
**Society's Perception and Women in Literature:
A Comparative Study of Mādavi and Kaṇṇaki in *Cilappatikāram*
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Link : https://santiniketansahityapath.org.in/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/4_Manami-Mondal.pdf

Abstract: Cilappatikāram is one of the most well-known Tamil epics, composed sometimes between fifth to seventh century C.E. in the post- Caṅkam period. The two main female characters of the epic are Kaṇṇaki and Mādavi. Though they both were the lovers of the merchant Kōvalaṇ yet they were literarily very different from each other. Kaṇṇaki was the chaste and the ideal wife of Kōvalaṇ whose beauty was unmatched. She was so virtuous that to avenge her husband's death she burnt down the city of Madurai. On the other hand, trained in the sixty-four arts of pleasure, Mādavi was a dancer and a medium of pleasure in the eyes of the society. So, inspite of being dutiful and loyal towards Kōvalaṇ she never left a mark on the people the way Kaṇṇaki did. In this background, the present article will try to look at how on the basis of social status and profession these two female characters were differentiated in the epic.

Key Words: Post *Caṅkam* literature, post *Caṅkam* society, *Cilappatikāram*, women characters, social perceptions, comparative study.

Caṅkam literature serves as the only source to understand ancient South India especially the ancient Tāmilakām. The term stands for the geographical region inhabited by the ancient Tamils. It covers the southernmost region of the Indian subcontinent, that is the present-day Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Puducherry and Southern parts of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. Trying to elaborate on the idea of the Caṅkam Age Kamil Zvelebil came to the conclusion, 'the term Caṅkam poetry or Caṅkam literature or even Caṅkam Age means that, according to a persistent indigenous tradition, a literary Caṅkam or Academy in Madurai shaped and controlled the literary, academic, cultural and linguistic life of ancient Tamilnad' ¹. Nakkīraṇār in his commentary on Iraiyaṇār Akapporuḷ, or Kaḷaviyal eṇṇa Iraiyaṇār Akapporuḷ gave further explanations on the Caṅkam Age. According to Nakkīraṇār; Talaiccaṅkam, Iṭaiccaṅkam, Kaṭaiccaṅkam were the three Caṅkams that took place under the Paṇḍyas. The first Caṅkam was in Southern Madurai (then Madurai). It lasted for 4440 years, and 4449 poets, including Gods and sages like Siva, Kubera, and Agastya participated in it. The second Caṅkam was held in Kapatapuram and lasted for 3700 years. 3700 poets took part in it and five grammars, including Agattiyam and Tolkāppiyam were composed during the second Caṅkam. The third Caṅkam took place in Madurai and lasted for almost 1850 years. It was patronized by forty-nine kings and was presided over by Nakkīraṇār ². The last Caṅkam resulted in the compilation of eight anthologies of shorter poems (Eṭṭuthokai) and ten long songs or Pattuppāṭṭu and these compilations were completed by the Caṅkam of poets under the patronization of the Paṇḍyas ³. The Caṅkam literature comprises of a total of 2279 poems written by 473 poets (including women), and 102 poems out of them were anonymous poems ⁴.

According to the scholars, the Caṅkam age lasted from the third century B.C.E. to the third century C.E.⁵ Towards the end of the third century C.E. there was a gradual shift of power from the Cēra, Cōla and Paṇḍyas to the Kaḷabraras. It further resulted in a shift in the political scenario of ancient South India. As it was happening towards the end of the Caṅkam period so this period in early history came to be known as the Post Caṅkam period. The Kaḷabraras ruled from third century C.E. to sixth century C.E. The Paṇḍyas and the Pallavaṅ again regained their power after defeating them. The Post Caṅkam period witnessed the changing social and political dynamics and the literature became a reflection of those changing dynamics. Amidst the chaos and confusion of constant changes, the social values and morality were gradually degrading. The post-Caṅkam literature consisting of the twin epics Cilappatikāram and Maṇimēkalai and the Eighteen Lesser Texts or Paṭiṇeṅkīlkaṇakku works was hence trying to focus more on the ethical and moral ideas with a view to reform the society. On this background, this article will try to look into the two female lead characters of the epic Cilappatikāram and will try to understand how the society was responsible for shaping these characters.

