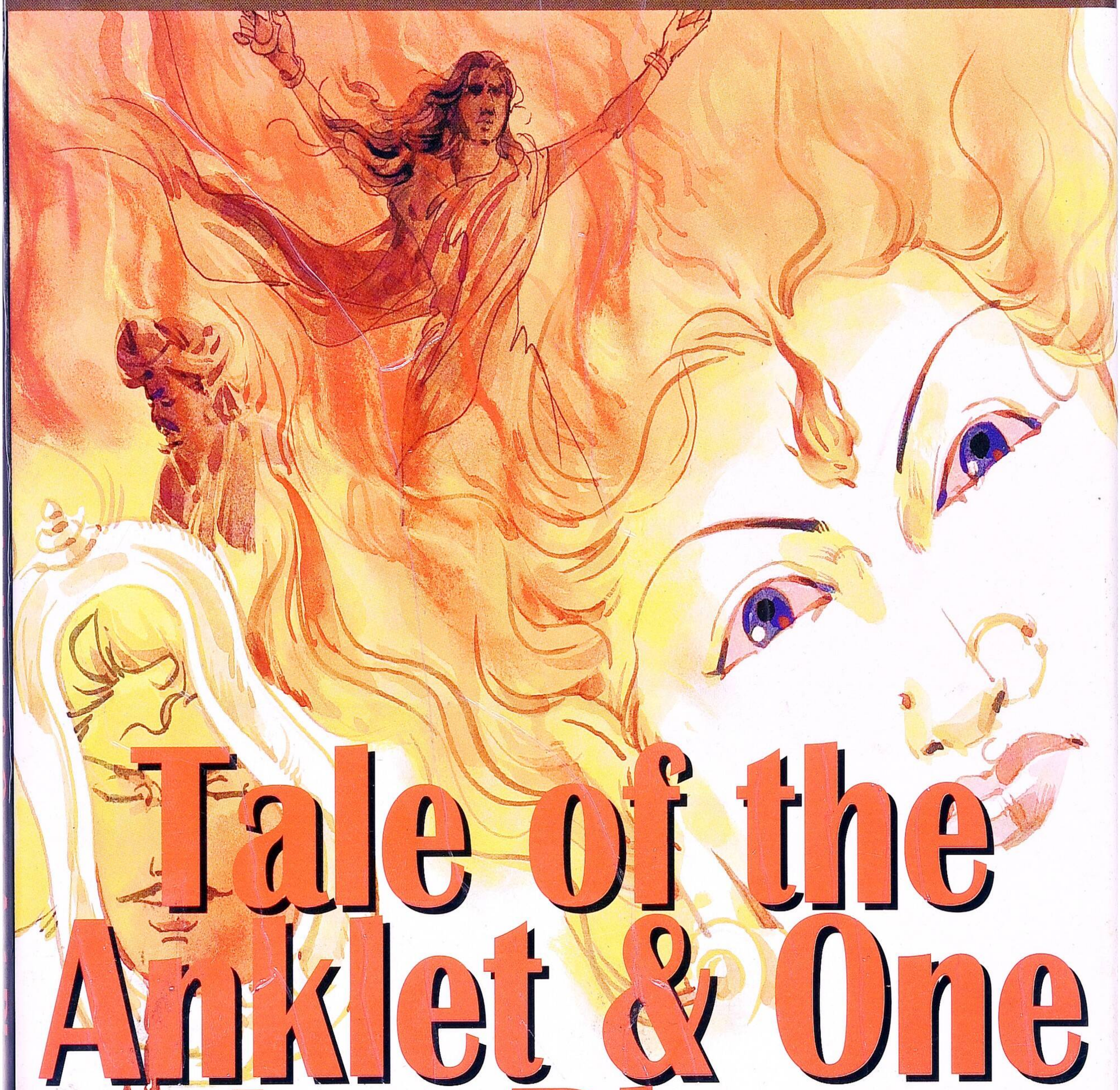
Kalaignar in English Translation



Tale of the Anklet & One Act Plays

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BHARATHIAR UNIVERSITY

Silappathikaram has got a theme of great interest and its appeal is not confined to Tamilagam alone. It is a classic of such high order that it has the right to be acclaimed by the world of letters as a whole…

Of the five Tamil classics, Silappathikaram is a gem of rare brilliance that can establish the eminence that Tamil literature held in the past.

It is most appropriate that Thambi Karunanidhi should give us *Silappathikaram* in his own inimitable diction and under the caption *"Poompuhar"* for his command over the Tamil language and his mastery over the art of portrayal, so well-known and so well-appreciated, gives him fit enough right to render *Silappathikaram* in the dramatic form – keeping the high standard of diction intact, and at the same time embellishing it with certain interpretations of events so as to offer logical explanations to some of the events that appear to us as being inexplicable, nay even unwanted ….

Karunanidhi has done a fine service to Tamil literature by bringing forth Poompuhar ….

Throughout, Karunanidhi has kept the easy flow, the elegance and the fragrance so essential for a classic…. The gold of Ilango is there and the workmanship of this writer of eminence is to be found in abundance.

– Arignar Anna

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Dr Kalaignar M. Karunanidhi

Kalaignar in English Translation

Tale of the Anklet and One Act Plays

Translated by

T. G. Narayanaswamy
M. D. Jayabalan

Edited by

P. Marudanayagam
V. Murugan

8830

Bharathiar University
Coimbatore, India

MACMILLAN

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M. Karunanidhi
Chief Minister

Secretariat
Chennai – 600 009
Date: 12.05.2009

Foreword

I am extremely happy to know that Bharathiar University, Coimbatore, has taken the initiative to bring out a selection of my writings in English.

Bharatidasan, a formidable revolutionary poet, instilled in the Tamils an intense love for Tamil in such exhortations as

May you thunder, O Conch!
That the never diminishing Tamil
Is our life-breath and our prosperity.

Periyar E.V. Ramasamy and Perarignar Anna devoted their entire lives to promote among the Tamils an awareness of the dignity of their race. Following in their footsteps, from my childhood to this day I have immersed myself in the task of writing in order to keep the Tamil youth ever vigilant because of my desire that the Tamil land and the Tamil society should progress rising to the level of the rest of mankind. With this end in view, my writings have taken numerous forms such as poetry, drama, fiction, essay, epistle and travelogue.

Many have admiringly observed and continue to observe that my literary output has also contributed to the onward march of the Tamils in several spheres. In such a context, let me unreservedly and to my heart's content praise Bharathiar University, especially its Vice Chancellor, Dr G. Thiruvasagam, for his efforts to publish the most significant of those writings in English.

My thoughts have always centred round the idea that the Tamils should awaken and that the Tamil land should achieve worldwide progress. May these translations effectively serve that cause dear to my heart!

To
Dr G. Thiruvasagam
Vice Chancellor
Bharathiar University
Coimbatore

அன்புடன்

(M. Karunanidhi)

Vice Chancellor's Note

There is a close parallel between the nationalist Tamil poet Subramania Bharathi (after whom this University is named) and Kalaignar M. Karunanidhi in that both of them have a deep-rooted conviction in art being an agent of social transformation and the writings of both seek to release people from the shackles of slavery and show them the way of dignity and self-respect.

Bharathiar firmly believed that at the root of all social problems lay the evil of the caste system. All his life, he stressed that there were only two castes – the righteous and the unrighteous, the former superior and the latter inferior. A standing example of the might of the pen over the sword, Bharathiar's writings played a very significant role not only in gaining freedom for India from foreign yoke but also in unfettering his countrymen from the utterly dehumanizing beliefs and practices of the Indian society.

Kalaignar, remaining in the forefront of the fight against social inequality in all its forms, is a writer with ingrained social consciousness and has fathered numerous social reforms as the head of the government and as the leader of a political party, thanks to which people from the sections of the society once looked down as being incapable of thought and knowledge are today intellectuals, professionals and leaders of men.

A grand fusion of Periyar, Anna and Bharathiar, Kalaignar stands as a towering personality. Kalaignar now at 86, age has not withered his intellect nor has time made his writings stale.

Determined to secure a presence for Tamil literature and culture on the global scene, this University has already translated Bharathi's poems into English and conferred the"Bharathi Tamil Chemmal"award on Kalaignar in 2007, the University's Silver Jubilee year. The present endeavour, translation of Kalaignar's works into English, is a major step towards realizing this goal.

G. Thiruvasagam

Prologue

Kalaignar M. Karunanidhi's literary works in English translation should constitute a gift of the Tamil language to world literature.

In so far as Kalaignar is both a visionary writer and an active practitioner of his vision, he is a phenomenon unto himself, standing a rung or two above his fellow artists of all genres.

Kalaignar's significance in the history of Tamil literature primarily lies in his restoration and renewal of the pristine glory of Tamil, the language that is the mother of the Dravidian family of languages and that is one of the primary classical languages of the world.

Kalaignar's creativity began to manifest in his concern for the ethnic identity of the Tamils and the aesthetic exuberance of the Tamil language, and today it has matured into a seminal contribution to world literature.

Looked at the need for winning international recognition for Tamil literature, especially in the context of the other pan-Indian language, Sanskrit, enjoying worldwide attention and study, the present translations of Kalaignar's selected works into English are an attempt in the right direction.

Such of these translations are also a need of the hour for the Tamil language to demonstrate its capacity for indestructibility and rejuvenation, at this hour of the prognosticatory threat of the social scientists that globalization would in its wake see the languages of ethnic communities either wear off or die out.

Kavipperarasu Vairamuthu

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Introduction

Kalaignar M. Karunanidhi, born in 1924 in a hamlet of Thanjavur in the southern part of India, has eminently succeeded in making spectacular contributions both as a statesman and as a man of letters. His has been a full life providing ample space for diplomacy, social reformation and creative writing. Neither a philosopher nor a full-fledged academic living in an ivory tower, he has the courage and the wisdom to think and to act remarkably. A prolific writer endowed with unusual powers of observation and meditation, he has been ceaselessly adorning his beloved Mother Tamil with a steady stream of writings, leaving no genre untouched. It may be poetry or prose, song or verse, essay or story, play or fiction, social novel or historical novel, creative writing or criticism, memoir or autobiography, script for a film or a play, broadcast or speech – he can handle it with astonishing ease. What he has written till today may run to more than fifty volumes of 300 to 400 pages each.

What Karunanidhi states in the first volume of his autobiography about the year in which he was born is a telling comment on the ethos of the times as well as on the political, social and cultural forces that moulded his world-view. That was a year that witnessed momentous events. Lenin, the supreme architect of the communist revolution in Russia, died and Stalin came to power. Trotsky's advocacy of violent worldwide revolution was abandoned in favour of Stalin's plan for *"socialism in one country"* and the communist leaders decided to adapt the movement to the differing situations in various countries. Turkey became a republic under the presidentship of Kemal Ataturk during whose fifteen-year reign, the country's political and economic structure as well as its religious and social bases was totally transformed. Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, written during his incarceration in Bavaria, preaching anti-semitism, power worship and disdain for morality and outlining his strategy for world domination later became the bible of

the Nazi party. Since all the empires had been weakened by the first world war, many colonies boldly rose in revolt against them.

When Nazism, Fascism and Communism were becoming prominent in the West, Gandhian ideology started taking shape in India. It was in 1924 that Gandhiji, released from prison, became the President of the Indian National Congress and Jawaharlal Nehru was elected its General Secretary. India had awakened from its deep slumber and Gandhiji's appearance on the political scene electrified the Indian masses. The Belgaum Congress meet had the party's future course of action mapped out. Though most of the Indian political leaders were unanimous in their view that the British should be driven away from the country, they were hopelessly divided with regard to the strategies to be developed for dealing with the foreign power. The labour unions in the country were gradually becoming stronger and stronger. The feudal lords and zamindars were waging a losing battle against the tillers of the soil. If in the south seeds were sown for organized fights for social justice, in the north there appeared signs of disruption of communal harmony.

It was in 1924 that Periyar E.V. Ramasami planned an epic battle against the evil of untouchability that later earned him the title of Vaikkam Hero. Besides laying a firm foundation for the labour movement in Tamilnadu, Thiru. Vi. Kalyanasundara Mudaliyar became a fierce fighter for the country's freedom. Finally, Karunanidhi significantly adds that it was the year in which "the revolutionary of revolutionaries, who dispelled the thousand-year-old darkness of the Tamil land," Arignar Anna, was a high school student equipping himself for the historic role he was going to play.

In this chronicle he is able to identify, of course with the benefit of hindsight, the intellectuals and men of action who later became his models as well as those against whom he had to define himself. Though all those personalities, movements, parties and ideologies might have attracted his attention at an impressionable age, he was going to choose Periyar and not Gandhiji, Arignar Anna and not Jawaharlal Nehru, the party wedded to Dravidian ideals and not the Congress, Periyar's Marxism and not Nehruvian socialism, and Tamilnadu and not India. To him, as to his guides and companions in the Dravidian Movement, the social and cultural emancipation of the Dravidians was of greater importance than even the political freedom of the country.

Even as a fourteen-year-old adolescent, Karunanidhi was captivated by the self-respect movement of Periyar E.V. Ramasami, whose fiery speeches and writings exerted an irresistible influence on several thousands of young men and women of Tamilnadu during the early decades of the twentieth century. To the politically,

socially, economically and culturally oppressed of the Tamil land, Periyar appeared as a new messiah who could save them from the atrocities perpetrated against them in the name of religion. His words and deeds, ideas and activities, principles and practices took the southern part of India by storm as he travelled the length and breadth of it tirelessly, asking the Dravidians to become aware of their racial identity and to boldly fight for their release from the shackles of slavery, superstition and inferiority complex which, in his view, had been the handiwork of an alien race. The young Karunanidhi was one of his prize catches.

If Periyar's thoughts made an indelible impression on him, Arignar Anna's powerful oratory became a perennial source of inspiration. He thoroughly soaked himself in Anna's speeches and writings, committed numerous admirable utterances of his to memory and revelled in quoting them as often as possible. When it came to his own speeches, he didn't slavishly imitate Anna but scrupulously developed a distinct style of his own. If Anna's ornate and colourful prose is almost verse and if every paragraph of his can be turned into a *viruttappā* by a few slight modifications, Karunanidhi's prose is punchy, heavily ironic and full of witticisms. If every sentence in the former's speech, having a lyrical charm of its own, is a case of "linked sweetness long drawn out," every sentence in the latter's speech moves fast and quickly reaches its carefully planned climax. If Anna's mastery of Tamil prose is almost unsurpassed, every speech of Karunanidhi is a sparkling performance. One would be reminded of the comparison Dryden draws between Demosthenes and Cicero:

> One warms you by degrees; the other sets you on
> fire all at once and never intermits his heat. …
> One persuades, the other commands.

Of all the modern poets, it was Bharatidasan, the organ voice of the Dravidian movement, who won his heart by a poetry that galvanized the Tamils into action. He can use Bharatidasan's similes, phrases, lines and whole poems to dramatic effect in his own speeches and dialogues for films. Inspired by Bharatidasan's play *Iraṇiyaṉ allatu Iṇaiyaṟṟa Vīraṉ*, he reconstructed the myths relating to Ravana, Vali, Hiranya and Indrajit. The Dravidian stance on many more legends, myths, literary representations and historical personages was later exquisitely articulated by Karunanidhi in different genres and modes.

Kalaignar's lack of college education or of classroom learning of ancient Tamil writings never stood in the way of his becoming an accomplished writer and competing with the university wits of his time. Energetic and strenuous self-schooling more than made up for it. Plunging into studies of classical and modern Tamil works, he got as much out of them as any contemporary Tamil scholar

could. He took to *Tolkāppiyam, Tirukkuṟaḷ, Eṭṭuttokai, Pattuppāṭṭu, Cilappatikāram, Maṇimēkalai, Kaliṅkattupparaṇi* and Sundaraṉār's *Maṉōṉmaṇiyam* just as fish take to water, and a sound knowledge of these stood him in good stead by shaping his vision of life and having quite an impact on the texture of his prose and poetry. Besides writing learned expositions of some of these texts, he could provide new renderings of many of these into lucid modern Tamil so that they could easily reach the masses. Because of his re-presentations of *Tirukkuṟaḷ* in more than one form, Tiruvalluvar became a household name in Tamilnadu.

There is no simple yardstick with which the performance of any writer can be assessed. It has to vary from group to group if not from individual to individual for there are writers and writers. Their missions vary; their methods differ. Gandhiji was a prolific writer but would never claim the title of an artist. Among those that have produced many works of lasting value, there have been political revolutionaries such as Lenin, Trotsky and Mao Tse-Tung, political theorists such as Hobbes, Thomas Paine and Karl Marx, statesmen such as Abraham Lincoln, Winston Churchill and Malraux, philosophers such as Voltaire, Bertrand Russell and Sartre, activists such as Mahatma Gandhi, Periyar E.V. Ramasami and Martin Luther King and scientists such as Charles Darwin, Julian Huxley and Einstein. The writings of these can't be measured against those of creative artists such as Flaubert, Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, who firmly believed that artistry was of primary importance and that their loyalty to language came before everything else.

Karunanidhi is almost equally split between his responsibilities to art and politics. He may be in or out of power; he may be the Chief Minister of Tamilnadu or the Leader of the Opposition but his creative vigour shows no signs of abating. The older he grows, the more voluminous the literary output happens to be. For the life, career and achievement of Karunanidhi, we can find three amazingly close parallels in contemporary world histoy: Arthur Koestler, Pablo Neruda and Wole Soyinka. Koestler, who, interestingly begins his autobiography with an account of what happened in different parts of the world on his birthday, was a communist when he was in his twenties, left the party during the Stalin purge trials, became an influential spokesman of the non-communist left and is now remembered for his writings characterized by an impressive journalistic style and a sense of commitment. Neruda earned a name as a poet, diplomat and communist leader, received the Nobel Prize for literature while serving as ambassador to France and is known for his highly personal poetry in the collection *Twenty Love Poems and One Song of Despair* and for his writings that glorify his home country's landscape and condemn the exploitation of the Red Indians. Soyinka, a Nigerian

revolutionary, playwright, poet and novelist, has won international acclaim for his writings which combine Western and Yoruba traditions.

Karunanidhi's writings, dashed off in the white heat of inspiration in the midst of a hectic schedule, are in Tamil, at once a classical and modern language that has, because of several centuries of constant use, become a supple medium of prose and verse. They have to be made available in English if the world at large, especially the West, has to recognize their power and glory.

Prof. P. Marudanayagam

I

Tale of the Anklet

Foreword

Silappathikaram! The very name is scintillating – there is rhythm and melody in it, and just as 'the *silambu* – the anklet' contained gems of rare value, the Epic contains not a mere story but the very spirit of ancient Tamilagam!

The story itself is of a high order – it portrays two types of womanhood – *Kannagi* and *Madhavi*, the former bearing troubles and tribulations – tears and sighs due to separation from her husband, *Kovalan;* the latter, a cultured damsel of dazzling beauty and delightful temperament, well versed in the art of love, pure and noble – not a mercenary nor an embodiment of seduction and coquetry, but one who twinned herself with *Kovalan*, with warmth and depth, and gave unto him her very soul.

Kovalan too is not of the usual type – the frivolous youth with tons of gold to squander – but a respectable young man, with an honoured place in society and hailing from a family of merchant-magnate.

Romance of the sweetest order – between Kovalan and Madhavi – their music and dance, unfolded in this classic does not bring before us the life of a depraved young man and a despicable damsel, but the life of two lovers – we find not the crocodile catching its prey, but the swan of the purest white, gliding in the rivulet with melodious movement.

It is not the story about the coquetry of a courtesan but the story of an abandonment of self – there is such a perfect reciprocity as between the two, that though reminded of the tear-laden eyes of Kannagi, the episode does not kindle feelings of nausea or irritation. What has happened, one is led to think, is something to be regretted but along with that we are led also to exclaim, what a perfect combination! What a superb romance!

The very portrayal of such characters, unless it comes from a master-hand, is bound to create feelings of disgust – but no, *Ilango*, the poet-prince of Chera Nadu

handles the theme in so superb a manner that we, along with Kannagi, bear with patience and with no malice Kovalan's sojourn into the 'not-strictly' correct path.

The Romantic aspect leads us on to the side of poignancy and pathos. While Kovalan and Madhavi are entwined in the fragrance of the new-found love, we find Kannagi strong enough to bear the pangs – not indifferent to what has happened to her – yet strong enough to bear the bleeding of her heart.

With what bright hopes this damsel of no mean beauty began her wedded life with Kovalan!

> Gold with no blemish
> Fragrance of the highest order
> Pearl of the noblest type…

In such a vein does Kovalan pour forth his love towards Kannagi – and yet, leaves her to pine for that love, while he enters into the mansion of music and dance.

No lover of the Tamil classics can resist being inspired by *Silappathikaram*, one amongst the five fine classics of Tamil literature. Ilango's magic touch makes every portion of this engrossing epic so true to nature that when one is reading *Silappathikaram*, one is taken to ancient Tamilagam, with all the pageantry alive, Nature's beauty laid before us, a veritable panorama of events and a parade of different types – and all pulsating with life – with brilliance all around.

It is most appropriate that *Thambi* Karunanidhi should give us *Silappathikaram* in his own inimitable diction and under the caption *"Poompuhar"* for his command over the Tamil language and his mastery over the art of portrayal, so well-known and so well-appreciated, gives him fit enough right to render *Silappathikaram* in the dramatic form – keeping the high standard of diction intact, and at the same time embellish it with certain interpretations of events so as to offer logical explanations to some of the events that appear to us as being inexplicable, nay even unwanted.

The part assigned to the Greek merchant as having been instrumental for the episode that took Kovalan to Madhavi's mansion offers an appropriate explanation to Kovalan's action. He did not allow himself to be enticed nor did he seek pleasure and frolic; he had to defend the fair name of Tamilnad and the fairest damsel from falling to the grip of an old man from Greece.

> Why don't you meet Madhavi once, my Lord! And convince
> her that she is yearning for the impossible?

It is this plea from Kannagi that takes an otherwise unwilling Kovalan to Madhavi's abode – not the flame of sensuality kindled by Madhavi's seductive beauty. He saw in her art in its finest form, nothing more. And circumstances not of

his creation lead him to her abode – he goes to advise and remains to become a co-partner in a new life of sweet melody.

Another and a far more important interpretation to an event to be found in *Silappathikaram* is given in an able manner by M. Karunanidhi.

It is well-known that *Silappathikaram* depicts the chief goldsmith of the palace as the real offender and from that has sprung forth an impression which has affected the very self-respect of an entire community.

