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## When Feminism Meets Dharma: Rethinking *Silappatikaram*

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### Abstract

This paper will provide an aboriginal feminist re-reading of *Silappatikaram* by preemptively foregrounding Tamil ethical thinking and exposing the explanatory constraints of the mainstream feminist theory of the West. Though Kannagi has often been understood as a sort of proto-feminist character, who lives outside of patriarchal control, most feminist interpretations have been based on theoretical paradigms, which privilege autonomy, linear opposition, and universalized conceptualizations of patriarchy. These frameworks, though having political importance, are frequently not sufficient to reach out to the ethical, cultural, and philosophical universe into which the agency of Kannagi is created. This paper claims that *Silappatikaram* expresses a kind of feminist ethics which cannot be entirely interpreted in the context of Eurocentric feminist ideas. The paper also involves the grassroots feminism, as well as decolonial feminist theory to establish that Kannagi gains power through ethical legitimacy and not institutional power or personal claim.

### Introduction

The Tamil literary and cultural canon is taken up by *Silappatikaram* a compilation of Ilango Adigal, usually dated between the second and the third century of the Common Era. The text, which is considered one of the Aimperumkappiyam (The five great Tamil Epics), is not just a story of personal loss or personal moral tragedy but a highly complex ethical quest on the topics of justice, kingship, social responsibility, and moral order. The central figure of this epic is a woman Kannagi whose experience of being pushed out of the

domestic sphere and into the moral one has created a long-term critical interest in literary, political, religious, and feminist discussion. Her metamorphosis, especially her confrontation of the royal institution and the burning of Madurai has rendered *Silappatikaram* to be significant in discussions on women agency, justice and authority on ethics in pre modern Indian literature. Contemporary feminist studies have often viewed Kannagi as a kind of an early protest against patriarchal injustice. These interpretations have legitimately attracted an interest to gendered vulnerability of women in judicial and political structures that are

dominated by men authority, particularly the episode where Kovalan was wrongfully executed. Yet, most such interpretations are highly dependent on Western feminist theories focusing on individual agency, resistance and progressive emancipation histories. When used blindly, these structures are dangerous of imposing alien epistemological structures on a text that has a totally different ethical and cultural logic. The major issue with mainstream feminist interpretation of *Silappatikaram* is that the initial silence and suffering experienced by Kannagi is interpreted as an obedient gesture, whereas her subsequent wrath is viewed as an awakening of feminism. This two-polar system severed her personality in an artificial way, and blotted out the ethical continuity that regulates her actions during the epic. These interpretations do not notice that agency of Kannagi is not expressed in form of defiance against societal standards but in form of ethical accountability basing on the Tamil cultural epistemologies. Her silence, forbearance, and moderation are not relaxed virtues but ethically motivated disciplines influenced by dharma as an ethical practice. Dharma is not a fixed moral law or moral code in the thoughts of the Tamil. Rather, it is more of an experience and a relationship ethic that governs relationships between individuals, society, state, and cosmos. Ethical coherence, restraint and accountability are the sources of moral authority, which evolves not out of personal assertiveness. In this context, the patience of Kannagi in marriage and subsequent outburst of righteous anger is not conflicting but morally connected actions of adapting to the shifting moral situations. It is not the personal revenge that she fights with the Pandyan king but the disastrous collapse of royal justice and ethical kingship. The argument presented in this paper is that *Silappatikaram* requires a feminist reading that cannot be based on the universal feminist paradigms but on the serious consideration of the indigenous ethical tradition. The research suggests a decolonial, Tamil-based epistemological interpretive model by considering the use of grassroot feminist

views, Dalit feminist challenges to power and justice, and the decolonial feminist theory. A structure like this would enable the ethical authority of Kannagi to be interpreted as deriving out of lived ethics as opposed to one based on individual autonomy and institutional power. This method is not only important as it provides a more culturally faithful interpretation of *Silappatikaram*, but also because it questions the epistemic privilege of Western feminist theory in the literary criticism. Decolonial feminist scholarship has suggested on numerous occasions that we need to acknowledge the existence of different feminist traditions which were influenced under different historical and cultural circumstances. By reading Kannagi in the perspectives of indigenous ethics, the feminist criticism is not watered down with such practices, instead, it increases the range of the conceptual glasses of feminism by recognizing other forms of agency, justice, and resistance.

