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## A retrospection of the life of Kaṇṇaki in Iṅkō Aṭikaḷ's *Cilappadikāram* with modern perspective

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### Abstract:

The Tamils regard the *Cilappadikāram* as their national epic and this is one of the masterpieces of the word. This is a significant work on women and spirituality with the representation of Kaṇṇaki in this Tamil epic. The epic celebrates the great achievements of Kaṇṇaki against injustice. However, her revenge is not an example to be followed but as a chaste woman she is glorified for her love and fortitude. She is always admired for her courage and through the power of chastity she metamorphoses herself into a goddess. Kaṇṇaki is eulogized as the global symbol of justice. The present paper aims to analyze the character of Kaṇṇaki from the epic *Cilappadikāram* by Iṅkō Aṭikaḷ. An attempt has also been made in this paper to establish the relevance of the story of Kaṇṇaki in the perspective of modern day women.

**Keyword:** Women, chaste, love, courage, power

### 1. Introduction

Literature occupies a significant place in the society. Literary works differs from each country and it has its own identity. Every literary works aim at something specific as its outcome. Literature tries to establish values in the society. The *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* are the great example of setting values in the society. Likewise, in Tamil literature, the *Cilappadikāram*, written by Iṅkō Aṭikaḷ, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. established the Tamil life and culture in its splendor and also their stern respect for justice. Kaṇṇaki is the protagonist, through whom the writer projects the outcome. She has been projected as a chaste, true lover of husband; at the same time she is a brave heart woman standing against injustice.

Kaṇṇaki is the daughter of Mānāykaṇ, who is a businessman by profession in the city of Pukār-the capital of Cōḷa. At the age of twelve she gets married to Kōvalaṇ, the son of Mācāttuvān, a man of immense wealth and a merchant of Pukār. After some happy years of their conjugal life her husband leaves her for a courtesan girl named Mātavi. Few years later Kōvalaṇ comes back to her with great realization of spoiling his immense wealth and valuable time with that courtesan girl. Surprisingly, Kaṇṇaki welcomes him with a smile and gives him the last ornament she has, the anklet, to start a new beginning. To start a new life they go to Maturai. There in Maturai, her husband is wrongfully killed by the Pāṇṭiyaṇ king. Kaṇṇaki demands justice for this wrong act of the king and proves her husband's innocence. Then she curses the whole city of Maturai to burn, she wrenches off her left breast and flings it on the city. Thus, in the whole epic the character of Kaṇṇaki appears to be very prominent and strong. The twin notions of *karpu* (chastity) and *anaku* (female sexuality) get intertwined in this epic. Therefore, it is a significant work on women and spirituality with the representation of Kaṇṇaki.

### 2. Body

Few of the notable traits of the character Kaṇṇaki can be noted as follows-

#### 2.a Patience and Forbearance

It is seen in the epic that Kaṇṇaki faces great misery as her husband leaves her for a courtesan girl named Mātavi. This is the most crucial time in her life. During that time her in-laws come to console her. But she does not express her grief in front of them<sup>[1]</sup>, although they are aware that she is in grief.

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Kaṇṇaki has neither given any chance to them to show sympathy towards her nor does she blame them. Instead, she offers her normal service to them hiding all her miseries <sup>[2]</sup>. Her patience and self-control focuses through this. She possesses a strong mind.

### 2.b Loyalty, Chastity and Love

All these traits are available in Kaṇṇaki. From the epic story it appears that she has been abandoned by her husband. Her husband has finished almost all his wealth for that courtesan lady. But Kaṇṇaki loves him unconditionally. She waits for him to come back. After some years when he realizes his fault he comes back to her <sup>[3]</sup>. Kaṇṇaki welcomes him with a smile and gives her remaining jewellery, her anklet <sup>[4]</sup>, to him to start a new life and accompany him to Maturai, which is far from their residence of Pukār. She forgives all the misdeeds of her husband. This shows how much love Kaṇṇaki has for her husband. In Maturai, when her husband is wrongly killed she questions on this in front of the Pāṇṭiya king (king of Maturai) and proves her husband's innocence. Her unconditional love makes her strong to keep her husband's dignity. During the time of great distress she never allows deviation of her mind. She just keeps patience and hope for her husband's return. All these can be taken as enough to focus the true love, loyalty and chastity of Kaṇṇaki's character.

