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Women's Knowledge and Epistemic Agency in Silappatikaram: Economic Reasoning, Evidence, and Justice in Kannagi's Legal Argument

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Abstract

Silappatikaram, one of the five great Tamil epics, presents a sophisticated portrayal of women as intellectual, ethical, and socially conscious agents. This study examines the female knowledge systems embedded in the epic, with a particular focus on the character Kannagi. It highlights women's roles in business and commerce, their participation in economic transactions, and their use of legal reasoning and evidence-based argumentation. Moving beyond traditional interpretations that confine Kannagi to the ideals of chastity and devotion, this paper reinterprets her as a rational thinker and legal advocate. Through an in-depth analysis, Kannagi is foregrounded as a figure of business intelligence, legal reasoning, and evidence-based justice. Shaped by the mercantile background of her household and the economic structures of ancient Tamil society, she demonstrates a keen understanding of wealth management, particularly through the use of high-value ornaments as financial assets. Her decision to liquidate her anklet during a period of crisis reflects calculated economic judgment. Furthermore, her appearance in the royal court reveals her mastery of legal discourse, where she employs logical argumentation and material evidence to challenge state authority. By analyzing the literary, cultural, and ethical dimensions of the text, this paper argues that Vazhakkurai Kadhavai of *Silappatikaram* constructs a progressive vision of women's intellectual agency in ancient Tamil society. Kannagi emerges as a representative of a sophisticated female knowledge system that integrates economic acumen, juridical awareness, and ethical assertion, thereby offering a powerful model of women's intellectual agency in classical Tamil literature.

Keywords: Women's knowledge system, legal reasoning, business intelligence, Gender Business Knowledge and justice

Introduction

Classical Tamil literature has often been celebrated for its poetic excellence and ethical depth. Among these works, *Silappatikaram* occupies a unique position due to its rich narrative structure and its emphasis on justice (Aram). Existing scholarship on Kannagi has primarily

focused on themes such as chastity, femininity, morality, justice, and resistance to political power. While these studies provide important insights, they largely interpret Kannagi within symbolic or ethical frameworks., recent scholarly perspectives reveal deeper layers of intellectual engagement, particularly in its portrayal of women. This study explores how *Silappathikaram* constructs women as knowledgeable agents in the domains such as commerce, law, and ethics. It focuses on three major female characters Kannagi, to demonstrate how the epic challenges the notion of passive femininity and instead foregrounds women's intellectual sharpness and moral authority.

Women and Economic Participation in *Silappathikaram*

The epic reflects a society where women actively participated in economic life. Contrary to the assumption that ancient societies confined women to domestic roles, *Silappathikaram* provides evidence of women's involvement in trade, wealth management, and financial decision-making. Kannagi, for instance, is depicted as the custodian of her family's wealth. The pair of anklets (Silambu) she possesses symbolizes not only marital fidelity but also economic value. When Kovalan loses his wealth due to his association with Madhavi, Kannagi does not remain passive. Instead, she contributes her anklet as capital, enabling their attempt to rebuild their life in Madurai. In the Vazhakkurai Kadhais of *Silappathikaram*, Kannagi's sharp business acumen is deeply rooted in her husband's merchant lineage and the broader economic structures of ancient Tamil society. Her arguments reveal a sophisticated understanding of commercial and financial strategies. The anklets she possesses, filled with precious rubies (Manikka Paral), illustrate the practice among ancient Tamil merchants of storing wealth in high-value ornaments as a secure and portable form of financial investment and asset preservation. Kannagi also demonstrates a deep awareness of product quality and material distinction when

she convincingly argues before the Pandya king that her anklets contain rubies, which are fundamentally different from and more valuable than the pearls (Muthu) found in the queen's anklets. Furthermore, her decision to hand over her anklet to Kovalan during a period of poverty reflects a calculated economic move to liquidate a valuable asset in times of financial distress. Kovalan's journey to Madurai to sell the anklet is presented as a legitimate commercial transaction, supported by his identity as the son of a prominent merchant family. In this context, Kannagi's fierce defense of her husband's innocence is not only an act of personal loyalty but also a powerful assertion to restore his commercial integrity and protect the ancestral reputation associated with their mercantile lineage

This act illustrates:

Thus, the epic portrays women as economically aware individuals capable of managing resources and engaging in transactions.