#### Review of Feminist Readings of *Silappatikaram*

Thoughtful commentary on *Silappatikaram* has passed through various interpretative stages to include both conservative moralistic interpretations and feminist / postcolonial ones. Tamil early commentarial traditions were mostly overtly ethical and didactic in approach to the epic, with a focus on such ideals as karpu (chastity), righteous kingship and moral order. In this context, Kannagi was venerated as a personification of perfect womanhood, tolerant, loyal and ethically firm. Although these interpretations did not ignore her unparalleled power, they tend to package it through the patriarchal moral ideology and glorify the suffering of females and the self-destruction, without critically questioning the gendered systems that drove them to such extents. Feminist literary criticism that developed in the late twentieth century changed the face of the interpretation of *Silappatikaram*. Feminist scholars started doubting the accolade of

chastity and suffering, and wanted to rediscover Kannagi as an agentic figure and not a passive virtue. The controversy that she fights the Pandyan king and then destroys Madurai was re-read as rebellion against the patriarchal control and the state of man. These readings played an essential role in preempting gendered injustice in the epic, especially the susceptibility of women to the arbitrariness of the judicial system and political violence. Nevertheless, most of the feminist interpretations, even those that are critical, are still theoretically grounded in western feminist paradigm. These analyses are often influenced by the notion of individual autonomy, opposition in the form of rupture, and freedom of social roles. Consequently, the life of Kannagi can be frequently split in two contradictory stages in which there is silence and submission in the marriage and a moment of defiant power after the execution of Kovalan. Being rhetorically compelling, this dichotomy model runs a risk of simplifying the ethical reasoning of the epic and muddling the cultural peculiarity of the agency of Kannagi. The issue of universalizing feminist categories in the analysis of literature has been brought up by postcolonial feminist researchers. The epistemic violence addressed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak stresses the point that Western theoretical constructs tend to suppress culturally specific forms of agency within the means of attention to a specific channel of expression (in the first place speech, open forms of protest). Such structures when applied to *Silappatikaram* run a risk of misinterpreting silence, restraint and endurance as the signs of oppression instead of being ethically significant practices in Tamil moral philosophy. The Indian feminist scholarship has also made feminist interpretation of the epic difficult because it prefigures the intersection of gender, ethics, and social power. Theorists like Uma Chakravarti have stressed that moral power of women in Indian traditions can manifest itself not opposed to moral conventions but as a result of their strict adherence to them. Equally, Dalit feminist critics like Sharmila Rege have also criticized the elite

feminist approaches to focusing on abstract liberation at the expense of material justice and ethical responsibility. Even though *Silappatikaram* has existed before modern caste formations, their attention towards justice, state duty, and moral failure is echoed with these criticisms. Scholars of Tamil literature have also helped to make the context in which *Silappatikaram* is read less Eurocentric, placing it in a context of indigenous ethical and philosophical traditions. These works put much focus on the center of dharma being a communal and experience ethic of social life. In this regard, the silence, tolerance, and subsequent anger of Kannagi are not opposing reactions but related ethical activities in reaction to the shifting moral situations. However, even in such scholarship, the feminist theory is seen as an adjunct and not a transformative concept. Even though the existing interpretations are rich, a systematic feminist approach to fully incorporate Tamil ethical thought, grassroots feminist knowledge and decolonial approaches has not yet been developed. The cultural context is often recognized by feminist readings without giving it an opportunity to alter their theoretical assumptions. This is where this paper fits into this gap of criticism. It aims to transcend the binary models of subversion and activism by fusing the indigenous Tamil epistemologies with the grassroots and Dalit feminist approach to provide a feminist interpretation that is ethically responsive of *Silappatikaram*.

