female stories charting variations of the romance, quest, and family plot (see also Russ 1973; Abel 1983; Miller 1985; Hirsch 1989); Lois E. Bueler (2001) investigates the development of the tested woman plot, a profoundly patriarchal plot pattern, across several genres and periods of literary history (7-8).

The semi-divine warrior of the epic is displaced by a mortal woman who loses control and becomes dangerous when she is angered. Kannaki’s character is thus novelistic enough to disrupt the epic structure; her individuality is conveyed in a persuasive manner. The novel, according to Georg Lukacs, “tells of the adventure of inferiority, the content of the novel is the story of the soul that goes to find itself, that seeks adventures in order to be proved and tested by them, and, by proving itself to find his own essence” (*Theory of the novel*, 89). Kannaki’s journey from Pukar to Maturai and then Vanci is the story of one such adventure where she seeks herself and realises that she can be both enchanting and chaste as Arundhati and fierce and violent as Pattini. In the beginning she is portrayed as a loving wife taking care of her husband. When Kovalan shuns her for Matavi, she is heartbroken but she patiently waits for him to return home. Ilanko, describing her state, writes: *Kannaki was heartbroken. No anklets sounded/ On her small, graceful feet. No girdle/ Blazed over her mound of love wound/ In a soft, white garment. No vermilion/ Rouge was painted on her breasts. Except/ For her bridal pendant, she wished for no ornament* (Parthasarthy, 43).

The emotions that Kannaki goes through here are the ones that can be recognised universally as those of despair, longing and desire.

This is in complete contrast to the Kannaki that the readers encounter in the Book of Maturai, where she is out to get revenge for her husband’s murder and burning down the whole city. “...this extremely human and humane heroine, this woman who is transformed before our eyes from a simple, quiet, patient maid into

a passionate, admirable woman of the magnitude of a Greek heroine, becomes a goddess..." (Zvelebil, 174). Not only does Kannaki take up the journey to find her essence but a similar journey is also taken up by Matavi. However, the journey taken up by Matavi is more spiritual than anything else. When Kovalan leaves her to go back to Kannaki she too is shattered and tries her best to bring Kovalan back into her life but in vain. When she learns of the events that have taken place in Maturai, she decides to become monk: *I must now lead a virtuous life.../ Her hair wreathed in flowers,/ She removed, and entered a Buddhist nunnery/ And was taught the holy word* (242).

According to Bakhtin while the epic was structured in the distance of the absolute past, the novel was in a "zone of direct contact with developing reality" (*The Dialogic Imagination*, 39). Characters like Kannaki, Kovalan and Matavi bring the narrative of *Cilappatikaram* closer to the present-day reality. The narrative is replete with social, moral and spiritual conflicts that find an expression through these characters.

INTERMINGLING OF GENRES

Throughout the narrative, Ilanko has skilfully combined songs with prose, thus intermingling various genres to form a unified literary structure. The use of multiple genre styles is suggestive of the presence of heteroglossia in the text. Ilanko's language is both medieval and modern in style as the songs range from a variety of subjects from love and romance to mythic themes and the praise of the Chola, Chera and Pandya Kings. The songs in the narrative "appear at critical junctures and function as choruses, unobtrusively commenting on the action" (Parthasarthy, 301). Ilanko binds together several isolated lyrics and makes them into one long poem. In the words of Edgar Allen Poe (1809-49),

What we term a long poem is, in fact, merely a succession of brief ones – that is to say, of brief poetical effects. It is needless to demonstrate that a poem is such only inasmuch as it intensely excites by elevating the soul; and all intense excitements are through a psychal necessity, brief (The Philosophy of Composition, 1846).

The structure of the songs are lyrical but there can also be said to be present elements of drama and narrative. In the first song titled "The Love Songs of the Seaside Grove", the poet brings out the erotic theme of the poem when Kovalan's friend describing Kovalan's feelings sings: *Shed by the heavy, flowering laurel,/ A cloud of pollen covers the seaside grove,/ Hides the whisper of furrows in the sand/ Of trailing right-spiraled coccinels browsing/ On the shore. Only her soft breasts,/ It seems flushed with beauty spots,/ Will end the heartache caused/ By her bright, full-moon face/ And wide, fish eyes/ That no flood of medicine can heal* (Parthasarthy, 68).

Kovalan is lovesick and desires nothing but Matavi, he is so infatuated by Matavi that he compares her to a goddess, "I didn't know she was a Goddess/ Had I known I wouldn't have gone there" (68). According to Sally Noble,

The author's comparison of the hero's infatuation for his lover with possession by the goddess serves as a powerful link between the erotic and mythic elements of the texts

as a whole, since the female protagonist if the story is dramatically transformed into a powerful and potentially destructive being (The Tamil Story of The Anklet, 83-84).