### 2.c. Rationality

The character of Kaṇṇaki appears as very rational. The idea of superstition does not prevail in her mind even in the days of such an antiquity. There are some incidents in her life which highlights that she never had believe in superstition.

When Kaṇṇaki is in distress at the absence of her husband, her childhood friend Devanti comes to console her. She narrates the story of two ponds connected to the Sun and the Moon outside the city walls, just where the river Kāverī meets the sea. And it is believed that women who bathe there and worship God of love, after taking bath, live happy married lives throughout this life and for the forthcoming lives. Hence she requests Kaṇṇaki to go there with her once <sup>[5]</sup>. But Kaṇṇaki strongly replies her that this will not be the proper solution to her problem <sup>[6]</sup>. She believes that her husband is her god. She does not listen to her friend and straightly ignores the stories of superstitions explained by her childhood friend. Though she loses her husband for another woman she is not in a mood to believe in any type of superstition. This trait of her character has made her upgraded and holistic in the storyline.

### 2.d Fight for Justice

The most important trait seen in her character is that she fights for justice till death and continue to establish her right through her behavior in the whole story of the epic.

While the King orders for a death sentence to Kaṇṇaki's husband for stealing the Queen's anklet, Kaṇṇaki does not dare to visit the king although the city is very new to her <sup>[7]</sup>. She questions in front of the Pāṇṭiya king. She breaks the codes of the system and questions the king directly <sup>[8]</sup>. She doesn't plead for justice. She demands for justice anyway which can be considered a very special for a lady of the society of that time. She burns down the city to avenge the wrong cause to her <sup>[9]</sup>. She fights against the injustice of her husband's murder. She also curses to burn the whole city except virtuous men, faithful women, old people, children and

cows, whereas; she requests the fire god not to spare the wicked <sup>[10]</sup>.

These show Kaṇṇaki's strength of mind as well as the kindness of her heart. She is always respectful to the elderly one. She proves her honesty and the respect she possesses for the elderly persons, woman and the children. She shows how faith and truth are to be valued in the human life. At the same time she does not excuse the wrong people. For this she is eulogized as a symbol of justice in Tamil society.

It is opined that the Indian society and culture has changed drastically as the impact of globalization, evolvement of science and technology. The change is inevitable. The changes have helped in making the society progressive. However, in the Indian context though changes has happened few elements of the society never gets changed. Out of which one must have to names the integrity, values, respect, ethics, honesty and so on. These elements will always be associated with the human life no matter at what age or what period society lives. That is the reason why almost Indian child grows up listening the stories of the great epics like the *Mahābhārata*, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the stories of the great personalities with valor. Parents always try to inculcate the important traits of the renowned personalities in their child by making them listen to the stories of them.

### 3. Modern Perspective:

Kaṇṇaki who is eulogized as the symbol of justice has lot more to attract the present day's women. India, where 48.50 percent of the total population (as per 2011 census) accounts for female is having many societal challenges to uplift the livelihood of women. Kaṇṇaki's forbearance capacity tells a lot about her strength of mental health. Her husband left her but she waited for him thinking that one day he would come back, she lost her husband in a wrong decision by the rule maker and she decides to stand against the injustice. Whereas today's modern women are more susceptible to the common issues of Depression and other mental illness. They are not having the patience to overcome the problems with a fight in the right manner. That is why cruelty by family and relatives is the highest recorded crime in India accounting 33 percent crime recorded in the year 2016 <sup>[11]</sup>. There are lots to learn from the character Kaṇṇaki to fight against the injustice in the proper way for the women.

Divorce and separation has become a common issue in the society. As per the global report the divorce rate in India is approximately 1 percent. Out of every 1000 couple 13 are seeking divorce in the court. In a country like India where family and culture are put at the top priority of everyone's life it is quite tough to digest that 13 out of 1000 couples are seeking separation of their conjugal bonding <sup>[12]</sup>. In this context Kaṇṇaki's love, loyalty towards her husband teaches how truth and love value in the society. Time has changed but values remain same. The true love has rejoined her relationship after the husband gets separated. Not only the women but also the men of the modern world have enough to learn from Kaṇṇaki.