#### Feminist Readings of SilaPattikaram:

The tradition of critical reading of *Silappatikaram* has passed through several stages of interpretations, starting with traditional moral interpretations, and passing through feminist and postcolonial interpretations. The commentarial traditions of early Tamil literature tended more to interpret the epic as a moralizing work, in terms of chastity (karpu), virtuous rulership, and virtuous order. In this context Kannagi was worshiped as the personification of perfect womanhood-suffering, loyal and morally upright. Although they recognized her

remarkable strength, these interpretations tended to put it in the context of patriarchal moral principles and glorified the suffering and self-denial of women with little or no analysis of the gendered system of relations that compelled them to engage in such suffering and self-sacrifice. The development of feminist literary criticism at the end of the twentieth century was a major change in the meaning of *Silappatikaram*. The glorification of chastity and suffering was challenged and feminist scholars began to reclaim Kannagi as a woman who was an agent who used her virtue passively. Her stand against the Pandyan king and the follow up harassment of Madurai was redefined as fight against patriarchal dominance and male state power. These readings played a key role in anticipating gendered injustice in the epic especially the fact that women were at the mercy of arbitrariness in judiciary and political violence. Nevertheless, even the critical intent must have its consequences, and most feminist readings are still theoretically pegged on Western feminist paradigms. Individual autonomy, resistance by breaking down, and breaking free of social roles are some of the concepts that often form these analyses. Consequently, the life of Kannagi tends to be split into two contrary periods, a time of silence and obedience in the marriage, and a time of rebellion after the execution of Kovalan. Although this dichotomy is rhetorically compelling, it is prone to simplifying the ethical reasoning of the epic, as well as to mask the culture-specificity of Kannangi agency. The postcolonial feminist scholars have also expressed serious questions of feminist universalisation of the literary category in the literary analysis. The problem of epistemic violence presented by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak brings out the fact that western theoretical approaches have the power to silence culturally imbedded forms of agency by focusing on one or more forms of expression, specifically speech and overt resistance, as opposed to others. Such structures, when applied to *Silappatikaram*, run the risk of

misunderstanding silence, restraint and endurance as one of the symptoms of oppression as opposed to a set of ethically important practices in Tamil moral philosophy. Indian feminist scholarship has also made feminist readings of the epic more complex by preempting gender, ethics and social power intersections. It has been stressed by thinkers like Uma Chakravarti that the moral authority of women in Indian traditions is frequently developed not by the non-adherence to the ethical standards but by strict adherence to them. On the same note, Dalit feminist theorists like Sharmila Rege have condemned the elite frameworks of feminism to consider abstract liberation at the expense of material justice and moral responsibility. Even though *Silappatikaram* is older than contemporary caste setups, its focus on justice, the role of the state, and failure to do what is right is highly reminiscent of these accusations. Another way in which the context-sensitive readings of Tamil literary works are developed is through placing *Silappatikaram* in the context of indigenous ethical and philosophical traditions. This is because these studies highlight the centrality of dharma as a relational and experiential ethic of social life. In this view, the silence, suffering and following anger of Kannagi are not inconsistent reactions but correlated ethical actions as a reaction to the fluctuating moral conditions. However, even in such scholarship, feminist theory is perceived as add-on as opposed to being transformative. Nevertheless, the richness of the existing interpretations, a complex feminist approach successfully reproducing Tamil ethical thinking, grassroots feminist thinking and decolonial approaches has not yet been established. Cultural context is often recognized by feminist readings but not allowed to redefine their theoretical assumptions. This paper fits in this critical gap. It attempts to overcome binary approaches to submission and resistance by synthesis of indigenous Tamil epistemology and grassroots and Dalit feminist analysis and come up with a feminist reading



that could address the moral complexity of *Silappatikaram*.

