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Gendering as power in a re-reading of Dr. Ayyappa Panikker's

'The Lay of the Anklet'

Dr. K Ayyappa Panikker depicts the vengeful anger of a chaste woman in his Lay of the Anklet manifested through the modern reading of the Tamil classic *Silappatikaram* written by the saintly poet Elankovadikal. It is literally translated as the *Story of Anklet* that depicts the life of *Kannagi*, a chaste woman who lead a peaceful life with *Kovalan* in Puhar (*Poompuhar*), then the capital of *Cholas*. Her life later went haywire when Kovalan falls for another woman *Madhavi* who was a dancer in the princely courts.. Although Kovalan remains under the charming spell for some time he comes back to his senses when he got ruined and decides to start his life anew in the city of *Madurai*, the capital of *Pandyas*. *Kannagi* volitionally accepts him and goes with him to seek their fortune in a new place.

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).). 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) The story goes that Kannagi crossed the hills and settled down in the city of Kodungallur where she became a deity worshipped by women. Popular belief is that on her way to Kodungallur she alighted at Attukal Temple where we have the powerful deity of Attukal Devi another powerful and vengeful Kannagi to whom the women folk flock in appeasement. The fire that burned Madhurapuri now glows as lamps in Kodungallur and Attukal which thrives amid the woeful memories of Kannagi and gives succor to many a broken heart. The re incarnated deity was the essence of woman empowerment. The epic portrays them as the divine power that lends solace to the marginalized and the downtrodden.

A furious Kannagi went on to prove the innocence of her husband. A vengeful Kannagi turns up at the royal court works herself into a divine fury, tears away her breasts, breaks open her anklet to reveal the King's mistake, for the queen's original anklet had pearls whereas the one taken from Kovalan had rubies and was believed to have burnt the entire city of Madurai by the furious fire of her chastity. She is believed to be the avatar of Goddess Parvati who patronises the 'pativrata'. Apart from the story, *Silappadikaram* is a vast treasure of information of music and dance, both classical and folk.

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. She was willing to come out of her nightmare with a serene and radiant smile. When Kovalan comes back to her, Kannagi is willing to do anything to help her husband including selling the anklets that were given to her by 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 poet Elangovadikal is believed to be the brother of Senguvattan.

Dr. K. Ayyappa Panikker revered and adored by the modernist sensibility in Malayalam also argued for the enrichment of poetic sensibility. He played a very crucial role in the evolving of Malayalam literature in the twentieth century. Ayyappa Panikker who developed an interest in Tamil culture and Dravidian Aesthetics in the latter part of his literary career brings alive the story of Kannagi through the mirror of modern day aesthetics depicting Kannagi not as a deity but as the epitome of Indian womanhood and chastity. She bears the signature of the reacting woman. "The Lay of the Anklet" is taken from the fourth volume of 'Ayyappa Panikkerude Krithikal'.

The poem is divided into three parts. The opening stanzas bring the tragic story of Kannagi to the minds of the readers. The second part is a poetic recreation of the romantic mood of a chaste woman and her husband during their honeymoon days, Madhavi's intervention and Kannagi's emotional turmoil having to suffer another woman in their lives. The last part is a

poignant outburst describing the agonies that Kannagi had to face in life and Elangovadikal's treatment of the Kannagi story . The poem ends on an evocative note on the origin of good poetry "poetry is engendered from agonies, writhes, sobs and thoughts"(SS 61)

The poem opens addressing Kannagi posing a question as to her fate of being forsaken by destiny. On a cosmic level Dr. Ayyappa Panikker's Kannagi is every woman forced to go through the vagaries of fortune. He dipped his pen in the universal plight of women and paints a picture of Kannagi that touches a sensitive chord in the heart of every woman. Dr. Ayyappa Panikker is so enraptured and obsessed with the story of Kannagi that it wakes him up from sleep and renders sleepless nights to him. He finds it increasingly difficult to believe the story of Kannagi of how her fury was able to reduce Madhurapuri to ashes and how the tinkle of her anklet still reverberates and throbs with life in the city of Kodungallur, the image of the new city.

He takes a peep into the rich and fabled history of Tamil culture and talks about the women rulers of Kunnalanadu in an excited vision of women power. The poet is full of wonder as he looks back at Kannagi who pulsates 'with the glow of freshly spilled blood', who not only burned the royal houses but also the pride and glory of her land in her wrath and tears and who still resonates as a " deity who nurses broken hearts". He gives a warning of the igniting power of a wronged chaste woman which was capable of burning up royalties and kingdoms. Woman as a power that has condensed her agony in her tears and then transformed it into writhing flames that burns up civilizations-a very powerful and disturbing image indeed.

In the second section Dr. Ayyappa Panikker recreates the romantic days of praises and endearments and love making. He alludes to the canto of *Puhar* in *Silappadikaram* which describes this happy phase of their lives at Kaveripattanam on the banks of River Kaveri.. And

then dances in Madhavi ‘ like a moth’ into the royal court and into the heart of Kovalan and weans away kovalan’s love leaving Kannagi grief stricken and desolate. In abject agony she embraces her fate as she realizes that “life’s truth is not in it’s wealth or its lack’. She asks why the poet did not “ redress the wrong” or “ rewrite this story”. Kannagi is view as a brave woman who could demand justice directly from the King and even daring to call him as an unenlightened king.

The third and final part is intense with its myriad images of a wronged woman on the one hand and of a woman who transcends the social construct of gender on the other. Kannagi leaves Pandya Kingdom overcome with anguish and weeps her way up the Eastern hills, all alone, with only the colourless sky and the endless sea to offer her solace. The poet paints a panoramic picture of her childhood days and how she fell prey to that enigmatic emotion called love overpowered her to “love before she looked” . The poet leaves aside a stanza to Kannagi to describe her woes, her despairs, her doomed fate, her fury, her vengeance and her all encompassing power that transforms her into a raging fire..in power packed words. The poet alludes to the woman as a flower who is admired not for her fragrance or her sweet honey but for her pollen grains. On a literary level we can see Kannagi as wallowing in the valley of despair for having been deprived even of a child but on a feminist stance we see her transcending the maternal cage to become the presiding mother deity for all women. Dr. Ayyappa Panikker was pointing to us to look beyond the past and the present and to rethink and critique on the feminist politics of the woman’s social position even after centuries have passed.

The original poet Elangovadigal is doubted as to whether he was able to capture the real woe of Kannagi. Dr. Ayyappa Panikker doubts whether the poet was just a dreamer or a bard in search of a bloom or a dream itself. Or was he a mirror that internalized the misery of a people

while his brother was busy conquering kingdoms. Through a very moving and emotional question he wonders what provokes true poetry. He asks “what hell fire, what hell fire, what funeral pyre breeds poetry”. “What grief did the Prince (Elangovadikal) blend with this old tale?”(SS61)

Very significantly he answers “ Poetry is born to him who has no one/ It is lulled to sleep in the cradle of the tongue/ It is rocked to mirth in the swing of the land./ It turns into a dream unknown to man./It is the voice of one yet to be born.” (SS61) The poet becomes the past, the present and the future and the prophet for the times to come. Dr. Ayyappa Panikker continues to have visions and dreams and in his attempt to portray Kannagi as an ordinary girl with her agonies and ecstasies raises her to a pedestal and worships her as a chaste woman of great virtue, who found herself and in that he emerges quite successful unlike Elangovadikal. And for that he used 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* and the *Lay of the Anklet* are very relevant to the human experience, which is probably why it still is a well read story even today and finds resonance in every heart.

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