
Karpu: The Ideal of Feminine Chastity in the *Cilappatikāram*

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In the prologue to the Tamil epic *Cilappatikāram*, Cāttaṅ, the reputed author of *Maṇimēkalai*, points to three “Truths” which he says are illustrated in the former epic. These are: (1) that *dharma* will become the God of Death to kings who swerve from righteousness; (2) that it is natural for great men to adore a chaste lady of great fame; and (3) that destiny will manifest itself and be fulfilled.¹ It is no exaggeration that the second Truth, affirming chastity for women, far supersedes the other two. In a sense it is the power of Kaṇṇaki’s chastity which becomes the instrument of the Pāṇṭiya king’s death. One might say that if she does not actually become the God of Death for him, she is certainly the one who summons the God for the king. Similarly, one might argue that the Pāṇṭiya king’s destiny, not to mention that of Maturai, Kōvalan, and many other characters in the epic, is fulfilled precisely through the instrument of feminine chastity, epitomized in the person and behavior of Kaṇṇaki. Feminine chastity, then, or *karpu*, remains the pervasive and all-encompassing “first Truth” of the epic. Both the other truths are energized by it, and thus in a certain sense are subordinated to it. It therefore seems worthwhile to take account of this concept, and to explore its concomitant powers and limitations, thereby achieving a richer, more dynamic understanding of

1. “Patikam,” Dikshitar’s translation (1978, 87). I have alternated between Dikshitar’s translation, and that of K.N. Subramanyam, *The Anklet Story*. I feel that Subramanyam’s translation, perhaps not as close as Dikshitar’s, nevertheless conveys a finer sense of the happenings from time to time. Where I have done this, I have tried to cross-reference with Dikshitar’s translation.

the term. This paper will attempt to discover some of the principles and nuances of *karpu* as found in the *Cilappatikāram*.

It can be argued with some validity, I think, that the *Cilappatikāram* is a woman's epic, in the sense that its primary focus is women. All the major characters are women: Kaṇṇaki, Mātavi, Kavunti; most of the minor characters are also women, and are given some importance: Mātari, Dēvanti, Aiyai. In contrast, there are only three male characters who achieve any sense of prominence in the epic, and at least two of them are presented as "tainted" characters. Kōvalan, for example, brings grief to his innocent wife, his family, and eventually even to Mātavi and his daughter (XII:220). In the end, he suffers an unjust death without achieving any heights of greatness, although he does redeem himself of his folly by repenting of the misery that he caused all his dear ones. The Pāṇṭiya king, although said to be a generally virtuous man, is impelled by forces of *karma* to pass hasty and summary judgment on Kōvalan without assuring himself of Kōvalan's guilt. This unjust act costs the king his life, the life of his faithful wife who dies immediately after him, and the complete destruction of his capital, once a thriving and wealthy city. The only prominent masculine figure who emerges with grace, and even with some triumph, is the Cēran king Ceṅkuṭṭuvaṅ, whose participation in the epic has the tones of an epilogue. He acquires his heroic stature by his efforts to assure Kaṇṇaki the adulation of posterity: in this effort, he is said to have daringly vanquished the Northern kings in battle. However, even he is criticized for his excessively harsh treatment of the defeated Northern kings. His own contemporaries, the Cōla and Pāṇṭiya monarchs reprove his behavior (XXVIII:374).

In contrast, the dominant women are all nearly, if not actually, perfect. Kaṇṇaki is certainly so, and for this she obtains her just rewards, and is deified in the end. Next in "perfection" is the Jaina nun Kavunti. She is presented as wise and kindly, but a little hot-tempered in defense of her "children" and her faith: for example, when a tired Kaṇṇaki and Kōvalan are harassed by a couple of impudent youngsters in the forest, she turns them into jackals, using her ascetic power (X:188). On another occasion, when a Brahmin traveller appears too loquacious in lauding the merits of his religion, she retorts sharply that they already have their own faith and that they don't need any assistance from him (IX:199). Perhaps for these minor flaws, she initially achieves the status of only a saint. At Kaṇṇaki's death, however, she resolves seriously to achieve her goal of freedom from rebirth, and practices *sallekhanā* unto death (XXVII:359).