There are ‘Five Great Epics’ in Tamil literature –

- *Cīvaka Cintāmaṇi*- forehead jewellery
- *Kuṇṭalakēci*- earstud
- *Maṇimēkalai*- girdle on waist
- *Vaḷaiyāpati*- bangles
- *Cilappatikāram*- anklet

Cilappatikāram is the earliest Tamil epic written in akaval meter. According to V.R. Ramachandra Dikshitar, the title Cilappatikāram is a combination of two words, ‘silambu’ (anklet) and ‘adikaram’ (the story about). So, the epic is the story of an anklet.⁶ Zvelebil is of the opinion that this epic was composed between fifth to seventh century C.E. because according to him the Caṅkam era texts of the 100–250 C.E. periods are totally different from this epic. The epic's style, structure and other details are quite similar to the texts composed centuries later.⁷

It is the tragic love story of merchant Kōvalaṅ who wasted all his money on Māḍavi, a dancer, and his chaste wife, Kaṇṇaki. Kaṇṇaki took him back and accompanied him to Madurai in order to sell her anklet. The goldsmith, who had actually stolen the queen's anklet, fooled him. He proposed to help Kōvalaṅ sell the anklets to the queen, who mistook Kaṇṇaki's anklets for her own. The Madurai chief mistaking Kōvalaṅ for the thief ordered for him to be brought to the court. He ordered the guards ‘kontu’ (to bring) Kōvalaṅ but the guards took it as the order to take legal actions against him (also means kontu). Completely lost and distressed by her husband's death Kaṇṇaki demanded justice. On failing to get the same, the chaste Kaṇṇaki tore her breast and put the city on fire. Later they rejoined each other in heaven. This epic is attributed to the Cēra prince Iḷaṅkō Aṭikaḷ who was the brother of Cēra ruler Ceṅkuṭṭuvaṅ. According to Zvelebil this epic is based on the common folklores about chaste women prevalent very much in South India. The last canto of the epic talked about a prince who turned into a Jain ascetic. It was probably indicating towards Iḷaṅkō Aṭikaḷ.⁸

From this brief storyline of the epic, it can be said that Kaṇṇaki and Māḍavi were

the two lead female characters of the epic and the epic presents a perfect juxtaposition of the two characters. As discussed in the introduction portion to this article, all the literary creations composed during this time was an attempt to revive the degrading moral status of the society. Literature was the most common medium through which the ideas of ideal society, heroism and womanhood reached the masses at the time. To fulfil the same purpose, Iḷaṅkō Aṭikaḷ portrayed Kaṇṇaki as the epitome of ideal woman. Kaṇṇaki was the dutiful, chaste and virtuous wife of Kōvalaṇ. She was so virtuous that the author compared her to the goddess Lakṣmī and the faultless Arundatī (North Star).

‘Then they led Kaṇṇaki, the Arundati of this vast world, to the auspicious nuptial bed...’⁹

Kaṇṇaki was of unmatched beauty. Her beauty was described as being capable of persuading the Gods to give up their symbols of power to her. Like the God of love would give up his sugarcane bow and Indra would give up his thunderbolt for the sake of Kaṇṇaki’s beauty. ‘Likewise the bodyless God of Love will be happy to give you his sugarcane bow, so that it may become your dark eyebrows...’¹⁰ ‘Indra too is bound to give you his thunderbolt which protects the Dēvas, saying that it will fittingly become your waist...’¹¹

The thing to be noted here is that, throughout the epic, Iḷaṅkō Aṭikaḷ is making rigorous attempts to portray Kaṇṇaki as the ideal woman and a wife. That is the reason why, when Kōvalaṇ left home in search of fortune, he left Kaṇṇaki in tears. Her red eyes were the markers of her distress. She would neither eat well nor sleep well. Kaṇṇaki had deprived herself of all ornaments except for her sacred tāli.¹²

‘But Kaṇṇaki was sad at heart. 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; ... her milk white teeth were not revealed to Kōvalaṇ in a loving smile; nor was her dark hair softened by oil.’¹³

She was so devoted to her husband that even after being separated from her husband she remained chaste. Kaṇṇaki became the ultimate symbol of love and sacrifice.



Kaṇṇaki Statue at Marina Beach, Chennai

Another important female character in this epic is a dancer named Mādavi. She was a descendant of the distinguished line of celestial nymphs.¹⁴ What made her different from Kaṇṇaki was the fact that she married the wealthy merchant Kōvalaṇ by selling her garland to him for 1008 kaḷaṇṇjus.