Though none can charge Ilango with that motive, the consequence of that has been that the entire community was forced to bear odium.

This odium Karunanidhi has deftly removed, for as a firm believer in the maintenance of concord between various communities, he wanted to erase this blot. And this is done in his *Poompuhar* in an admirable way.

Not the goldsmith, but a petty officer of the royal household of Pandyan Nedunchezhian is presented as the real culprit. This is done to maintain social justice and such an interpretation to ancient episodes becomes quite justifiable and necessary – and it is done with the best of motives. And this has been admired and appreciated by not only the members of that maligned community but also authors who render ancient classics in modern form.

Apart from such deft handling, the entire rendering of the Epic, in prose form, is done in such an admirable way that neither the fragrance nor the form found in *Silappathikaram* is lost – in fact the melody is there as sweet as Ilango gave it.

While the first part of *Silappathikaram* contains the life-story of a young man and a fair courtesan, the later part rises to a height that is breathtaking. Events march on with rapidity and dramatic turns. He who became immersed in Madhavi's beauty finds himself estranged! What was once an abode of superb delight becomes a place to be shunned. He returns – disillusioned – impoverished – conscious of the injustice meted out to his Kannagi – with remorse and regrets, with only one aim in life, to begin the conjugal life that was cut asunder, to lead a new life – with none other than Kannagi to claim him! Tears of joy and hope come gushing forth during the scene depicted about Kovalan rejoining Kannagi. She did not wait in vain, here comes her Kovalan, back to life, back home – once again this home will become bright and happy, once again the delightful embrace and the sweet smile, home that has lost its brightness and has been engulfed in darkness and desolation is to become bright again – here comes Kovalan to light once more the lamp of love. Tears no more Kannagi! No more the pang! Smile! Laugh! Dance with delight! He whom you had lost, you have regained! No more need you be single and solitary, here comes Kovalan! – it is with such warmth and hope, almost glee that we welcome the home-coming of Kovalan. And yet…!

The poet of the highest order, Ilango takes us and them not to a new life and happiness regained, but to a scene, that brings forth tears of blood.

Karunanidhi rises to great heights while portraying the pathos of Kannagi, when she is confronted with Kovalan beheaded! What woman can bear the death of her husband! What woman can bear insult done to her husband! Here lies Kovalan, beheaded, falsely accused, hastily judged and savagely disposed of. What can a helpless Kannagi do! It is the Royal King who has been responsible for this. The deed is dastardly, but the author is no ordinary man, the powerful and well-learned Pandyan has ordered this.

Why? How? -- screams forth Kannagi and her fury causes echoes that thrill one and all. She refuses to remain bemoaning the loss! She refuses to allow the blemish to stick on to the fair name of Kovalan. No! Justice should be established, Justice I shall get, thunders forth Kannagi, and dashes onward to the Royal Court to demand Justice.

Kannagi's pleading, her argument, her admonition as depicted by Karunanidhi is thrilling and is so realistic that we are tempted to join her in her anger, curse, accusation and admonition. The volcano erupts, the sea becomes stormy, the wailing widow becomes the supreme law-giver – King thou art not, Oh Pandya! and King thou shall not be! – roars this *'Pathini'* – the whole pent-up fury bursts forth. It is not easy for a writer to depict this faithfully and in fine form. Karunanidhi has succeeded exceedingly well in establishing his claim as a writer of superb style!

Speak my Lord
Speak but a word
Speak to Kannagi
Speak, your Kannagi has come…

With tears flowing, she screams and screams! But then gets no response – he is dead. And then she says,

Thou speakest not
My Lord
But hear this,
Make I shall the
Whole world to speak,
On your behalf….

And Kannagi has made the world speak – not only the world of her day – but the world for all times to come.

Throughout, Karunanidhi has kept up the easy flow, the elegance and the fragrance so essential for a classic.

Karunanidhi's *Poompuhar* rendered into English under the title *Tale of the Anklet* – is itself an anklet – the gold of Ilango is there – and the workmanship of this writer of eminence is to be found in abundance.

Silappathikaram has got a theme of perennial interest – and its appeal is not confined to Tamilagam alone. It is a world subject – a classic of such a high order that it has a right to be acclaimed by the world of letters as a whole. The rendering of *Poompuhar* in English is timely and the author responsible for this deserves our admiration and congratulations. Mr T. G . Narayanaswamy has done full justice to the subject and style to be found in *Poompuhar* of Karunanidhi.

Karunanidhi has done a fine service to Tamil literature by bringing forth *Poompuhar*, and the English rendering has made it possible for a wider domain than Tamilagam to get the thrill and message that Ilango Adigal offers through *Silappathikaram*.

If we have any one thing to offer to the wide world as proof positive of the eminence we once held, it is the Tamil Classics, and of the Five Fine Classics, *Silappathikaram* is a gem of rare brilliance. And this English rendering fulfils a long-felt need and I have great pleasure in welcoming this English version of *Poompuhar*. Let the fragrance of *Poompuhar*, the 'City of Flowers' spread far and wide, and let the world realize the 'glory that was Tamilagam'. Long live Tamil! Long live Tamilagam!

Madras
9 January '68

C. N. Annadurai
Chief Minister
Government of Tamilnad

Preface

Poompuhar! We have listened to the song of the waves on many a shore but the poignant tune of the waves that roll in the sea off Kaverippoompattinam of the present takes us to a world far, far away from the world of today. And what we are transported to is the world of Tamil literature, of nostalgic antiquity, drenched in nectar perennially sweet.

The beauteous city of Poompuhar was on the banks of the Cauveri where the river meets and merges with the billowing sea. The city with its three sectors, namely Pattinappakkam, Maruvoorppakkam and Nalangadi – where the landmarks were the Grand Arch which the King of Avanti had constructed as a gift to Karikal Chola, the Auditorium of Pearls which was a present from the Monarch of Vajra and the Pavilion which was a tribute from the Ruler of Magadha - is today under the sea. But the renown of the city reigns supreme even now and all the oceans of the world cannot draw a veil over it.

As long as the Chera Prince-Poet Ilango's epic *Silappathikaram* is on record, the fame of Poompuhar, the greatness of Mathurai, the valour of Vanchi and, in short, the glory of Tamilagam shall remain undimmed.

The characters delineated by the royal ascetic Ilango Adigal – Kovalan and Kannagi and Madhavi of dulcet speech, Nedunchezhian the Pandya king who sacrificed his life at the altar of justice and Senguttuvan the Chera monarch who led an expedition to the North in order to hew rock from the Himalayas for the Statue of Kannagi – send a message in unison to us, that singing the praise of the Tamil people is a noble exercise that has no point of satiation. And this play based on Ilango's Epic is the outcome of that emotion and enthusiasm.

As a member of the vast ranks, ever vigilant in the cause of Tamil and the Tamil people, I have been impelled to this effort by my affection and love for the

language of everlasting fragrance and eternal grandeur. Active service to Tamil is the first and foremost of my duties and this attempt is but a step in that direction.

The Tamils have a long and venerable history and their writ had run even in far-off lands, across the high seas. Many foreign countries had established diplomatic relations with the land of the Tamils. *Silappathikaram* is not only a story of eddying emotions; it is also an elaborate history of Tamilagam.

Poompuhar, the birthplace of the characters of *Silappathikaram*—Kannagi and Madhavi and Kovalan – was a harbour-city handling export and import on a large scale, as has been recorded in detail in *Pattinappalai*: "Steeds from across the seas and loads of pepper delivered by barges from inland: gems and gold from the northern hills, sandalwood and *akhil* from the western ghats, pearls brought from the southern sea and coral from the eastern sea; goods from the plains of the Ganga and produce from the banks of the Cauveri itself – a resplendent sight, the scene of active prosperity here…." Karikaalan was a Chola monarch of great renown who ruled from this Capital and his period has been estimated to be from 60 B.C. to 10 B.C.

King Karikaalan has also been referred to as the "great Chola who attained rest in Kurapalli". This description has evidently arisen on account of the place of his demise which was 'Tiruvidaikazhi', otherwise known as 'Kurapalli'. In a poem praising Karikaalan, Kaarikkannanaar of Kavirippoompattinam has also mentioned the name of the Pandya king Peruvazhuthi who was described after his death, as 'Peruvazhuthi who attained rest in Velliyambalam'. Kaarikkannanaar's poem has been included under the serial number 58 in *Puranaanooru* and its gist is as follows: "You are the monarch of Woriur which is the abode of virtue; and he wields his sceptre from Mathurai where Tamil flourishes. You are the Lord of the Cauveri; and he is of the Pandyan stock with a proud record in battle-valour, and among the natural assets of his kingdom are sandalwood of the Pothigai hills and pearls from the sea. Together, you two are as awe-inspiring as a pair of great gods. May your friendship flourish! May your spear dominate the field of battle! May you two march in splendour and engrave your respective emblems, the tiger and the fish, on the hills of other climes!".

From this poem of Kaarikkannanaar it may be inferred that Karikaal Chola and Pandyan Peruvazhuthi were contemporaries. As we have already seen, Karikaalan's period was from 60 B.C. to 10 B.C. It was during this time that Augustus Caesar ruled in Rome, (i.e.) from 39 B.C. to A.D. 14. It is clear that the Tamil king who sent envoys to the court of Augustus Caesar was Pandyan Peruvazhuthi. Trade relations had been established between Rome and Tamilagam a long time before, but the ties became closer only after Karikaalan and

Peruvazhuthi were crowned. The friendship between Rome and Tamilagam flourished steadily thereafter and it can be said that decline set in only after the period of King Nero of Rome. Archaeology has yielded impressive material testifying to the friendly relations between Rome and Tamilagam.

The Greeks and the Romans were called 'Yavanas' here, and quite a few of them were in employment in Tamilnad as palace-guards. Tamil literature contains ample references to this fact. Mention is made in *Silappathikaram* of ' the Yavanas with swords fierce in battle, making excellent guards.'

Nakkiranaar who has contributed verse numbered 56 in *Purananooru* refers to the excellent liquor offered by Yavanas; which shows that the foreigners used to bring liquor from their countries and sell it here in Tamilagam.

Pepper formed the main item of export from Tamilagam to Rome. It is said that when Rome was subjugated once, it was ordered to pay 3000 pounds of Tamilnad pepper to the conqueror.

In a place called Colachal, south of Musiri, convicts sentenced to death were made to dive for pearls, for export to Rome.

In the records of Ptolemy, there are references to two ports of Tamilnad which could be taken as Kavirippoompattinam and Pudhuvai (Pondicherry). Pearls and conches of Korkai in Pandya land were of course world famous. That the pearls from Korkai were matchless is seen from the lines in *Ahananooru*: " Pearls of Korkai guarded by the virtue of the valorous Pandyas. . ."

Apart from pearls, Korkai exported fine cloth, of cotton and silk, to Rome and other places; and it imported horses, varieties of liquor and glassware. The harbour was always buzzing with activity.

Literature of the Sangam age contains proud references to the active Musiri port where Yavanas arrived in ships laden with gold and returned with a cargo of pepper.

It has also been recorded in Tamil literature that merchants and sailors from many countries used to arrive at the port of Puhar and that there was great friendship not only among them but also between them and the local people. And that way, Puhar can certainly be said to have nurtured fraternity among peoples of different lands.

Such was the prominence in maritime trade and the historical greatness of Poompuhar. It was against this backdrop that Ilango placed the theme of his monumental epic that had in it sufficient material of invaluable importance to posterity. The way of life of the ancient Tamils, their culture, civilisation and political organisation and their love of and proficiency in Arts – all these have been

delineated in a masterly manner in *Silappathikaram*, the great author of which deserves to be remembered with gratitude by historians too.

The story of *Silappathikaram* has formed the basis for very many new stories in Tamilnad. A spate of stage-plays too cropped up on the subject, totally discarding the literary finesse, artistic splendour, historical background and the nobility of the characters of the original. In the process, Kannagi became ' Karnagi', Kovalan turned into 'Kovilan ' and Madhavi was transformed into 'Madhagi', to be sinned against in that name! And all this caused unbearable anguish to those who had studied *Silappathikaram*.

I am one of those who feel that it is no fault to effect a few changes in the presentation of the story, if such changes lend strength to the fundamentals enunciated by the author of the Epic. Likewise, it is no fault to portray the characters with added details, as long as such a portrayal does no violence to the nature of the characters.

Also, it would not be inappropriate or improper if a few alterations are made, in tune with the spirit of the times, without, of course, deflecting the purpose of the story. It would be equally proper if certain ideas are emphasised that might have been left out by the author, and certain reasons listed which the author might not have felt the need to record, in his time; that these insertions do not overflow the boundaries of the theme of the original should be the sole criterion.

With these objects in view, I have made bold to put through certain alterations while writing this play of Ilango's Epic. I am listing a few instances:

- In the Epic, Madhavi gives a garland to the hunchbacked lady and asks her to hawk it in the street, the idea being that she (Madhavi) would marry whoever can afford to purchase the garland. Such an indiscriminate choice of a bridegroom does not appear to do justice to a sensitive damsel like Madhavi who later merges her personality so thoroughly with that of Kovalan, a handsome young man and a connoisseur of arts. So I have gone with Ilango, only up to the point where the condition is stipulated for eligibility to woo Madhavi. Thereafter, I have deviated from the original, and added a sequence involving an old Greek. And incidentally I could also point out the links between Tamilnad and Greece, of those times.
- The version in *Silappathikaram* is that, on buying the garland, Kovalan went straightaway to Madhavi's house. It certainly does not seem logical to convey that the affection which Kovalan had for Kannagi evaporated all of a sudden. I could not find it in my heart to come out with an affirmative answer to the question as to whether Kovalan who had described his adoring wife so spontaneously as "the gem which the earth could not have

yielded and the melody which no harp could compose" would have forgotten her in a trice. The logic of the situation led me to effect certain alterations so that Kovalan's abiding love for his wife and her inherent nobility might be highlighted.

- Madhavi's insistence that Kovalan should visit his wife and Kovalan's acceptance of her advice are additions in detail, intended to assist Ilango to draw the attention of readers to Madhavi's good heart and the purity of her thoughts.
- Madhavi was not after Kovalan's wealth. And yet Kovalan's riches disintegrate and he is reduced to penury. It is to clear this apparent contradiction that 1 concluded that Madhavi's people must have abstracted Kovalan's wealth by imposing themselves on Kannagi, and without Madhavi herself being aware of their machinations. When she does come to know of their tricks, all she can do is to return the gold to Kovalan's parents and again this gesture underlines her nobility.
- I have not made the Goldsmith guilty of the theft of the anklet. This deviation from the Epic is to bring the story into pace with the times; and the change does not interfere with what follows the theft of the anklet.
- Pandya king Nedunchezhian's literary contribution, in the form of a poem on learning, included in *Purananooru,* does not find mention in *Silappathikaram*. I have supplied the omission.
- The dramatic element in the seaside scene in which Kovalan parts from Madhavi is only an elaboration around the nucleus in the original.
- It is hard to sell anklets or ear-rings except in a pair. Kovalan could not have been ignorant of this and if he had actually taken both of the anklets for sale, there would have been no grounds for anyone to suspect him and the story of course would not have had a climax and Kannagi would not have become a militant heroine. The entire tragedy hinges on Kovalan taking only one of the anklets for sale. I have provided a rational explanation for his act and I do feel that it does add strength to the sequences as developed in the Epic.

These changes and alterations have also helped to a great extent in evolving this play from llango's *Silappathikaram*.

In the course of the play, I have also included adaptations of two popular legends from the West, one related to illustrating Sir Walter Raleigh's chivalry and the other in proof of King Solomon's wisdom. Legends such as these are universal in appeal, as may be seen from the fact that versions of them are there, in many languages.

My thanks are due to Mr T. G. Narayanaswamy who has rendered the play into English, to the management of the B. N. K. Press Private Ltd. who have printed the book, to the artists Amudhone and Vijaya, to Mr R. Nagaswamy, Director of Archaeology, Government of Tamilnad, who has helped with the photographs in the book and to my close friend and comrade-in-literary-studies Mr Anandam who, assisted by K. Gopalaswamy and G. Dhinakaran, has organised the publication of this work.

I shall ever be beholden to my revered leader Anna, Chief Minister of Tamilnad, who has so graciously consented to contribute the 'Foreword' to this book.

Madras
9 January '68

M. Karunanidhi

Text of the Play

1 Vanchi Prepares for Festival

A broad street in Vanchi, the capital of the Chera kingdom. A royal messenger on elephant-back beats a drum to draw the attention of citizens. The elephant is awe-inspiring in grandeur and the silk draped over its sides carries the imprint of a bow which is the emblem of the Cheras.

The messenger rounds off his drum-beating with a flourish and as the echoes fade, silence descends in a rush, to be slowly replaced by the eager whisperings of the expectant crowd.

Messenger (in strident tones) : Eternal life to Tamil! Victory to Tamilnad! Rejoice, ye citizens, and celebrate in splendour this, the birthday of our valiant prince Senguttuvan, the worthy son of the brave and noble Neduncheraladhan who led an army to the North and engraved our emblem of the bow on the rock of the towering Himalayas. Let the bells ring in gay abandon and let the music of revelry fill the air, as the great people of this vast land send their felicitations to the lion-hearted prince. Long live Senguttuvan,! Long live Cheraland! Eternal life to Tamil! Victory to Tamilnad!

The drum resumes its vigorous music as the elephant moves down the street and the citizens disperse in small groups, chatting happily.

2 Senguttuvan's Birthday

Sanctum in the Chera palace. The youthful prince Senguttuvan is seated in front of a full mirror, dressing. His wife Venmaal assists. Gazing at her adoring face in the mirror, Senguttuvan turns to see the reality of the image and smiles in affection.

Senguttuvan: My dear, you are all set to dress me up and send me to the Royal Court. 1 am just thinking that the day might not be far off, when I would have to change all this finery for battle-dress; and on that occasion too, I shall expect you to bid me leave in the same manner and with the same poise.

Venmaal [*pained a little, but brave nevertheless*]: Certainly, my Lord, for I have trained myself to school my emotions. Scars of battle are but trophies of valour. And the supreme confidence is mine that even if you were to sustain wounds in a war, miracle medication shall ever be there on my eager lips and finger-tips.

Senguttuvan [*moved by her answer, and changing the topic*]: My dear, doesn't it strike you that every year we alone are celebrating our birthdays . . .?

Venmaal [*shy*]: You mean an heir is yet to be born; why don't you ask the court astrologer today as to when we may rock a cradle here?

There is a knock at the door and Senguttuvan's younger brother Ilango enters. He looks more like a poet than a prince and around his head is the halo of learning.

Ilango: What is all this talk about astrologers and predictions? Will people never learn to outgrow such superstitions? . . . Well, it is getting rather late, brother, please come at once or we would keep the court waiting.

Senguttuvan: Oh, don't blame me for the delay. It is your sister-in-law who is still giving the finishing touches to my decoration.

Ilango [*appealing to Venmaal*]: Sister, do please release him quick. 1 will wait outside. [*He turns to go.*]

Senguttuvan: Don't be so very arch, Ilango. You may stay here itself and take me with you. [*Turning to Venmaal*] My dear, do I have your leave to go to the Court with my brother? [*Her eyes convey the message of her lips and responding in like manner, Senguttuvan strides from the chamber, accompanied by Ilango. Submerged in love, Venmaal is a picture of thoughtful beauty and grace.*]

3 Celebration Takes a Turn

Royal Court. King Neduncheraladhan and his queen Narchonai are on the throne. A brisk and intricate folk-dance is in progress in the hall. The dancers carry an artistic bow and arrow each and as Senguttuvan and Ilango enter, the dancers set up a waving arch with their bows. The two princes walk up to the throne, pay obeisance to their royal parents and take their seats on either side of the throne. All the while the dance continues and when it concludes, Neduncheraladhan speaks.

Neduncheraladhan: Beloved courtiers, my heart is brimming with pride and joy as I convey my blessings to Senguttuvan on his birthday. Senguttuvan has the material in him to consolidate the prosperity of our land and expand the frontiers of its renown. My younger son Ilango is his able lieutenant and companion and hence I am doubly proud and happy. On your behalf, on behalf of the Queen and on my own behalf, I wish many happy returns of the day to Senguttuvan and I hereby proclaim that in the very near future he shall ascend the throne and take charge of the sceptre from me.

Courtiers [*applauding*]: Long live Senguttuvan! Long live Senguttuvan!

As the cheers taper off, the astrologer rises with an ominous glint in his eyes.

Astrologer [in a loud voice]: Long live Prince Senguttuvan! And long live Ilango, the future king of our land!

Neduncheraladhan [*puzzled*]: What is the meaning of this, astrologer?

Astrologer: It was not I who spoke, Your Majesty, it was the voice of Destiny. In law and practice, the Crown is inherited by the eldest son, no doubt, but the ways of Providence are inscrutable and Fate is no respecter of customs and traditions. It is decreed that your younger son Ilango and not Senguttuvan shall rule this land .

Pindrop silence in the court.

Neduncheraladhan [*shocked*]: Could it be so?

Courtiers [*in confused whispers*]: How can the younger prince supersede his elder brother? ... Fate, the Astrologer says... What tidings these, to be received on a day of rejoicing!...

For some time, Ilango had been watching his brother's face which loses colour when the import of the prediction sinks deep into his heart.

Ilango [*firm*]: No, no! It is my brother who is born to rule and nothing shall change that position.

Neduncheraladhan [*desperate*]: Who can defy Destiny, Ilango? Our Astrologer's prediction is bound to come true.

Ilango: That might be so for those with ears of superstition but not for me, Sire, since my ears are tuned in to the gospel of truth and truth alone. The forecast is bound to fail and I accept the challenge of the so-called Fate which has got to turn tail when confronted with determined endeavour, as Valluvar has inspired us to believe.

Astrologer [*irked*]: Haven't you read the epics, Ilango? Could anyone alter the decree of Destiny that Rama the eldest brother should go into exile and Bharata rule in his place?

Ilango [*arguing*]: The epic I read says authoritatively that neither Bharata nor Rama ascended the throne but it was the sandal that reigned supreme. [*Sarcastic*] Revered Master-Astrologer, please do not dangle the epics before us in order to prop up a false case. Here and now I swear to create an epic new that shall smash your prediction to smithereens. My brother and brother alone shall rule this land and the miracle that brings this about will not originate from your chart-caged planets but from the effulgent sun of honest intellect.

