

Status of Women in Classical Tamilakam and Greece: A Comparative Study of Ilangovadikal's *Silapathikaram* and Sophocles' *The Women of Trachis*

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Abstract

Ilangovaladikal's Kannagi and Sophocles' Deianera share a similarity, namely their husbands are attracted to other women. But Kannagi and Deianera respond to the crisis in different ways. Kannagi is patient while Kovalan is gone and supportive when he returns. Deianera on the other hand tries to win her husband back with a love potion which goes amiss and kills him. Kannagi's husband Kovalan gets killed on false charges of the theft of the Queen's silambam. Kannagi proves the innocence of her husband in the King's court and burns down Madurai. Deianera on realizing her mistake kills herself. Though these two women belonged to glaringly different cultures and the works are separated by at least 3 centuries in between, and the women's responses are different in temperaments, it hinged on the idea of karpu/chastity. Karpu in Tamil denotes fidelity and loyalty of a woman towards her husband. Chastity or purity or sexual loyalty in western societies appear to be gender neutral, but it is often found in connection with women as in the phrase 'chaste woman'. The Greek term sophrosyne though a philosophical term meant chastity/fidelity for women. Kannagi's fidelity raises her to the level of a goddess while Deianera's fidelity induces her to suicide having wronged her husband unintentionally. This paper proposes to compare the socio political backdrop that produced the Tamil classic Silapathikaram by Ilangovaladikal and the western classic The Women of Trachis by Sophocles and tries to establish that the parameters of Classical Age includes gendered access to power and the establishment of social hierarchy. Literature as a reflection of society idealizes these conditions.

Keywords: Silapathikaram, Women, Ancient, Chastity, Karpu



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History gives meaning to human life and connects each life to immortality, but history has yet another function. In preserving the collective past and reinterpreting it to the present, human beings define their potential and explore the limits of their possibilities. We learn from the past not only what people before us did and thought and intended, but we also learn how they failed and erred. (Greda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* 221)

Sophocles' Deianera is a sad woman worried all the time about her husband's absence from home and his wellbeing. As the play opens, she is worrying over her husband Herakles' absence to her nurse. Even though the play is titled *The Women of Trachis*, we do not get to see either Deianeira or any other woman in their full glory. As the play opens up in the middle of action, Deianera is disposed of quickly and the rest of the play is just Herakles crying out in pain. It is strange that a play's titular character has such a short life span, it needs to be understood that the title refers to the gravity of her action on her husband, the play's real protagonist - Herakles. When that perspective is put in place the subordination of both Deianera and taking cue from the title *The Women of Trachis* comes to the fore.

Quite contrary to the character of Deianera, Ilangovalikal's Kannagi would not cause any harm either physically or emotionally to her husband Kovalan, leave alone causing his death. In fact, when Kovalan dies, wrongly beheaded by the Pandiya King Nedunjelivan, Kannagi seeks justice in the king's court. She proves Kovalan's innocence which shames Nedunjelivan to an instant death. Kannagi, having established the truth, burns down the city of Madurai. She is spotted by people in a mountainous region being carried over to the skies by her husband Kovalan, 14 days after his

death. Since then, people worship Kannagi as *Pathini Deivam*.

The similarity to these women's stories is the centrality of their husbands to their lives. The wife who wronged her husband meets a tragic, inglorious end and the wife who was true to her husband attains eternal glory and deification. It is intriguing to note that the two plays reinforce male centrism and female subordination despite being produced in geographically far off places with glaringly different cultural beliefs and languages. It leads us to think that these two cultures might have encountered something that steered them to a society where every action was carried out to glorify the male of the species. That principle of male centrism and female subordination is patriarchy and there are quite a number of theories that discuss its origin. By analyzing the painful suicide of Deianeira and the deification of Kannagi, we can observe how these disparate literary traditions both reflect the structural transition from kin-based egalitarianism to the rigid hierarchies of the State.

We begin with the postulation that pre-state human societies were relatively egalitarian and state societies with "centralized government, socioeconomic class divisions, a market economy and large populations" (oxfordreference.com) were achieved by sacrificing the socio-political, economic and sexual freedom of women. This paper argues that male centrism and female subordination is a feature of state societies.

The Beginning of Women Oppression

Western philosophical tradition assumed women's secondary status as natural due to her biological constitution. Biological determinism is pivotal in the works of Greek philosophers Aristotle, Xenophon, Plato and Semonides.

