

The Silappadikaram

The *Silappadikaram* is a Tamil epic that is speculated to have been composed around the fourth to sixth century AD (Zvelebil 178). It is said that of the Dravidian languages “Tamil has maintained the greatest purity and has preserved some of its original literature” (Adigal VIII). Of what are called the “Great-Poems” or the “[f]ive major poetical works in Tamil” only the text of the *Silappadikaram* and two others survived (VIII). The author, Prince Ilango Adigal, was the supposed brother of King Senguttuvan who appears later in the story, although no other Tamil poems mentioned that the king had a brother (Zvelebil 179). There are two existing commentaries, one which is ancient (the *Arumpadavuri*) and the other from the fifteenth century by Adiyarkunallar (Adigal IX). This story has been translated into various languages but most are not exact in depicting the tale like the original language (Zvelebil 172).

The *Silappadikaram* begins in the city of Puhar in the kingdom of Chola, a bustling trading town in which Kannagi and Kovalan are to have a marriage arranged by their parents (Holmstrom 3). After the marriage Kannagi “spent most of her day learning about the household” and “[s]he knew that both Kovalan’s parents and her own looked to her to maintain the traditions and honour of her family...” thereby illustrating her devotion to her role as a wife (6,8). This role involved learning her duties as a partner and homemaker from her mother in law, then implementing her skills in a way to make home life harmonious for Kovalan and herself. Years later a dancer named Madhavi captures Kovalan’s eye. Kovalan starts another life with this woman, even having a child with her, all the while neglecting Kannagi (12-13). Kovalan becomes increasingly charitable in his new life, especially to those who have made mistakes, and

he ends up frittering away his fortune (14). He starts to sell his and Kannagi's own possessions and feels an overwhelming sense of guilt and restlessness (15).

One day he returns to Kannagi declaring "[a]ll these years I've lived with a woman who cannot tell the difference between truth and falsehood. On such a woman I have wasted all my ancestral wealth. I bring you nothing but poverty. I am bitterly ashamed" (25). Kannagi tells Kovalan to take her anklets, given to her by her mother as a wedding gift, to help him get his fortune back (25). This act shows her dedication to her husband even after years of loneliness and abandonment. Kovalan decides they need a new start so they sneak out of Puhar at night and start their journey to Madurai in the Pandya kingdom (25-26). They stop and talk to the "renunceint" Kavundi who decides to go with the couple on their long journey (27).

Many events happen along the trip, quite a few with lessons attached. For instance, a monk reminds the group that "each of our actions is like a seed that is sown and is bound to bring a harvest of its own kind," which told of how *karma* affects people based on their behaviour (30). Another lesson comes from Kavundi who, after turning two people into jackals when they teased Kannagi, stated that "[d]isrespect is no small thing". This once again illustrates how one's life should be lived, in this case in regard to the treatment of others (32). They also stop at a temple where "Aiyai, goddess of hunters" is being worshiped (35).

When the group finally gets to Madurai, Kavundi leaves Kovalan and Kannagi in the care of Madari an animal herder (47-49). When Kovalan goes to the smith to try and sell one of Kannagi's anklets, the smith thinks Kovalan stole the piece of jewellery from the queen (53). King Nedunchezhiyan was informed of this and put out the order "[s]ee if the thief has the queen's anklet in his possession. If that is really so, kill him immediately and bring me the jewel

to the queen's chambers" (56). The order is carried out and Kovalan is killed (58). Kannagi receives the news of her husband's unjust death and is devastated. She calls out to the Sun God who replies "this city which accuses him shall be destroyed by fire" (63). Kannagi goes before the king and shows him his mistake, for the queen's original anklet had pearls whereas the one taken from Kovalan had rubies (68). Kannagi gives the Sun God the order to "not on any account spare the wicked" and the city is burned (70). Only the goddess of the Royal Pandya house, Bharatan, was left (72). The goddess tells of how both Kovalan and Kannagi were connected in a past life. In that life Kovalan had killed Kannagi's husband by mistake; this caused Kannagi so much grief that she had thrown herself off a cliff (74). The goddess told Kannagi that "[a] virtuous life is good in itself, but may not prevent the sins of a past life from bearing fruit", putting into perspective why these unfortunate events had happened to Kovalan and herself (74).