Bowing to the Throne, Ilango leaves the hall. The Assembly is plunged in bewilderment and the King and the Queen glance at each other, thoroughly mystified by the rapid pace of events.

4 Ilango's Renunciation

Palace of the Chera king. Neduncheraladhan, Narchonai, Senguttuvan and Venmaal are engaged in anxious discussion. Senguttuvan has overcome his disappointment and his face is now clear and bright.

Senguttuvan: Who is Ilango after all? Is he not my younger brother? All you have to do, Sire, is to forget for a moment that I was born, and conduct the coronation of Ilango. Is not that the simplest and the best solution?

Neduncheraladhan: That will not be proper, son.

Senguttuvan: Why quarrel with Providence, father ? Let me not come between Ilango and the throne ordained for him. Let him rule the land; and as Commander-in-Chief I will ever be by his side and be a sword and shield to him.

Ilango's voice is heard, calling "Brother". They all turn in the direction of the voice and Ilango appears, in the robes of a monk.

Senguttuvan [*shocked*]: Ilango, what have you done, my boy?

Ilango: Nothing, brother, except taking to the path of renunciation so that the firstborn in the royal family may fulfil the role he is groomed for. Ilango is no longer a prince; he is a king in his own right in that he owns nothing material and is only an ascetic.

Narchonai [*sobbing*]: Ilango, my son! What quirk of Fate is this, that I should live to see you in this apparel!

Ilango [*smiling sweetly*]: Not fate, mother. Destiny dictated that I should be king but I put it to rout through straightforward strategy.

Senguttuvan [*breaking down*]: I will not allow this sacrifice, Ilango. You who should come in procession in the streets of this capital city ought not to spend your life in the wilderness of austerity. The kingdom is yours, Ilango, take it if you have some consideration for us, your near and dear.

Neduncheraladhan: Unparalleled is the glory of your renunciation, my son, but don't you owe a duty to us, your old parents? Can you find it in your heart to reduce us to agony like this?

Narchonai: My son, my son, do not drive a thousand spears into our hearts.... (*pointing out Venmaal who is steeped in speechless grief*) See the scalding tears of your sister-in-law, the writhing agony of your aged father and the pain you have inflicted on your brother. I gave birth to you, my son, but now the pangs are a thousandfold. Even if you will not obey me, you cannot reject my prayer....

Ilango (*in steeled detachment*): Let no one seek to change the course of the life I have chosen for myself. If we are content to put our faith in Fate, then Tamilnad would soon turn into a dungeon of despair. I am here to defy Fate and I shall do so till my last breath. The magnitude of the very first victory has heartened me in my mission and I beg of all of you to bless me and bid me leave.

Senguttuvan (*alarmed afresh*): Bid you leave! Ilango, where indeed are you going?

Ilango: Don't be afraid; I will not leave Tamilnad. My residence is only the monastery on the outskirts of this city and I shall certainly be seeing you all from time to time.

He takes leave of them and walks away with footsteps firm. They watch him through tears, but he does not look back, even once.

As Ilango the monk descends the steps of the palace, guards stand motionless, like graven images. Citizens of all walks of life have gathered in their thousands in front of the palace-gates and a hush falls on the vast concourse as Ilango moves through and away. The calm expression on his face shows that his inner eyes have spotted the goal and he is determined to reach the destination.

Soon the crowds are left far behind and Ilango is all alone when the Astrologer crosses his path.

Astrologer (surprised): Is it Ilango? What a morbid transformation, Prince!

Ilango: Oh, it only marks the downfall of your deity called Fate. You are best-equipped to be my first convert and so, Master-Astrologer, why don't you follow me?

Astrologer (confused): What, me? To follow you?

Ilango: Yes, that is what I meant. But I find you are not ripe enough. Perhaps 'Destiny' wills otherwise! Farewell, my friend.

He walks onward, leaving the Astrologer dumbfounded.

5 Birth of Anklet's Tale

Mountainous region overlooking the River Periyar. A track winds through the heights and slopes of rugged beauty. Ballads native to the hills are heard and as the music gathers volume a group of tribal folks appears on the scene. The carefree travellers are laden with gift-articles, animate and otherwise, ranging from tiger-cubs to sandalwood. As they reach the bottom of the hill, they meet Ilango and prostrate before him.

Ilango: My blessings to you, friends. You seem to have undertaken a festive journey from the hills to the bank of the River Periyar. May I know the occasion for the travel?

One of the tribesmen: Don't you know, sir? Your brother Senguttuvan and Sathanar the poet are camping on the bank of the river and we are going there to pay our respects to them and present a few articles.

Ilango [*pleased*]: Is that so? Then let me also join you, for it is quite some time since I saw my brother.

The tribesfolk resume their journey

* * *

Bank of the River Periyar. King Senguttuvan, Venmaal and Sathanar are in a relaxed mood as they survey the natural scenery. Over their pavilion is hoisted the Chera flag with the emblem of the bow. Ilango and the tribesfolk arrive and at the sight of his brother, Senguttuvan's eyes light up with joy. He rises and walks a few steps to meet Ilango, with outstretched arms. The brothers embrace each other.

Senguttuvan: Welcome, Ilango!

Ilango: Greetings, brother. [*To Venmaal*] How are you, sister? [*She smiles by way of answering 'quite well'.*] [*To Sathanar*] What a pleasure to meet you, comrade!

Sathanar: The pleasure is mine and also the privilege.

Ilango [*to Senguttuvan*]: Brother, your subjects from the hills have come to greet you.

Senguttuvan: I am indeed glad to see them.

The tribesfolk prostrate before him and offer the gifts they have brought.

Senguttuvan: Thanks, my friends. May you all live long and in prosperity. Now, is there any news of importance in this part of the land?

One of the tribesmen [*he is obviously their chosen spokesman*]: Yes, sir. A lady with unloosed tresses, whose name, we ascertained, was Kannagi, stood as in penance for very many days right under the *vengai* tree yonder. She had lost her husband but her faith was profound that he would return to her. One day she was not to be seen and we know not where she went, sir. Judging from the ardour of her devotion, we are inclined to believe that she succeeded in rejoining her husband; and this we can affirm, that never before have we seen a woman of such divine grace and never before have we seen such a picture of sorrow!

Senguttuvan [*repeating the name to himself as if trying to recollect something*]: Kannagi!

Sathanar: Yes, yes, Kannagi, the Queen of Chastity. Her life is an epic and only Ilango has the art and style to record it for posterity.

Senguttuvan: Ilango will fulfil your desire, Sathanar, and so let us inaugurate the writing straightaway.

Fondling a tiger-cub, Sathanar commences to relate the story. His resonant prose is transformed into rich poetry as it passes through Ilango whose stylus races over the palm-leaves (which were the equivalent of writing paper in those times.) The scene changes to the rhythm of Sathanar's voice and a flag bearing the tiger-emblem of the Cholas flutters high against the backdrop of the blue sky with cumulus clouds.

Sathanar: Poompuhar, the City Beautiful on the banks of the River Cauveri where it meets and merges with the billowing sea. It is the capital city of the Chola kingdom...

6 Beauteous Pride of Poompuhar

Poompuhar unfolds itself in all its opulence and majesty as Sathanar speaks.

Sathanar: Poompuhar the City Beautiful on the banks of the River Cauveri where it meets and merges with the billowing sea! It is the capital city of the Chola kingdom. The Indra Festival is celebrated there annually in all pomp and pageantry and it is in honour of the memory of an ancestor of the Cholas called Indra. Poompuhar is a city of added attractions during the Festival and foreign tradesmen too join in the celebrations. Fine arts claim pride of place in the agenda; and music and dance programmes are arranged in all the three districts of the city, namely, Pattinappakkam, Maruvoorppakkam and Nalangadi.

Here is the Grand Arch which the King of Avanti constructed as a gift to Karikaal Chola....

This is the Auditorium of Pearls, a present from the Monarch of Vajra...

The Pavilion before us is a tribute from the Ruler of Maghada....

All the streets and homes are decorated today and gaiety is the keynote of all activity. The air is charged with the sweet music of Tamil.

(Song)

Praise unto the sun! Praise unto the sun!
For like the golden wheel of Chola's prowess
The sun too circles the land!
Praise unto the moon! Praise unto the moon
For like the Umbrella of the Lord of the Cauveri,
The moon too showers grace!
Praise unto the cloud! Praise unto the cloud!
For like the compassion of the great King Chola,
The cloud too enriches the land!
Praise unto Puhar! Praise unto Puhar!
For the capital city of the Chola kingdom
Nurtures world peace and prosperity!

Sathanar [*continuing*]: On a mound of white sand on the seashore stands a young woman of ravishing beauty. She is scanning the waves and awaiting the arrival of her beloved from across the high seas. The woman of chiselled features and inherent charm is Kannagi the daughter of Manaykkan, the merchant-prince who is renowned for his philanthropy.

Presently a ship nears the shore and Kannagi's face lights up with joy. The ship is anchored and alighting into small boats, the passengers travel towards the shore. There are Greeks and Romans among them. In one of the boats is a strong young man, with soulful eyes and next to him is an elderly Greek gentleman. The young man is Kovalan, Kannagi's husband. On spotting his boat, Kannagi wades through the shallow waters to reach it quicker.

Greek gentleman [*to Kovalan*]: I wonder who that angel of a girl is! Her courage matches her good looks, for see, how she defies the waves!

Kovalan [*in excitement*]: She is my wife Kannagi.

Greek gentleman: I envy you, my boy. In my motherland Greece, there is not a woman comparable to the divine beauty who is your helpmeet.

Smiling in pride, Kovalan leaps into the sea and swims to meet Kannagi. They embrace each other and even the waves seem to rejoice at their union.

Kovalan [*in emotion*]: Kannagi!

Kannagi [*sulking*]: How long had you conspired, my Lord, to leave me alone and be happy elsewhere?

Kovalan [*caressing her as they walk on the damp sand*]: If agony could be called happiness, I was indeed happy, Kannagi. Remember that the sword of separation is sharp-edged on both sides.

By now the two have reached dry sand. They stand in the steady sea-breeze as Kovalan takes out a small casket from the folds of his dress and gives it to Kannagi.

Kovalan: This is from Greece and it is my special present to you.

Kannagi opens the casket and sees an exquisite piece of carved ivory.

Kannagi [*enraptured*]: Ivory exported from Tamilnad has come to life under the hands of the Greek craftsmen.

Kovalan: Materials from Tamilnad are much in demand there, Kannagi. Peacock feathers are made into the costumes of danseuses in Greece. In Rome and Egypt too, I found that possession of pearls from Tamilnad is considered an index of one's wealth and standing in business circles.

Kannagi: What a rich tribute to our land!

Kovalan: But one thing they have not realised yet—that here in Tamilnad is a treasure which is far more precious than all the ivory and pearls and rubies...

Kannagi [*eager*]: What is there, my Lord, so very precious?

Kovalan [*softly*]: It is my Kannagi whose image is imprinted on my heart. Whenever I am in alien land, 1 think of Tamilnad as the birthplace of Kannagi and every time I chant her name, poetry wells up in me.

Kannagi [*proud and shy*]: My Lord, will you ever leave me again?

Kovalan: Is it ever possible to be away from Tamil?

Kannagi [*keeping up the metaphor*]: In case an alien language intervenes?

Kovalan: It will be swept away. Like light to the eyes and timbre to the harp and like the moon to the skies, shall I be with you for ever and aye.

Kannagi: Not like the moon, my Lord, for it plays truant. Don't you know it is pitch-dark on the night of the new moon?

Kovalan: Kannagi, even if I forget my self I shall not forget your face of perfect beauty and grace which is the acme of the artist's dream. Let us go home now and make up for all the days of separation.

The elderly Greek gentleman walks up to them.

Greek gentleman: Kovalan, I don't blame you for forgetting an old man like me!

Kovalan: Pardon me, sir. [*Introducing him to Kannagi*] Kannagi, he is a prominent merchant from Greece. [*She curtsies*]. The bulk of our exports pass only through his

firm. [*Humorously*] All that is grey is not old, Kannagi, and our friend here has the heart of youth.

Greek gentleman [*in mock anger*]: How dare you call me old, Kovalan? Let me appeal to the comely judge here; tell me, damsel, am I an old man?

Kannagi [*prankish*]: Not at all, *thatha**!

Greek gentleman: That is right, bright girl! Kovalan, what does '*thatha*' mean in your language?

Kovalan: It is the equivalent of Apollo in Greek, sir!

Greek gentleman [*delighted*]: See! She is as wise as she is beautiful!

Kovalan [*explaining*]: Kannagi, he is learning Tamil only from me.

Kannagi: So, he would have by now learnt two of the three sections in the Tamil language, prose and melody.

Greek gentleman: But the theatre art of Tamilnad is still a sealed book to me.

Kannagi [*to Kovalan*]: My Lord, today Madhavi is giving a dance programme in the Hall of Pearls. Why not we take our friend there to witness the performance?

Kovalan agrees and he and Kannagi go home accompanied by the guest.

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*thatha = grandfather

7 Queen of Artistes

Auditorium of Pearls. Madhavi's dance is in progress. The Chola King and his family are in the front rows of the audience. Near the entrance to the dais and down below are seated Madhavi's mother Chitrapathi, her agent, a very old hunchbacked woman, and Madhavi's companion and maid Vasantamalai.

Kovalan, Kannagi and the Greek gentleman enter the hall and take their seats.

Madhavi's artistry keeps the audience spellbound. The Greek visitor, in particular, is overwhelmed.

Greek gentleman: Kovalan, is it a portrait come alive that is dancing there?

Kovalan [*ragging him*]: It must be so, for nothing else could rekindle the embers in your ancient heart. The portrait is Madhavi and 1 myself have known her only through reputation, till this evening.

The programme concludes, to the applause of the audience. Madhavi comes from the dais and bows before the king.

King: My blessings to you, Madhavi. In the field of dancing, you are the foremost in our land. May your genius flourish!

Saying which, he presents her a flower-garland, a baton (as a mark of her supremacy in Fine Arts) and a silk-purse containing 1008 kazhanjus of gold. He then leaves the hall, with his retinue.*

**kazhanju* = a measure of gold by weight

Chitrapathi whispers something in the ears of the hunchbacked old woman. Hunchback takes the garland from Madhavi's hand and goes to the dais.

Hunchback [*to the audience*]: Gentlemen, Chitrapathi's daughter Madhavi provided a feast to your eyes and ears and hearts so far and now we shall move a stage ahead. Here is an opportunity for anyone eligible in your midst to seek her hand. [*Holding up the garland*] He who is able to pay 1008 *kazhanjus* of gold for this flower-garland shall be Madhavi's life-companion.

The magnitude of the price stuns the audience.

Greek gentleman [*rushing towards the dais*]: Here is the gold.

Chitrapathi and the hunchback exchange glances of delight.

Madhavi [*alarmed*]: Vasantamalai!

Vasantamalai [*hurrying close to Madhavi, in a gesture of defence*]: Madhavi!

The Greek gentleman unties a bag and pours out the gold for all to see.

Greek gentleman: This gold I had brought to buy pearls from Tamilnad but now I have got something more valuable. This is not the price of the garland but of Madhavi the queen of my heart. [*To Hunchback*] Here, take the gold and give me the garland.

As Hunchback is about to conclude the transaction, Madhavi grabs the garland from her hand and rushes sobbing to her mother Chitrapathi.

Chitrapathi [*chiding her daughter*]: What is all this, Madhavi? Are you still a child? Give the garland at once.

Vasantamalai [*to Chitrapathi*]: Madam, for the sake of 1008 *kazhanjus* of gold do you want to throw away your daughter on this 108-year-old bidder? [*Pleading*] Listen to me, Madam, and postpone the selection to a more opportune occasion.

Chitrapathi: Hush, Vasantamalai, it shall not be said that Chitrapathi went back on her word. Madhavi belongs to this gentleman and I will not be challenged on this.

Vasantamalai [*wringing her hands and appealing to the audience*]: Is there no one here to come to the rescue of Madhavi? [*Getting no response, she turns to the Greek gentleman himself*] Sir, I appeal to your good sense! Oh, do please save Madhavi!

Greek gentleman [*in mordant wit*]: 1 will, for the rest of her life and mine— I have sufficient riches for the purpose.

Vasantamalai sinks in despair. In the audience Kovalan and Kannagi stand rooted to the spot, not knowing what to do, to help Madhavi.

Chitrapathi [*grim*]: Madhavi, give the garland. Did you not say that you would marry and settle down in life? And now that I have yielded to your whim and arranged the match, why do you want to humiliate me like this?

Madhavi [*in a tear-choked voice*]: I have decided to remain a virgin.

Chitrapathi [*her anger mounting*]: I cannot dance to your tunes all the time. [*Menacingly*] Give the garland or else...

Kannagi [*to Kovalan*]: My Lord, I cannot bear to see Madhavi's plight. Please do something to rescue her from a sentence worse than death.

Madhavi [*losing all hope and falling at the feet of the Greek gentleman*]: Sir, have pity on me!

Greek gentleman [*querulous*]: What is all this drama? A promise was held out in public that whoever pays 1008 *kazhanjus* of gold for the garland could claim Madhavi and now there seems to be a conspiracy to back out of the deal.

Kovalan strides towards the dais.

Kovalan [*firmly, to Greek gentleman*]: Enough of this. You will get neither the garland nor Madhavi. Collect your gold and come out please.

Greek gentleman: Kovalan, so you are also in the conspiracy. Wonderful are the standards of justice in Tamilnad!

Kovalan [*pricked*]: It is not considered proper in Tamilnad that an old man should yearn for a young bride.

Greek gentleman [*not budging*]: Then why was the offer made here in such specific terms?

Kovalan: Madhavi's mother stipulated the condition that whoever can afford to buy the garland could claim her daughter. My interpretation and verdict is that he who bids for the garland should be worthy of Madhavi. Is that clear? Let us go now; you have caused enough anguish to everyone here. ,

Greek gentleman [*adamant*]: Madhavi is mine and I shall not leave without her. You have an agile brain and a glib tongue, Kovalan, but all your oratory cannot cover the fact that no one here could compete with me and produce 1008 *kazhanjus* of gold.

Kovalan [*stung to the quick*]: Dare you imply that we are bankrupts here in Poompuhar? [*Unclasping the pearl necklace he is wearing*] Here is something worth a lot more than 1008 *kazhanjus* of gold. I will take the garland in exchange for this and thereby rescue Madhavi from the clutches of this old sinner.

Impulsively he hands over his pearl necklace to Madhavi and takes the garland from her hands. Kannagi in the audience is taken aback by the turn of events. His mission of rescuing Madhavi accomplished, Kovalan walks off the dais and comes straight to Kannagi.

Kovalan: Kannagi, let us go.

Kannagi [*apprehensive*]: But...

Kovalan [*not noticing her fear*]: Come on, dear, we have nothing else to do here. [*He hustles her and they leave the auditorium*]

The hall is soon empty and the frustrated Greek too has left with the rest of the audience. Madhavi and her team are, however, still on the dais. Madhavi has recovered her poise.

Madhavi: Vasantamalai, he took my garland, but why has he gone away?

Vasantamalai: That is an odd question, Madhavi. Why should he stay?

Chitrapathi [*to Vasantamalai*]: Simpleton, don't you follow her train of thoughts? She wants to meet him again. [*Turning to her daughter*] Am I not right, Madhavi?

Madhavi blushes and averts her eyes in affirmation.

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8 Kannagi in Wedded Bliss

Bedchamber in Kovalan's house. Fragrance of jasmine. Moonlight filters through the casement. Kovalan and Kannagi are seated on the couch, close to and facing each other.

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Kannagi: My Lord, what a panic I got into, there in the Hall of Pearls when you offered your necklace to Madhavi!

Kovalan: Tell me, dear, could 1 have done anything else to save Madhavi?

Kannagi: I know, my Lord, but I was scared all the same. Only, even in the grip of fear, faith glowed at the bottom of my heart, like the pearl on seabed.

Kovalan: That only goes to show that all women are suspicious by nature. What surprises me is that my Kannagi too has this common failing.

Kannagi: Not that I suspected you, my Lord. It was the sudden turn of events that unnerved me somewhat. [*Clinging to him*] Don't I know that I have absolute claim over you!

Kovalan: I am your willing slave, Kannagi. For without you by my side, my life feels drained of purpose.

Kannagi [*telling more*]: I shuddered to think whether my priceless treasure would slip into the hands of Madhavi and whether the religious rights performed at the time of our wedding would be deprived of their efficacy to hold us together in union.

Kovalan: The vow I took at the altar when we stood hand in hand under the canopy of flowers shall remain immutable, dear.

Kannagi: So I trust, my Lord, and that is the staff of my life.

Kovalan: Kannagi, in future I will not talk of remembering you, for that would imply I had forgotten you, which is an impossibility for me. You are the pure gold of my life and you are the pearl, the fragrance flawless, the sweetness of honey and the source of light. You are the gem which the earth could not have yielded and you are the melody which no harp can compose. I can chant your praise till eternity and even then I would not have done justice to my theme.

Kannagi [*moved*]: My Lord...

Kovalan [*softly*]: Kannagi...

As if in magnified echo, someone outside calls 'Kannagi' in a loud and perturbed voice. That upsets the magic for the lovers. They draw apart and recovering herself, Kannagi unbolts the door and goes outside while Kovalan stands irresolute for a moment and then smiles to himself as he sits on the couch again.

Kannagi comes to the courtyard and she is surprised to see her parents standing there grief-stricken.

Kannagi's mother [*rushing to Kannagi and holding her in embrace*]: My daughter, what harm have I done that such a fate should befall you! [*She weeps.*]

Kannagi [*mystified and perturbed*]: Mother, what are you talking about?

Kannagi's father Manaykan [*putting on a brave face*]: Fear not, my daughter, everything will work out well. [*His pose giving way*] Till yesterday 1 could never have believed that any shadow would fall on your conjugal bliss, but today... [*his voice fails him.*]

Kannagi [*in acute suspense*]: What has happened, father? Please tell me that.

Hurrying footsteps are heard and Kovalan's parents arrive on the scene.

Kovalan's father Masathuvan [*in great anger*]: Kannagi, where is Kovalan?

Kannagi: Uncle...

Manaykan [*interrupting her and addressing Masathuvan*]: See what your son has done! A portrait in cheer she was when I gave her in marriage to Kovalan but now he has reduced her to tears.