Aristotle posits the female persona with "virtues like self-control, courage and justice" (qtd in Frede 301) yet denies her authority which is accorded to men. Men therefore qualify to rule and women are moulded to be subordinate in Aristotelian conceptualizing. For Aristotle, this subordination is not a social imposition but a reflection of an internal lack, leading him to further categorize the female soul.

The female soul despite possessing the "deliberative" capacity, "lacks authority (*akyon*)" because male and female souls manifest themselves in "different ways" (Frede 297). The lack in *akyon* is further explained by William Fortenbaugh as women's inability to "control their emotions" (298). For this reason, the rule of the male over the female in a family is not interchangeable like the "political rule of citizens over citizens" (296). Thus, the female, caught in a tussle between virtues and emotions, is contained inside homes. Aristotle's conceptualization of society is male centric because women as a species are not made to lead. In this respect, Aristotle echoes the opinions of many of his predecessors including Plato.

Plato's views on women are rather radical for his age. He saw men and women as equals. In Book V of *The Republic*, Plato admits that women are better than men in "many things" (Frede 288). As there are men with different capabilities, so are women and therefore in his *Republic* women should "participate in all the activities in the city they are capable of" (288). In his *Laws*, he grants heiresses rights to dispose of their property and to choose a husband themselves in the absence of a male relative. Plato's *Laws* enabled women to hold public office, act as magistrates and to attend public assembly. Socially women were to be given education, trained in sports and military including the participation in all women

"common meals" (293) just like men. In fact, Plato saw the restrictions laid on women as a waste of the potential of half the population.

Plato's androcentrism comes to the fore in his *Timaeus*. Considering that historically Plato preceded Aristotle, it could even be interpreted that Aristotle's theory of souls is similar to Plato's theory of reincarnation. The world in Plato's conception begins with all souls born as males which is an opportunity to live well and "prove themselves in their subsequent life" (Frede 294). In the cycle of reincarnation, the souls that lived well will be born again as males and those who fail beget the punishment of being born as a woman. Furthermore, he envisions common meals as a disciplining method for "the nature of woman is inferior to that of man" (Plato qtd in Frede 293) and excludes them from higher learning and elite councils. Inclusion in rudimentary tasks alongside exclusion from specialized engagement reveals that, despite his radical proposals, Plato's faith in biological determinism remained as foundational as that of other Greek thinkers.

Xenophon combines biological determinism with divine ordinance to relegate women to the domestic sphere. In Xenophon's conception a weaker biological constitution results in a weaker will leading women to vices like "gluttony and temptation" (Xenophon, *Economicus*, IX.5). Not only that Xenophon grants men a stronger constitution in God's name; "He has made the man's body and mind more capable of enduring cold and heat and travel and military service" (Xenophon, *Economicus*, VII.22). In contrast, women's bodies are tailored for indoor work. In conclusion, men are stronger physically, mentally and having travelled far are capable of ruling the weaker and ignorant women. Xenophon's theorization of women avoids the

pitfalls of Plato (equality) and Aristotle (virtues) by conceiving them as truly vulnerable beings in need of constant supervision.

Semonides of Amorgos takes male entitlement one notch higher by listing out the animal qualities of women in his diatribe. The ugly sow woman, the vicious bitch woman, the ridiculous donkey women are all a hindrance to the growth of their husbands except the bee women. The bee woman does not indulge in the pleasures of gossip of intimate affairs like the other women. She works hard; “she grows old with her husband...bearing children who are fair and well-spoken of” making her eligible for gods’ blessing to make her “outstanding among all women” (North 36). Semonides’ bee woman is embarked on a path of erasure of her personality, and replacing it with altruism.

Given the fact that Semonides is antecedent to Plato, Aristotle and Xenophon, a gradual ideological degradation of the female persona is discernible. Semonides’ diatribe, however unpleasant, still retains some kind of an agency in women; it is the erasure of the agency that Semonides sets forth to do with his bee woman. Xenophon’s recourse to divine ordinance monopolizes women’s agency and confines their physical movement. Plato, though reasonable about women’s physical capacities, is blinded by a sense of male superiority. By the time Greek thought reaches Aristotle, it is almost as if humanity has forgotten women’s claim to an agency. This ‘ideological degradation’ of the female persona, moving from animal-like traits to the ‘bee woman’s’ erasure of self, provides the philosophical justification for Deianeira’s lack of authority (akyron) within the Greek household.