#### **Limitations of mainstream feminist theory: a text-centered analysis**

In the Western liberal and radical versions of feminism, mainstream feminism as a theory has been very critical in revealing patriarchal domination, gendered injustices and systematic marginalization of women. On applying these theoretical models to the premodern Indian works like *Silappatikaram* however, their limitations become evident with regard to their analysis. The epic describes the agency of women in terms of ethical responsibility, related duty, and moral power, as opposed to personal autonomy, or the act of resistance. Text-based approach into the analysis shows that the mainstream feminist theory frequently misinterprets the form and content of the agency of Kannagi. This is one of the major constraints of the mainstream feminist theory that tries to equate agency to speech and overt resistance. In these structures, silence is very often viewed as oppression internalized or subconscious. When this assumption is applied to *Silappatikaram*, the silence and the endurance that Kannagi endures in marriage is read as passive submission. Instead, her restraint is not framed in her text as powerlessness. Quite to the contrary, composure, patience (porumai) and ethical clarity of Kannagi are repeatedly predetermined as moral virtues. Her silence serves as moral restraint- as an ethically significant action in the Tamil ethics. Feminist theories that use vocal protest as the only form of agency cannot appreciate silence as an agency-based ethical choice. The other notable drawback is the linear narrative of feminist awakening which is usually assumed in Western feminist criticism. These models follow a line of oppression to awareness and lastly resistance. This framework when projected onto *Silappatikaram* divides the character of Kannagi into two conflicting stages of a submissive wife and a rebellious avenger. This dual interpretation covers the moral continuity that

rules her. The same moral teaching dharma is the source of Kannagi endurance, moral discipline and subsequent righteous anger. Her conversion is not a cry of realization about the oppression but a reaction to the disastrous failure to observe moral order. The mainstream feminist theory is artificial discontinuity that is introduced into the text by the focus on rupture and transformation.

The mainstream feminist theory is also prone to universalization of patriarchy as a single and trans-historical domination system. Although *Silappatikaram* is definitely a work of gendered vulnerability, the injustice of the epic scene is not a one-sided outcome of male dominance over a woman. Instead it is the inadequacy of the state justice and kingship. The Khalalan case of unjust execution by the Pandyan king can be viewed as a failure by an ethical ruler and the judiciary. Feminist readings which are solely based on patriarchy stand the danger of becoming a simplistic interpretation of power relations in the epic and missing out on its long-running criticism of political power, arbitrariness of the law and morality. Moreover, the Western feminist theory tends to focus more on personal independence as the source of feminist agency. On the contrary, *Silappatikaram* creates subjectivity based on relational identity wife, citizen, moral witness and ethical agent. The power of Kannagi is not due to the claim of personal rights but her moral equality with righteousness and duty. Feminist models that prioritize autonomy to relational ethics find it hard to admit such forms of agency and fail to define them as limited or subordinate. Mainstream feminist theory is characterized by another serious shortcoming of the secular orientation. Ethical justice of the *Silappatikaram* cannot be separated with cosmic order, spirituality and moral balance. The acts of Kannagi are justified not only in a social perspective but also in a cosmical context and also, her appointment to a divine authority proves the fact that ethics and spirituality are merged in the Tamil philosophy. Feminist

methods that treat spiritual schemata as retrogressive are not well placed to understand such aspects without reductionism. Lastly, an uncritical use of mainstream feminist theory runs the risk of replicating epistemic inequalities that give precedence to Western bodies of knowledge as opposed to native bodies of knowledge. Reading Kannagi with the help of borrowed theoretical categories, critics can drown out the ethical language of Kannagi itself. This does not mean that the feminist critique should be rejected but rather its re-direction should be called. It is necessary to understand the limitations of mainstream feminist theory in order to come up with an indigenous feminist approach, which can interact with *Silappatikaram* in their own philosophical language.

#### **Dharma as a lived ethical framework in tamil thought**

Dharma (aram) does not serve as a strict moral code and a purely religious doctrine in the Tamil intellectual and literary traditions. Rather, it functions as an experiential, relational and situational ethical theory that regulates behavior at the personal, societal, political, and cosmic levels. Tamil moral philosophy, in contrast to juridical or rule-based morality, focuses on balance, responsibility, restraint, and accountability which are developed through experience. *Silappatikaram* is firmly rooted in this ethical world and the agency of Kannagi can be explained only in this context. Classical Tamil literature like the Tirukkural and *Silappatikaram* theorizes ethical life not as the adherence to set principles but as the development of moral sense in daily life. Dharma is practised in the form of patience (porumai), truthfulness, justice, and responsibility and not in self-assertion. Ethical decisions are thus obtained with time and consistency coupled with moral coherence. This knowledge complicates feminist theories, which can only see agency as resistance and rupture. The dharma in the early life of Kannagi is an example of ethical restraint. Her patience in the abandonment by Kovalan and she is