Mātavi, although a courtesan, dancer and actress, living as worldly a life as one can imagine, is still spoken of with kindness. The epic represents her as being sincere in her affection for Kōvalan, although artful in

her seduction of him. At his rejection, she suffers real heartbreak, and her final letter to Kōvalan reflects her sincerity (XIII:220). Upon receiving word of his determination to continue with Kaṇṇaki instead of her, she forsakes her worldly life completely. She never takes another lover, joins a Buddhist convent, and also ensures that her daughter never becomes a courtesan by initiating her into the Buddhist community (XXVII:360). This is a fit Buddhist ending to what is considered by some to be a Jain story: the reader is told that while the life of a courtesan need not be dissolute, and while it is possible for a courtesan to be virtuous, it is certainly a life conducive to eventual suffering, and is better avoided.² It is significant, I think, that Mātavi never actually was involved with more than one man, beginning and concluding her career with Kōvalan. In a certain sense, she also was a chaste partner, although not as much as Kaṇṇaki, since Mātavi also enjoyed the flattery and non-sexual attentions of other men (V:131).

One might well wonder, then, why women more 'perfect' than their men, or at least no more flawed than them, should be required to offer their adulation so keenly to them. A case in point is the Pāṇṭiya queen, who, not necessarily perfect herself, nevertheless gives up her life at the death of her decidedly flawed husband, in a case of "first-class chastity" (Balasubramanian 1981, 19). This is because of the theory of *karpu*, or feminine chastity, the matter to which we must next turn our attention.

The term *karpu* is understood to refer to the concept of feminine chastity (Tāmil lexicon 821–2). Since this is a prominent theme of the epic, let us first determine what the epic understands by the expression.

Kaṇṇaki is pre-eminently the model of chastity in the epic: "It is Kaṇṇaki, the woman, the human heroine, who alone matters to the poet" (Zvelebil 1973, 174). She matters because she is the *raison d'être* of the poem. Her suffering as a chaste wife brings down the Pāṇṭiyan king and his illustrious capital; acknowledgment of her greatness inspires Ceṅkuṭṭuvaṇ's campaign to the North in the final *kāṇṭam*; and in her capacity as chaste wife she is subsequently deified. To learn more about the expectations of chastity in the epic, then, it seems appropriate to study the

2. This conclusion is also perhaps corroborated by the observation that courtesans are among the people who die in the conflagration of Maturai, though "the flames did not go near the residences of the righteous" (XXII:304). This fact resolves the hitherto ambiguous status of courtesans in the epic: although admired and appreciated for their art, culture, sophistication, wit, and sundry charms, the concomitant practices of their profession render them ultimately unrighteous. However, courtesans are deemed no more unrighteous than unrighteous married women, who are also consumed by the flames (XXII:304) Mātavi fortunately realizes the unworthiness of her life-style without requiring such a tragic illustration of it.

actions and behavior of Kaṇṇaki.

Kaṇṇaki's career as a chaste wife begins at the age of twelve, when she is married to Kōvalan. At this time, she is frequently compared with Arundhati, the mythic ideal of feminine chastity, thereby foreshadowing her future greatness in the same role. At a young age, Kaṇṇaki takes charge of her household duties, in the manner of a proper wife from a respectable household: "Kaṇṇaki in the discharge of her household duties earned a name worthy to be praised" (II:103).

When Kōvalan neglects her in favor of the charming and accomplished Mātavi, Kaṇṇaki becomes dejected and "sad at heart" (IV:117):

Her anklet was no more on her charming feet; the girdle no longer graced her soft waist-cloth; her breasts were no more painted with vermilion paste: no jewel other than her sacred *tāli* did she wear; no earrings were visible on her ears; no perspiration adorned her shining moon-like face; nor was there collyrium on her long fish-like eyes; no more was there the *ilaka* on her beaming forehead; her milk-white teeth were not revealed in a loving smile; nor was her hair softened by oil. (IV:117)

In the absence of Kōvalan, apparently, she forsakes all manner of adornment, save for her *tāli*, the deeply symbolic string signifying her status as a married woman who follows the codes of *karpu*. The description of her here as being too dejected to even bother with the daily rituals of dress is quite consistent with the descriptions of women one finds in the *marutam tinai* of *akam* poetry, which explores similar themes.