Biological determination consumed common belief and western philosophical tradition until the arrival of Engels’ *The Origin*

of the family, Private Property and the State. *The Origin of the Family* decoded the subordinate status of women as material intention rather than divine ordinance. Engels’ identification of three phases of human evolution namely savagery, barbarism and civilization present a historical trajectory beginning with a state of pure matriarchy. In this stage, marriages were group-based, children descended through the mother and the father held no significant role in upbringing or inheritance. Engels calls this “mother-right” (Engels 29) which acknowledged women as progenitors of human lives and revered their role.

Group marriage and “mother-right” was perceived as matriarchy by Engels. Even though matriarchy might suggest a female version of patriarchal rule, this stage was actually a liberal, open era devoid of centralized authority. Engels conception of matriarchy is organic, susceptible to growth and unsuspecting either about the growing self-consciousness in men as bread winners during the barbaric age or the loss of their status it would entail. Conversely the state and patriarchy were moulded for the sustenance of male authority.

Engels’ iconic saying “The overthrow of the mother-right was the world historical defeat of the female sex” (Engels 30) captures the genesis of women oppression. In this transition, male jealousy is a functional necessity of state-building, emerging alongside private property to ensure patrilineal inheritance. The self-consciousness in men of their importance as property owners provided the starting point for patriarchy. Thus, Engels sets precedence to understand female subordination as a conscious decision rather than a divine ordinance.

The !Kung San of Botswana presents the perfect case to understand male-female dynamics in a non-agricultural and non-

industrial society. In the !Kung San tribe of Botswana women contributed about 55 – 80 percent of the food through foraging. In contrast to state societies, !Kung women had extraordinary right over reproduction, divorce and remarriage. Rape, the most vulgar mechanism to instill fear, control and submission is non-existent in !Kung society and women participated in councils. Even with so much leverage, men acted as spoke-persons for the group. Men were involved in aggression, in a few cases against their wives and yet men invariably complained that women had more power. The key variable among the !Kung is the absence of institutional sanction for male leadership and aggression—a sanction that, in state societies, moulds individual impulse into systemic authority.

In contrast, among the !Kung turned pastoralists, it was harder for women to divorce, they were blamed more, and children were trained in gender specific tasks from an early age. The pastoralist women spent more time at home than their men. Instead of gathering food, they cooked food brought home by men. Families were becoming more private and husbands held greater control on family affairs (Draper).

As the !Kung data proves the arrival of agriculture, and the resultant sedentary lifestyle had caused sexual inequality among them. Agriculture moved the focus of production from use to exchange. As trade developed, women's labour, sexuality and reproductive capacities became potential resources to be controlled. A good example would be the shift from bride service (where a man provides service to his wife's family) to bride price, where "he and his kin provided a payment to obtain rights over the woman's labour, sexuality and reproduction" (Lee and Daly 39). Agriculture was the first step to entering a patriarchal social order.

This shift from foraging autonomy to pastoralist restriction demonstrates that male dominance is a historical variable rather than a physiological constant. As Richard Lee and Richard Daly argue, if such domination were rooted in human biology, it would remain universal and uniform; instead, its presence fluctuates with economic change, proving that patriarchy is a byproduct of sedentary lifestyle rather than a biological destiny.

In pre-state societies, people were bound by kinship relations and in such situations, individual genders hardly mattered. Irrespective of their gender, individuals made decisions taking into account the well-being of the group and groups always sought consensus. The group had a great impact on individual decisions and "the relations between specific men and women" (Lee and Daly 37). The extended kin group acted as a "protective device for women" (42), a base of communal autonomy and power. The state, in contrast, dismantles this communal base. Thus, "Patriarchy can best be understood as the reproduction of state hierarchy within the family" (41).

Western reliance on biological determinism serves to project the power dynamics of the modern state backward onto human history. By transmuting state-level hierarchies into 'natural' laws, this tradition silences inquiry into the facts of pre-state societies. In this light, biological determinism is revealed not as an observation of nature, but as an ideological tool that masks a conscious, structural decision as an immutable law—thereby justifying the 'world-historical defeat' of women through the erasure of their organic history.