Kannagi and Legal Reasoning: Evidence-Based Justice in Vazhakkurai Kadhais

Kannagi's pursuit of justice achieves its ultimate glory by centering completely on the Vazhakkurai Kadhais "Vazhakkurai Kadhais (The Chapter of Pleading for Justice) is the 20th chapter of the epic *Silappathikaram*, consisting of a total of 81 lines. The first 49 lines describe the events leading up to Kannagi entering the royal court and confronting the king. Kannagi's encounter with the Pandya king represents one of the earliest literary depictions of legal reasoning and evidence-based argumentation by a female character. The 50th line is particularly significant, as Kannagi addresses the king with her very first words: "Thera Manna!" (O unreflecting king!). This phrase carries a direct accusation, condemning the king for his failure to investigate the truth before delivering judgment. By this, she implies: "O king who failed to inquire and seek the truth, you have wrongfully executed my husband."

Observing Kannagi standing before him with

tear-filled eyes, the king asks, “O young woman who stands before us in grief, who are you?” In response, Kannagi delivers a powerful and structured argument: “O king who has failed to realize the truth, listen to my words. My hometown is the renowned city of Puhar, ruled justly by King Sibi, who alleviated the suffering of a dove, and by the righteous King Manunithi Cholan, who sacrificed his own son to deliver justice to a grieving cow. In that very city lived the noble and reputed merchant Masathuvan, whose son, driven by fate, came to your great city of Madurai to earn a livelihood through trade. He brought one of my anklets as capital for his business, but he was unjustly killed by you. I am the wife of that Kovalan. My name is Kannagi” (Vazhakkurai Kadhai, lines 50–63).

The narrative reaches its climax within a brief span of twelve lines (67–78). Kannagi asserts that her anklet contains rubies, while the king insists that the queen’s anklet contains pearls. The anklet taken from Kovalan is then brought before the court. Kannagi takes it and smashes it open, causing rubies to scatter out and strike the king directly. In that moment, the truth becomes undeniable. Realizing his grave error, the king laments, “I am no king! I am the thief!” Overcome with shock and guilt, he collapses and dies. Traditionally, small stones or beads, known as ‘Paral’ or ‘Ari’, are placed inside anklets to produce a chiming sound. The use of precious rubies inside an anklet, however, was rare and signified great wealth. Since the Pandya king firmly believed that royal anklets contained only pearls, Kannagi confidently declared, “The golden anklet of my foot contains rubies.”

In this episode, Kannagi presents her case with remarkable precision, clarity, and confidence. Her argument is logically structured, supported by cultural references, personal testimony, and material evidence. She leaves no scope for doubt or counter-questioning, thereby demonstrating the critical importance of evidence in the administration of justice.

This episode in *Silappatikaram* stands as a powerful illustration of evidence-based reasoning in a judicial setting and highlights Kannagi’s role as a rational and authoritative voice in the pursuit of justice. Kannagi’s legal reasoning can be understood through several key elements: the introduction of her identity and background, the presentation of physical evidence, logical comparison of objects, identification of procedural injustice, and the assertion of moral and legal accountability. At the outset, Kannagi introduces herself and establishes her background before presenting her arguments. This structured approach strengthens the credibility of her claim. After Kovalan is unjustly executed on the false charge of stealing the queen’s anklet, Kannagi does not respond with uncontrolled emotion. Instead, she enters the royal court with a composed and methodical argument.

She presents material evidence in the form of the remaining anklet and demonstrates a crucial distinction: her anklet contains rubies, whereas the queen’s anklet contains pearls. This difference becomes decisive forensic evidence, exposing the flaw in the king’s judgment. Through this logical comparison, Kannagi highlights the failure of due process and challenges the authority of the king. Thus, her argument is not merely emotional but deeply rational and evidence-based. By identifying procedural injustice and demanding accountability, Kannagi transforms from a grieving widow into a powerful figure of legal consciousness and judicial reasoning.

The Crucial Role of Evidence

Evidence is the most vital element of any legal case. In most criminal cases, the testimony of an eyewitness who directly witnessed the incident is given the utmost importance. Without proper evidence, no claim can be accepted as proven. In *Silappatikaram*, the pearls and the rubies serve as the ultimate evidence. Since Kannagi’s anklet contained rubies, it was irrefutably proven that Kovalan was not a thief.