‘... this garland is worth a sum of 1008 kaḷaṇṇjus of very excellent gold. He who buys this garland becomes the husband of our creeperlike lady.’¹⁵

She was an accomplished dancer of exceeding beauty. Her eyes were compared to the eyes of a fawn by the author.¹⁶ Mādavi was the woman who went against the norms of the rigid patriarchal society and chose her way of life according to her own will. That is the reason why, after the death of her beloved Kōvalaṇ, she gave up the life of luxury and grandeur and joined the Buddhist Saṅgha.¹⁷ But the journey was not easy for her. There were some prescribed rules as how a courtesan should behave and going against those rules meant going against the contemporary society and its practices. As a result, the greatest enemies to her journey from a dancer to a bhikṣuṇī were the society and her own mother.¹⁸ Generally, parents support the decision of their children but Chitrāpati, Mādavi’s mother was strictly against her daughter’s decision to forego the life of a dancer. From her childhood, Chitrāpati’s mind and soul had been conditioned according to the needs of the society, that is the reason why when Mādavi decided to join the Saṅgha, she vehemently opposed it. For Chitrāpati, the life of every individual was pre-destined and trying to change that destiny actually meant opposing the society and the destiny. Mādavi was destined to be a dancer and provide pleasure to the city dwellers, hence, her decision to devote herself to the monastic life was totally unacceptable to Chitrāpati.

‘Friend equal to the goddess of fortune, whence, this grief? Have you no longer any consideration for the city’s inhabitants, both wise and mad? For girls like us, the life you wish to lead is a culpable breaking of custom.’¹⁹

But these words could never demotivate Mādavi from moving against the tide. Maybe, that is the reason why she was overshadowed by the perfect Kaṇṇaki and Mādavi’s perfection was neither acceptable to the society nor to Aṭikaḷ. The phrase ‘girls like us’ show that women like Mādavi and Chitrāpati were always supposed to be at the periphery of the society and not at par with Kaṇṇaki.



Mādavi

Source: <https://jewelryinnarratives.com/Mādavi-and-jewelry-in-silappathikaram/>

Throughout the epic, Mādavi had been portrayed in comparison to the chaste Kaṇṇaki. In this respect, it is important to discuss the viewpoints of N. Murugespandian regarding the same. In the essay named 'Characterization of Mādavi in Cilappatikāram', Murugespandian opined that '... the character of Mādavi has been portrayed as the antagonist to elevate Kaṇṇaki to the position of a goddess.'²⁰ He further refers to a class of women known as kaṇigaiyar kulam²¹ to which Mādavi belonged. Women were socially assessed based on the work they did and women belonging to kaṇigaiyar kulam (including Mādavi) were sex workers.²² Her heart and mind had always taken the backseat when her body and beauty were sold for the pleasure of the men. He further added that Aṭikaḷ viewed the Cilappatikāram society as a male dominated patriarchal society where there were only two types of women- women like Mādavi who were despised and women like Kaṇṇaki who were worshipped.²³ Murugespandian further asserted that both the characters of Mādavi and Kaṇṇaki were dependent on the males of the society but to highlight the ideal chaste imagery of Kaṇṇaki, the character of Mādavi had been more homogenised compared to that of Kaṇṇaki. Kōvalaṇ's act of dishonesty and adultery was accepted by both the society and Kaṇṇaki but Mādavi's sexual act (though she had been loyal to Kōvalaṇ throughout) was seen as a sin responsible for the tragedy faced by Kaṇṇaki and Kōvalaṇ. According to him, '... if Mādavi's sexual act is adultery, then that of the Kōvalaṇ should also be adultery.'²⁴ It was the society that put forward the notion that the body of a courtesan like Mādavi was meant for the institution of prostitution and not for the institution of family.