While Greek philosophical thought provided justification for patriarchy, Engels identified the materialist intention of that mysticism. Anthropological data proved that

male superiority is irrelevant for survival and gender imbalance cannot be generalized. Greda Lerner by presenting the history of patriarchy established that reification of women is primal to other inequalities found in society. For Engels private property preceded patriarchy, Greda Lerner argues that reification of women made private property possible both of which lead to the central authoritative stronghold namely the state.

Patriarchy as a system casts the male in authority and the female under its dominion. In this system the female is merely a tool to be used. However, patriarchy would not have been built by men alone. Behind the transition from nomadic hunter-gatherer economies to horticultural, pastoral or agricultural economies is a conscious acceptance of a new way of subsistence production. It could not have happened without the willing participation of women. Therefore, Gerda Lerner rejects the idea that women were merely passive victims of "violent men". Instead, she argues that civilization was built jointly by men and women and women participated in constructing the very system that eventually subordinated them.

The 'willing participation' of women is a survival consensus driven by a faith in division of labour and the protection offered by kinship structures. However this was a structural trap, the growth of which were improbable to predict. By the time the state institutionalized this division of labour, the kinship buffers that protected women had been dismantled, leaving them as joint builders of their confinement.

The male-female division of labour is often offered as a justification for gender inequality. The earliest division of labor was functional, consensual, and based on survival needs rather than male dominance. Groups accepted and institutionalized division of labour because it provided the efficiency needed for survival and

those who adapted survived. The mother goddess worship that prevailed all over the world is a manifestation of the awe and wonder for the creative power women held in them that made men puny. To validate their worth, men created exclusive institutions and initiation rites that were later used to exercise authority over the creative power of women and other men like in the case of military leaders. The creation of state is a way to exercise authority, and guard property.

For Lerner the deciding factor in women oppression is the reification of women through 'exchange of women' between tribes. This exchange served as the model for slavery; women's reproductive capacity was the first "resource" to be appropriated. Lerner challenges Friedrich Engels' theory that private property caused the subordination of women. Instead, relying on anthropologists Meillassoux and Aaby, she argues the reverse: the appropriation of women's reproductive capacity preceded and created private property. Thus, reification of women presents another one of the corner stones of statehood.

Women in a hunter-gatherer economy retained complete freedom in terms of livelihood, personhood and reproduction. Hunter-gatherer life style is communal with minimal privacy. Sedentism as a result of agriculture restricted women's movement, knowledge and life choices. Families became the basic unit of settlements. Domestication of animals created ownership and a private home for the families. Sedentism while more private than hunter-gatherers still retained the communal ties through kinship.

While inequalities existed in villages, the total subordination, marginalization, and the physical imprisonment of women inside their homes was not possible until the states were

formed. The state served as a catalyst for the ascendance of men into fortified realms of authority through their removal from all kinds of domesticity including child rearing. Formations of states also killed kinship which acted as a buffer between individualism and equality. Even though women had lost a lot of their autonomy in agricultural/ horticultural/ pastoral societies, their situation wasn't unredeemable because both men and women in such societies had one goal namely the growth of the family. States on the contrary, is made up of many institutions in which women's participation was only tertiary. Their marginal participation was used to uphold the institutions making men the sole beneficiaries of these institutions.

The transition from foraging autonomy to state-level hierarchy represents the institutionalization of the 'internal lack' first proposed by the Greeks. While Aristotle and his predecessors attempted to anchor female subordination in the soul, history and anthropology reveal it to have been a structural necessity of state-building. By dismantling the communal protection of kinship and reifying reproductive capacity into a controlled resource, the state successfully transmuted a functional division of labor into a systemic imprisonment. The creation of the state was the final act in this 'ideological degradation'—a fortified realm designed to guard private property and exercise authority, effectively erasing women's organic history and leaving them as tertiary participants in a society they helped build.

The Distant lands and cultures of Greece and Tamilakam - *Karpu* and *Sophrosyne*

The geographically far away Tamilakam and Greece have defined virtue for their women in similar terms. *Karpu* in Tamil and *Sophrosyne*

in Greek emphasize steadfastness of women in the marital context which aids the inheritance of property and upholds patriarchy. *Karpu* and *Sophrosyne* originally meant wedded life and soundness of mind however in the context of women they were redefined to being chaste and loyal to their husbands.