Ethical Consciousness and Moral Authority

Kannagi's actions are guided by a strong ethical framework rooted in Aram (righteousness). She does not seek revenge for personal satisfaction but demands justice to restore moral order.

Women's Knowledge Systems: From Domestic Economy to Public Justice

The representation of Kannagi in Silappatikaram provides an important opportunity to understand the relationship between women's knowledge, domestic economy, social responsibility, and public justice in classical Tamil society. Her knowledge is not presented as abstract intellectual learning but as practical knowledge acquired through lived experience. The epic demonstrates that women's intellectual capacity could operate within the household as well as beyond its boundaries. Kannagi's knowledge of wealth, ornaments, family reputation, trade, social values, and justice enables her to respond effectively when the established social order fails to protect her husband.

The economic dimension of Kannagi's knowledge is particularly significant. The anklet (silambu) is not merely a symbol of marital status; it also functions as a transferable form of wealth. When Kovalan loses his wealth, Kannagi understands that the anklet can be converted into financial resources. Her decision therefore demonstrates an awareness of the relationship between property, liquidity, and economic survival. The action may be interpreted as an example of household-level financial decision-making. In this sense, Kannagi is not simply the passive possessor of wealth but an active participant in the management of family resources. The narrative thereby suggests that women belonging to prosperous merchant households could possess practical knowledge of property and economic transactions.

Kannagi's knowledge also extends to the identification and differentiation of valuable commodities. Her distinction between the

rubies contained in her anklet and the pearls associated with the queen's anklet is central to her argument before the Pandya king. This distinction is not accidental. It demonstrates her familiarity with the material characteristics and economic value of precious objects. The physical object becomes a source of knowledge, and knowledge becomes the basis for legal reasoning. Thus, the anklet operates simultaneously as an economic asset, a cultural object, and forensic evidence.

Another important dimension is Kannagi's social and geographical knowledge. Her reference to Puhar, the merchant community, and the traditions of righteous rulers establishes her social identity and credibility before the king. She does not enter the court merely as a grieving wife. She consciously constructs an argument by establishing who she is, where she comes from, what social community she belongs to, and why her claim deserves to be heard. Her invocation of rulers such as Sibi and Manunithi Cholan places the immediate case within a larger ethical framework of kingship and justice. Her knowledge of political morality therefore becomes an instrument through which she questions the legitimacy of an unjust judgment.

The courtroom episode also demonstrates the transformation of private knowledge into public knowledge. Initially, Kannagi possesses knowledge concerning her husband, her family, and the anklet. When the state refuses to verify the truth, she brings this private knowledge into the public sphere. She converts personal testimony into an evidentiary argument. This movement from the domestic sphere to the royal court is significant because it challenges the conventional representation of women as confined to private life. Kannagi's authority emerges precisely when she enters a public institution and demands accountability from the highest political authority.

Her method of argumentation further reveals an important epistemic structure. First, she establishes her identity and social back-

ground; second, she explains the circumstances that brought Kovalan to Madurai; third, she identifies the object involved in the alleged theft; fourth, she distinguishes the contents of the two anklets; and finally, she produces material evidence to establish the truth. This sequence resembles a rational process of establishing facts before arriving at a conclusion. Her argument therefore demonstrates that women in classical Tamil literary imagination could be represented as observers, interpreters of evidence, and participants in public reasoning.

The episode also raises an important question concerning the relationship between authority and knowledge. The Pandya king possesses institutional authority, whereas Kannagi possesses experiential and material knowledge. The king's authority initially produces an erroneous judgment because the necessary evidence has not been adequately examined. Kannagi's knowledge, although originating outside the formal structures of power, ultimately corrects the failure of institutional authority. The narrative thus suggests that legitimate justice depends not merely on the status of the person making the judgment but on the quality of evidence and reasoning supporting that judgment.

From this perspective, Kannagi can be understood as representing an alternative model of intellectual authority. Her authority does not arise from political office, formal education, or masculine institutional power. It arises from observation, experience, economic awareness, ethical consciousness, and the ability to interpret material evidence. Her knowledge becomes authoritative because it successfully establishes the truth. The Vazhakkurai Kaadhai therefore presents an important literary model in which female knowledge is transformed into social and political agency.