sharing poverty with him when he comes back are misinterpreted and taken to signify passive submission. In the Tamil moral reasoning, restraint is a characteristic of moral power but no moral weakness. Kannagi is not impulsive in response to injustice; she exercises ethical patience, the moral authority must be discerned. Her silence is not the lack of agency but a kind of ethical action based on the relational responsibility. Importantly, Tamil thought does not presuppose dharma as fixed, but it is contextual. Moral order is good and therefore ethical restraint is good. Ethical intervention is the case when dharma is not observed. A justifiable failure of dharma on the state level is embodied in the unfair execution of Kovalan. King in political philosophy of the Tamils is not possible without justice and a ruler cannot be justified without ethical ruling. The mistake made by the Pandyan king is not therefore just a womanish mistake in judicial practice but a moral failure that disrupts the order of the world and the universe. It is not the renouncing of dharma but the accomplishment of it in Kannagi. Her challenges to the royal power are based on moral authority based on her ethical and moral upright behavior. She does not talk as a personal person who wants to revenge but as a moral witness to injustice. Her articulation in the court is characterised by consensus, supportable arguments, and moral restraint, which make her consistent with dharma. Righteous anger (aram ulla kopam) is also a valid ethical reaction according to Tamil ethical thought when injustice is more than tolerable. Rich righteous anger, in contrast to the uncontrolled rage, serves to reestablish moral balance and not to destroy. The anger of Kannagi is put in this moral category. Her burning down of Madurai is not shown as an emotional overindulgence but rather as a moral necessity that occurred because of institutional justice failure. Notably, the Tamil thinking of dharma is relational, not individualistic. Ethical action is aimed at bringing back normalcy within the society as opposed to claiming rights. The power of Kannagi is based on her

relationships as wife, citizen and moral agent but not on her personal autonomy. This is the relational ethics that makes the Tamil dharma and the Western moral systems different and provides a new approach to feminism which is based on responsibility instead of opposition. The foregrounding of dharma as an ethical system of living establishes a native feminist philosophy in the practice of which the power of women is exercised in the form of moral authority, ethical judgment, and justice. The silence, speech, anger and transformation of Kannagi are not mutually exclusive and morally inconsistent, but ethically rational reactions to the altering moral situations. It is important to note this form of coherence to appreciate the epic as a text that enshrines a culturally based feminist vision.

#### **Kannagi's transformation from domestic virtue to moral authority**

The change in *Silappatikaram* of Kannagi in being not a figure of domestic virtue but an embodiment of moral authority has been seen as a dramatic break (a sudden change of passive wife into rebellious avenger). These readings are, nonetheless, framed through the feminist paradigms in which resistance is the most important agential sign. A more in-depth reading of the text shows that what Kannagi is changing is not her previous moral identity but her moral development. Her authority in morality is achieved by continuity as opposed to contradiction.

The domestic space (illaram) within the Tamil culture and ethics is not only a place of imprisonment but also a place of ethical construction. The virtues of patience, fidelity, and restraint are not mere passivity of Kannagi but disciplined ethical behaviors that do not lack moral credibility. The fact that she survived the betrayal of a man that she loves, Kovalan, and can suffer at his absence is evidence of ethical maturity and not subservience. Such actions define her as an ethically sound subject the authority of whom is gained by consistency and