In a parallel description, one learns that, "because she had not been separated from her lover, Mātavi had not lost her charms" (V:131). The implication is clearly that if she were separated, she would lose her charms, as in fact she does when Kōvalan leaves. As the Brahmana Kauśikan is heard lamenting, before relating Mātavi's sorrow to Kōvalan:

O *mātavi* plant, with all thy flowers fallen down, unable to bear the heat of summer, thou seemest to be distressed, even like the flower-like Mātavi of long eyes who has fallen into deep affliction, unable to bear Kōvalan's separation from her. (XII:218)

Mātavi, at the separation from Kōvalan, has indeed lost her charms and wilted, much like her namesake flower. Of course both women suffer the grief of being deserted by the one they love, and no doubt this is partly responsible for their lack of ornamentation. But that there is more to the matter than simple unhappiness at being rejected is further evident in the description of "the chaste and good queen Vēṇmāl" at the return of her husband Ceṅkuṭṭuvaṅ from war. Her servants, informing her of his return, instruct her to "let Beauty reappear! The great lord is come. Dress

your fragrant flowery hair in daytime ornaments” (XXVIII:366). Hearing them, the queen “replaced her close-fitting bangles” (XXVIII:368). The queen, of course, was not rejected or abandoned; she was only separated from her husband. Nevertheless, she also abandons all signs of auspiciousness, and does not even dress her hair properly until he returns. This is accepted as quite natural by the maids. One can derive from this, therefore, that one of the expectations of a good chaste wife separated from her husband was that she will abandon all signs of beauty in his absence, and live simply, as befitting her state of separation.

The next question that must arise is, why? The answer to this question is provided in a story about a chaste woman, related by Kaṇṇaki herself to the dying Pāṇṭiya queen:

Seeing a stranger staring at her with lascivious eyes, a lady changed her full-moon face into that of a monkey. When her departed husband returned, that flower-soft lady, with pure gems on her *alku*, gave up her monkey face. (XXI:295)

One notes that the rationale for the lady’s action was to avoid the admiration of men other than her husband. She therefore transforms her face into that of a monkey, thereby rendering herself completely undesirable as a woman, until her husband returned home.³ The lesson that may be drawn from this account for a lady aspiring to chastity is that she is not to attract any male attention to herself through means that may enhance her beauty. In the husband’s absence, therefore, she is expected to live simply and austere. Thus, while the description of the scene typically employs traditional *akam* literary techniques of the *marutam* region, the similarity with *akam* literature is in fact quite superficial, because the ethos of the woman’s lack of ornamentation is subtly, but surely, changed. Now she refrains from dressing up not so much because she is disinclined to do so in the absence of her lover, but rather because she is a chaste wife, and must avoid the flattering attentions of other men.

Continuing with the development of Kaṇṇaki’s career, Mātavi’s good fortune finally comes to an end. Following a seemingly minor quarrel, a shame-faced Kōvalan returns to his wife and home. “Stricken with grief at the sight of the pale Kaṇṇaki, his fair wife, [he] said, ‘By consorting with a false woman who makes every false thing appear like the truth, I have lost the store of my ancestral wealth. O, the poverty I have caused makes me ashamed of myself!’” (IX:173). Kaṇṇaki’s response is interesting to

3. It could be argued that this is also in effect what Mātavi does. When Kōvalan leaves, she cuts off all her hair completely, thereby androgynizing or desexing herself so as to attract no attention from men.

observe. She does not censure him in any way. Rather, with a radiant smile on her “brightening face,” in a striking gesture, she attempts instead to console him, saying, “O do not grieve! You yet have my anklets. Accept them”(IX:173). She makes the offer, as Dikshitar points out in case one misses the point, “thinking that Kōvalan wanted to take some more ornaments to the dancing-girl Mātavi” (IX :173). Her only concern is her husband’s happiness. Or in fact, her concern is for her husband’s immediate pleasure, a need only to satisfy his latest whim, at whatever cost to herself. No longer is Kaṇṇaki concerned about her own material and emotional poverty. She seeks only to fulfill his desire, even if it is unreasonable. Kōvalan, to his credit, is sincerely apologetic, and takes the proffered anklet with the intention of beginning a new life with it, in the company of his wife.