Consequently, *Silappatikaram* may be read not only as a narrative of chastity and justice but also as a text that recognizes multiple forms of knowledge possessed by women. Economic knowledge enables Kannagi to

protect family survival; social knowledge enables her to establish credibility; geographical and cultural knowledge strengthens her argument; and evidentiary knowledge enables her to challenge judicial error. These interconnected forms of knowledge ultimately transform a woman from a private member of a merchant household into a public voice demanding justice. Kannagi's significance therefore lies not merely in her moral purity but in her ability to convert knowledge into agency and agency into a demand for justice.

Her speech in the court reveals:

- Awareness of justice as a universal principle
- Critique of unjust governance
- Moral courage to confront authority
- When the king realizes his mistake, he dies of shame, symbolizing the collapse of unjust power. Kannagi's subsequent curse on the city of Madurai is often interpreted as an expression of divine anger; however, it can also be understood as a symbolic act of moral correction. Through this transformation, Kannagi evolves into a guardian of justice, embodying both human reasoning and divine authority. This ultimately reinforces the foundational truth of *Silappatikaram*: "Justice becomes the god of death to those who deviate from righteousness while ruling a kingdom"

Conclusion

One of the significant aspects of *Silappatikaram* is its representation of female agency and knowledge. Although the epic was composed by Ilango Adigal, a male poet, the narrative appears to draw from earlier oral traditions and folk narratives that circulated among the people. In transforming an oral story into a literary epic, Ilango Adigal successfully incorporated a distinctly feminine perspective, particularly through the character of Kannagi.

The text suggests that women in domestic spaces possessed extensive knowledge of

family affairs, social relations, and economic activities. As members of merchant households, women were not isolated from commercial matters; rather, they were familiar with the functioning of trade and business conducted by their husbands and families. This social reality is reflected in Kannagi's character, whose understanding of commerce, ethics, and justice becomes evident in the Vazhakkurai Kaadhai episode.

Following the unjust execution of her husband Kovalan, Kannagi initially expresses her grief through lamentation (*pulambal*), a common feature of oral and folk traditions. During this emotional phase, she questions the accusation that her husband was a thief. The divine voice from the sky affirming Kovalan's innocence may be interpreted symbolically as the collective voice of the people who recognized the injustice committed by the state. Significantly, after this period of intense sorrow, Kannagi regains self-control and approaches the royal court to seek justice.

Kannagi's argument before the Pandya king demonstrates remarkable logical reasoning and rhetorical skill. She first establishes her identity by referring to the ethical traditions of her native land and invoking exemplary rulers such as Manunidhi Cholan and Sibi Chakravarti. By doing so, she frames her appeal within a moral and political discourse familiar to the king. This introduction not only legitimizes her position but also emphasizes her awareness of ethical governance.

Furthermore, Kannagi exhibits practical and ecological knowledge. Being aware of the economic and geographical characteristics of the Pandya kingdom, she understands that the region was renowned for its pearl fisheries, particularly those associated with Korkai and the coastal areas of the south. Consequently, she confidently argues that the queen's anklet would contain pearls, whereas her own anklet contained rubies. This distinction becomes the central piece of evidence in her case. By demanding the queen's anklet and breaking open her own anklet be-

fore the court, Kannagi presents material proof that exposes the king's error and establishes Kovalan's innocence.

This episode reveals a sophisticated form of evidence-based argumentation. Despite her personal tragedy and emotional suffering, Kannagi is able to construct a rational, fact-based, and persuasive case. Her success is not dependent on divine intervention alone but on her capacity to use observation, knowledge, and logical reasoning. Therefore, the Vazhakkurai Kaadhai episode can be interpreted as a powerful representation of a female knowledge system within classical Tamil literature. From a female perspective, Kannagi's courtroom argument demonstrates that women were imagined as capable of intellectual authority, ethical judgment, and public intervention. Through her character, Ilango Adigal presents a model of female agency that transcends domestic boundaries and enters the political sphere. Thus, the Vazhakkurai Kaadhai scene stands as an important literary articulation of feminine knowledge, evidence-based reasoning, and the pursuit of justice in *Silappathikaram*.

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