Tholkappiyam begins by postulating *kalavu* and *karpu* as merely two categories of romance. *Kalavu* is the un-wed romance between a man and a woman while *Karpu* is settling down in marriage. Hence the argument that *Karpu* doesn't imply chastity by many culture defenders in Tamil Nadu. In the meanwhile, *Tholkappiyam* says, "Bashfulness is of greater worth than life itself,/And chastity unsullied stands superior to bashfulness too" (Murugan 1057). It entails that for women chastity (*Karpu*) is more valuable than her required qualities of "bashfulness, timidity and obedience" (1042).

The female persona in *Tholkappiyam* is silent – a complete surrender of her voice. For *Tholkappiyam* says that the passion of love of the heroine Will find expression/Through suggestive modes/And through the context of the situation. /And not through explicit utterance. (1052)/Rare as it is/In the feminine nature of the heroine/To respond in verbal utterance/To the hero's overtures of love,/She is wonted to non-verbal suggestive responses. (1054)

Thirukkural elevates the presence of *Karpu* in a woman to celestial levels:

பெண்ணிற் பெருந்தக்க யாவுள்

கற்பென்னும்

திண்மையுடன் டாகப் பெறின. (54)

தெய்வந் தொழாஅள் கொழுநன்

தொழுதெழுவான்

பெய்யெனப் பெய்யும் மழை. (55)

Kural no 54 makes a woman the pride of the world if she remains steadfast in her marital

vows while 55 goes one step higher and grants women the power to command natural forces like rain provided, she worships her husband instead of Gods.

Similarly, *Kalithogai* another one of the literary pieces of the *canam* era says “வறன் ஓடின வையகத்து வான்தரும் கற்பினான்” (பாலைக்கலி.15 :20) which means if a chaste woman orders it will rain even at times of draught.

Such importance accorded to women's loyalty in marriage over their personal comforts and desires diminishes their lives to mere cogs. In stark contrast to the diminished female persona is the male persona owning the world and every other being in it.

The extreme restraint that *Karpur* wields on women is best exemplified in a verse in *Kalithogai*:

- காமர் கடும்புனல் கலந்து எம்மோடு ஆடுவான்
தாமரைக்கண் புதைத்து அஞ்சி, தளர்ந்து அதனோடு ஒழுகலால்
- நீள்நாக நறும்தண்தார் தயங்கப் பாய்ந்து அருளினால்
- பூண் ஆகம் உறந்தழீஇய போதந்தான் அகன்அகலம்
- வருமுலை புணர்ந்தன என்பதனால் என தோழி (குறிஞ்சிக்கலி.3:1-5)

A girl who was washed away by floods was rescued by a young man touching her breasts adorned with jewels. The girl having learnt this declared herself as his wife. The girl's friend tells the girl's mother that her words are fit enough to bring rain. The severity of the girl's observance of *Karpur* and the appreciation it garners acts as the benchmark of a *karpudaipen*. Such examples push women to indulge in extreme self-abdication.

Kalithogai has not only given a narrative example for *karpur* but it has effortlessly transferred *karpur* from married women to unmarried women. From *Tholkappiyam's kalavozhukam* and *karpozhukam* to *Kalithogai's* narrative, the boundary for women has shrunk dramatically. *Karpur* has brought unmarried women into its fold causing them to give up their sexual rights for exemplar popularity. As it is understood from *Kalithogai's* narrative *Karpur* is not just mental steadfastness but sexual loyalty.

A married woman's steadfastness or *Karpur* is a dictum for women and she is expected to accept the husband's concubines as sisters. She can shame him, but can never deny him his place in the household. More importantly her role in the society is confined to her house and revolves around her husband. Her foremost duty is to bear heirs for the husband, especially a first male child. She is to run the household with or without the earnings of the husband for the husband might choose to leave her while fighting a war or in the prospect of earning money. In any case she is to keep the honour of her husband by being steadfast mentally and physically.

That *Tholkappiyam* and *Thirukkural* talk only about the *Karpur* – even in its most innocent form of steadfastness – of women and not men underscore the distortion of gender parity in classical *Tamilakam*. If *Karpur* isn't distorted enough *Tholkappiyam* further categorizes 'Karpur' into three degrees: the first category of 'Karpudai magaleer' are the ones who die immediately on the death of their husbands; the second category are women who commit 'sati' or 'udankattai eruthal' and the third category of women choose to live a life of a widow embracing abstinence of even the smallest pleasure like tasty food. The three

categories of 'Karpū' skillfully alters the self-worth of women from physical to moral thereby institutionalizing a singular centre of authority for the state.