Novelistic discourses are not just tales of tragedy, but they also portray the various pleasure of life even those that are profane in nature. Novelistic accounts are often replete with descriptions of descriptions of carnal desires, lust and worldly pleasures. Kovalan's lust for Matavi brings out this narrative feature, making it a novelised text. He is so infatuated by her beauty that he turns his back on his wife leaving her behind and squandering all his wealth on Matavi. Ilanko here portrays both extramarital and marital love in Kovalan's relationship with the courtesan Matavi and his wife, Kannaki. Kannaki's situation is contrasted with Matavi's, both the women experience love, while one experiences love in separation, the other experiences love in fulfilment. However, Kovalan is soon disillusioned by Matavi's love and believing her to be in love with some other man leaves her and goes back to Kannaki. This is what the lyrics in the narrative are about. Both Matavi and Kovalan feel that the other is in love with someone else and after a lover's tryst, end their relationship.

ORAL TRADITION AND INTERTEXTUALITY

Indian literature, since time immemorial, has followed the tradition of oral transmission of knowledge. From Vedas, to Upanishads to the epics, all have followed the oral narrative tradition. Tamil literature too has not been untouched by this tradition. A narrative can be oral in more than one respect: performance, composition or transmission. A narrative can be composed orally and at the same time, the method used for its transmission can be written. The oral narrative can also be transmitted through performances by bards and minstrels, thus making the discourse of the oral narratives highly intertextual. Oral narratives, as has been observed, borrow freely from other narratives and are never fixed or closed as their written counterpart. It is commonly believed that a text is continuously in dialogue with other literary and non-literary texts through time and space. "Intertextuality, as theory, talks about the cumulative formation of the various texts of a culture or cultures in general" (Singh 138). The theory of intertextuality was developed by Julia Kristeva in her essays *The Bounded Text* and *Word, Dialogue and Novel* both published in the late 1960s. Kristeva coined the term intertextuality,

...to indicate that a text (such as a novel, a poem or a historical document) is not a self-contained or autonomous entity, but is produced from other texts. The interpretation that a particular reader generates from a text will then depend on the recognition of a relationship of the given text to the other texts" (Edgar Sedgwick 197).

According to Kristeva, a text has two axes, a horizontal axis which links the author of the text to the reader and a vertical axis which connects one text to another. There is a shared relationship between the narrator and the audience.

Scholars are of the belief that since *Cilappatikaram* is a product of indigenous Tamil culture it came into existence long before it was given to the

readers in its written form by Ilanko Atikal. “Actually, the story existed in the oral tradition before it was written down: it is said that Prince Ilango Adigal wrote down the events of the story as they were told to him by eye-witnesses” (Eric Miller, *Variations in and of the Story of the Silappathikaram*, 2016) By the time the text was transmitted from oral to written it had already travelled throughout the Tamil land and had acquired a number of elements from various sources including the Sanskrit oral traditions and Jaina tradition. A number of Hindu myths and traditions, such as karma or fate, nonviolence were embedded in the narrative of *Cilappatikaram*. One such folktale that can be identified is the story of the “Brahmin and the Mongoose” drawn from the tales of *Panchatantra* narrated by Vishnusharman. In canto fifteen of *Cilappatikaram*, Matalan, a Brahmin narrates the tale while praising the chivalrous nature of Kovalan. Another myth that can be identified in the narrative is that of Krishna and the herdswomen in the “Songs of the Herdswomen”. The songs of this canto are very closely related to the later Krishna Bhakti texts and include some of the earliest references to the herdswoman.

Along with the presence of folktales in the text, several versions of the Kovalan and Kannaki’s story came to be extant, especially in the form of folk ballads which were performed. The performative aspect in any text not only involves elements of intertextuality but also renders the narrative with novelistic elements. The most popular among these folk ballads is *Kovalan Katai* (The Story of Kovalan) published in 1873 and is attributed to Pukalentip Pulavar (12th-13th century) (Noble, *The Tamil Story*). The ballad is different from Ilanko’s *Cilappatikaram* as it is full of elements from Hinduism, for instance, Kannaki is represented as an incarnation of Goddess Kali, whereas in *Cilappatikaram* Kannaki was an ordinary human being. Other versions of the story performed occasionally during the twentieth century include *Kovalan Kannaki Natakam* which is a play written to be ritually performed (1889), *Kovalan Carittiram* (*The Story of Kovalan’s life*), was performed as a musical, *Cankita Kovalan*, another musical written by M.R. Muttuccami and *Kannaki katai: villuppattu* (1953) show the popularity of the story of Kovalan and Kannaki (Parthasarthy, 319).