Masathuvan: Worry not, my friend. I will myself teach him a lesson. [*To his daughter-in-law*] Kannagi, leave the matter to me and trust me when I say that I will never allow sorrow to come your way.

Kannagi [*assertive, in spite of her confusion*]: Oh, don't think ill of him; he is my God.

Masathuvan: He may be God to you but he is my son. If he wants to bring discredit to our family and marry that dancer Madhavi, it will be over my dead body.

Kannagi: Whoever said that he will marry her?

Masathuvan: Why, it is the talk of the entire town that they exchanged garlands in public. I provided for him to set up house with you, but if he is inclined to stray I will see that he does not escape the consequences.

Kannagi: Oh, why don't any of you have the patience to find out the truth?

Masathuvan's wife: The truth is there plain as a pikestaff, Kannagi, but now that we are seized of the matter, you need no longer worry about it. Your uncle can be depended upon to discipline Kovalan and restore him to you.

Manaykan's wife [*butting in*]: Look at my daughter... her eyes are red with weeping. Is it to see her in this state that I gave birth to her! [*She sobs.*]

Masathuvan [*growling*]: 1 will go straightaway and deal with Kovalan...

Kovalan comes out of the bedchamber, smiling.

Kovalan [*to Masathuvan*]: Father, where are you going to search for me?

Masathuvan [*staggered*]: Kovalan, were you here all the time?

Kovalan: Of course, where else should I be?

Masathuvan [*perplexed*]: What all I heard about you, son! I suppose some mischief-mongers started a rumour. [*His anger changing direction*] Wait until I meet them and they wouldn't be recognised by their own kith and kin!

Kovalan: Don't be in a hurry, father. What all you would have heard was true in details but not in conclusion. 1 parted with a necklace in exchange for a garland so as to rescue Madhavi from the clutches of an old reprobate and there the matter ended as far as I was concerned. If you had heard anything beyond that, it was an extension in gossip which deserves to be dismissed with disdain.

Manaykan's wife [*chiding her daughter*]: Kannagi, why could you not explain all this before, instead of keeping us in agony?

Kannagi: So now you turn on me! Doesn't it strike you all that you never allowed me to speak?

Manaykan [*still in some doubt*]: And so...

Kovalan [*reassuring him*]: Kannagi and I are two persons but with one mind, uncle, and my responsibility is even more than yours in safeguarding her happiness.

Masathuvan [*remorseful*]: I have been hasty, son. and I am sorry that I allowed gossip to get the better of me. When the truth is known about how you rescued Madhavi, the world will praise me for being the father of such a noble son. That tribute is enough for me, Kovalan. [*He embraces his son.*]

Manaykan's wife [*to her daughter*]: Kannagi, thrice-blessed are you to be daughter-in-law in such a family.

Kannagi sheds tears of joy.

9 Parting Sparks Separation

Bedchamber in Kovalan's house. Two oil-lamps are burning steadily. Kannagi garlands Kovalan and touches his feet with her hands. Kovalan raises her and as she looks into his eyes, her face reflects a trace of sorrow.

Kannagi: Are you holding back anything from me, my Lord?

Kovalan [*taken aback by her perspicacity*]: I cannot, my dear, even if I want to. I was only thinking how to break the news to you, that 1 have to proceed on a brief trip to Rome in the near future. [*Talking fast, to forestall her objections*] I would have sent someone else in my place, Kannagi, but the cargo is very valuable and the responsibilities of shipping it are heavy. Fifty thousand pearls have to be delivered at the palace of Count Augustus and I have to be personally in charge of the transaction from start to finish. Allow but this one trip, dear, for the business means so much to us in material terms, not to mention the fact that it would add to the standing of Tamilnad in the field of international trade.

Kannagi [*in tearful resignation*]: As you are on the high seas with the precious cargo, will you remember the lamp flickering here, my Lord?

Kovalan: No, my dear! [*She is startled.*] For, as I said once before, if I have to remember you, I should have forgotten you in the first instance and that is of course impossible. [*He wipes her tears.*]

Kannagi [*still sulking*]: They say Rome is a beehive of beauties.

Kovalan [*promptly*]: Then I would be lame for the duration of my stay there, so that I cannot reach up to the hive. Anyway, what honey can be sweeter than the nectar you give me? In my dreams I will feast on your beauty...

Kannagi [*interrupting him*]: That way you are more fortunate, my Lord, since I will not be able to see you in my dreams.

Kovalan [*startled in his turn*]: Why so, dear?

Kannagi: Because dream presupposes sleep and my eyelids do not meet when you are away from me.

Kovalan: I will be back in sixteen weeks, Kannagi, and that shall be my last trip abroad. Never again shall I be away from you, even for a single day...

Persistent knocking is heard, at the front-door. Kovalan frowns in annoyance.

Kovalan: Let me go and find out who it is, at this time of the night. You wait here, Kannagi.

He unlatches the door, crosses the courtyard and goes to the main door.

Kovalan opens the front-door and is mightily displeased to find Vasantamalai without.

Kovalan [*harsh*]: Is it you, again?

Vasantamalai [*hurt by his tone*]: I only came to inform you, sir, that Madhavi is preparing to sacrifice her very life at the altar of unrequited love.

Kovalan [*unmoved*]: Whatever be your mode of assault, my answer is the same— I did not buy Madhavi's garland to marry her.

Vasantamalai: So you are determined to pass death sentence on her.

Kovalan: I admit the fault is mine, in having intervened. I should have allowed the old Greek to take her away with him!

Vasantamalai: Will you at least fulfil Madhavi's last wish, sir, and let her know for what flaw in her that you reject her so thoroughly? Do you find her lacking in beauty or grace? Is her proficiency in Art not up to the mark?

Kovalan: Tell her from me that her beauty and accomplishments are of such a high order that the genius is yet to be born who can be her helpmeet!

The chime of anklets is heard and Kannagi comes to the doorway.

Kannagi: I came to see what was detaining you for such a long time.

Kovalan [*pointing at Vasantamalai*]: Nothing but this. She has come for the hundredth time to persuade me to marry Madhavi. [*In disgust*] The sheer impertinence of the idea!

Vasantamalai: How long am I to run up and down? Cannot you come but once and give your answer in person to her?

Kannagi: There is some sense in what she says. Why don't you meet Madhavi once, my Lord, and convince her that she is yearning for the impossible?

Kovalan [*surprised not a little*]: Kannagi, to give a negative answer in person would be adding insult to injury!

Kannagi: Not exactly, my Lord. Advice from one she has so much regard for might make her see reason. Is it not worth a try anyway?

Kovalan [*very reluctant*]: Well, Vasantamalai, go and tell your mistress that I am coming to confirm my 'no' to her. [*She curtsies and hurries away.*]

Kannagi brings his silk wrap and sandals.

Kovalan [*as she ties the sandals to his feet*]: I don't have to go at all, but for your insistence. What a melancholy mission and that too when we two should be in each other's company...

Kannagi: Madhavi is a soft-hearted girl and I want her to be happy. Tell her that you yourself would find a suitable husband for her.

Kovalan: All right, Kannagi, I will be back in a few moments.

Kannagi: I have myself asked you to go but now I find even this brief separation unbearable. [*Her eyes filling with tears*] How shall I bid you leave, my Lord, when you set out for Rome?

Wiping her tears once again, Kovalan gets into his chaise and drives away. With a vague sense of fear haunting her all of a sudden, Kannagi keeps gazing at the vehicle until it disappears round the bend.

10 Madhavi Conquers

Madhavi's villa is being hurriedly decorated for Kovalan's visit. As Kovalan's chaise stops at the gate of the compound, dancing beauties are ready there to accord him a magnificent welcome. Kovalan is overwhelmed by the opulence of the reception and as he walks towards the house like one in a dream, Madhavi meets him and seeks his blessings by bowing low. With her lovelorn gaze fixed on his face she rises and leads him on. A thin stream of water from the garden crosses their path as they approach the building and lest Kovalan's feet should get wet, Madhavi takes off her cape, folds it and places it on the ground so that it may act as a bridge for his feet. Kovalan hesitates to step on the silk but not having the heart to reject the pleading in her eyes, he yields to her ṣolicitude and walks on.

As Kovalan mounts the stairs, Chitrapathi accords a traditional welcome with aratti. Madhavi takes a garland and steps forward but Kovalan gently prevents her from garlanding him. Seeing the anguish in her eyes, however, he yields to the extent of receiving the garland in his hands.

Kovalan is led to the seat of honour in a miniature auditorium. Filled with wonderment at the splendour of the reception, he watches a group dance, the sheer brilliance of which drugs his senses. Madhavi is the centre of the programme. The group gets reduced as the programme advances and at last Madhavi alone is left on the dais.

In that temple of Art, the Deity Kovalan is on the throne and his devotee Madhavi dances as she has never danced before. Emotions fleet across her features and it does not

take long for Kovalan to realise that she is actually portraying her own travails, from the time she saw him first in the Hall of Pearls. Dance and music rise to supreme heights as her grief mounts and even the creeper-plants in the hall and the pillars of rock seem to respond to the unconsoled melody of her mood.

Kovalan's heart beats fast as the music rises to a crescendo and she swirls to a stop prior to writhing as in agony, on the marble-floor.

His restraint breaking at last, Kovalan cries 'Madhavi' and rushes to her. Placing her head on his lap he seeks to bring her back to consciousness by sprinkling water on her face. Taking a fruit from a bowl nearby he squeezes it and tries to pour the juice into her mouth.

Kovalan [*caressing her*]: Madhavi!

She opens her eyes slowly and gazes into his down-turned face. Tears well up in her eyes and she sobs her heart out.

Kovalan [*with great feeling*]: Why these tears, Madhavi? Why do you wear yourself out in such a frenzy of dance?

Madhavi [*her voice tear-choked*]: That was because it was my last dance.

Kovalan [*shocked*]: No, no! You should not even think on such lines.

Madhavi [*ruefully*]: What is there for me to live for, my Lord? These last few days I have been clinging to my life, only because I wanted my Art to come to fruition before the eyes of one who alone deserves the privilege of witnessing it. Tonight my mission is fulfilled and I shall drift away like a tired leaf. [*She closes her eyes and opens them again after a pause. Her eyelids flutter.*]

Kovalan [*seeking to resuscitate her will to live*]: If you do anything hasty, the best in the Art of the Chola Kingdom would be extinguished.

Madhavi: My Lord, can Art flower in a heart drained of joy and enthusiasm?

Kovalan: Why not, Madhavi? Even the floods of sorrow could energise the waves to rise high in the ocean of Art.

Madhavi: Maybe, my Lord. But in a land where everyone seeks inner peace and joy, why should Madhavi alone make a cult out of grief and spread it through the medium of melody?

Kovalan: You talk as if some great sorrow has enveloped your life!

Madhavi [*alert, with hope kindled*]: Does it mean that the shadow of grief has been swept away from my life? Tell me, my Lord, tell me; has the *kuyil** alighted on the branch of my tree, to herald a fresh lease of joy for me?

**Kuyil* = a singing bird of the nightingale species.

Kovalan [*overwhelmed*]: Madhavi!

Madhavi: I seek not gold, my Lord, nor the other riches of the world. The patronage of monarchs holds no attraction for me. All I ask is that you should be by my side for, apart from you, I have no life nor has my Art any meaning.

Kovalan: Madhavi!

Madhavi: Let me be the vine, my Lord, clinging to you the staff of my life. Let me be a bond-slave, my Lord, tip-toeing in your footsteps. Promise me a spark, my Lord, and I shall ask nothing more.

Kovalan: Madhavi!

Madhavi [*her voice tapering off*]: I know why you are withholding your grace. Is it not because you judge me by my clan and suspect that I too am trained in the craft of seduction?

Kovalan [*mortified*]: No, no, dear, you do me an injustice!

Madhavi [*in exultation*]: So my God has relented at last!

Kovalan [*holding her close to his heart and whispering in her ear*]: Madhavi, my beloved!

Drinking in the nectar of his love, Madhavi presently sleeps, with her head on his lap. Kovalan gazes in rapture at the childlike innocence mirrored by her face.

11 Bravery in Grief

Kovalan's house. Kannagi is standing near the doorway, waiting for her husband. The chaise returns on weary wheels. She eagerly looks for Kovalan to alight and she is alarmed when the driver alone comes and stands irresolute.

Kannagi: Where is your master?

Driver [*with head bowed*]: Master has not returned..., he has also postponed his journey to Rome.

Kannagi is dazed. The driver goes away. Just then, Kannagi's friend Devanti comes in and is surprised to see her at the doorway, as in a trance.

Devanti: Kannagi, what is the matter? Why are you looking like that?

Kannagi [*recovering*]: Oh, it is nothing, Devanti.

Devanti: Then why are your eyes wet? Where is your husband?

Kannagi [*temporising*]: He must have gone to prepare for his journey to Rome.

Devanti: And that is why you have been crying—in anticipation of the parting! Really, you must learn to be a little less emotional, Kannagi.

They go into the house.

Devanti: I heard Madhavi was keeping on sending envoys to your husband. Has she stopped now?

Kannagi [*steeling herself*]: Of course, she has.

Devanti: That's right. Could anyone ever think of Rama parting from Seetha or Kovalan from Kannagi? Like Surpanaka, Madhavi interfered and she has been paid well for her pains.

Kannagi: Do not speak ill of her, Devanti. Madhavi is a fortunate woman.

12 Kovalan in Newfound Joy

Madhavi's villa. Madhavi is stringing flowers and Kovalan is engrossed in the deft movements of her fingers.

Madhavi [*happy*]: What is engaging your attention, my Lord?

Kovalan: Only the artistic movements of your expressive fingers. You are created for Art, Madhavi; I see it in every gesture of yours.

Madhavi [*with conviction*]: No, my Lord, I was created only for you and that was why I could meet you and win you too.

Kovalan: Coming to think of it, you could not have been created at all! Where in the universe could there be an artist and sculptor to fashion a dream-like you? The gold of your complexion and the rain-cloud of your tresses, the ruby of your lips and the pearl of your teeth, the magic in your eyes and the drug in your speech—which creator could have assembled them all and having assembled, parted with the fruit of his labour?

Madhavi: It is so easy for women to string flowers, my Lord, but I see that it is far easier for men to string garlands of praise for women in their presence.

Kovalan: My dear, when I seek to describe you and chant your praise, it is the Tamil language that gets enriched.

Madhavi: And likewise, when I garland you, may the flowers be flattered!

This time there is no resistance to her garlanding. Her conquest is complete.

13 Kannagi in Loneliness

Kovalan's house. Masathuvan and his wife are there to console Kannagi.

Masathuvan: Kovalan is a traitor to my house, Kannagi. He is like a fish in Madhavi's net and alas, you are like a goldfish thrown on hard ground.

Kannagi [*putting on a brave face*]: Things have not gone that far, uncle. [*Playing the hostess, as a ruse to conserve her self-control*] How selfish of me to forget even elementary courtesies! Let me go in and bring some fruits for you. [*Without giving them time to restrain her, she goes in, wipes her eyes and returns with a bowl of fruits which she sets before them.*]

Masathuvan: Forgive me, Kannagi, for having brought forth a son who is callously indifferent to the feelings of your tender heart. When 1 look at you in your present state, I feel like rushing to Madhavi's house, putting Kovalan in irons and dragging him here.

Kannagi [*alarmed, for she knows her father-in-law is impetuous and is capable of carrying out his threat*]: No, no, uncle, it would only aggravate the trouble. After all, the fact is there that it was I who despatched him to Madhavi's villa and if you were to go there and humiliate him, I would become a traitor to my husband.

Masathuvan is cornered and he keeps quiet,

Masathuvan's wife: How I wish, Kannagi, that you had been my daughter rather than daughter-in-law!

Kannagi [*smiling through her grief*]: If I had been your daughter, auntie, how could I have got your son for husband?

Masathuvan [*grimly*]: I would have brought for you a bridegroom more handsome and noble than Kovalan.

Kannagi [*with a touch of firmness*]: Pardon me, uncle, but I cannot bear to hear my husband insulted. Do you think auntie here would keep quiet if I were to speak ill of you?

Masathuvan: That shows you don't know your auntie. Had 1 strayed off the leash like Kovalan, your auntie would have started an epic war. At any rate she would not be dumb and passive like you.

Kannagi: Don't you all worry overmuch, uncle. He will return soon, for the love he has for me is not a flash of lightning in the high skies; it is a column of light piercing the horizon even. He is mine, till eternity and what does a brief separation matter?

Masathuvan [*disarmed by her devotion*]: Until he returns, Kannagi, why don't you come and stay with us?

Kannagi: Uncle, it was you who enabled us to set up a separate household, in keeping with the traditions of the Tamil people. Why should I wind it up unless 1 am proved to be defeated? He might have left me in the midst of flames but my duty is to stay at my post until my Lord and Master returns.

Masathuvan [*won over*]: Daughter of Manaykan, my tributes to your determination. You are an eloquent example of the greatness of the Tamil society, for you represent the essence of its fundamentals. May your grief vanish soon, Kannagi! [*He gets up to leave.*]

Masathuvan's wife [*also rising*]: We came here to try and console you but you have given us strength to stand up to the ordeal, Kannagi. [*To Devanti who has just come*] Devanti, please look after our Kannagi; [*pointedly*] and if she needs any help, at least you should come and tell us.

The Elders leave. Kannagi goes up to the front-door with them.

* * *

Kovalan's house. As Manaykan and his wife enter, Vasantamalai is leaving, with some jewel-caskets on a tray. At the sight of Kannagi's parents she trembles in guilt and hurries away with face averted. Evidently, she has been imposing on Kannagi and abstracting the valuables in Kovalan's name. With an added anxiety on their minds, the Elders enter the courtyard where Kannagi receives them.

Manaykan: Kannagi, your husband is lost to you, but is it necessary that you should part with wealth too?

Kannagi: Whose wealth is it, father? Is it not the earning of his industry and that too accumulated through hazardous journeys on the high seas? What better use can I put it to than by giving it away, to his satisfaction?

Manaykan: Wealth is like wax that melts rapidly if you do not conserve it, Kannagi. Wealth is not an ocean that remains the same in size even as you draw from it.

Kannagi: If wealth dwindles, not much is lost, father, for we could always acquire more wealth through industry. But if the love which my husband has for me shrinks . . . [*she is choked*].

Manaykan [*bitter*]: So you are still under the delusion that Kovalan's love for you is intact. In that case why should he be infatuated with that sorceress Madhavi who is his queen and goddess now?

Kannagi: I would not approve of your reviling Madhavi. She is far superior to me, not only in beauty but in love too. He has parted from me but I am still alive, whereas Madhavi will not be able to survive the pangs of separation. That is the reason why he has stayed there. Not that he loves me less; only he is more compassionate towards Madhavi and he knows full well that of the two she is more gentle and sensitive and hence is in greater need of his protection.

Manaykan [*lamenting*]: What nobility in this daughter of mine! Kovalan, how did you have the heart to fling this bouquet in raging fire!

The strain of the discussion has been too much for Kannagi, Tears flow down her cheeks and she makes no effort to restrain her grief.

Kannagi: Do not worry, father; it will take us nowhere.

Manaykan's wife: We both came here to console you but it is you who are giving us strength. Deserting a paragon like you, how could that savage . . .

Kannagi [*incensed*]: Mother, measure your words. If you want to curse my husband and call him names, then 1 would not like you to visit this house. Whoever disrespects my husband cannot be my friend or relative. Now leave me alone, leave me alone . . .

Her sobs are heartrending and the parents watch helplessly.

14 Madhavi's Magnanimity

A verdant grove on the bank of the Cauveri. Madhavi and Kovalan are at the heights of happiness. She sings and dances, then suddenly sits down fatigued.

Kovalan [*concerned*]: Why, Madhavi, this fatigue?

Madhavi: I don't know, my Lord, but these days I am subject to sudden spells of giddiness.

Kovalan: Let me make a resolution here and now, that I should not ask you to dance.

Madhavi: Are you displeased with me, my Lord?

Kovalan: Certainly not, my dear, but I know that in your present state you should not dance much.

Madhavi: Why so?

Kovalan: I won't tell you, for you would feel shy.

Madhavi: You have got to tell me, for I cannot bear the thought that you are holding back anything from me.

Kovalan: On second thoughts, I feel it will be better if I don't tell you.

Madhavi [*sulking*]: That is all right then. You can enjoy your secret on your own.

She prepares to leave the place. Just then Kovalan sneezes.

Madhavi [*involuntarily*]: May you live a hundred years!

She moves away from him and her eyes are moist.

Kovalan [*coming to her*]: Why this sorrow, dear?

Madhavi [*accusing him*]: Did you not sneeze, a while ago?

Kovalan: I did; and you wished me a long life. But how does it account for your tears?

Madhavi: You thought about someone other than me and that was the cause of the sneeze!

Kovalan: When you pervade my entire being, how could I have any thought of anyone other than you? Now I see—women are apt to get truculent on such occasions.

Madhavi [*persistent*]: What such occasion, my Lord?

Kovalan [*hedging*]: Occasions such as cause fatigue when you dance.

Madhavi: Tell me, Master-physician, what is the cause of the fatigue?

Kovalan: So you have come back to the starting point of the cross-examination!

Madhavi: You want to cling to your secret and so let me not disturb you, sir. [*Once again she moves away, pouting.*]

Kovalan: Stop, Ma..dha..a..vi!

Madhavi [*turning*]: Why do you lengthen my name?

Kovalan: Because you are en route to becoming - '*madha*'*. That is why you feel fatigued when you put yourself to physical strain. How do you relish my secret?

Madhavi [*blushing in innocent pride*]: I. . . I. . . [*too shy to express her delight, she covers her face with both hands.*]

Kovalan [*taking her in his arms*]: Madhavi!

Madhavi: My Lord!

Their rapture is cut asunder by a lamenting voice from somewhere outside the grove.

Voice: Oh God, for what sin of mine in the previous birth am I put to this suffering? Why should 1 live at all, when my husband has deserted me? My husband is hard-hearted but cannot my cry of anguish touch Your heart even, Oh God?

Kovalan and Madhavi rush in the direction of the voice, to find a brahmin-woman with a babe-in-arms crying her heart out and gazing wildly at a boat in the Cauveri going away from the bank.

Kovalan [*to brahmin lady*]: Madam, what calamity has befallen you that you

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**Madha* = mother.

should stand here in such despair?