restraint. It is specifically the lack of unconditional obedience that makes the domestic virtue of Kannagi very important. She does not simply blindly accept what Kovalan is doing; she has her own judgment and she will use ethical patience and not act impulsively. In Tamil ethics, this restraint is the expression of strength and as well as clarity of morality. This moral basis plays a very important role in case of injustice. Wrongful execution of Kovalan is an issue that has been featured in the epic as a disastrous failure of state justice, which requires ethical intervention. In the circumstances, when Kannagi comes to the world in order to struggle against the Pandyan king, she does not give up her moral control. The reasoning, the clarity in facts and the moral authority is apparent in her speech in the royal court. She provides evidence, reveals the negligence of the judiciary, and brings the king to seeing how wrong he is. This scene illustrates that the power of Kannagi is not produced through emotional outburst but moral justification that is built through the years. Her power is based on dharma rather, institutional position. The incineration of Madurai is the highest point of this moral change. Feminist interpretations tend to hail it as a radical protest, or to condemn it as too much violence. In the moral universe of *Silappatikaram*, though, it acts as just righteousness. Tamil ethical thought acknowledges that the situation may arise when the moral order can be maintained only through restraint, which means that ethical behavior must be violent. Kannagi does not take vengeance against herself but is a moral reaction against the injustice of the system. Importantly, the change of Kannagi does not destroy social order; it reveals the lack of ethic in it. She does not want to be in power but one who wants the authority to be held accountable. Her deification at the conclusion of the epic movie affirms that her activities are in line with cosmic dharma. Her transformation can be characterized by moral authority rather than rebellion. *Silappatikaram* also labels feminist binaries with domesticity being equal to submission by introducing domestic virtue and public

authority as morally complimentary to one another. The experience of Kannagi shows that feminist agency in indigenous settings can manifest itself in the form of ethical responsibility instead of denying relational roles. Her metamorphosis therefore represents an aboriginal feminist rationality of moral consistency and fairness.

### **Female anger and justice: re-reading the burning of Madurai**

One of the most dramatic and controversial events of the Indian classical literature is the burning of Madurai in *Silappatikaram*. The burning of the city by Kannagi has been construed in many ways, as either a way of the female anger being out of control or as a radical feminist uprising against the male patriarchal order. The two readings, nevertheless, have a danger of over simplifying the ethical framework in which the episode exists. A more detailed textual and cultural examination of the situation shows that the anger of Kannagi is not irrational or exaggerated, but it is ethically justified and even judicial. The anger of women, historically, has been delegitimized and pathologized and often equated to hysteria, emotional instability or moral failure as part of patriarchal discourse. The feminist theory has attempted to re-appropriate the wrath of women as a political sentiment, although it tends to view anger in the context of reaction to individual oppression. *Silappatikaram* presents a unique moral set up. Kannagi is not angry because of an injured subjectivity, but because of such a tremendous betrayal of dharma as the unjust death of Kovalan by the Pandyan king without due investigation. The epic puts up the rightfulness of the anger of Kannagi meticulously. She challenges the royal authority by appealing to reason and moral examples before the loss of Madurai. Her address in the court reveals the laxity of the courts and makes the king realize his mistake. It is after institutional justice fails miserably, when the king himself recognizes it and dies in humiliation, that the rage of Kannagi

becomes destructive. This sequencing of the story is essential: anger does not appear as a spontaneous feeling but as a moral necessity when all the justice institutions fail. Tamil ethical theory acknowledges that righteous anger (*aram ulla kopam*) is also an acceptable ethical reaction to injustice. In comparison to uncontrolled rage, righteous anger serves in bringing moral balance. The incineration of Madurai is not explained as lawlessness but as righteousness. The symbol of fire which appears frequently in literature of Tamilian literature is regarded as purification and moral redemption. Kannagi reveals the ethical decay of a city that is maintained by inequitable leadership by burning down Madurai. Notably, Kannagi does not have an individualistic but a collective anger. It targets not at personal enemies but at a system that has failed on matters of ethics. This makes her action not like revenge works but in line with larger issues of justice and responsibility. Feminist commentaries that have minimized this episode as either personal catharsis or rebellion are likely to miss the ethical and political dimension of this episode. The epic also authorizes the anger of Kannagi by Cosmic authority. Godly spirits are aware of her virtuousness and her subsequent elevation proves her right actions are in harmony with the moral order and not in opposition to it. Here, the anger of females is a tool of justice and not a danger to the social peace. When re-reading Madurai burning in the perspective of dharma, *Silappatikaram* confronts patriarchal belief that puts the virtue of women in the context of silence and perseverance. It states that ethical anger is not only justified but also needed when injustice is systematic. The anger of Kannagi therefore turns the concept of virtue back upon itself and broadens feminist ethic to incorporate the moral indignation as an acceptable kind of justice. Decolonial Feminism and Indigenous Epistemologies.