In commensurate with Karpū, the Greeks have *sophrosyne* which is described as "the most multifaceted of all Greek virtues" (North 35). In the *Odyssey* the word *Sophrosyne* was used to convey a state of "soundness of mind" against the chaos created by the gods emphasizing mental health which was not gender specific. In the *Iliad*, the word *sophrosyne* implied a "sense of propriety" (North 37), a mechanism of social boundary keeping. Plato complicates the term making it almost impossible to arrive at a solid definition by removing silence, modesty, minding one's own business and self-knowledge from its connotations. For Plato *sophrosyne* (Temperance) is beneficial only when it has the intellectual capacity to distinguish between what is good and evil. Yet this description is not considered definite by Plato's Socrates thereby leaving the term open for a more rigorous logical scrutiny. From Homer to Plato, the term *Sophrosyne* had traversed through the intellectual, social and purely philosophical realm; while Plato began to associate it with the well-ordered state, it remained an intellectual science of good and evil rather than the purely moral-administrative virtue later defined by Aristotle.

In *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle defines *sophrosyne* as a middle ground between "pleasures and pains" the "excess" of which will become "self-indulgence" (28-29). *Sophrosyne* "preserves one's practical wisdom (*sozousa tan phronsin*)" (95). Throughout Greek literature "to speak briefly" or to remain almost silent was made a seminal dimension of the word *sophrosyne*. *Sophrosyne* means to have

"restraint, self-knowledge, and the acceptance of limits" (North 37-38). It is the "principal *virtus feminaram*" and "some of its aspects belong exclusively to men" (North 35). *Sophrosyne* for women meant to be "dutiful, obedient, and well-behaved."

Sophrosyne was used as feminine virtue in the 7th century diatribe against women by Semonides of Amorgos. Semonides uses the word *Sophronein* to describe "a treacherous wife and the deceived husband" (36). We could deduce from her statement that the word *sophron* means chaste in the case of women and in the context of men being chaste was never a priority. By the 5th century both married and unmarried women were expected to be dutiful, obedient and well-behaved. Penelope and Andromache are exemplary *Sophrosyne* women.

The characteristic traits of a *Sophrosyne* woman are staying indoors and not indulging in gossip, tending to household work. Tortoise is a symbol of *sophron* women because they were believed not to have tongues and therefore unable to speak and they carry their home with them and hence never leave their homes. A *Sophron* woman does not nestle jealousy in her. The exemplary Andromache even suckled Hector's children through other wives. In simple terms *Sophrosyne* women exhibit "inconspicuous behavior and obedience to father, husband, other *kyrios* and being chaste" (Frede). *Sophrosyne* women cannot be "passionate and heroic" (Frede); she "freely" chooses "self sacrifice." As Helen F. North points out "the good woman as portrayed in epitaphs and encomia, is valued for her chastity and her domesticity" (45).

Both Karpū and *Sophrosyne* function as linguistic tools of the State, transforming the biological reality of womanhood into a socio-legal 'virtue' that serves the stability of male-centric inheritance.

Kannagi and Silapathikaram

Ilangovalikal's *Silapathikaram* shows us a well-developed functional state and a business class which functions with its own hierarchy. *Tholkappiyam* the oldest surviving Tamil book lays down the rules for a marriage thus: "The Wedded course is/The hero, who comes from a worthy lineage,/Taking the hand in marriage/Of the heroine/As she is offered by those of a line worthy and compatible,/With the rites and ceremonies attendant thereon" (Murugan 1086).

Accordingly, in *Silapathikaram*, Kovalan and Kannagi's parents, both leaders among the merchant class decide to unite not just their children, but their wealth, status and political capital. Kovalan and Kannagi's consent is not sought and therefore it is not required. Their wedding, a grandiose event marked the blissful thereafter where Kannagi is the ideal daughter-in-law and wife. Ilangovalikal marks her subservience with a no dialogue treatment for the entirety of their years together. Kannagi's silence ascribed by *Tholkappiyam* is an erasure of her subjectivity as a person and building a new one as a wife forever watchful of her husband's wishes and family honour. Following Lerner's postulation, Kannagi's silence and submissiveness serve the state's need for property lineage. In short state survives on the erasure of female subjectivity.