Brahmin-lady: Sir, my husband has rejected me, all because he found me guilty of an unconscious fault. [*Pouring out her misery*] He had a mongoose for pet and one day when I returned from the river I found it blood-spattered and grinning. In my haste and panic, I thought it had bitten my child and so I threw my pitcher on the mongoose and it died on the spot. It was only afterwards did I discover that the mongoose had actually bitten a cobra to death. It had saved my child from the cobra and when I realised what I had done, my remorse knew no bounds. On my husband's return in the evening, I told him of the day's happenings and prayed forgiveness for having killed his pet. He was, however, too furious to pardon me and now he is going away there, in that boat. Won't you do something to make him relent? If he does not deign to come back, I have no other go but to jump into the river with my child and put an end to my anguish that way!

Kovalan [*shouting authoritatively, in the direction of the receding boat*]: Hey, boatman, stop rowing and return to the bank. It is a matter of life and death.

The boat stops and then returns. The brahmin-lady rushes to the water-edge and pleads with the passenger.

Brahmin-lady: Once again I seek your forgiveness. Please come home, at least for the sake of this child of yours.

Her husband [*callous*]: A sinner like you is better dead than be alive. I will not have anything to do with you.

Kovalan [*to the brahmin*]: Sir, will your action in leaving your family and home help to bring the mongoose back to life?

Brahmin [*sullen*]: I am only going on a pilgrimage to wipe out the sin of killing, which my wife is guilty of.

Kovalan [*patiently reasoning with him*]: If, as a result of your departure now, your wife and child were to starve to death, would not that sin be on your head? And in that case, would you go on another pilgrimage to wash off that sin? Coming to the root cause of the trouble, you will admit that the mongoose could not have known whether the snake would bite the child; and yet it killed the reptile. Likewise, when your wife killed the mongoose she did not know whether the pet had bitten the child. Don't the accounts tally, without your having to put yourself to the trouble and expense of a pilgrimage?

Brahmin [*convinced by the reasoning*]: I never analysed the problem that way! [*Getting off the boat*] I owe you many thanks, sir, for having come to my assistance. [*He rejoins his wife whose gratitude to Kovalan is too deep for words.*]

The brahmin and his wife with the babe-in-arms take leave of Kovalan and Madhavi. After they have left, Madhavi gazes at Kovalan thoughtfully.

Madhavi: Your counsel to the brahmin was appropriate, my Lord, that he should not desert his wife. Even if you are to be displeased with me, I must tell you that the advice applies to you also in equal measure and that you should lose no further time in visiting your home where my sister Kannagi must be pining for you. How many times have I sought to persuade you in the matter?

Kovalan: You are right, Madhavi, but I would feel so ashamed to face her.

Madhavi [*cornering him in argument*]: You mean you are ashamed of being in love with me!

Kovalan [*confused*]: Not that, Madhavi!

Madhavi: What else could it be? Either you have to admit you are ashamed of our love or you should agree to go and meet Kannagi. I want the issue to be settled before 1 budge from here, for I would not like you to be bracketed with those who only believe in preaching to others, without themselves following any of the teachings. Not only that, my Lord, I am genuinely frightened whether the tears shed by Kannagi would affect the child in my womb.

Kovalan [*closing her mouth with the palm of his hand*]: You don't have to threaten me, Madhavi. I promise to carry out your bidding . . . There is a chill in the air, dear, let us return home.

They leave the grove as dusk falls.

15 Return Thwarted

Kovalan's house. Austerity all round. Kannagi is a picture of grief as she moves from chamber to chamber. The lamp is unlit and the oil is being drained, drop by drop. The front-door is ajar and noticing that a rooster is trying to sneak in, she slams the door shut, in mechanical action.

Outside, Kovalan, who has arrived in trepidation and stepped on the stair just then, receives a rude shock when he sees the door literally slammed against his face. For a moment he stands, head bowed, and then he turns and goes away.

Unaware of her husband's arrival and departure, Kannagi is standing in front of Kovalan's portrait.

Kannagi: My Lord, will you never return? Why did you direct the anger of the volcano on my humble self and why did you select my heart to test the point of your spear? Your embrace is denied to me and my ears are deprived of the poetry of your speech. With bleary eyes I keep vigil, through day and night, hoping against hope and battling against despair. Will my devotion be in vain, my Lord, just as my love has been? Won't you come but once, so that I may have a brief glimpse of the face of my God?

Her gaze is fixed on the portrait as she is tossed about in a sea of memories.

16 Birth of Manimekalai

Madhavi's villa. Madhavi is a mother now. The angelic child is being cradled and the celebration is on a lavish scale.

Madhavi takes the child from the cradle and brings it to Kovalan, who kisses the infant in pride and affection.

Madhavi: You should name the child, my Lord.

Kovalan [*gazing at the babe*]: You are the synthesis of all that is sweet, my child, like milk and honey and sugar-candy. You are the zephyr from the south, bearing the pollen of all the flowers fragrant. The magic of your slightest smile puts to shame the melody of the flute and the harp. You are a jewel to womanhood, my daughter, and every gesture of yours is an expression of Art supreme. So I name you Manimekalai and bless you, my child.

Those present: Long live Manimekalai!

Alms-giving is an important aspect of the celebration, which Kovalan himself is supervising when he hears a cry for help from the street. He runs to the street and there he sees that an elephant running amuck has caught hold of a brahmin and the panic-stricken victim is squirming in the noose of its trunk. The animal is in the act of raising its victim high, with the intention of dashing him to the ground when Kovalan distracts its attention and challenges its might. The elephant releases the brahmin and goes for Kovalan, who through a series of adroit and hazardous manoeuvres, controls it until it

accepts to obey his commands and is taken charge of by its mahout. Passers-by who had run helter-skelter, now gather in their hundreds to honour Kovalan by garlanding him. Madhavi feels immensely proud of her hero's valour.

17 Valour Seen through Tears

Kovalan's house. Devanti is relating how Kovalan controlled the wild elephant and saved the life of the poor brahmin. Kannagi is listening, in deep concern.

Devanti [*concluding*]: They say that even battle-scarred warriors could not control the elephant and that your husband literally achieved the impossible.

Kannagi [*in tears and in smiles*]: Oh, he is as valorous as he is compassionate. Are you certain he was not hurt even a little?

Devanti: What solicitude, Kannagi? [*Light-heartedly*] Even if he had received a bruise or two, Madhavi is there to tend him,

Kannagi: Yes, you are right; Madhavi is there. My sister is a blessed girl!

She looks up at Kovalan's portrait and ministers to him in her fancy.

18 Two Sides of the Festival

Yet another Indra Festival in Poompuhar. The tiger-flag is hoisted to the cheers of the populace and the city is brighter and gayer than ever before. Since the last Festival, statues have been installed of the renowned Chola ancestors, Indra and Karikalan.

There is a march-past by the army; and at the harbour, the royal ships and barges present a formation.

Madhavi and Kovalan are apparelled in finery and they stop by Manimekalai's cradle to fondle the child.

Kovalan: See the beam of the child's smile, Madhavi. Manimekalai is a replica of yourself in grace and cheer.

Madhavi [*without inhibition*]: But the consensus of opinion among the ladies here is that Manimekalai resembles my sister Kannagi. I have myself got into the habit of considering the child to be Kannagi's daughter rather than mine.

Kovalan [*embarrassed, closing the topic*]: Let us go, Madhavi.

They kiss the child and go out. Manimekalai waves to them from the cradle while Vasantamalai and others pamper her with their attentions.

Kovalan and Madhavi go round the city participating in the best of the celebrations.

* * *

Kovalan's house, now dilapidated and shorn of light. The tumult of the Festival in the city plunges Kannagi in agony. By closing the casement she tries to shut out the flash of fireworks but the bright lights do filter in, through the chinks.

The music and dance outside is cacophony to her ears and memories of the Festival in the years past weigh her down. In utter despair, she stands in front of Kovalan's portrait. That spot to her has become a sanctuary from the rest of her own home.

Kannagi: My Lord, I am certain that you would be in the midst of the celebrations now. I have stayed cloistered within these four walls from the day you left me for Madhavi, but I can bear the agony no longer. I have got to see your face, my Lord, at least from a distance, or my life would ebb away. I am coming, my Lord, to seek you out . . .

She unbolts the frontdoor and rushes to the street, as in frenzy. Devanti is alarmed and she sets out to follow Kannagi.

On the seashore. Kovalan and Madhavi are on a stroll. They walk close to the water-edge and the waves caress their feet from time to time.

Kannagi too has reached the seashore but she is too far away from the lovers to see them or to be seen by them. Devanti overtakes her at last and grips her shoulders, none too gently.

Devanti [*gasping on account of exertion*]: What a fall have you registered, Kannagi, by coming out like this! Even if you wanted to bring disgrace to your family, could you not choose a less auspicious time than when the land is celebrating the Indra Festival?

Kannagi [*bridling*]: Is it a disgrace, Devanti, if I come to see my husband?

Devanti: At this time of the day and looking the picture of misery, should a respectable woman be seen running in frenzy? What would people think of you, Kannagi, and how would Kovalan himself feel if he were to see you here? [*Kannagi is silent*] You have so far put on a brave front before your parents and in-laws and won't they sink in despair if they learn of this? Coming from a noble family you are daughter-in-law of an equally noble house; recollect your background, Kannagi, and do not give way to such despair. [*Kindly*] After all, why should you want to see your husband in person when he is all along dwelling in your heart? Let us return home, my friend, before we are noticed here.

She takes Kannagi by the arm and almost drags her along.

19 Melody Breaks

Bedchamber in Madhavi's villa. An oil lamp burns in a corner. Through the casement is seen the grey of the pre-dawn. Kovalan and Madhavi are in sound slumber.

A cock crows and somewhere a conch is blown to herald the break of day. Madhavi awakes and gently calls 'My Lord'. Kovalan is still asleep. She takes a harp and runs her fingers over its strings. The soft melody awakens Kovalan and he gazes at her face in speechless adoration.

Madhavi: The Indra Festival is to conclude today, my Lord. Shall we go to the seashore to witness the majesty of sunrise?

Kovalan: As you please, my dear, but there you must play the harp and sing a seaside lyric for me.

Madhavi: I agree, my Lord, on condition you also respond with a lyric of your own.

Kovalan: If the theme is Madhavi, I will compose and sing any number of lyrics but if you want a routine seaside song, I am out of the deal.

Madhavi: Have it your way, then. Let us hurry, my Lord, or we would miss the golden splendour of the rising sun. [*Calling*] Vasantamalai, we are going to the seashore and so see to it that a settee is arranged there for us, on the white sand, in the shade of a flowering tree and curtained with silk drapes. Order the chariot to be at the gate in the next few moments and keep my harp tuned and ready.

Vasantamalai [*from a distance*]: I will attend to the work straightaway, my Lady!

Kovalan and Madhavi drive through the streets in the chariot drawn by dark-brown stallions. The buildings on both sides stay illuminated and the lighthouse adds to the magnificence of the landscape. It being the last day of the Indra Festival, people are afoot although it is not yet dawn and most of them are proceeding to the seashore. Kovalan and Madhavi arrive at the spot reserved for them and are pleased to find that it faces the rendezvous of the Cauveri and the sea.

Madhavi is radiant and her happiness transcends the need for spoken words. She plays the harp and the soft melody captures all the beauty of the morn as the sun peeps out of the horizon and floods the sea and the earth with fiery gold. The waves too seem to be tamed as the melody flows. Kovalan sits entranced.

Presently, Madhavi stops playing and offers the harp to Kovalan.

Madhavi: Your turn first, my Lord, for the promised lyric.

Kovalan [*not taking the harp, but caressing her fingers*]: Soft as *anicham* flowers are your fingers, that they cannot cause a scratch even if I prick my eyes with them. The hardness of my touch might prove too much for the strings of the harp, Madhavi, that have been accustomed only to tenderness.

Madhavi: If only this harp were animate, my Lord, it would weave out a poem in melody in order to express the thrill of your touch. Please do not tarry, for my ears are eager to share the joy of my eyes.

Kovalan takes the harp and plays as he sings.

[Song]

With a mere sweep
of his Sceptre bright,
Your Lord and Master
the Chola Monarch
has won and wed
Ganga there
in the distant North,
and Kumari too
in the extreme South;
And yet, and yet,
O Cauveri,
you're kind and constant
to your Lover Royal!

The reason, I know,
for your constancy,
is that the faith
in chastity
is immutable
for womanhood.

And so, blessed are you,
O Cauveri!

Madhavi: A lovely lyric, my Lord, and the melody was so rich; but ... [*she hesitates and her face clouds.*]

Kovalan [*urging her*]: Yes, Madhavi . . .

Madhavi: The content of the lyric? [*she leaves the question incomplete.*]

Kovalan: Why, my dear, did you not follow? [*Explaining*] The song was in praise of the Cauveri, whose Lord and Master Karikal Chola led an army to the North and extended his domain to include the River Ganga too. And yet his first wife Cauveri did not turn away from him. That shows the power of chastity in women and so Cauveri deserves to be blessed.

Madhavi: That is all right, so far as it goes. But your theme went further, my Lord, for, in the lyric, the Master of Cauveri did not halt his matrimonial adventures with Ganga . . .

Kovalan: Well, it is a historical fact that Karikalan conquered the Pandyas too and annexed Kumari. Even then Cauveri was the same loving wife.

Madhavi: Now I see the meaning of your lyric. The Master would make love to Ganga one day and to Kumari on the next. And still Cauveri will have to be passive and patient and constant. Likewise, the Master here would desert Kannagi for Madhavi and from Madhavi he would flit to ...

Kovalan [*interrupting her*]: Don't misinterpret me, dear. All I had in mind was Karikalan's glory and the boundless grace of Cauveri.

Madhavi: [*petulant, taking the harp*]: Now, let me do a lyric.

[Song]

With honey-bees playing herald
and decked in flowers bright,
modest-eyed do you come,

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O Cauveri constant.

The secret of your grace
I've found out, coy maiden,—

It's because your Lord
wields a sceptre ever straight!

Kovalan [*sombre*]: I see ... according to you, Cauveri's constant grace is due to her husband remaining upright and just. The moral is that your affection for me depends on my affection for you and in case I neglect you, you would turn to ...

Madhavi: [raising her voice a little]: What a contorted construction you are putting on my simple lyric!

She lays the harp aside, leaves her seat and walks out on the sand. Kovalan follows her on the seashore. A fisherwoman walks between Madhavi and Kovalan. His fertile fancy sees Madhavi in the fisherwoman.

Kovalan [*to himself*]: Cruel indeed are the eyes of this damsel who is wielding flower-stalks to drive the birds away from her catch . . . [*Rambling*] Blossoms from the garden, flawless speech and a face rivalling the full moon . . .

Madhavi watches him from a distance.

Kovalan [*still not himself*]: A beauty of tender age, so delicate of form, with waist thin as gossamer ...

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Harassing are the eyes
of the gold-hued damsel here,

her tresses-like curly clouds
and her teeth brighter than pearl;

the sand she walks upon
and the grove she shelters in—

Harassing are they
but I dare not get away!

Madhavi: [*to Vasantamalai who has joined her*]: Did you observe his behaviour?

Vasantamalai: Yes, Madhavi. There is a limit even for the aberrations of a tiff.

Madhavi [*simmering*]: He has taken a fancy to some other woman and he is no longer able to conceal his perfidy ... I will make him suffer for this, by pretending to have fallen in love with some other man.

Vasantamalai: It is a dangerous game, Madhavi. Do not play with fire.

Madhavi: I will call it off in time, so you need not worry about it. He is returning. Leave me now.

Madhavi goes near a warrior's statue in the vicinity and imagining it to be Kovalan's for a moment, she addresses it.

Madhavi: Oh, my beloved, you did not come to me with true love. Like a brigand you came to rob me of the pearls of my smile, the ruby of my lips and the roses of my cheeks. And yet I fell for you and now I cannot live without you. I am aching for your embrace, dear, so don't leave Madhavi the Queen of fine arts to pine away like this.

Midway through her soliloquy, Kovalan has returned, after emerging from his wild dream. Listening to her, he is enraged.

Kovalan: Stop, you strumpet, stop!

Madhavi [*running to him, terrified*]: My Lord . . .

Kovalan [*shaking her off*]: Don't dare to touch me. Beguiled by you 1 have lost my all and become an object of derision for my kith and kin and friends. Driving my devoted wife Kannagi to despair, I wallowed in your sinful lap and it has taken this long for me to wake up to the truth about you.

Madhavi [*shocked, closing her ears with her hands*]: Enough, my Lord, enough! Is it for this that the day dawned?

Kovalan: This day has redeemed me from your clutches!

Madhavi [*in a daze*]: Oh, what have I done to merit this treatment from you?

Kovalan: With my own ears I have listened to the prayer you addressed to your secret lover, and do you still think that your game can go on?

Madhavi [*falling at his feet*]: Do not torture me, my Lord. I have never denied I belong to a family of courtesans but I swear on all that is sacred that I have not even thought of any man other than you. You have got to believe me, my Lord.

Kovalan: I know you are well-versed in arts of all sorts, but I shall no longer be deceived by your seductive smile and succulent speech. Try your craft on the new lover you have hooked and thus progress in your trade. Get away from here, for your very presence is poison to me!

Madhavi swoons. In utter indifference Kovalan turns away.

20 Penitent Return

Kovalan's house. Almost demented with grief, Kannagi stands near the casement and then walks slowly to the front-door. She opens the door aimlessly and a rooster enters as if it had been waiting for the opportunity. She does not have the energy or the interest to chase it away. Apparently surprised at the absence of objection to its entry, the rooster moves forward and pauses, surveying the terrain.

Lost in mournful thoughts, Kannagi does not at first notice that someone is standing at the doorway. When she does, she is not sure whether it is not the apparition of Kovalan come to mock her futile devotion.

She stands gazing at him, in disbelief. Kovalan is all contrition and he waits in the agony of suspense for her reaction. Presently Kannagi falls at and clings to his feet. He raises her and both stand united in the cyclone of sorrow unchecked.

Kovalan: Forgive this hardened sinner, Kannagi, he who left the spring-shade of your foliage for the mirage of glamour.

Kannagi [*restraining him*]: No one should revile my Lord and Master, not even he himself!

Kovalan: You are the gem of womanhood, Kannagi, and you are the embodiment of all that is the noblest and the best in Tamil culture. Deserting you 1 was lost to the world and my existence was circumscribed by the tinsel charms of an enchantress. The infatuation has cost me my standing, and today I am an object of derision in this land, a man deprived of what ought to be dearer to him than

life even . . .

Kannagi: Madhavi is my sister, my Lord, and even in the depths of grief you should not think ill of her. How is Manimekalai, my Lord?

Kovalan: That child is the symbol of my sin, Kannagi, and I would rather blot it out of my memory.

Kannagi: Oh, do not say so, my Lord, for Manimekalai is my daughter too, although she knows only Madhavi as her mother.

Kovalan [*overwhelmed by her magnanimity*]: You are a deity, Kannagi, and not a woman of this earth. I can never hope to make amends for the wrong done to you, O my Goddess!

Kannagi: My Lord! My Lord!

Kovalan [*in intense self-pity*]: In the field of maritime trade I had helped to put Tamilnad in the forefront. But in my personal life I fell a prey to wiles and traded my honour for filth. Today I am a bankrupt in every sense of the term and now that I stand dishonoured, let me go down unwept by the world. Let the sea that nurtured my fortune draw a curtain over my head!

Kannagi: As long as there is life there is hope, my Lord. Let me fetch some gold from the coffers of my father, so that you may start to rebuild your business.

Kovalan: My dear, don't you think I have had enough of disgrace, without it being said that I sponged on my in-laws?

Kannagi: Then let me seek the help of my father-in-law whose granary is stocked to the brim with pearls.

Kovalan: Having squandered the capital which my father provided, I cannot bear to touch another coin of his. I do not see a way out, Kannagi, except that which any man may embark upon, unfettered and free, when he yearns for a permanent end to his misery.

Kannagi [*getting an idea*]: My Lord, my anklets belong to me and no one else. They would fetch a very good price and the capital would suffice for the business.

Kovalan [*mortified*]: You want me to sell the anklets which are all that is left of your ornaments? What a sinner I am, to live to hear this?

Kannagi [*rallying him*]: I do not need an ornament, my Lord, if it is not to be of use to you. After all, cannot we secure a pair of new anklets, once your business is re-established?

Kovalan [*coming round*]: There is something in what you say; but I cannot bear to be seen here in Poompuhar, selling my wife's anklets. Everyone knows me in this place and the ignominy of the transaction would prove too much for me.

Kannagi [*at a loss*]: Then . . .

Kovalan [*brightening up somewhat*]: Why not we leave this city, dear? We could go to Mathurai, the capital of the Pandya kingdom where the anklets will fetch a good price and where no one will be able to identify us!

Kannagi: Yes, my Lord. I am ready for the journey.

Kovalan: Come, then, for wherever I am, you have got to be by my side, till death does part us, Kannagi! Let us leave this city at dead of night so that we may not be noticed in our present state of penury and distress.

They cross the courtyard and go in.

21 Madhavi in Loneliness

Madhavi's villa. Madhavi, anguished and worn out, is seated near Manimekalai. Vasantamalai enters.

Madhavi: Could you meet him, Vasantamalai? How did he receive my message?

Vasantamalai: It is too late, Madhavi. In spite of my warning you played with fire and now you have lost him. His house is uninhabited and all 1 could learn from Devanti was that Kovalan and Kannagi have left for Mathurai.

Madhavi [*losing all hope*]: Shall I ever see him again? [*To the child*] Alas, Manimekalai, your father has left the city even without taking leave of you and me! Calling you by a hundred endearing names he used to shower kisses on your cheeks and he was looking forward to hearing you utter your first word. Even before you could learn to call me '*Amma*'* and call him '*Appa*'+ how could he have the heart to tear himself away from you and from me your hapless mother!

Chitrapathi enters.

Chitrapathi [*sternly*]: Madhavi, What a dirge are you raising, my daughter? As if you were his lawfully wedded wife and he has deserted you!

Madhavi [*turning on her mother*]: Enough, Mother, I have borne enough for the misfortune of being your daughter!

Hunchback [*coming in*]: What is the matter, Chitrapathi?

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* Amma = 'ma for mamma', +Appa = 'pa for 'papa'.

Madhavi [*scolding her*]: So you too have come! Like the hunchback in *Ramayana* who sought to wreck the country, you are here to bring this house to rack and ruin.

Hunchback [*arrogant*]: Hold your tongue, Madhavi!

Madhavi: Why should I? Without my knowledge and making use of his name, you plundered his wealth. What depraved creatures you all are! Did you think, you schemers, that I loved him for his riches ?