Decolonial feminism is a reaction to the epistemic superiority of Western feminist theory and universalizing assertions. It disputes the



notion that feminist ideas that are formulated in the historical and cultural background of Euro-Americans can be used to effectively understand gendered experiences in other societies. The primary aspect of decolonial feminist discourse is the analysis of epistemic violence the exclusion of local knowledge systems by introducing Western theoretical knowledge systems. Applied to classical Indian texts like *Silappatikaram*, decolonial feminism provides a necessary approach to methodology to recover culturally mediated agency of women.

The Western feminist theory, especially its liberal and radical branches, tends to share the benefits of secularism, individualism, and anti-traditionalism. Decolonial feminists claim that these premises unwillingly recreate colonial discourses of knowledge, with Western modernity serving as the example of the feminist emancipation. These frameworks find it difficult to explain ethical systems with spirituality, morality, and social responsibility as they cannot be separated. *Silappatikaram* exists in an indigenous epistemological space in which ethics is practiced, relationship-based and cosmologically based. Kannagi has power not as a result of resistance to tradition but as a result of moral conformity to dharma.

The Tamil epistemologies of the indigenous Tamils see knowledge as embodied and experiential as opposed to abstract. Moral truth is created in the act of living, moral restraint and moral responsibility towards others. In this context, the silence, endurance, and anger of Kannagi are not conflicting but morally suitable reactions in a certain situation. Decolonial feminism helps to accept these practices as agency without imposing them on the Western feminist patterns of liberation or resistance.

The critique of feminist representation of western feminists about female representation of the Third World women particularly applies in this case. Mohanty warns against reducing non-Western women to the

status of helpless victims who are not empowered. The feminist interpretation of Kannagi that re-enacts this logic is that she was still mostly oppressed and only became awakened when she rebelled. A decolonial feminist approach acts against this kind of flattening by paying attention to the cultural specificity of the ethical authority of Kannagi.

Relationality is another ethical value that is predicted by decolonial feminism. Indigenous epistemologies uphold responsibility, reciprocity and collective justice as opposed to Liberal feminism, which places an emphasis on an individual right. Such relational ethics can be illustrated by the actions of Kannagi. Her anger is not self centered, it tackles a moral failure which threatens the community and cosmic order. In this model, justice is not an individualistic concept but a communal one.

This reading is further supported by the overlap between decolonial feminism and the Dalit feminism. They both confront feminist universals of the elite and focus on justice as rooted in lived experience and ethical validity. Whereas the idea of modern caste politics has not existed, the issue of state power and judicial inefficiency expressed in *Silappatikaram* is echoed in decolonial feminist desires to understand authority, accountability, and moral regulation. This paper constructs the epistemic monopoly of the Western feminist theory and asserts plural feminist paradigms by placing the book of *Silappatikaram* in the context of the decolonial feminist discourse. Kannagi does not come out as a wanting feminist subject who is compared to the western standards, but as an indigenous feminist ethical figure, whose power is based on dharma, relationship responsibility and moral coherence.

#### ***Silappatikaram* as an indigenous feminist text**

The integration of grassroots feminism, Dalit feminist perspectives, and decolonial feminist theory further reveals how feminist authority in *Silappatikaram* arises from ethical legitimacy rather than institutional power.

Kannagi's actions transform personal grief into collective justice, aligning with indigenous feminist traditions that prioritize responsibility, dignity, and accountability.

Recognizing *Silappatikaram* as an indigenous feminist text expands the conceptual horizons of feminist theory itself. It affirms that feminist ethics need not mirror Western historical trajectories to be philosophically rigorous or politically meaningful. Instead, the epic demonstrates that indigenous literary traditions can articulate powerful feminist visions grounded in justice, moral coherence, and ethical responsibility.

By reclaiming *Silappatikaram* within an indigenous feminist framework, this paper contributes to the decolonization of feminist literary criticism and underscores the necessity of plural feminist epistemologies. Kannagi ultimately emerges not merely as a symbol of resistance, but as a figure of enduring moral authority whose ethical vision continues to challenge dominant feminist paradigms. In order to read *Silappatikaram* as indigenous feminist text, it is necessary to make a radical break with universalized feminist paradigms that define empowerment in terms of individual autonomy, rejection of tradition, or open opposition to social roles. Rather, the epic expresses a culturally informed feminist ethics based on Tamil epistemologies, and the power to act in morality, responsibility in relationships and justice to ethics. The character of Kannagi is an example of such indigenous feminist logic, which can serve as a model of feminist agency not based on the Western theory but not explainable by the moral idealization of patriarchy.