Kaṇṇaki’s self-sacrificing, silently suffering behavior, and her reluctance to blame her husband in any sense, is further evident in another passage, where both of them are seated in Matari’s house, and Kōvalan is once again overcome with remorse at the grief that he had caused his parents and wife. He comments on his wife’s steadfastness: “Even though I asked thee not to leave our great city for this place, thou camest with me. What a thing thou didst!”(XVI:256).⁴ Kaṇṇaki replies, apparently to assuage his guilt regarding his parents:

Though I could not give charity to observers of *dharma*, or honour *Brahmanas*, receive saints and ascetics, or entertain guests as befits our great family, I hid from your revered mother and your highly reputed father...my sorrow at not having you before me. (XVI:256)

She informs him that, as much as possible, she had tried to defend him to his parents. Instead of using the situation to gain their well-deserved sympathy, she had sought instead to maintain a dignified exterior, pretending that everything was well, even though she was suffering sorely. This “rectitude,” this self-denying nature—one might even say “martyrdom”—is part of why Kaṇṇaki is admired, and an integral part of the concept of feminine chastity in the *Cilappatikāram*. A true wife does not complain to her husband; she attempts to fulfill his every desire, even if it is unrighteous or wrong, and even if she disagrees with it. And in contact

4. This statement, in fact, is not strictly true: Kōvalan clearly asks Kaṇṇaki to accompany him: “Rise up, O lady with the tresses decorated with choice flowers! Come with me to the city of Maturai highly renowned for its tower”(IX:174). One wonders if there may be some influence of the Rāma story here, with the intent of underscoring Kaṇṇaki’s faithfulness, i.e., Rāma’s attempt to dissuade Sitā, and Sitā’s insistence upon accompanying him in exile. This parallel is also drawn earlier, as noted, where Kauṣīkan compares Pukār to Ayodhyā at the departure of Rāma and Sitā.

with all others, even his own family, she seeks to defend him, or at least to divert or minimize criticism of him.

The fact that this is a “feminine virtue” lauded by the epic as being exemplary of *karpu*, feminine chastity and dutifulness, receives support from an unexpected quarter: the hymns to the river Kāvēri. Kāvēri is conceptualized as a woman married to the Cōḷa king, in whose territory she flows:

Hail to thee, Kāvēri! Even if our Cōḷa king...extends his righteous sceptre far and weds the Ganges, thou will not sulk. I have learned, O fish-eyed one, that not sulking, even though he weds the Ganges is the supreme virtue of chaste ladies.

Hail to thee, Kāvēri! If our king...extends his unbending sceptre far and weds Kaṇṇī (Kaṇṇākumāri), O Kāvēri! Thou wilt not sulk. Hail to thee! I have learned that not sulking, fish-eyed Kāvēri, even if he weds Kaṇṇākumāri, is the mighty virtue of ever-chaste ladies. (VII:146)

The message of the song is clear: a chaste wife does not “sulk” at anything her lord does, however distasteful. She remains silent, and accepts it cheerfully and uncomplainingly. This is clearly expected of her as a chaste wife, and is a decisive criterion for that epithet—a necessary part. As Kōvalan assures us, it is the supreme virtue of chaste ladies. It is further significant, I think, that this song is sung by none other than Kōvalan himself. One is led to speculate, therefore, that Kōvalan, on returning home, although sincerely ashamed, did not really expect to be questioned or upbraided by Kaṇṇaki. Although sorry for hurting her, he did not really expect that Kaṇṇaki would “sulk,” or make an issue of it. Nor indeed was he surprised by Kaṇṇaki. She played her role masterfully, and as a result, the young couple could put the past behind them, and attempt to start a new life elsewhere. The moral of the story seems to be that through wifely compromise and rectitude, peace was established again.

We have now learned several lessons about feminine chastity in the *Cilappatikāram*, and it might be well to recount them briefly. The first lesson is that a wife separated from her husband is expected to observe what one might loosely term a period of mourning. The description of her is that found in the *marutam tinai* of *Caṅkam* poetry, but is now given a new twist. She abandons her usual ornamentation and detail of dress not simply because in the absence of her lover she is listless and has no desire to look pretty. Now she does it also because she is a chaste wife, and as such is obligated to be as plain as possible, so as not to attract the attention of any other man.

Another lesson learned is that a chaste wife never verbally questions

her husband's behavior, however unreasonable or unrighteous it may be. Her greatness as a chaste wife is achieved through silent suffering and martyrdom, the rationale behind it being perhaps that if she grieved in silence, without complaint, at some point the husband would be confronted by his conscience, and on returning home would be moved by the grace and dignity of his wife. In any case, a wife who conforms to these norms is deemed supremely virtuous.

Both these lessons relate to possibilities in a woman's life, i.e., if her husband is away, or if he returns home errant. But how does a chaste wife react in the eventuality of a husband's death? This is the next question which rises upon contemplating the subject.