Chitrapathi [*callously*]: You never loved him at all. We allowed you to make love to him so that we could find the means to live in comfort and style.

Madhavi: You are not my mother but a vampire living on my blood; and that Hunchback by your side is Evil incarnate whose mission is to destory this ancient city of Puhar. It is a sin to be near you even . . .

They go away in dudgeon.

Madhavi [*to Manimekalai*]: And now, child, we are sole support to each other.

She weeps bitterly and the child watches her, in uncomprehending grief.

22 Journey to Mathurai

Rugged road to Mathurai city. Kovalan and Kannagi find it hard going, particularly since the stretch is thoroughly desolate. They meet Kaunthi Adigal, an elderly Jain nun.*

Kovalan: Our respects to you, Mother. [*Introducing*] Kannagi, this is Kaunthi Adigal whose name would be familiar to you.

Kannagi: We are honoured to meet you, Mother.

Kaunthi Adigal: My blessings to you, children. May I know . . .

Kovalan [*anticipating her question*]: We are from Poompuhar-on-Cauveri, that harbour-capital of the Chola land which exports gold and pepper, rubies and pearls and ivory and sandalwood. My name is Kovalan and this is Kannagi my wife.

Kaunthi Adigal: Kovalan, are you not the son of that merchant-prince Masathuvan? What calamity befell you, boy, that you have to trek in this manner?

Kovalan [*bitterly*]: I turned false to Kannagi, the light of my life and it is meet that I should be chastised. I am a sinner twice over, Mother, for now I am taking her along this road of suffering!

Kaunthi Adigal: Don't despair, my son. Genuine repentance is punishment enough for you; and it is your life ahead that matters now. Are you not bound for

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**Adigal* = a title equivalent to ' Reverend '.

Mathurai? Then let me be your travel companion.

Kannagi [*to Kovalan*]: My Lord, how far is Mathurai from here?

Kovalan [*evasively*]: It would be five six *kaadhams*[+], dear.

Kaunthi Adigal [*to Kannagi*]: He means five multiplied by six, that is thirty *kaadhams*, child. Why, are you tired? [*To Kovalan*] I can walk a little ahead of you, in case you would like to carry Kannagi in your arms . . . [*Kovalan is embarrassed*]. I suggested it because I thought it would be the appropriate penalty for having put her to this ordeal!

They resume the journey.

Kaunthi Adigal [*talking, seemingly to reduce the tedium of the travel*]: Kannagi, of course, would not be used to such journeys. We have to watch every step of ours, or we would find ourselves in pitfalls, set up by man and nature in conspiracy, when the hollows made for digging up tubers get filled with withered leaves and flowers. [*Gently*] Is not the path of life too similar?

Kovalan [*with conviction*]: Yes, Mother, and I say this from bitter experience . .

Kaunthi Adigal [*continuing*]: We could cut across the paddy-fields but there in the canals, the fish seeking to escape from beavers would fall on us and that would scare Kannagi. There is a path through the sugar cane plantations but if we are ever so careless we would puncture beehives and the honey would go to waste as it flows into water ...

Kovalan: That was the way my wealth went, Mother!

Kaunthi Adigal [*as if she had not heard Kovalan's interjection*]: We might walk through orchards but there we have to bow as we go, or else the jackfruit would bang our heads like enemies in war or like true friends who check us when we tend to go astray . . .

Kovalan [*bursting out again*]: Alas, no one—not even my conscience— checked me or blocked my way when I slipped off the path of good conduct.

Kaunthi Adigal: Don't you know that the mind is a monkey which goes meandering only when the conscience is in slumber? Forget the past, Kovalan. The future presents a challenge; so rise to the occasion, boy, hoping for the best and setting store by nothing except sincere effort.

They keep walking.

* * *

Forest. Kovalan has come to fetch drinking water from a spring when Kausikan, a brahmin from Poompuhar meets him, with an epistle from Madhavi. Kovalan reads the message.

Madhavi's voice: Cherished and Revered! My obeisance to you. No one but I myself

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[+] *kaadham* = a measure of linear distance of about 10 miles.

am responsible for the flight, accompanied by wife and unknown even to fond parents. Hapless am 1, with no cure to offer for a lacerated heart and I can only beg to be forgiven, again and again.

Your Beloved.

As Kovalan reads through the epistle, tears course down his cheeks.

Kovalan [*to Kausikan*]: Tell Madhavi from me that I am filled with remorse for the wrong done to her. [*Scanning the message once again*] I find that this epistle contains what all I would like to convey to my parents and so, sir, will you please take it back with you to Poompuhar and give it to my father?

Kausikan [*sad that Kovalan is not returning*]: Yes, Kovalan.

Kausikan leaves, with the epistle.

23 Madhavi's Renunciation

Masathuvan's mansion in Poompuhar. Masathuvan is scanning the epistle.

Kovalan's voice: Cherished and Revered! My obeisance to you. No one but I myself am responsible for the flight, accompanied by wife and unknown even to fond parents. Hapless am I, with no cure to offer for a lacerated heart and I can only beg to be forgiven, again and again.

Your Beloved.

Masathuvan sighs and gazes into the distance. When he comes out of his abstraction, he finds Madhavi standing silent before him, with Manimekalai in her arms. Behind her are five maids bearing trays laden with gold.

Masathuvan [*surprised*]: May I know . . .?

Madhavi: Pardon me, sir, for the intrusion. I am the sinner who is the cause of the tragic happenings in your family. I am Madhavi. I have come now, sir, to return the gold which had been taken from your son, without my being aware of it. You would relieve a part of my burden of sorrow if you deign to accept what is yours.

Masathuvan: You have a heart of unalloyed gold, Madhavi, and I realise it only now.

Madhavi: My heart is past mending, sir, for I am a withered flower which the plant has cast off.

Masathuvan: Although it had been taken without your knowledge, this pile of gold was my son's gift to you, Madhavi, and it is a rule in our house that we never take back anything given once.

Madhavi: When I have lost the treasure of my love, what use is this transient gold to me, sir! Oh, please say once that you have forgiven this sinner!

Masathuvan [*moved to tears*]: Madhavi, my beloved daughter!

Madhavi [*breaking down*]: Manimekalai, my child, see for yourself what a noble family your mother has wrecked . . .

Masathuvan [*consoling her*]: Weep not, Madhavi . . . Let me see the child.

He takes the child in his arms and the thought that he is now a grandfather tickles him in spite of his grief. Manimekalai smiles up at him. Reminded poignantly of Kovalan's smile, his eyes fill with tears once again . . .

24 Near Mathurai

One way to Mathurai. The track winds through paddy-fields against the distant backdrop of blue hills. A thorn runs into Kannagi's foot and she gasps in pain.

Kovalan [*removing the thorn*]: There seems to be no end to the misery I am causing to you, Kannagi. [*Staring at the thorn*] I am far more callous than this thorn, for it only sought to hurt you in the foot when you stepped on it, whereas, without any provocation whatsoever, I inflicted a wound on your heart and that too, a wound which even Time cannot heal . . . Rather than see my Kannagi suffering like this, I would prefer to be blind and this timely thorn shall do me a service . .

He raises the thorn to his eye.

Kannagi [*crying out and catching hold of his hand*]: Oh, my Lord, what a terrible thing are you attempting? The only antidote to my sorrow is your comely grace and do you want to rob me of that also? Don't thrust me deeper in the slough of despond, my Lord, don't!

Kaunthi Adigal: Kovalan, how could you forget the maxim of the *Thirukkural* that the best weapon against adversity is a courageous smile? A hero is one who stands up to vicissitude, and why do you lose heart when you are so near your destination? The Pandyan capital Mathurai is almost within sight and don't you notice the fragrance from the bower of the Sangam-Tamil? Walk with cheer, my

children . . .

As they cross a field, an over-energetic fish, leaping too high from the irrigation canal, lands on the ground and squirms helplessly. Kaunthi Adigal hurries to its aid.

Kaunthi Adigal: This is how some people too behave. Without assessing the possible effect, they get into action and then find themselves marooned.

Kovalan [*with wry humour*]: It is my melancholy privilege, Mother, to be the living example of all your observations during our journey.

Kaunthi Adigal [*smiling, but not giving any other indication of having taken notice of Kovalan's remark*]: What a lovely fish! It is the emblem of the Pandyas and that is perhaps why it knows not fear.

She restores the fish to water and it swims away, in the exultation of freedom.

25 Nedunchezhian the Upright

A solid fort enclosing the vast city of Mathurai. Flag with the emblem of the fish flies proud on the mast. The voice of Nedunchezhian the Pandya king is heard assuring the people that justice shall reign supreme in the land,

Voice: In the court of the Pandya king, justice shall prevail, even if the skies fall . . .

King Nedunchezhian and Queen Kopperundevi are on the throne. Ministers and courtiers are at their appointed places. Two litigants stand in front of the king.

Nedunchezhian [*addressing the litigants*]: Both of you are scholars of repute and citizens of standing and I find it difficult to disbelieve either of you. [*To one of them*] Poet Arulalar, it is not disputed that the script of this literary work [*pointing to a set of palm-leaves*] is in your handwriting and on the face of this evidence the argument is valid that the author of the work could be only yourself. [*To the second litigant*] Poet Malaivanar, how do you propose to counter the evidence?

Malaivanar: I propose to explain it away, Your Majesty. [*The courtiers titter.*] Arulalar was my disciple and amanuensis and he wrote to my dictation.

Arulalar is taken aback by the audacity of the contention.

Arulalar: O Pandya king who nurtures the Tamil Sangam! on the greatness of Tamil, I swear that this literary work is wholly the product of my labour! At no time was Malaivanar my teacher!

Nedunchezhian: So it is a case of your word against Malaivanar's and as I said at the outset, I should not charge either of you with perjury. So I rule that the

authorship of this work has not been established beyond reasonable doubt. The property shall be confiscated and it shall be consigned to the fire here and now, while this Court is in session.

Malaivanar bows to the royal will in apparent regret, but Arulalar is beside himself with grief.

Arulalar [*pleading*]: No, Your Majesty, let it not be recorded in history that a bonfire was made of a Tamil work here in the Court of the Pandyas who have, from time immemorial, nursed the Tamil language and literature. I relinquish my claim and I appeal to you, sir, to issue a decree in favour of Malaivanar, so that the work may not be lost to the people.

Nedunchezhian: Truth has spoken and I decree that Arulalar is the real author of the literary work. He shall also get a reward of 5000 *kazhanjus* of gold to equip him to pursue his research studies. As for Malaivanar, he has been shown to be a plagiarist; the ignominy of the exposure is sufficient chastisement for him and I let him off with the warning that he should desist from being a drag on society. The Court shall now disperse.

The courtiers stand, as the king and the queen leave the hall.

26 Queen's Ornament

As the king and the queen walk through the corridor towards their private apartments, one of the queen's anklets slips off and falls to the ground with a musical clatter. The queen picks up the ornament, examines it and shows it to her consort who has stopped for her.

Queen: The clasp is broken, my Lord.

King [*calling*]: Hey, there! [*An officer of the palace hastens in, followed by a maid. Both of them bow and wait for orders*] Take this anklet straightaway to the Chief Goldsmith and order him to mend it. [*To the Queen*] Why don't you give the other anklet too?

Queen: I wouldn't like to be without an anklet, my Lord, and anyway, it is only a minor repair.

The officer takes the anklet to be mended and bows again, as the king and the queen leave.

The maid notices that the officer is gazing at the anklet avidly and she rags him.

Maid: Do not swallow it, sir, it would prove hard in digestion!

Officer [*startled*]: What a dangerous joke? Do you think I want to risk my head?

He goes off, with the ornament in his tight grasp.

* * *

The Chief Goldsmith's workshop-cum-residence. As the officer from the palace enters, work stops for a moment and the artisans look up in curiosity. The Chief Goldsmith

gets up and hurries to greet the officer.

Chief Goldsmith: Pleased to see you, sir. You must have come with some message from the palace.

Officer [*exhibiting the anklet*]: The clasp of the queen's anklet is broken and they want it to be mended quick.

Chief Goldsmith [*examining the anklet)*: Tell them, sir, that it will be ready by this time tomorrow.

The Chief Goldsmith places the anklet in the safe but before he can turn the key in the lock, he is distracted by the noise of hefty hammering from the anvil of a very junior assistant.

Chief Goldsmith [*rushing to the assistant*]: Is that the way to treat gold, you juvenile delinquent?

Taking the half-finished ornament from the assistant's anvil, he hands it over to a more experienced artisan.

Chief Goldsmith [*to the second assistant*]: Here, you complete this work. [*Turning to the junior assistant*] Learn to respect the royal metal first, fellow, or switch over to some other profession.

He returns to his place and turns the key in the lock, blissfully ignorant of the fact that in his brief absence the officer has abstracted the queen's anklet and concealed it in the folds of his dress.

Officer: So I shall tell them that the queen's anklet will be ready tomorrow.

Chief Goldsmith: Yes, sir.

He escorts the officer up to the entrance of the workshop.

27 Nobility in Simplicity

Kovalan and Kannagi have arrived at the outskirts of Mathurai, accompanied by Kaunthi Adigal. A pastoral song is heard being rendered in chorus and presently a group of boys and girls appears, herding cows and singing with gusto. The leader of the group, a very smart girl with bright eyes, identifies Kaunthi Adigal even from a distance and she comes running ahead of her friends.

Girl [*to Kaunthi Adigal*]: Our respects to you, Mother!

Kaunthi Adigal: My blessings, Ayyai. Where is your mother Madhari?

Ayyai: She has gone to offer rice to the monks and she will be back in a few moments. Let us go home, Mother, and . . . [*looks enquiringly at Kovalan and Kannagi.*]

Kaunthi Adigal: They are our guests, Ayyai. [*Introducing*] Kovalan and Kannagi.

Ayyai: Welcome to Mathurai, dear guests!

Kaunthi Adigal [*to Kovalan and Kannagi, as they follow Ayyai and the group of cowherds*]: Ayyai's mother Madhari is a pious and hospitable woman and you would be delighted to meet her . . .

* * *

Madhari's dwelling. Though modest, the place is spick and span and it is easy to see that the family inhabiting the abode is dedicated to plain living as an outcome of noble thinking. Kaunthi Adigal, Kovalan, Kannagi and Ayyai are awaiting Madhari's return from her mission of feeding the monks.

Ayyai: There . . . mother is coming . . . [*calling*] Mamma, mamma!

Madhari [*seeing Kaunthi Adigal first*]: Welcome, Adigal, my obeisance to you.

Kaunthi Adigal: Madhari, I have brought two guests with me and they have become my children in the course of our journey. [*Introducing*] Kovalan and his wife Kannagi. They are of such prominent stock that if it comes to be known in Mathurai that they are here, they would be accorded an opulent reception by some of the wealthiest houses in the city. But I have brought them here because you are nobler than the noblest and also because they prefer to stay in a quiet place. You must keep them here and look after them until they are on their own.

Madhari: It is a privilege for me, Adigal, to do your bidding. [*To Kovalan and Kannagi*] Welcome, friends, this is your home now. Kannagi, my daughter Ayyai will be your constant companion.

Kaunthi Adigal: My responsibility is over now. Let me take leave of you all.

Kannagi [*in tearful gratitude*]: Mother, you have been such a source of strength to us ...

Kaunthi Adigal: And now Madhari will take my place. [*To Madhari*] Madhari, I am committing Kannagi to your care; [*emphasising*] she is your ward and I shall hold you personally responsible for her welfare.

They bid Adigal an affectionate farewell.

28 Theft on Record

Sanctum in the Pandya palace.

King Nedunchezhian is engrossed in writing. Palm-leaves are arranged neatly, on the carved desk in front of him. Kopperundevi enters.

Kopperundevi: I wonder why the anklet has not been brought yet... The goldsmith seems to be taking his own time, to mend it ... [*Apparently oblivious of her presence, Nedunchezhian keeps writing.*]

Kopperundevi [*sulking*]: Here I am, voicing a problem, and for all the attention you bestow on me, I might as well be talking to myselfl What is there so very urgent to write about, my Lord, even while I am waiting here?

Nedunchezhian [*looking up, as from a trance*]: Oh, I am writing a poem, on the importance of learning . . .

Kopperundevi [*still sulking*]: When it is not an exotic poem, it is the thunder of battle. That is all the subject one hears in this place. [*Angrily*] Let me remind you, my Lord, that this is our bedchamber and not a classroom—nor a military camp!

Nedunchezhian [*musing*]: Tamil is a zephyr that blows whenever and wherever it enters; it needs no password nor a coat of arms. Listen, my dear, to what I have written here,

Acquire the priceless
treasure of learning
through timely acts of
aid to the preceptor
and by offering
material wealth
and through service
steady and sincere . . . .

A maid enters in some agitation and interrupts.

Maid: Your Majesty, the Chief Goldsmith of our palace seeks an urgent interview.

Nedunchezhian: Well. . . [*He gets up and goes to the doorway.*]

Chief Goldsmith [*in trepidation*]: Obeisance to you, sire!

Nedunchezhian [*solicitously*]: Why are you trembling, my man? Anything that matters?

Chief Goldsmith [*crying out*]: Mercy, Your Majesty, mercy . . .

Nedunchezhian: Compose yourself, Goldsmith, and let me know what ails you.

Chief Goldsmith: Oh, Your Majesty, I am not to blame. I had taken all precautions to keep the anklet in a secure place. I myself deposited it in an iron-safe, locked the safe and kept the key next to my heart. And yet, when I unlocked the safe this morning, the anklet was not to be found. [*Wailing*] I am undone, oh, I am undone...

Nedunchezhian [*perturbed*]: What, is the Queen's anklet lost? If you had kept it safe, how could it have disappeared without your knowledge? Goldsmith, answer me straight, "Whom do you suspect of the felony?"

Chief Goldsmith: Whom shall I point out, Your Majesty? A hundred assistants work under me.

Nedunchezhian [*thoughtful*]: Well, assemble all the hundred goldsmiths in our Court tomorrow. I will myself conduct an inquiry and apprehend the culprit.

Chief Goldsmith: I will carry out the order, Your Majesty. Once again I pray for forgiveness and mercy . . .

The Chief Goldsmith retires, leaving Nedunchezhian pensive and frowning.

29 Message of the Single Anklet

Kitchen in Madhari's dwelling. Kannagi is busy cooking food. Kovalan is seated near the doorstep, a picture of dejection.

Kannagi [*calling softly*]: My Lord . . . why this spell of depression?

Kovalan: I was thinking, my dear, as to what best I can do to make a living and seek to rebuild our fortune.

Kannagi: The anklets I wear were your present to me, my Lord, on the day of our marriage. They are worth 5000 *kazhanjus* of gold.

Kovalan: The very thought of selling your anklets stabs my heart like a hundred daggers, Kannagi . . . [*Drifting back into the past*] The pageantry of the celebration is still etched on my memory ... the gorgeous procession through the streets of Poompuhar and the grand function witnessed by the elite of the city . . . With my own hands 1 fastened the anklets, while my demure bride blushed in fond pride and stood in tremulous joy on the threshold of a new life . . . And today in the very same hands, here in Mathurai, am I to carry the anklets for sale? . . . The chiming of your anklets is a constant reminder to me of the only ornament 1 have not robbed my wife of, and should I have to sink deeper in felony? . . .

Kannagi: Leave off such sombre meditations, my Lord, so that the past may not be a drag on the future. Food is ready and it is cooked all by myself. It seems ages since I served you. Please come, my Lord, 1 am so eager to resume my duty . . .

Kovalan takes food and the happiness of their early days is recaptured almost in full, for the couple.

Kannagi; How was the cooking, my Lord?

Kovalan [*cheerfully*]: More wonderful than ever, Kannagi, perhaps because this was the last meal you have cooked for me.

Kannagi [*startled*]: Why so, my Lord?

Kovalan: Once I re-establish business, do you think 1 will allow you to go near the oven? We shall have servants for all that work and your sole duty shall be to remain my queen and bride all the time.

Kannagi [*playfully*]: What extremes in mood? Only a few moments ago you were so dejected, but now you feel strong enough to conquer the world, my Lord! [*Offering neatly folded betel-leaves to him*] When the anklets are sold, my Lord, remember to purchase some silk-garments and ornaments for yourself; I must see you again decked in finery . . .

Ayyai comes from the front room.

Ayyai: Brother, brother , . ,

Kovalan: Yes, child . . .

Ayyai: Please don't take sister Kannagi with you to the city. We are arranging a folk-dance here in our hamlet and we are eager that sister should witness it.

Kovalan: Go ahead, Ayyai. Kannagi is not coming with me.

Ayyai runs away, delighted.

Kovalan: So, shall I start for the city, Kannagi? [*Kannagi stoops to unfasten her anklets. His resolution gives way at the sight*] No, my dear, I would rather be a labourer and spend the rest of my life in the hut of austerity than convert your anklets into coins and build a fortune on that base.

Kannagi [*determined, looking up*]: Haven't I told you, my Lord, that we would be able to secure any number of such anklets, once your business is resumed ?

Kovalan: Wait, Kannagi, for the last time let me see you walking with the anklets on your feet . . .

She obliges and Kovalan struggles with his emotions.

Kannagi: How much you scare me, my Lord, by using expressions like 'last meal' and 'last time'!

Kovalan [*embracing her*]: Don't be frightened, Kannagi. Haven't you said, again and again, that good times are just round the corner for us?

Kannagi: Yes, my Lord, I am convinced about that.

Having unfastened one anklet and given it to him, she is about to remove the second anklet too, when he stops her.

Kovalan: Let it be there, Kannagi; the proceeds from one anklet would be adequate for us. And the single anklet still with you will chime and tinkle to hammer a lesson into my conscience, so that I may never prove false to you again, even in the region of thought! . . . Bid me leave, Kannagi, and wish me well in my venture.

Kannagi: In my mind I already feel the effulgence of the future, my Lord! [*Bidding him leave*] You must be very careful in this unfamiliar city and you must also return soon.

Kovalan [*boyish*]: You are instructing me as if I am a child, Kannagi!

Kannagi [*shy*]: Is it not time that I trained myself?

Kovalan pats her affectionately. Chorus music is heard, indicating the commencement of the folk dance.

Kovalan [*stepping out*]: Be of good cheer, Kannagi. I will come back very soon with the capital for our new life.

He leaves. Ayyai and her friends enter and take Kannagi with them to the dance.