The central part of this feminist imagination is the acceptance of the moral judgment of women as one of the highest qualities than the official power when the justice is destroyed. Kannagi, a socially unprivileged and politically ineffective woman reveals the moral incompetence of kingship and justice. The

Pandyan king who symbolically represents the manly and state power is disclosed as a person of dubious moral qualities, and Kannagi is disclosed as the ultimate judge of justice. This reversal of power is an immense feminist intrusion. Institutions do not give feminist power in *Silappatikaram* but rather, it is acquired through ethical coherence.

In contrast to the models of feminism developed in the West, where domesticity is the location of oppression, the domestic sphere (illaram) in *Silappatikaram* is a space of the formation of ethics. Not tools of subjugating speech but ways in which moral power is developed, Kannagi is patient, restrained and faithful. Her agency is not curtailed by her domestic virtue, but it facilitates it. This consistency between personal morality and government morality confronts feminist oppositions between domesticity and empowerment. The epic also expresses an aboriginal feminist morality by making female anger just. The act of burning Madurai by Kannagi is not depicted as a emotional outburst or as a personal payback, but as an act of appropriate morality due to the injustice of the system. The fact that anger is a morally approved reaction, reveals patriarchal structures that limit feminine virtues to silence and suffering by *Silappatikaram*. The anger of the women in this context transforms into a moral reprovment and not a social chaos.

Of significance, feminist justice as depicted in *Silappatikaram* does not envisage the breaking down of social order. It rather reveals the ethical failure of authority structures and requires accountability. Kannagi is not interested in domination or power, she makes the society face the injustice. The fact that she is eventually elevated into divine status confirms that her actions are in line with the cosmic dharma which strengthens the validity of the indigenous feminist ethics which take moral responsibility as a basis instead of an ideological defiance.

## Conclusion

In this work of analysis, I have maintained that *Silappatikaram* requires a feminist reading that is sensitive to localized epistemologies of the Tamil people instead of the need to apply universalized Western feminist concepts. Although mainstream feminist theory has played a key role in highlighting the gendered injustice, its focus on autonomy, rupture, and abstract patriarchy is not adequate to address the ethical complexity of classical Tamil literature. This paper has been able to show through close analysis of the character of Kannagi that feminist agency in *Silappatikaram* is expressed in dharma as a lived ethical model, a form of relationship, a situational and a moral one.

The character of Kannagi and her transformation into a moral power is not a feminist awakening story but is ethical continuum. Her silence is a sign of restraint as opposed to submission; her rage is a way of restoring justice as opposed to revenge. The incineration of Madurai comes up as a morally approved response to the disastrous failure of the state justice and kingship. The epic undermines patriarchal assumptions that limit women to ethical agency by justifying the female anger and moral judgment.

This combination of feminism of the grassroots, Dalit feminist viewpoints, and institutional theory of decolonization further demonstrates how feminist power in *Silappatikaram* takes place through authorities of ethical legitimacy, and not through institutional power. The actions of Kannagi trigger personal mourning into community justice, which is consistent with the indigenous feminist practices that value the responsibilities, dignity, and accountability.

The identification of *Silappatikaram* as a feminist text of the indigenous kind broadens the conceptual horizons of the feminist theory itself. It confirms that feminist ethics do not have to follow the Western historical patterns in order

to be philosophically sound and politically significant. Rather, the epic shows that aboriginal literature may express strong feminist imaginings based on fairness, ethical consistency, and ethical responsibility.

Reclaiming *Silappatikaram* as an indigenous feminist, this paper helps the decolonization of the feminist literary criticism and emphasizes the importance of plural feminist epistemologies. Kannagi turns out not only as a figure of opposition, but as an icon of long-term moral power who is still able to give moral vision based on which feminist paradigms are able to compete with the mainstream.

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