Sociologically, widowhood is not a happy state of affairs in general, and we get some idea of this even in the *Cilappatikāram*. For example, Kaṇṇaki at the death of Kōvalan, suddenly is confronted with her widowhood:

Like the distressed women who keep difficult vows after their loving husbands have been burnt in fire, am I to perish in misery?...Like the distressed women, who, after losing their husbands...go in despair to many places of pilgrimage, am I to perish?...Like the afflicted women, who are ever plunged into hard vows of widowhood after their beloved husbands have fallen a prey to the funeral fire, am I to pine away in grief? (XXIII:279)

The life of a widow is difficult and rigorous. Kaṇṇaki rebels at the thought of what she, with her great chastity, is reduced to, "losing all fame in this life" (XVIII:279), and living life like an ordinary widow. She appeals to all the chaste wives of Maturai in impassioned tones, pointing to the injustice of being made a widow even though she is pure and chaste. Finally, she takes her complaint to the king.

In his discussion of women in Tamilnadu, Balasubramaniam points to three categories for judging the chastity of women and their affection for their husbands, and all three may be assessed in the event of widowhood. In the first category, a woman who is intensely in love with her husband dies spontaneously and immediately upon learning of his demise; this is called "first-class chastity." In the second category, a woman becomes a *sati*, and joins her husband on his funeral pyre: this is the "second class" of love and chastity. Finally, in the third category a woman chooses to remain a widow, with all its incumbent hardships. She earns her living by spinning cotton (and so is called *paruththipeṇḍir*, "cotton woman"), she undergoes tonsure, and lives a life of stark simplicity. Such a woman is deemed lowest on the scale of her affection and chastity (Balasubramaniam 1976, 19–20). In a certain sense, one might say that she

pays for the perceived deficiencies in her conduct while her husband was alive, by her unhappy existence after his death. It is this class of wife and widowhood that Kaṇṇaki finds repulsive; her unstated assumption is that as a chaste and faithful wife, who truly loved her husband, she deserves better.⁵

There are only two instances of widowhood in the epic: that of the Pāṇṭiya queen, and that of Kaṇṇaki. The Pāṇṭiya queen, on seeing her husband fall, dies within minutes of him (remaining alive only long enough to hear Kaṇṇaki's panegyric on the chaste women of Pukār). Thus she exemplifies what Balasubramaniam has termed "first-class chastity." She does not even wait long enough to become a *sati*; her reaction is spontaneous and immediate. Kaṇṇaki's reaction, however, is different. She is deeply stricken, and when she sees Kōvalan's body, she wails and cries aloud, but she does not die. Her husband's spirit, departing his body in the company of a host of gods, advises her, "O my dear, stay; stay here" (XIX:285). This suggests that Kaṇṇaki was perhaps just about to die in the manner of a first-class chaste wife, but was discouraged from doing so by her own husband. Kaṇṇaki therefore rises, and diverts the passion of her grief into positive action. She challenges the Pāṇṭiya king, denounces his injustice, and proves conclusively that her husband is innocent. Then, her wrath not easily appeased, she goes out to avenge her husband's unjust death, and sets fire to the city. The fire rages for fourteen days and consumes the city, until Kaṇṇaki is finally reunited with her husband on the fifteenth day, and goes with him to heaven.

In the last *kāṇṭam* of the story, the Cēran queen is asked the question, who is better of the two apparently chaste ladies, the Pāṇṭiyan queen or Kaṇṇaki? The queen responds:

The Pāṇṭiyan queen is destined for heaven surely, as she did not care to live a widow after her husband the king's death. But the other evidently is the Goddess of Faithfulness, and she no doubt came into our kingdom to bless it. She deserves to be worshipped by women for all time. (Subramanyam 1981, 148; Dikshitar XXV:335)

5. This issue becomes more complex when one considers that through her own self-restraint and discipline, her formidable *śakti*, a chaste wife was thought to protect and enable her husband in all circumstances: for example "the *śakti* of a wife causes the husband to be a successful breadwinner" (Wadley 1980, 160). Kaṇṇaki is deeply confused at how such an unjust death to her husband is possible, when her chastity should have saved him, just as it should have saved her from widowhood. One can therefore bring another interpretation to her fury with the king and Maturai: they had attempted to thwart the powers of her *karpu*, and therefore, they had to pay for it. As Reynolds points out, "A chaste woman is not to be crossed; there is no anger like that of a righteous woman" (1980, 49).