30 Anklet for Sale

Broad street in Mathurai city. Kovalan is in conversation with a prosperous-looking citizen, who is examining the anklet, in unconcealed admiration.

Citizen: What a marvellous piece! If you bring the twin of this anklet too, I am willing to take both and you can name the price.

Kovalan [*trying to avoid any reference to the second anklet*]: Don't you know anyone, sir, who would be willing to buy this anklet for the rubies in it, which could be taken out for the purpose of making any other ornament?

Citizen [*returning the anklet*]: The appropriate man for you would be the Chief Goldsmith of the palace who might be able to make use of the parts of this single anklet.

Kovalan: Thank you, sir.

He leaves.

Citizen [*talking to himself*]: Seems to belong to a noble family . . . must have fallen on evil days . . .

Kovalan, looking a little tired and very self-conscious, meets two other local citizens.

Citizen [*looking at the anklet*]: What superb craftsmanship! I think you better take the anklet to the Chief Goldsmith of the palace.

Citizen's friend: Think of him and he is there! Here comes the Chief Goldsmith himself.

The Chief Goldsmith comes, accompanied by two persons.

Citizen [*accosting*]: Master-Goldsmith, here is someone with a magnificent anklet for sale.

Chief Goldsmith [*startled*]: Anklet? [*opening his eyes wide on seeing the ornament, he addresses Kovalan*] I might be able to help. You don't belong to Mathurai, do you?

Kovalan [*pleased, that he has found an opening*]: No, I come from Poompuhar.

Chief Goldsmith: Actually, I was looking for just such an anklet. Will you kindly wait with the anklet in this hall here, while I discuss the matter with the king and return? [*To the two persons who came with him*] Keep him company until I am back.

The two persons get the import of his special gesture and they nod in comprehension. The Chief Goldsmith hurries away. Kovalan settles down to wait.

31 Sceptre Bends

Sanctum in the Pandyan Palace. King Nedunchezhian is all dressed and ready to go to Court. Kopperundevi is still on the couch, a sullen queen.

Nedunchezhian: It is getting late, dear, and you will have to hurry.

Kopperundevi [*rebelling*]: I am not coming to Court, for I dare not be seen in public, without my anklet.

Nedunchezhian: But have I not told you that I want to examine the suspects in the Court today and apprehend the culprit?

Kopperundevi [*sardonic*]: And by the time you complete all formalities the anklet would have travelled a long distance. You are so preoccupied with writing poems and studying military science and attending to public affairs that you do not have the time to bother overmuch about the ankle of your consort staying deprived of its ornament.

Nedunchezhian [*sternly*]: Do not forget, Kopperundevi, that the country is above even you or me. For a trivial anklet, should a queen throw a tantrum like this?

Kopperundevi [*raging*]: Yes, a trivial anklet indeed! That is because I have myself become trivial to you. [*She is near tears.*]

Nedunchezhian [*unmoved*]: Once again I am asking you, are you coming to Court or not?

Kopperundevi: Without my anklet, 1 will not take one step from this place.

Nedunchezhian goes out. The scene has upset him and he is in a black mood.

* * *

Nedunchezhian is walking along the corridor and the officer follows him at a respectful distance. The Chief Goldsmith comes from the opposite direction and bows low to the king.

Nedunchezhian: Yes? . . .

Chief Goldsmith [*exultantly*]: The man who stole the Queen's anklet has been apprehended, Your Majesty.

The officer is in mortal fear.

Nedunchezhian: Where is he now?

Chief Goldsmith: Having mended the clasp, he was trying to dispose of the anklet. I have kept him in a safe place and come straight to report the matter to you.

Nedunchezhian: A thief in my land! [*To the officer*] *Konru varugha* (*which is Tamil for "kill and return"*.)

The officer bows and sets off with the Chief Goldsmith.

32 Virtue Mowed down

The Chief Goldsmith, the officer and a group of guardsmen arrive at the hall where Kovalan is waiting.

Kovalan: Master-Goldsmith, was your mission successful?

Chief Goldsmith: Of course. But your mission, alas, has failed.

Kovalan [*his face has fallen*]: So the king does not need the anklet?

Chief Goldsmith [*flippantly*]: Why should the king want an anklet at all? It is the queen who requires it!

Kovalan [*confused*]: Master-Goldsmith . . .

Chief Goldsmith [*interrupting*]: Hand over the anklet to him [*pointing at the officer.*]

Kovalan does so.

Officer [*interrogating Kovalan*]: How did you come by this anklet?

Kovalan: It is my wife's.

Officer: What is the reason for your selling it?

Kovalan: The buyer does not require that information.

Officer [*flushing*]: A competent thief indeed!

Kovalan [*shocked*]: Thief! . . . Master-Goldsmith, what is the meaning of all this? Is it proper to foist a baseless accusation on me?

Chief Goldsmith: Was it proper on your part to steal the anklet of the Queen?

Kovalan [*angered*]: Who stole the anklet of your Queen? Lacking the capability to trace the culprit, should you, in your monumental inefficiency, go about searching for scapegoats?

Officer: Hold your tongue, fellow. Our king is distressed beyond words to learn that one of the five deadly sins has sneaked into his land in your person.

Kovalan : Then let me meet the king and tell him that 1 am no thief; that I am not a sinner to any except my devoted wife whom I set adrift in the sea of tears when I strayed from her to liquidate all my wealth—silver and gold and gems in heaps; and, that, taking refuge here in Mathurai in order to make a fresh beginning in life, I had to stoop to the extent of selling my wife's anklet. I am a devoted child of Tamil and my thoughts are charged with the lofty melody of Tamil; living on others is foreign to the traditions of our family and do you feel I would ever covet another's property? I am confident of securing justice from the renowed King Nedunchezhian and so, sirs, please lead me to his presence now itself!

Officer: Do you think the King is your bodyguard to be at your beck and call?

Kovalan: He is Guard to the land, for he guards justice and righteousness, the rule of law and the tenets of equity; and above all, he guards Tamil, the language of love and beauty and truth. I have heard it said in foreign countries too, that Nedunchezhian cannot countenance an injustice of the size of an atom even. Let such a king look at my face and say whether he finds there a trace of felony; he is an expert in physiognomy and I shall abide by his verdict. Take me to him, for I cannot bear to be under a cloud, even for a moment.

Officer: Let me tell you, veteran thief, that our Monarch will not deign to look at the face of a sinner like you!

Kovalan (retorting): After looking at your face, I am sure that the King would only be too glad to see any other face!

Chief Goldsmith: Impertinence will take you nowhere, man. Having been caught with the goods on you, why don't you realize that discretion lies in being humble and come out with the truth?

Kovalan: Master-Goldsmith, I am putting to you a straight question, 'Am I a thief'?

Chief Goldsmith: And I am giving you a straight answer, "Yes, you are!"

Kovalan (frantic): I, a thief!.... Kannagi, your husband is a thief; and that is the verdict of the Pandya land!... When you bid me leave this morning I saw tears in

your eyes; were they in presage of this blot on my character, dear? ... I had hurled the harp of my life in the dust of neglect and now I am served right for my transgression.... And when the news or this ignominy reaches you, how shall your heart bear the lightning-shock? When you became my wife, you must have dreamt of a future bright and placid, like an emerald-isle in the centre of the lake of contentment, where it is either sunshine or moonlight always, with not a streak of darkness in between and with not a murmur of sorrow in the air. Like a wanton boy I wrecked that dream and made your life a raging volcano; and not stopping with that, I have secured for you the title that you are the wife of a thief! - ... O Priceless Gem of my life, even as I walked here, I planned to build our home anew, brick by brick, and when the terrace-garden touched the skies, to rest my head on your lap, with the twinkling stars alone being witness to our love in fulfilment ... And now I am nothing more than a common thief, here in the streets of Mathurai.... You be my judge, Kannagi, and tell me, "Am I a thief? Am I a thief?"

Kovalan's voice rises to a crescendo. Even as his cry of anguish reverberates in the air, the officer gives a signal to the chief of the guardsmen who thereupon mows down Kovalan with one sweep of his sword...

33 "My Husband a Thief ?"

Madhari's hamlet. The concluding sequence in the folk dance is a tableau on grief. Kannagi, in the front row of the audience, is lost in the eloquence of the theme.

Madhari rushes in, like a storm.

Madhari (crying out): Kannagi! Kannagi!

Kannagi (shocked out of her meditations): Ah…

Madhari (wailing): They have branded Kovalan a thief and killed him too, my child!

Kannagi swoons.

* * *

Madhari's dwelling. Kannagi opens her eyes and sits up, without being conscious of her own movements. Scalding tears from her eyes fall to the ground but she is not conscious of that either.

She looks around but does not recognize Madhari or Ayyai or others. She looks beyond and keeps staring at the image of the recent past, of Kovalan taking leave of her, to go to the city with her anklet in his hand…

Kovalan's voice: Shall I start for the city, Kannagi?

Kannagi (crying out): No, my Lord, you should not go-- they will kill you there! (*Talking to herself)* Yes, they have done him to death and that too, after calling him thief… My Lord! You, a thief! … … No, No…

She runs out in a frenzy, toppling the oil-lamp as she rushes past. Madhari and others follow her. In the empty hut, the flame from the oil-lamp licks a wooden post and leaps upward. Soon the roof is ablaze. Fire spreads through the deserted hamlet and fanned by a strong wind, it races towards the city of Mathurai, as if at the bidding of Kannagi the symbol of chastity.

34 Kannagi Swears Vengeance

Hall in Mathurai City where Kovalan stayed last. Kannagi rushes in like a gale and falls on the blood-spattered body of her husband.

Kannagi: Have they reduced you to a corpse, my Lord! When I bid you leave and sent you to the city with my anklet, I predicted that good times were just round the corner for us. I had no means of knowing then that untimely death was lying in ambush for you! How did you allow yourself to be abducted by death, my Lord, and that too with such a terrible allegation branded on your forehead? There in Madhari's hamlet I was watching a tableau on grief while here in this hall of injustice you were the hero of a tragedy, preparing to set me adrift once again in the sea of sorrow, with my heart breaking into myriad bits. Did not the halo of integrity around your head, the light of courage in your eyes and the smile of truth on your lips convince your enemies that you were innocent beyond the shadow of doubt? Was it in anticipation of your end that you asked to see me walk, wearing both the anklets? Combing your hair in the aura of *akhil*, I added the fragrance of sandalwood to the gold of your complexion. And after food, I gave you betel-leaves of bright green treated with milk-white lime and spiced areca nut; the red of your lips coursed through my veins in pulsations of

sheer joy and I was waiting for you to come and resume the dialogue that transcends spoken words. And here I am now, deluded and deserted once again, and should I not at least know the reason, my Lord, why I am being chastised for no fault of mine? Did you not say but the other night that I was the pure gold of your life, the pearl, the fragrance flawless and the source of light; was it all only an exercise in imagery which evaporated when the stars set and the sun rose, like the dew-drops on grass? Speak to me but once, my Lord, just once, won't you? … [*Rising like an enraged tigress*] Since you will not speak, I will force the whole world to speak for you. The world has got to accept that you were not a thief and the Pandya king who wields a sceptre bent will have to bow his head in shame. The savages who shed your blood must be crushed and the city of Mathurai with a blot on its emblem should be wiped off the face of the earth. That shall be my sole mission from this moment and this I swear, my Lord, on your blood. [*She dips her finger in Kovalan's blood and applies a tilak on her forehead.*] [*In laughter terrible*] Blood for blood, blood for blood….

She rushes out as she came, like a gale. Unfastening the single anklet and taking it in her hand, and with tresses unloosed she flies in the direction of the Pandya palace.

35 Volcano in Court

Kannagi at the entrance to the palace. Her appearance strikes fear in the hearts of the guards.

Kannagi (ordering the guards): Go forthwith and tell your Monarch that a woman who moves, though lifeless, has come to meet him, with tears in her eyes and a single anklet in her hand…

One of the guards hurries in to convey the message to the king.

* * *

Court of the Pandya king. A guard enters and bows low to the Throne.

Guard: A woman is at the entrance, your Majesty, and she is in tears. She insists on seeing you.

Nedunchezhian: Admit her.

Kannagi enters, like a thunderstorm and volcano. The courtiers gasp at the sight of her.

Nedunchezhian (kindly): Lady in great grief, who are you?

Kannagi (fearless): O Monarch who acts in haste! (*the courtiers are shocked at the form of address; the king, however, is impassive*) I come from where a ruler of yore wrote himself into history by offering his own flesh in order to save a dove in distress; and where, a successor of his trussed up and laid his son on the ground and ran the royal chariot over the little prince who had caused the death of a calf under the wheels. I am from the land of Karikalan the Great and my birthplace is

Poompuhar, the capital city of the Chola Kingdom. I am the daughter-in-law of Masathuvan the merchant-prince…

Nedunchezhian: What is your petition in this Court?

Kannagi: Hasty Monarch who has ascended the throne to blunt the glory of the three royal houses of Tamilnad, cradled by three seas yielding pearls, and in the shade of three flags; with three drums; and three *Sangams* to nurture Tamil! Cultivate the patience to hear in full who I am, before you are ready for my petition…

Nedunchezhian: Who, then, are you?

Kannagi: I am Kannagi, who have come here with the single anklet, with the dust of the street on my person, with tresses unloosed and with brow in a frown. I am Kannagi who have come, making bold to revile you in your own Court. That is all you know so far.

O Pandya king, whose fame is spread far and wide! Your envoys are there in the Court of Rome and here are Romans in this Court of yours as envoys and warriors. Your emblem is known in distant climes and your flag is flying very high. In an act to break the flag-mast and make it come down in a crash, in an act to bring the contumely of foreigners on your anointed head, your tyrannous Sceptre inflicted the precipitate sentence of death on one by name Kovalan. Know now, Monarch, that I am Kannagi, the wife of Kovalan!

Nedunchezhian (exclaiming): Kovalan's wife! The wife of the thief who stole the anklet!

Kannagi: Enough, Monarch, guard your tongue, although you guard nothing else. Was my husband a thief? No! On the other hand, the thieves are those evil men who foisted the blame on him.

Nedunchezhian: Let not grief and fury blind your vision, Kannagi. Your husband was caught red-handed and don't you know that justice in Tamilnad prescribes death for the thief?

Kannagi: O Pandya king who cites the Scripture of justice! What a mockery have you made of justice here, where the law is not to protect the good but to serve the needs of the mighty! That is why you poured the treasure of my life into the abyss of death. O you who go in pomp on a caparisoned elephant and in the shade of an umbrella gorgeous, tell me why a case which ought to have been heard in this Court was disposed of in an abandoned hall somewhere in the city. Tell me, Monarch, why the sword of the executioner moved so fast, even without heeding the defence of the accused. Is that to be called justice and righteousness and rule of law and good governance rolled into one? Dare you call yourself a king practising virtue and upholding truth?

Nedunchezhian: Kannagi, the anklet in your husband's hand was my wife's.

Kannagi: It was not. The anklet in my husband's hand was mine and mine alone.

Nedunchezhian: I do not believe you.

Kannagi: Who are you to believe me, and did anyone ask you to do so? I have come to this Court with a case against you and since you are the accused, you have no manner of title or right to sit in judgement. The noble Elders who have formed the Assembly here, they shall be judges now and let them give the correct verdict. (*addressing the House*).

Revered Gentlemen
of upright conduct,
I address my plea
to each conscience.
Take the oath
on your mother dear,
on Tamil pure
and on the people of the land.
Swerve not
from the path of Justice
out of fear
of the might of the King,
this Pandyan here
who put to rout
the Aryan hordes.
And draw not
the curtain of his fame
over the guilt
I charge him with.

The allegation, gentlemen, was that my husband Kovalan had stolen the anklet of Queen Kopperundevi and the sentence, of death, has already been pronounced and carried out.

My case is that it was a hasty verdict, delivered without inquiry or investigation or trial; and I hold Nedunchezhian here responsible for it.

Seniormost minister: Are you submitting any evidence in support of your contention?

Kannagi:: Yes, the anklet I hold here in my hand. It was the twin of this anklet that my husband brought to the city for sale and some evil men murdered him and abstracted the ornament, at the behest of the accused here on the throne.

Nedunchezhian: Then, what of the anklets worn now, by the Queen?

Kannagi: Of the pair she is wearing now, one anklet is mine without doubt. O Pandya King who have defiled this court of law, a thousand questions you are aching to ask, in order to wash the blood clean from your hand! Had you but shown a fraction of this care to cross-examine my husband, would you not have retained your title for evenhanded justice? And would not my husband be still in the land of the living?

Seniormost minister: Are you in a position to prove that one of the anklets worn by the queen now belongs to you?

Kannagi: Is there any use, my proving it? Would you be able to fit the severed head of my husband on to his shoulders again and would you be able to bring him back to life? You cannot, I know. Hear me further. My husband's head fell, only on his death; but your heads shall hang down even while you are alive, and that I shall see to, by making you realize that you are deprived of your honour, that you have taken leave of righteousness and that your justice is in tatters. Now, answer this question, O Pandya of Mathurai! What form the contents of your wife's anklets – pearls or rubies?

Nedunchezhian: Pearls, from Korkai.

Kannagi: My anklets contain rubies.

Nedunchezhian: Here, let me see… (*he turns to the queen who unfastens her anklets and hands them to him. He dashes one of the anklets against the floor. The anklet breaks, to scatter pearls.*)

Nedunchezhian (holding high the second of the anklets): This was the anklet, stolen by Kovalan.

As before, he breaks the anklet. Rubies, red as blood-drops, roll on the floor.

Nedunchezhian (dazed): Ah…

The courtiers too are in consternation.

Kannagi: Are you still in doubt? Here is my second anklet.

In a fury of vengeance, she hurls the anklet on the floor with all the strength at her command. There is a shower of rubies.

Kannagi:: What else have you to say, Pandya? Ministers of the Council and Elders of this Court, what, is there no answer to this from any of you? Your tongues are tied and your heads hang in shame; who dare talk of justice now? Pandyan Nedunchezhian's virtue and valour and power – are they not less than the dust

under his chariot-wheels now? What a fall, Nedunchezhian? You are an object of derision for the whole of Tamilnad and *Thirukkural,* the scripture of the Tamil people, points an accusing finger at your awry sceptre! *(Her voice takes on a tremor that strikes terror into the hearts of the courtiers*) Having lost your honour, do you still need a marbled hall and a terraced palace? What is your title worth now, that you cling to your throne? Having held justice to ridicule, why does your trembling hand still hold the sceptre? The cold wind of Truth is blowing belatedly into this Court and is that why you cower there in the shade of your gorgeous Umbrella? Archers and swordsmen, cavalry and elephant-brigade— will these shield you from the verdict of history? Your tears are too late, Pandyan, but weep all the same and as you do so, think how you thrust me back into the darkness of grief when I had worked my way to the distant dawn. When my defenceless husband fell a prey to your sword of tyranny, would he not have writhed in agony even as he bled to death? And now my words stab your heart like a hundred swords and there is not a soul to pity you as you squirm like a worm cast in the noonday sun….

Nedunchezhian (his voice broken): Kannagi, your husband was not a thief! I am the thief, for I have robbed you of your husband. In my haste, I uttered the order, "Kill and return" (*konru varugha)* instead of saying "Bring him here" (*kondu varugha)* and the fatal slip has brought a punishment worse then death on my head… O Tamil, O motherland, O my mother, forgive me, although I am undeserving of any grace…

He slides down from his throne and falls full length on the floor. Soon his body is still.

Kopperundevi: O, my Lord, my Lord! *(she too falls.)*

36 Mathurai in Flames

Kannagi (her fury still unabated): Blood for blood! Death and destruction! The city of Mathurai which could not prevent the murder of my husband, let it be razed to the ground. Let mansions crumble and mounds arise. Let the very earth split and devour the sinful. Let dust get churned up and blot out the sun. Let fire spread and leave nothing behind, except its own spark – the spark of justice that shall glow through time!

The laughter of her vengeance rises above the roar of the raging fire which threatens to burn up even the skies.

People run for their lives but the fire catches them up and they go down with hideous cries. The Chief Goldsmith, the officer who stole the Queen's anklet, the guardsmen who surrounded and killed Kovalan – all of them are swallowed up by the flames.

Kannagi, still with tresses unloosed, seems to lead the fire mile upon mile, until she leaves the boundary of Mathurai…

37 March to the North

On the bank of the River Periyar,

Senguttuvan with Venmaal.

Senguttuvan (in angry laughter): Did the Kanaka-Vijayas dare to deride Tamilnad, the homeland of such a heroic woman as Kannagi! What audacity and hardened villainy on their part! Here was Nedunchezhian who sacrificed his life at the altar of justice, and his Queen Kopperundevi who followed his lead even beyond death. Shall I rest, while aliens scoff at the land of unparalleled valour? No, a hundred times, no! Let those kings of the North get ready for a showdown on the field of battle. I shall conquer them and march them to the South, with the rock for the statue of Kannagi, loaded on their heads. Let the war-drums roll and the call go forth to all the warriors of our land...

The scene shifts to the Chera Capital Vanchi.

Senguttuvan: Glory to you, my men, who have stepped forth to teach a lesson to the enemies of Tamilnad. The challenge is an invitation to us to demonstrate our valour and the North shall tremble under the tread of our legions. Ignorant of the alphabet of heroism, they have gone to the extent of mocking at our emblems of the bow and the tiger and the fish, engraved there on the rock of the Himalayas. The fancy-names of the flippants are Uttaran and Vichitran and Sivedhan and

Bhairavan and heading the mob are the Kanaka-Vijayas. From the plains of the Ganga have they dared the might of the Cauveri, and on behalf of Tamilnad I say 'The challenge is accepted'. The fight shall be to the finish and the menace of their bravado has to be eradicated once and for all!

Tumultuous applause. As it subsides, the Chief Priest rises to ask a question.

Chief Priest (to Senguttuvan): Your Majesty, the challenge is to the Chola and the Pandya kings too and so, do you have to shoulder the entire burden of the expedition?

Senguttuvan: It is the honour of Tamilnad that has been challenged and an immediate answer is called for in terms of action. My brother-kings you have mentioned might not be in a position to react militantly just at present, but we shall not make that an excuse to postpone the day of reckoning.

By doubting the valour of the Tamils, our foes have held out an affront to all that lends substance to our culture and civilization. They have sought to denigrate Valluvar, the author of our code supreme, poets Sathanar and Ilango and Paranar here in this Assembly whose works shall outlive time and the innumerable artists of peace and war and wisdom who enable us to live in dignity. Let us march to strike the words of scorn from the lips of the detractors. 'Victory or death' is our motto, my men, for honour is dearer to us than life…

The warriors respond with full-throated battle-cries and the great army sets out.