The state's intrusion into female subjectivity is self-explanatory in the courtesan system. Free, wealthy and yet marginalized, Madhavi depicts the stronghold of the state on every kind of people. Marginalization is the price paid by the courtesans in exchange for free self-expression. Contrasting Madhavi's acclaim in the 'Indra Vizha' against Kannagi's bashfulness to Kotravai possessed Shalini's prophecy about the exemplary status awaiting her, it is clear that the patriarchal state valued female subordination

more than free self-expression. Kovalan's re-internalization during the 'kaanalvari' that Madhavi is merely a 'kanigai' who is beyond the control of a single man is the revival of the patriarchal state in him.

Silapathikaram reifies the erasure of female subjectivity however small the character may be. A look at the other female characters in *Silapathikaram* suggests that even though women had agency, their subjectivity is bound to either a man or a God. Kavunthiadikal or Shalini are devotees of God. Madhari, the elderly *aayar* woman in the outskirts of Madurai dies having delivered her ill tidings. Madhari, a little deviant from the other women serves the elite which is once again a state mechanism. An elderly woman beyond reproductive years, living in the outskirts of the city, a cowherd by profession, her relationship to the state must be one of veneration. She serves as the conscience of the state and acts as its tool. Her death pronounces not just the erasure of female subjectivity, but also the disposability of a post menopause subaltern woman over a man of her own class or a woman belonging to the elite class.

Silapathikaram exposes the vulnerability and protects the sanctity of the state through the deaths of Kovalan and Pandiyan Nedunchezhiyan. A patriarchal state needs not just submissive women but also men worthy of that submission. Kovalan falls short in merit; Pandiyan Nedunchezhiyan even though slips in the beginning, stands tall by accepting the ultimate penalty. The state formed by ordinary men for very material reasons (see Lee and Daly) represented by Kovalan's murder is sacralized beyond ordinary human endeavour through Pandiyan Nedunchezhiyan's death. The death of Kopperundevi emulates Pandiyan Nedunchezhiyan as a husband and marks her as the first rate

karpudaipenn. These deaths present the ultimate paradox of womanhood and statehood. Women like Kopperundevi and Kannagi who live in the shadows gain a subjectivity by erasing their physical bodies. Statehood and patriarchy both a product of male subjectivity gets institutionalized through the erasure of the male subjectivity both as a provider and as a protector in *Silapathikaram*.

Kannagi herself survives 16 days after Kovalan's death but in the meanwhile, she had done the unimaginable. She who had not stepped out of her home without a male escort, steps into the court of the King. She demands justice for her plight, proves that the King had given a wrong judgment and burns down Madurai. She plucks out her breasts, erasing her physical presence as a woman. It is as if she had proclaimed the erasure of womanhood after the death of the husband.

Kannagi is an exemplary woman of Karpu because she had great faith in her Karpu so much so that she refuses to bathe in the holy waters of Somakundam and Suryakundam and offer prayers at Kaamakottam which was supposed to bring her husband back from his concubine with the single phrase, '*Peedu andru*' meaning it is not honorable for a Karpudai Penn like Kannagi to beg before a god to get her husband back - her Karpu should bring him back. Indeed, as a proof Kovalan returns to her.

Kannagi who did not speak except for '*Peedu andru*' in Puhar Kaandam says '*silambu ulathu kolga*' to Kovalan offering her support to him when he returns. On the way to Madurai, when Shalini a tribal woman possessed by Kotravai prophecies that Kannagi would attain exemplary status, she merely blushes and hides behind her husband enacting another dictum laid down for women as not to talk boastfully. Kannagi takes a step-a-head and refuses even to

think of herself as an exemplary woman. And her final act of Magnum Opus was done not for herself but to safeguard the reputation of her husband. Thus, it is safe to conclude that a *Karpudai Penn* is one that is not only steadfast but also the one who puts her husband before herself. As Thiruvalluvar says, 'Deivam thozha....' if a woman who worships her husband commands, it will rain.