The next segment of the book is a chapter about the Chera King Senguttuvan. He heard the story of Kannagi and how she was carried from the Chera kingdom by the gods to join her husband (77). Senguttuvan decided to get a block of stone from the Himalayas to carve a likeness of Kannagi the "Goddess of Steadfastness" (80). He marvels at how "three great Tamil Kingdoms had been linked together by the story of Kannagi", meaning the Chola Kingdom (where the story began), Pandya Kingdom (where Kannagi destroyed the city of Madurai), and his own Chera kingdom (where Kannagi was taken by the gods) (85). Each had been a part of Kannagi's journey and she affected people from all three kingdoms profoundly.

One thing that should be noted about the *Silappadikaram* is that throughout the whole story many different religious sects and rituals were mentioned. This reflects the diversity of the setting it was written in. When leaving the city of Puhar, Kannagi and Kovalan pass by "the great Vishnu temple", "seven Buddhist Viharas", and "wandering Jain monks" (26) all within close

proximity to each other showing the obvious acceptance of multiplicity. At the time of Kannagi and Kovalan “Brahmanism (Hinduism), Jainism, and Buddhism – were at the time harmoniously coexisting in the south” (Adigal VIII).

The *Silappadikaram* showed that some deep rooted traditions of India that can still be seen today. A main theme in the story is *karma* which is still a modern principle present in India today. In the book not only was Kovalan warned about his actions in the present causing bad future *karma*, the murder he committed in a past life brought him an unfortunate end. Various other traditions, such as Kannagi and Kovalan’s arranged marriage, finding an auspicious day for the ceremony, and consulting astrologers, reflects part of Indian culture that is still prevalent today.

Another interesting aspect of the *Silappadikaram* was the portrayal of the ideal woman. Throughout the whole story Kannagi proved how pure and true she was. Through her husband’s infidelity and misconduct she stayed faithful and chaste. When Kovalan comes back to her, Kannagi is willing to do anything to help her husband including selling the anklets that were from her mother as a wedding gift. When Kovalan is murdered, Kannagi would have killed herself willingly for her husband immediately if she hadn’t had the duty to uphold his honour by clearing his name. In the end, Kannagi destroys a whole city for her husband and remained loyal throughout. It is because of this that King Senguttuvan is so impressed by her story that he erects a statue in her honour, making it clear that Kannagi was a version of the ideal woman of that time.

The *Silappadikaram*, by Prince Ilango Adigal, is a story about a woman and her husband as they struggle with the problems of fidelity, right and wrong, and justice. The core themes of

the *Silappadikaram* are very relevant to the human experience, which is probably why it still is a well read story today. It is a tale that produces good insights to the culture, lessons, *karma*, and ideals of the Tamil people who hold it dear.

References and Further Recommended Reading

Holmstrom, Lakshmi (1996) *Silappadikaram Manimekalai*. Madras: Orient Longman Limited

Adigal, Ilango (1965) *Shilappadikaram (The Ankle Bracelet)*. New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation

Zvelebil, Kamil (1973) *The Smile of Murugan: On Tamil Literature of South India*. Leiden :E.J Brill

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<http://www.tamilartsacademy.com/books/roman%20karur/chapter18.html>

<http://www.attukaldevi.com/pl/story-kannagi.htm>

<http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/topics/Senguttuvan>

<http://www.hindu.com/2006/06/16/stories/2006061603461100.htm>

http://www.allsands.com/History/People/indianfolklore_wji_gn.htm

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Silappatikaram>

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