Superstition is a widespread social problem in India. Though education plays a vital role in removing the superstitious mind still it can't be attributed as the only measure to avoid superstition. The literacy rate in India is increasing day by day however superstitions are not decreasing with the evolvement of science and technology. Every day one or the other instances of cruelty cases are coming up which are due to the superstition. One of the notable crimes which have root cause of superstition is the witch hunting which is more common in our own state i.e. Assam. Kaṇṇaki's life incidents of not

believing in superstition and facing the practical problems has lot more to teach us for standing against superstition.

Her standing against injustice influences our women to fight for their right and justice. Her determined mind to oppose the decision of the king and proofing of the righteousness has lot to attract present day women.

Going through the life of Kaṇṇaki one will definitely earn thousands of reason to rejoice his or her societal values. For all that the heroine Kaṇṇaki is eulogized as the symbol of justice and she will be attracting the people of this world till time exists.

#### 4. References

1. Parthasarathy R. The *Silappadikāram*, vide. p.92.
2. Your good mother And your renowned and excellent father, Honored by the king, had come to see me. Your father at that time hid from me the rage You had thrown him in. with love in their hearts And kind words on their lips, they consoled me. I hid from them the pain of our separation And the agony that followed. Seeing the false smile. That brushed my lips, they suffered. *Cilappadikāram*, The Book of Maturai, Canto- 16, lines, 78-86
3. By keeping company with a liar,  
Full of deceitful conduct, I have lost  
The mountainous hoard of wealth left to me  
By my family. The poverty has brought shame on me.  
*Ibid.*, The Book of Pukār, Canto-9, lines,104-107
4. Her bright face lit up with a consoling smile, She said:  
my anklets. Here !take them. *Ibid.*, Canto-9, lines, 108-109
5. To wipe out the evil as a result of it, go  
To the place where the Kāviri takes its waters  
To the roaring sea. There is a seaside grove  
Where the blue lily opens its petals,  
And where there are two holy tanks, the tank  
Of the moon and the tank of the sun. women  
Who bathe on their steps and worship at the temple  
Of Kāma nearby will enjoy this world  
Together with their husbands. To heaven, the land  
Of pleasure, they will go and be reborn there. We will  
one day go there to play in the water. *Cilappadikāram*,  
Canto-9, lines, 86-96
6. <sup>1</sup>Resplendent in jewels, Kaṇṇaki replied: It doesn't make  
me proud." *Ibid.*, lines, 87-88
7. Ho gatekeeper! Ho gatekeeper! O gatekeeper of the king  
Who has forshaken his wisdom, whose vile heart  
Has turned away from justice! Go tell the king  
A woman, bearing an anklet from a pair  
Of tinkling anklets, who has lost her husband  
Waits at his gate. Go tell him. *Cilappadikāram*, The  
Book of Maturai, Canto- 20, lines,34-39
8. Kaṇṇaki replied: "impetuous king!  
Listen to what I have to say. Pukār  
Of great renown is my town. One of its kings  
Of spotless glory once rid a dove  
Of its suffering to the wonder of the gods.  
Another had his only son killed under the wheels  
Of his chariot. He was burn to the quick  
By the tears falling from the eyes of a cow  
That swung the bell at the palace gates. king of tinkling  
anklets! Born in Pukār  
As the son of Mācāttuvāṅ, a merchant prince  
Of untarnished fame, Kōvalaṅ came to Maturai  
For a living, driven by his karma. When he was here

To sell my anklet, he was murdered.

I am his wife: Kaṇṇaki is my name." *Ibid.*, The Book of Maturai, Canto-20,lines 60-75

9. I was born in the city where such virtuous women  
With fragrant locks of hair were born.  
If I too am truly a virtuous woman, forbearing  
I will not be, but bring ruin on Maturai and the king.  
The force of my vengeance you will see,  
Thundered Kaṇṇaki as she walked out of the palace  
In a rage she cried out: Men and women  
Of Maturai of the four temples! O gods in heaven  
And ascetics listen! I curse this city. Its king erred In  
killing the man I loved. Blameless am I !*Ibid.*, Canto-21,  
lines, 49-58
10. Kaṇṇaki, the golden vine, Was in a rage, and ordered the  
god of fire: brahmanas, good men, cows, chaste women,  
The old and children- spare these. Go After the  
wicked." *Ibid.*, Canto-14, lines-60-65
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