Previously, many scholars have separately analysed both these characters but a comparative analysis has not been attempted before. The differentiation between these two female characters was noticed at multiple levels in the epic. In the Cilappatikāram, the differentiation in the characters is often portrayed through the difference in their dresses and ornaments. Mādavi who was happy with Kōvalaṇ was fully ornamented and adorned whereas Kaṇṇaki in grief had removed all her ornaments. Even her dress was never in proper place. Mādavi and other women of joy would decorate their breasts with pearls and sandalwood. 'Because she had not been separated from her lover, Mādavi, wearing beautifully serrated earrings, had not lost her charms.'²⁵

While, Kaṇṇaki away from Kōvalaṇ was so sad and distressed that she shunned her anklet, girdle, earrings and tilaka. She only wore the tāli for the welfare of her husband. '... no jewel other than her sacred tāli did she wear... '²⁶ Hence, there is a beautiful contrast in 'The dark left eye of Kaṇṇaki and the red right eye of Mādavi throbbed and were filled with tears of sorrow and joy respectively... '²⁷ Somewhere, the epic wanted to denote that women like Mādavi who were meant for pleasure were capable of bringing distress on any person. 'Many in the world have fallen into dire distress by regarding women and food as objects of pleasure... '²⁸

On the other hand, the attempt to present Kaṇṇaki, belonging to higher status of society, as the highest ideal of womanhood is also noticed. For the same reason, Kaṇṇaki has been attributed with numerous virtues, which though often exaggerated performed the job of portraying her as the chaste and rightful wife perfectly. According to the societal norms the women were supposed to be forgiving and that is the reason why, in spite of knowing that Kōvalaṇ had spent all his wealth on another woman she vowed to

help him by selling her anklet and accompanying her husband to Madurai. When Kōvalaṇ tried to sell the anklet, the ruler of Madurai, owing to the conspiracy of the thief goldsmith, put him to death. Such was the virtue of the chaste lady Kaṇṇaki that on hearing the news of her husband's death she tore her breast and burnt the city of Madurai.

'The wife of the murdered Kōvalaṇ having no refuge, shed tears copiously; and because she was so very virtuous, the Paṇḍyas suffered great distress when she plucked out one of her breasts, on which lay a string of pearls, and thereby burnt the great city of Madura.'²⁹

On the contrary, Māḍavi was a dancer. She did not have any respectable position in the society and her job was to entertain the higher status of the society. Hence, in the eyes of the society, she was incapable of becoming an ideal woman and an ideal wife. That is why, inspite of being the perfect, loyal and caring wife towards Kōvalaṇ, she was seen only as a home wrecker and nothing else. Kōvalaṇ mistook her ballads by the sea shore as her disloyalty and love for other man and left her to return back to Kaṇṇaki. 'I sang the kāṇalvari; but she, the cunning one combining several deceitful lies, sang with her mind upon someone else.'³⁰

The thing that can be assumed here is that, Māḍavi was a very strong individual and unlike Kaṇṇaki, she was not ready to forgive the change of love in Kōvalaṇ so easily. So, she decided to counter him through her ode to the sea. That attitude and independent individuality was completely unacceptable to the men of the society (including Kōvalaṇ and Aṭikaḷ) because they were habituated to dominating women without any resistance. This may be another reason the attempt was noticed at glorifying Kaṇṇaki vis-à-vis Māḍavi.

So, it can be rightfully said that this epic was centred around a society that was bounded by rigidity and patriarchal norms. The society expected women to be forgiving, inspite of the mistakes and adultery their husbands committed. They were supposed to be aware about the affairs of their husbands yet they were to forgive them and accept them wholeheartedly. 'The women who during the day had shown their anger on learning of their fickle husbands' infidelities, their kohl-laden eyes red with fury, disdaining every excuse, now asleep on their scented couches scattered with flowers, clasped their husbands, all unawares, like lianas.'³¹

But the opposite picture was not the same. If the women committed adultery they were dishonoured and considered at same rank with the prostitutes and the courtesans. The wives were supposed to be loyal to their husbands only and think of no other men. This was expected of the ideal women and since, Kaṇṇaki was successful in fulfilling all these criteria, she was the perfect wife and the ideal woman. Further to elevate her position in the society as the ideal woman, was introduced the episode surrounding the city of Madurai. Kaṇṇaki was so disheartened and distressed by the wrong done on Kōvalaṇ that she tore her breast and set the city of Madurai on fire. The dichotomy lies here where the author again proved the supremacy of Kaṇṇaki over Māḍavi. Kaṇṇaki was so chaste and honourable that the death of her husband magnified both her karpu³² and aṇaṇku.³³ Kaṇṇaki was known as the karpuḱkarasi whose aṇaṇku was so powerful and dangerous that it was capable of burning down a whole city.³⁴ On the contrary, Māḍavi

was a dancer. Her body, mind and soul were meant for the pleasure of the men. She herself lamented that she was not pure or chaste as Kaṇṇaki that is why even after hearing the news of Kōvalaṇ's death her soul did not leave her body. 'Mādavi replied, Maid of the beautiful bracelets! When I learned the news of the terrible death of Kōvalaṇ, who was my lover, I survived. Life did not wish to leave my body. I thus lost the esteem of the people of this ancient city bristling with flags, and since then I have lived in shame.'³⁵