My suggestion is that with her actions, Kaṇṇaki sets a new standard for chastity in women. The ideal of first-class chastity now is no longer the woman who simply abandons her life at the death of her husband; now it is the woman who lives on. Her living on, however, is very qualified, as we see in the case of Kaṇṇaki. She continues on to complete her husband's mission, to clear his name, to establish him as an individual worthy of respect. Instead of passively giving way to her grief, she takes charge. Her chastity is such that she can even overcome her grief and live on without him. The crux of the matter, however, is that she lives on only for his sake, doing his work, completing his mission. This is what differentiates her from the ordinary widow. And as soon as her work is done (or rather, his work, which she undertakes to complete), she gives up her life, having no more purpose to live. This is the new ideal of chastity embodied in the person and behavior of Kaṇṇaki. This is the reason why the Cēran queen considers Kaṇṇaki to be the greater of the two chaste ladies; it is for this reason that she is deified. Her will to live is derived entirely from her husband, as indeed apparently was the Pāṇṭiyan queen's. The subtle difference is that while the queen stereotypically derived her will to live simply from the fact of the Pāṇṭiyan king's existence, and upon his death immediately died herself, Kaṇṇaki derived her will to live from her husband *in toto*: his interests, his work, his preoccupations, that is, all of him. When he ceased to live physically, therefore, she took up the task of satisfying his spirit by fulfilling his earthly work, so that he could proceed to the next stage of his existence, in heaven, free of worry or concern. And when this work was completed, she did not tarry to enjoy her life; she wandered in devastated aimlessness until she could join him there.⁶

None of this is at all amazing if we consider the overarching and ultimate direction of feminine chastity as found in the *Cilappatikāram*: that which is its logical premise, and its logical conclusion. This premise is stated in two passages of the text, and is the underlying assumption of the whole epic. In the first instance, Kaṇṇaki's friend, Dēvanti, tries to comfort Kaṇṇaki by suggesting that they bathe in two special tanks of water dedicated to two gods. She had heard that through this exercise, women who had lost their husbands would regain them, and in such a

6. One could also interpret this scene as the purification of Maturai. The city has been defiled by the unrighteous act of its king. Kaṇṇaki, as a supremely chaste woman, herself pure, has the power to bestow purity. She therefore calls on the power of all chaste wives, and eventually undertakes to purify the city of Maturai through the agency of fire, a primordial purifying agent. The fire then rages, destroying all wrong-doers, but sparing the righteous. "A chaste woman is the guardian of morals, and her inner heat becomes the fiery wrath of justice inflicted against transgressors of the moral order" (Reynolds 1980, 49).

way as not to lose them again (IX:173). Kaṇṇaki's response to this is, "That would not be proper." To this Dikshitar offers the gloss that "this is in keeping with the sentiment of the Kuralvenpā, st. 55, where it is stated that chaste ladies offer worship to no Gods but their husbands" (173). The same sentiment is voiced by the Jaina saint Kavunti, in her speech to the cowherdess Mātari, enumerating reasons for why the latter must look after Kaṇṇaki: "She is a Goddess in human form, none greater than she can you find when you know her; she has been faithful to her husband, and knows no God but him" (Subramanyam 1981, 97; Dikshitar XV:247).

Thus, one learns that in the *Cilappatikāram*, the primary expectation of a chaste woman is that she should worship her husband as God, forsaking all traditional concepts of deity. If she wished to be perfect, nothing less was expected of her. A clear illustration of this is found in a story told in the *Maṇimēkalai*, which may be repeated here:

A young Brahmin woman named Marudi is upset and disgusted when she finds a stranger looking at her with interest. She marches over to her local deity, and demands to know how this is possible, when she is a chaste wife, and as such does everything possible to discourage external male attention. The deity replies promptly: "A chaste wife certainly can cause rains to pour. But you cannot do that. No doubt you have been dutiful to your husband. But you have been going to festivals and worshipping gods other than your husband." (Arunachalam 1978, 75-6)