Among contemporary Tamil people there is a great pride about ancient Tamilakam - as one of the old civilizations; *mun thondriya mootha kudi*. This ancient Tamilakam as it is discerned from *Silapathikaram* is a society with a centralized power - a king ruling over a large mass of diversified population. As *Tholkappiyam* says there are four classes of people - Royalty, Brahmins, the business class and all the other people. Ancient Tamilakam is at least three nation-states - the Chera, Chola and Pandiya. As power was consolidated, hierarchy must have been established. In that hierarchy, women had been accorded a subordinate status to men, a faithful follower of her husband, a bearer of his children and as a guardian of his wealth. As argued earlier, Karpu is an erasure of subjectivity and ancient Tamilakam is far from being an egalitarian society.

Deinera

As Kannagi is a Karpukarasi, Deinera is a sophrosyne woman. A free born woman married to a warrior she exhibits the stoicism of a warrior in managing her household. Families are the microcosm of the state where in the patriarch becomes the representative of the king. In the absence of the head, it falls upon the wife to hold fort for him. Just like the legendary Penelope, Deinera keeps the house during the many years of Herakles' servitude. As a

sophrosyne woman, her heart hovers around her husband Herakles. He is not just the head of the house, but the object of her worship.

Deinera exhibits self-restraint at every step of her life. As a daughter she obediently accepts the man chosen by her father even when the suitor was a shape shifting river god Achelous. She recalls her thoughts thus: “when I expected him, I always prayed in my unhappiness, that I would die (20) before I’d ever come into his bed” (21). Here we see a woman completely subordinate and devoid of a voice despite being the ideal beautiful woman yet showcasing restraint from taking any extreme steps. Similarly, when Herakles wins over the river god to marry her, she remains composed. As a good wife she was worried about his well-being which left her with “fear after fear for him, and each night brings new anxiety which the next night’s worries drive away.” she has often prayed to “the Gods” that “they would not bring me sorrow.” She is fully aware that “if Herakles survives, then so do we - if not we die with him”. She had been patient with the many affairs of Herakles. Like the tortoise she had held her tongue and kept her stead for her husband.

Deinera’s downfall begins the moment she nestles jealousy for the young Iole. An un-sophrosyne thought leads to a much graver miasma. In Greek philosophical conception Deinera’s action is the result of her *akryon*. While her suicide is the inevitable act, it is also an act guided by the state. Unlike Oresteia, Agamemnon and Herakles in Euripedes, Deinera has no way out. Hyllus, her trusted son refuses to understand her intention driving her to an extreme un-sophrosyne act of suicide. The state through family, Hyllus, acts as a judge of her character.

While Kannagi emerges as the epitome of *Karpū* by defending the honor of her husband, Deinera becomes the example of un-sophrosyne through her fatal *hamartia*. Sophrosyne, the idea of balance and self-restraint in a man becomes obedience and sexual fidelity in a woman. Deianeira instead of trusting her husband’s actions takes matters into her own hands, a trait unbecoming of a sophrosyne woman. Jealousy, mistrust and a desire not to lose command of her household – which is not hers to command in the first place – overrides her sexual fidelity. Her *hamartia*, encouraged by the women of Trachis validates not just the Aristotelian *akryon* but also the state’s imposition of female sophrosyne, an erasure of the female agency like the bee woman.

Kannagi gains subjectivity and wields her agency by the somatic erasure of Kovalan; Herakles’ somatic erasure is initiated by Deianeira’s subjectivity and the realization of her agency. In both the cases patriarchy holds primacy supported by the state. Deianeira, haunted by the expression of her agency, performs one final act of defiance by killing herself with a two-edged sword on her marital bed. Through death Deianeira reclaims her subjectivity while the state represented by Hyllus acknowledges her female sophrosyne by crying for her tragic end and his own harsh judgement. Herakles, the true representative of the state in the household, is dumbfounded most likely due to the defiant nature of her agency acquisition. Had Deianeira been brought before Herakles to be avenged, she would have emerged as the miasmatic traitor of the *oikos*. By choosing death by the sword much like a warrior, Deianeira has reified her subordination and yet claimed her agency.

The stories of Deianera and Kannagi has presented the subordination of women. The

societies these two women lived in are strikingly similar. Both of them are state societies with a proper king and nobles. Women were confined to their homes and the battles they fought were to retain their men in their lives like Deianera or glorifying their men like in the case of Kannagi. The emergence of state societies destroyed women's agency and relegated them to the margins.

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