It can be concluded that the Cilappatikāram epic revolves around two main female characters. Kaṇṇaki, the wife of Kōvalaṇ, a merchant's daughter living in the upper strata of society was an ideal female character in Iḷaṅkō Aṭikaḷ's eyes. She belonged to that stratum of the society, where the sign of chastity was forgiveness and reacceptance. Kaṇṇaki was forgiving towards her husband so her vengeance took shape from her chastity. According to popular legends, Cēra ruler Ceṇkuṭṭuvaṇ brought stones from the Himalayas in North India and constructed a temple for Kaṇṇaki in South India (2nd century C.E.). Even now, Kaṇṇaki Amman is worshipped as the goddess 'Pattini' in Sri Lanka by the Sinhalese Buddhists, 'Kaṇṇaki Amman' by the Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus, and 'Kodungallur Bhagavathy' and 'Aatukul Bhagavathy' in Kerala. Keralites believe her to be an incarnation of goddess 'Bhadrakālī' who reached Kodungalloor and attained salvation in the temple there.³⁶ The Uraiperukaṭṭurai section of the epic states:

- 'From that forth the Paṇḍyan kingdom was deprived of rains and famine-stricken. This was followed by fever and plague. Verriverceḷiyan of Koṛkai propitiated the Lady of Chastity by sacrificing a thousand goldsmiths, and celebrated a festival... thereupon the kingdom was rid of disease and distress.'
- 'Hearing this, the Iḷam- Kōśar of the Kongunāḍu instituted festivals in honour of the Lady of Chastity in their land, and this resulted in plentiful rains.'
- 'On hearing this, Gajabāhu of Ceylon... built a shrine for the Lady of Chastity where daily sacrifices were performed... he also instituted annual festivals commencing with the month of Āḍi, then the rains came to stay... '
- 'At this the Cōḷa king Perurnkiḷḷi built at Uṛaiyūr a shrine for Pattiṇikkaḍavuḷ, and instituted daily offerings, thinking that she would shower her blessings at all times.'³⁷

On the other hand Mādavi was a dancer of Apsara origin. Mādavi, an outsider to the elite society, excelled in arts and crafts. She sold herself to Kōvalaṇ which was normal among the dancer community. But she truly loved Kōvalaṇ and was always loyal to him as the epic does not mention her being in any sort of physical or mental relationship with any other man. Yet a dancer could never be chaste in the eyes of society. Iḷaṅkō Aṭikaḷ clearly explained that there was no Kaṛpu in the dancer Mādavi since her job was to entertain the upper classes. So she was incapable of being loyal to a single person. Because she was not ready to accept all the wrongdoings of her husband, the society was not ready to accept her. Her musical response to Kōvalaṇ on the beach made it clear that she defied social norms and was speaking her mind whenever and wherever necessary. That's why Kōvalaṇ left her to return back to Kaṇṇaki. However, the epic repeatedly emphasized on the fact that such women like Mādavi were the cause of social unrest and family problems. Even

after giving up their dancer identity when Mādavi and her daughter (with Kōvalaṇ) Maṇimēkalai joined the Buddhist Saṅgha, it was unacceptable in the eyes of the society. So, the society was clearly divided into two groups, women like Kaṇṇaki who were revered because they bowed down before the society and were known for their chastity and women like Mādavi, who were always a part of the pleasure but not a part of the family. Both these types of women were under the male domination without any independence but one was always favoured over the other.



The Clear Distinction between Kaṇṇaki and Mādavi

Source: <https://vocal.media/history/silappatikaram-unraveling-the-epic-tale-of-kannagi>

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10. Ibid, p. 94
11. Ibid, p. 94
12. According to V.R.R. Dikshitar, tāli was the earlier Tamil version of the North Indian māṅgalyasūtram.

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14. Ibid, p. 97
15. Ibid, pp. 104-105
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