COINCIDENCE PLOT AND NARRATIVITY

The coincidence plot is a literary strategy widely used in narrative plots wherein an action takes place outside of the intentions of the character. The author manipulates the narrative plot of time and space for an action to take place or for an event to occur. The most common example of a coincidence plot in literature can be traced back to *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles where Oedipus unknowingly kills his father and marries his own mother. Although Oedipus never intended for this to happen it is by coincidence and fate that the events in his life take place. The author moulds the narrative of time and space in a way that Oedipus happens to meet his father, the king and kills him in a fight and marries his widow, who later turns out to be his mother. According to Hillary P. Dannenberg, in her essay “A Poetic of Coincidence in Narrative Fiction”:

Not only do many other forms exist; the realization of the coincidence plot within the discourse of each text is subject to a number of key variables which produce substantial differences in its actual presentation. These are, most notably: the depiction of characters' cognitive processes and emotional states during the recognition scene; suspense management prior to recognition; the narrative explanation or naturalization of the coincidence itself. Moreover, the diachronic ubiquity of the coincidence plot means that it can be used as a kind of transhistorical laboratory to observe the evolution of specific narrative strategies in fiction as a whole (400).

Coincidence plot is a key narrative strategy in novelised discourses and has variously been described as “a convergence of several elements: agent(s) and/or object(s), time and/or space” (Tamar Yacobi “Lots of Space: World and Story in Isak Dinesen”, 464); “the coinciding of events and of the physical presence of persons at the same point of time and space” (Lawrence Dessen “Space, Time, and Coincidence in Hardy”, 162). These definitions lay emphasis on the function of coincidence to bring together characters to the right time and right place for the event to occur. Coincidence, according to Bert Hornback is just another term for chance or fate that is not directed by God but is brought about by an accident. The use of coincidence plot in a narrative fiction can lead to both a euphoric experience wherein there is a reunion of the family members or a tragedy wherein a revelation leads to falling apart of relationships.

In *Cilappatikaram* too, coincidence or fate has a critical role to play. Like most other epics, *Cilappatikaram* does not have a villain in the real sense of the term. For instance, in the *Ramyana* the antagonist is Ravana, while in the *Mahabharata* it is the conflict between the brothers that results in war. The tragedy in the life of Kovalan and Kannaki is not brought upon by a third person but by mere chance. As seen in the “Book of Maturai”, Kovalan is present at the wrong place and at the wrong time. As mentioned earlier, Kovalan goes to the market to sell Kannaki's stone studded anklet. There are several bad omens that occur while he is on his way, but he overlooks them, “Before him appeared a humped bull: his people did not know that it was a bad omen” (Parthasarthy, 164). While in the market it is again by chance that he comes across the royal goldsmith who had stolen the queen's anklet and who, on seeing that Kovalan is in possession of a similar anklet, turns him to the king, accusing him of the theft thus leading to his tragic end. Even though the goldsmith's action leads to Kovalan's death, he cannot be called a villain as his actions are a result of an attempt to save himself from the charge of theft, similarly one cannot blame the king too, who is nothing but hot-tempered and unbalanced. Thus, a play of coincidence brings about the tragic end of Kovalan and results in the destruction of the city of Maturai at the hands of Kannaki.

CONCLUSION

Although a great work of epic proportions, *Cilappatikaram*, cannot be categorised as an epic narrative in the strictest sense of the term. The epic idiom, folk tradition and the novelistic elements make it into a hybridised text.

The presence of both prose and lyrics also gives the narrative a modern element. Since the narrative has evolved from the verbal into the non-verbal, together, they combine to form a novelised text. Novelisation is the process of transmutation from one medium to another, and here, it is achieved as it shifts from oral to written to folk ballads being performed.

Cilappatikiram is not a story of schematic shadowy figures, of faultless heroes and demoniac villains. If we ask who actually is the villain of the piece, we are unable to answer. Nobody is entirely to be blamed – and all of them are guilty. Not a single character in *Cilappatikiram* is thoroughly bad or thoroughly good, not even the pious Jaina woman-ascetic, and probably not even Kannaki (Zvelebil, 180). Features like these take the text farther away from an absolute past of the epic and make it more familiar to the reader.

Chance encounters and the role of fate or coincidence further leads to the process of novelisation in the text. In fact fate is present throughout the narrative and occurs at every crucial moment. The separation of Kovalan and Matavi is also inspired by fate, when the two have a misunderstanding that the other is in love with someone else and Kovalan goes back to Kannaki. The presence of multiple genres make the text into novelised narrative.

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