The implication is clear: all of a woman's best efforts and intentions toward her husband are laudable and praiseworthy, but ultimately lacking without the final ingredient. In order to achieve the title of a truly chaste wife (as Kaṇṇaki does), a woman must worship her husband verily as God. Nothing short of this is satisfactory. This is the logical conclusion of her personal, social, and religious life, its peak and its culmination, if she wishes to be a chaste woman, powerful and highly regarded in society. This is the direction of her efforts, and it can also be regarded as the premise for her actions. For if a woman regards her husband literally as God, then no doubt her primary concern (if she is truly religious) will be her God's interests. If he were to leave her, therefore, she would no doubt be stricken with grief and pine for him, probably abjuring all forms of frivolity and fun, in a sense in a state of *virāha bhakti*, if we use the *bhakti* paradigm, as it is apparent that we must. When he returned, she would simply be happy to have him back. The sole difference is that whereas a devotee has the right to reproach her God, and frequently does (as we see in the *bhakti* poems, e.g., of Āṅṅāl), a chaste wife is not expected to reproach her husband, even though they are said to share the

same relationship. In a certain sense, therefore, a woman's freedom in this husband-God relationship is even more circumscribed than it might be in following the directives of an actual deity.

At this juncture, one might well question the value of this ethic. We have seen what is expected of a woman as a chaste wife; what are the benefits? What rewards can one hope for? Why should a woman be expected to work towards exemplifying this value?

In the *Cilappatikāram*, as we have already found hinted, the rewards are substantial. The most frequently mentioned one is that a chaste woman can cause the rains to fall. Kavunti says this in her speech to Mātari: "Do you not know the truth of the good saying that in a land where chaste women live, rains will not fail, prosperity will not decrease, and the great monarch's victory will not diminish?" (XV:247). Mātari clearly has heard of this piece of wisdom. Purely chaste wives have an impressive stock of supernatural powers. One is told, for example, that Maturai suffered from severe drought as a result of Kaṇṇaki's curse. This was finally alleviated only when the citizens of the city, seeking to propitiate her, sacrificed a thousand goldsmiths in her name (XVIII:361-2). Kaṇṇaki, of course, is able to summon the sun itself to testify to Kōvalan's innocence (XVIII:280). Her curse is awful and to be dreaded. She sets fire to the city of Maturai, and eventually, she ascends to heaven in the company of her husband, and a host of gods besides. These are clearly supernatural powers and occurrences, and Kaṇṇaki acquires them through her practice as a chaste wife.

One might at this point draw a parallel between Kaṇṇaki and Kavunti. Kavunti also has similarly supernatural powers. However, hers are derived through strict physical and mental discipline, and through rigid asceticism in the Jaina mode. The suggestion could be made that Kaṇṇaki also practised a brand of ascetic discipline, a *yoga*, which consisted of observing strictly the norms and spirit of feminine chastity, and devotion to her husband. Through this practice, she too had amassed a store of ascetic power, as had Kavunti. For want of a better term, one might say that they both had, through their separate disciplines, generated a quantity of *tapas*, or ascetic heat, which gave them extraordinary supernatural powers, to be used at will (Wadley 1980, xiv). Kaṇṇaki, therefore, in her role as chaste wife, can be conceived as following a "yogic" discipline rather like that of Kavunti, although there is no question but that their object and direction are ultimately different. Kavunti can be thought of as practising a "Jaina *yoga*" (using the term in its original sense, as "way", or "path"), while Kaṇṇaki can be thought of as pursuing a "*karpu-yoga*". Both *yogas* require rigor and discipline, and both have concomitant, at least temporal, rewards.

Kaṇṇaki's self-effacing behavior, in this sense, need not be regarded as a powerless or subservient attitude. Rather, it is an effective strategy of manipulation based on the logic of *vrata*, an exercise of negative power. Through the power of her own exemplary conduct, the wife seeks to inspire a change in the behavior of the errant husband. Similarly, Reynolds states that "Women need be subordinate to men, and such subordination endows women with a power that is superior in intensity, range, and effect than that which led to their subordination in the first place. Subordination, therefore, becomes not merely tolerable, but providential" (1980, 57). In this view, the reticence of Kaṇṇaki is actually a source of her strength. Her apparently subservient status to her husband in the normative conduct of their lives, therefore, belies the considerable power and energy that a woman may have accumulated. Kaṇṇaki emerges as a strong and dynamic being, possessing awesome power, much more so than her husband, who, seemingly powerful in daily life, is in fact a victim of fate and circumstances. Kaṇṇaki in a fundamental sense, through her own will-power, controls her fate and circumstances, and much more. She is also able to control the plight of other beings, whatever their temporal might. In this sense, then, the *Cilappatikāram* can be seen as a woman's epic, a profound affirmation of the silent powers that women possess and command even in the daily functions of their lives.

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