38 Mission Accomplished

North India. Senguttuvan the Victorious surveys the scene of battle. His commander-in-chief Villavankothai is by his side.

Senguttuvan (exultant): We have made short work of them, Villavan. What is this place called?

Villavankothai: It is known as Kuyilaluvam, Your Majesty.

Senguttuvan: Kuyilaluvam shall be enshrined in military history. What surprises me, Villavan, is that Kanaka and Vijaya are not to be found anywhere. I shall hate to think even of our enemies that they fled from the field of battle rather than embrace a heroic end.

Villavankothai: It is fact that they have escaped in disgrace, Your Majesty. Reports indicate that they might have done so, disguised in saffron robes!

Senguttuvan: What a shame! And they were the brave who rated our valour low!

A group of Chera warriors drag Kanaka and Vijaya to the presence of Senguttuvan. The captive kings are in the clothing of monks.

Senguttuvan: Our thunderous opponents seem to have achieved renunciation in the heat of the battle… Well, ye valiants, you must be familiar with all the ancient legends; will you please answer a few questions on the subject? To start with, could you tell me the duration of the war between the devas and the asuras?

Kanaka [*shamefaced and sullen*]: 18 years.

Senguttuvan: And how long did the battle last between Rama and Ravana?

Vijaya: 18 months

Senguttuvan What of the war of Bhaarata?

Kanaka: It raged for 18 days.

Senguttuvan : I find that the figure is etched on your memory. Let me brand it deeper by reminding you that Senguttuvan's war in the North was crowned with success in 18 brief *nazhigais**!

Kanaka and Vijaya [*together*]: We plead for mercy, sir!

Senguttuvan: We do not have the authority to pardon you. That prerogative rests with Taminad and it is on the soil of the South that you have to kneel and pray for forgiveness and freedom.

Villavan [*to Senguttuvan*]: 32 months have elapsed, Your Majesty, since our army set out from Vanchi.

Senguttuvan: Yes, Villavan, but it has been time fruitfully spent. Let us return, after hewing rock from the Himalayas, for the statue of Kannagi. Kanaka and Vijaya here shall have the honour of carrying the rock to Tamilnad. Let them realize the weight of their penance, ere they receive the benefit of the magnanimity of our land…

* * *

The Statue of Kannagi has been installed and is being consecrated at a solemn function attended by a vast concourse. Kings and princes are present, at the invitation of Senguttuvan; notable among them are the rulers of Malava and Kongu, and King Kayavahu of Lanka. The poets and men of letters are led by Ilango and Sathanar.

A wave of respectful silence spreads through the congregation, from the fringes, as a nun enters, leading a child. The nun is Madhavi and the child is her daughter Manimekalai. With a faraway look in her eyes, Madhavi walks up to the Statue and deposits her daughter at Kannagi's feet.

The child gazes in wonderment at the deity and at the assembly plunged in momentary silence, too deep for words. As yet, Manimekalai, of course, has no means of knowing that she herself is to be the heroine of an epic, to be written by Sathanar, the sequel to Ilango's Silappathikaram which is the Tale of the Anklet.

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* *nazhigai* = a unit of time equivalent to 24 minutes.

II
One Act Plays

Preface

It is interesting to note that these one-act plays were mainly written for films. Writers like Kalaignar were inspired by Swami Sankara Das and Pammal Sambanda Mudaliar, the pioneering Tamil playwrights. Moreover, it was a common practice in the pre-Independence India to sing patriotic songs not caring for the propriety of the stage, nor caring for any relevance to the story. Such diversions were not treated as violations but welcomed by the audience.

One such device is introducing a play within a play, in the manner of some of Shakespearean plays. It was a welcome trend from the point of view of the spectators as it provided variety and enabled them to see the special talents of the artistes.

For writers like Kalaignar it served as a platform and a forum to discuss certain socially relevant topics, such as love between the prince and a low class woman as in *Anarkali*, or as in *Socrates* to spread rationalistic ideas, and the need to suggest and justify Periyar E.V.R' s social reform movement, or to maintain and project the past glory of Dravidian culture and valour as in *Cheran Senguttuvan.*

An important thing to note is that almost all sentences end with exclamation marks. Rarely does one come across a full stop. This attitude of the writer shows his intention to make all speeches declamatory, using highly emotive language. The style was also meant to suit the particular actor who was to deliver the speech. In most instances, it was the playwright's close friend Sivaji Ganesan.

Talking about the style, mention must be made about the fondness of the writer to use a lot of alliteration, assonance and internal rhymes. Though it was practically prose, the tendency to make it poetic is pre-eminent, which invests Kalaignar's language with its characteristic flavour and appeal and by which his propagandist material is transmuted into aesthetic stuff.

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Scene – 1

Garden

(*A love duet by Anarkali and Saleem. From a distance observes Raja Mann Singh.*)

Saleem: Anarkali! I look for a means of not parting from you even for a moment. I don't find it!

Anar: You are a warrior! What, don't you know? Only when permanent peace has come to stay in the world forever, and when conditions so improve that white doves, instead of vultures, start hovering around can there be uninterrupted love between lovers in the homes of warriors. Isn't it so, my darling?

Saleem: Anarkali! Night takes leave without telling us; it kills us without truly killing. My love! . . . Shall I take leave?

Anar: Yes, duty calls you back!

Saleem: Your magnetic eyes prevent me. I feel that too. But . . . .

Anar: It is courtesy which compels my mouth to bid you farewell, while at the same time comforting my heart with the hope of meeting you tomorrow.

Saleem: This humble sepoy (soldier) should not be a cause for a trifling error to happen in the reign of Akbar, my dear!

Anar: (embracing) Dear mine!

Saleem: See you later, my dear. . . ! (*exeunt*)

(*Raja Maan Singh leaves the place with a resolution in his mind*)

Scene – 2

Anarkali's house

(Forgetful of the world, Anarkali keeps moving towards her house in great joy. As she enters, she is startled to find Raja Mann Singh standing there.)

Anar: Who is it?

Raja: Raja Mann Singh!

Anar: Raja Mann Singh!

Raja: Yes. . . . Minister to Emperor Akbar; Administrator; General of the Armed Forces.

Anar: (*cautiously, yet mischievously*) Brother-in-law too to Akbar! I know, my Lord! The cottage of this poor maid is greatly graced by your visit.

Raja: Royal dancer! You say your cottage is honoured by my visit. I say that the court itself should be honoured by your visit.

Anar: I am after all a dancer ! What greatness lies with me that could bring pride to the nation?

Raja: At the king's court . . . .

Anar: You mean to say that the country becomes reputed because of my dance, don't you?

Raja: No. . . . You must dance only at the king's court.

Anar: What?

Raja: You should not dance in the heart of Prince Saleem!

Anar: What ? Saleem! He has a heart ! And there . . . my dance?

Raja: And a garden to project it.

Anar: What do you mean ?

Raja: Why do you hush up, Anarkali? . . . . I rushed here only after I witnessed you both enjoy singing like a pair of pigeons in the garden!

Anar: All right! Has there been any proclamation in Akbar Badsha's regime that to love is a grievous wrong. . . ?

Raja: Not made yet. .. . however. . . . There is reason to deliberate on those lines, considering the status of such lovers!

Anar: Status for love! Should not a dancing girl and a patriotic warrior fall in love?

Raja: He is not a soldier, but a ruling prince.

Anar: Ah!

Raja: Son of Akbar! Lord of the world!

Anar: Ah!

Raja: Saleem! Saleem! Saleem!

Anar: Saleem! Saleem! Saleem! No, no. He is not Saleem. Not the son of the Emperor! A mere sepoy! He's only a sepoy! He who has endeared my heart will not tell me lies!

Raja: Do not pretend! I know very well that a wandering dancer (*geisha girl*) will not cast an enticing net to capture an ordinary soldier! Enamoured of the king's court, regal bedchamber, royal procession through the streets of the kingdom – in the hope of acquiring all these things for a glance. Only with this end in view did you aim at enthralling the son of the crowned monarch!

Anar: Enough, stop it! Don't sting like a thousand scorpions at my heart which is already ablaze! Anarkali showed love only to a sepoy, and not to the sceptred son !

Raja: Still feigning , Anarkali!

Anar: It is not me who dissembled! It is the son of your crowned monarch! Knowing that I do not respect the enthroned, Prince Saleem has told me such a big lie!

Raja: Let bygones be bygones; let what is yet to happen be good. Look here, Anarkali! I'll give you one lakh gold coins. Take that and get away from here to some place. Let the prince forget you!

Anar: If I loved him for gold I'd go now! Why talk of lakhs, there are a number of rich men who are ready waiting to pour money in crores at my feet. Be it they, or you - or the gold you offer me – All these are like sand to me – all these equal sand.

(*She picks a handful of sand and shows to him*)

Raja: (quietly) Think over it a little in quietude! Then give your reply! You showered your love on him thinking that he was a mere soldier! Once you knew that he belonged to the ruling class you ought to have abandoned his love in consonance with your principles! Young woman! Were I in your place I would certainly choose to forget Saleem!

Anar: You would forget – because – you are not Anarkali!

Raja: All right ! What do you say as your final decision!

Anar: You have no right to intercept my opinions!

Raja: What?

Anar: Anar's ' liberty to love ' will not yield to Delhi imperialism!

Raja: Let me see its ending too.

Scene – 3

Anarkali's house

(Anar is weeping – Saleem's sweet voice calling her 'Anar' is heard. She is startled, and springs up like a snake trod upon.)

Anar: Welcome, welcome prince who has made a maid's heart languish!

Saleem: Anar! You are cross with me because I did not come here at the appointed time?

Anar: Does time matter to men of stately court? Or even the thought . . .?

Saleem: Man of majesty! Oh! How wrathful! Anar! In your anger you tend to heighten my status! . . . . Do you make fun of me, a poor soldier?

Anar: I know! The warrior who talks like the breeze ! I know you are not a warrior but the son of Emperor Badsha!

Saleem: Ah!

Anar: I have understood! The cloud of smoke you raised has cleared! Truth shines like the rising sun!

Saleem: Anarkali! No. . . No . . . .

Anar: (bursting into tears in anger) Yes. That's it. You are not Saleem! An ordinary sepoy! You are not zari (disco) flower! Ordinary yellow *samanti* flower! You are not the flamboyant silver flower of the royal palace! Fragrant jasmine flower! The thief of my heart! You are not the brilliant gold flower of the court! But the pleasant smelling rose dripping dew drops! Not the young prince! But the prince of my heart! Isn't it so Saleem? This is how that I must dupe myself!

Saleem: Anar! Please listen to me!

Anar: I have listened several times! Listened umpteen number of times to your declamatory false declaration "I am a soldier going to the warfront carrying a lance and a shield." Then, I was not aware of the great dimension of differences in status. Had I known it then this lotus in the little pond would not have fondly blossomed for the sun in the sky! You the son of the king carrying the flag imprinted with a crescent! The future protector of Delhi imperialism! Why do you stare like that?

The honeyed feast tasted behind the screen! Love ambrosia that should be thrown out after getting cloyed! Are you worried that before fulfilment of the need it stands interrupted? You the son of the Badsha of armed forces! Enough you have baited me with the gait of a warrior! Please go away!

Saleem: Anar! I never thought of cheating you! I declared myself a soldier fearing that the truth that I am royal by birth might frighten you.

Anar: Not that I would fear, but that I might reject! I might not yield! Saleem Badsha has done a feat even a commoner would not dare do! The reason is that he has so much love for Anarkali! It is like the tiger that has grown fond of a deer which appeared before the tiger which is disguised as a goat, with a view to nurturing love and friendship! Your story is similar, isn't it, Badsha?

Saleem: Anarkali! Enough. Stop it! Saleem is neither a tiger, nor did he dissemble! But any amount of my argument is not going to convince you; nor are you going to believe me. The tall walls of the fortress prevent you from hearing the soft melodies of immaculate love that spring from my heart! The curtain that ' I am the son of Akbar' interrupts the view of my heart where stands painted the picture of my love queen Anarkali! So my sighs and my arguments won't reach your ears! I shall demonstrate right now that Saleem desires to die and lie like a corpse at the rosy feet of Anarkali ! Look here Anar! Look here!

(*Saleem draws his sword and attempts to take his life*)

Anar: (*Rushes forward to him*) Saleem! Forgive me!

Saleem: Anar! (*They embrace each other*)

(*Soldiers enter*)

Soldier: Emperor Akbar commands that you two be arrested!

(*Raja Mann Singh stands at a distance*)

Saleem: Ah! . . . .Raja Mann Singh.

Raja: (*standing at a distance*)

Yes. That's how Akbar's court decrees.

(*Saleem and Anarkali are taken away*)

(A voice from behind the curtain):

Saleem and Anarkali are accused. Akbar Badsha orders the execution of both – Raja Mann Singh persuaded the king to pardon Saleem; lest the lineage of the king should get broken, and secured Saleem's release! It was further ordered that Anarkali should be entombed alive! Hearing the news Saleem rushed to save his lady love! What awaited him when he reached there? Alas! Before he could reach, Anarkali's tomb had been sealed.

Scene – 4

The tomb

Saleem: Anar! Anar! Did you disappear, my flawless rain of flame! You the greatness of womanhood! You the birth place of beauty! Did the wicked men hide

your immaculate beauty from my eyes! You are a living example of love! You are a string of pearls, even poets cannot attempt describing such a one! Did the stone-hearted men bury you in a heap of stones, not willing to destroy the fullness of your smiling face by setting fire to it? My love! Anarkali! Anarkali!

Sinners! You have murdered Anarkali! You have put out the flame of my heart! Broken the divine Veena! Buried the deathless heroine of the epic of love in a heap of stones! Hidden her eternal beauty! But, you silly fools, none of you have the courage to pluck her from Saleem's heart! None has the skill!

It is said that she is a nomad! And I am born to rule over the country! People in all the eight directions would obey the intent of the movement of even my little finger! Different armies I have! And I have the capacity to cross many a hurdle! A palace as big as a town! A huge fortress! Servants, run-errands, weaponry, army, all I have in abundance! Many are there at my beck and call! Should I need pleasant breeze? And there is a garden! Should I swim? There is a stream! Many to bewail if my feet get hurt while walking on a path covered with silk! A thousand people are there to ponder whether it is better to sprinkle my bed with jasmines – *mullai* or *malli*?

What though I have all these? What of all these joys? To me who have no right to claim my love who has filled my heart? To me who have not the liberty to live with the one I loved? What if I had all these or not? Why this palace? Why this luxury? Why this royal life? Why a thousand to run errands at my command? Why all these? Why? Why . . . ? Anarkali! Why all these to one who could not live with you? Why this kingdom to a slavish prince? In a world without you why should I live at all?

Akbar's son should not fall in love with a dancing girl! Oh tomb that encloses my most beautiful love, tell me! You have devoured her because she did not have royal status. Akbar Badsha, a Muslim can marry a Rajput lady Jyothi Bai. But the son of that Rajput woman should not love a dancing girl! Oh, tomb that has swallowed my love, tell me! Is the judgment proper! You won't answer! You know only to devour life! Come on, do it now. You are used to doing it!

(*Saleem prepares to die. – – but his country did not need his death*)

2 Cheran Senguttuvan

Before the play begins a voice is heard. It is a golden leaf from the epic written by Elango, brother to King Cheran Senguttuvan.

It is the story about bringing a stone from northern India to carve the statue of Kannaki to be consecrated in Tamil Nadu!

Heroic lines that depict the golden glory of the historic past of Tamil Nadu.

A day in the distant past! When we were seated on the throne, ruling over the country with infantry, cavalry, and chariot divisions!

Then in the court of rulers known as Kanakan and Vicayan in the north , , , ,

Scene – 1

The most valiant, most merciful, divine ruler, Vedic scholar, the chief of all ruling classes, and the kings of the North, Kanakan and Vicayan, are coming. Attention! Attention!

Kings: Namaskar!

Kanakan: Namaskar!

Vicayan: Namaskar!

Kanakan: All of you seem to be waiting to see the princess who is to appear and elect a suitor! Hi, hi, hi . . . .!

A king: Well, now that both of you have come together! If one of you were chosen how would you both then share one woman?

Tamil Poet: It would then be another *Mahabharatham*.

Vicayan: Who are you, man? What do you speak?

Tamil Poet: Tamil! Pure Tamil! It was born with the world! Born at a time before stone was formed and sand was formed! Tamil is older!

Vicayan: What business have you at the elective wedding hall?

Tamil Poet: Hm! Strange question, King! Strange to say that only old people like you have business at the *swayamvar* hall and young men like us do not have any reason to be here!

Vicayan: No need to fool! Say who you are!

Tamil Poet: I am a Tamil poet – come on a pilgrimage to north India.

Kanakan: A poet? Do you know how to compose poems?

Tamil Poet: Tamil Nadu has not yet come across a poet who could not write poems – nor a soldier who could not wield a sword.

Kanakan: Let us see. Come on, tell us a poem!

Tamil Poet: Fought on the banks of the Ganges – The Tamils
Brought fame to the banks of the Cauvery;
Ruled over the rolling waves of the seas – The Tamils
Hailed by the world as the greatest!

Kanakan: Stop! Stop!

Vicayan: Stop that nonsense!

Kanakan: Crazy fellow! The Tamils battled on the banks of the Ganges! They would indeed fight! Had they come to fight when Kanakan and Vicayan are in power we would have broken their legs! Be careful!

Kings: Ha, ha, ha!!!

Vicayan: What Kanakan said deserves a reward of a thousand lakh ! When your kings imprinted their national emblems of the tiger, the bow and the fish – perhaps there were no kings like us!

Tamil Poet: Why? To fall prostrate at your feet and pay homage? You that have bats in your belfry; listen! I will return to the south today itself. I shall report to King Cheran of the undiplomatic talk of loose-tongued Kanakan and Vicayan at the feast, in the presence of other kings, denigrating the Tamil language, exposing their ignorance of the rich language. You haughty and headstrong people! Tamil valour has not died yet! We will meet again! The ruling monarch is Cheran Senguttuvan! Cheran Senguttuvan!!

Scene – 2

Cheran's Assembly Hall

(*Senguttuvan and Venmal present*)

Ven: Tell me an interesting story, my darling!

Cheran: Shall I tell you? Cheran married Cholan's daughter; Cheran had a son by the marriage! The youth married this young lady!

Ven: This is an already known story.

Cheran: A story that has happened too.

Ven: Tell me a story that has not taken place, my dear!

Cheran: That may not be interesting, dear.

Ven: Hm. . . How about a love story?

Cheran: No. no. In *Purananuru* . . . .

Ven: Enough. It is about valour, isn't it?

Cheran: It is a love story about marrying valour! It is about a woman who lost her father and her husband in war now sending her son to the battlefield! Listen to it for a while, Ven! I have written it myself in a new style.

There was a time when Chera, Chola, and Pandya kings
On the new sands of the Tamil Cauvery were waging
Wars as to who should fly the flag atop the tower!
Then on a battlefield her father plunged with power
Fought and died. Hearing the news the Tamil woman
Melted like a lighted candle! Now her husband who'd gone
Out returned, with eyes burning red! With tears in her eyes
She told him of the war and her father's demise!
Did you cry for your father's death, my dear!
'No my dear!'
If one warrior dies in the army of jasmine land, one the less,
It's like a tear in our clothes, and foes would enter fearless!
So 's my fear; hence tears broke barriers!
He,
Like a tiger that comes out of its cave,
Like the smoke emitting volcano,
Grabbed the sword that'd chop the foes!
Vowed vengeance! Lifted up his fulgent face!

'I'll pound the foes to a hundred pieces!
Without saving nation, homeward I won't be bound!
But the young lady
With a smiling face said she,
"March forward, my lord!"
Maybe I'll come back or not
So turn round I will kiss you now"
Gave her – then he shot arrows
At the foes!

War! War! War!

Thus sounded the drums!

Look! Look! Look at her man
Sweep with valour through the army band!
It's how his friends of the fighting class
Acclaimed with applause!
The beautiful lady smiled through her eyes
The more she heard of her man's feat and
Increasing accolade on the battlefield!
Forts were retrieved! Enemy horses' legs broken!
Foes with Tiger flags defeated! Lances broken!
The distant drums of our victor king
Are heard like summer's thundering!
She jumped for joy! Sang to new tunes !
Soldiers came –said "Success is your man's"
King's messengers came – paid their homage-
Neighbouring women-friends came –
Delighted to read aloud citations! The dame
Shed joyful tears! – Why then
Came the man to break heart-rending news?

"My dear young lady!
Do not shed tears!
Latest news from warfront, listen!
Alas!

He that vowed on the marriage platform
Decked with mango-leaf festoons, "We
Are united for life, now bears the lance
His chest and has fallen dead!
After the soul left the body lived
The lady - like a moulded doll -
Wailed aloud - The family was
Like a bunch of flowers!
She cursed the merciless Death!
Decried death! What remains yet?
The fruit has grown rotten, she yelled.

Eyes brighter than snow, speech
Sweeter than palmyra candy
Ditties of love through nuptial nights -
Are all gone? Turned to dust?
Henceforth these are sleepless eyes!
Bemoaned! And prayed in the direction
Of her fallen lord!

No sooner did the victors' drumbeats fall
on her ears, though she's in a swoon, than
she sprang up and said, " What was lost is lost.
Let my entire family be sacrificed! Will I
Live for my own home? Rather, I will die
For my glorious country." -
The Tamil woman, capable of telling time
by looking at the sinking slotted platter,
suddenly remembered her son, lovingly reared
in a cradle, now sent to learn from the teacher
seated under the banyan tree!
She went there – the boy sprang to her calling
" Mother" lisping the word in sweetness!
"Has the dad or grandpa returned home?" said he.

"Yes, returned, and went away to the land of Death!
Come along my dearest. . . . !" said she.
"It's a matter of honour, honour, deathless honour!
My son, come along to taste it," – said she.
He came forward, the tender shoot of that family,
The light of home, with brightened face; said she,
"Because of enemy's invasion — our family
stands now denuded, my boy!
No worries ---
They went to the warfront and died.
But they earned the name that "They saved our honour!"
And it will remain till the end of the world.
My son! You must also fight the enemy
As long as there's strength in your body.
Sing the war-song! This is your Motherland —
Take sword and advance!" Saying thus
She hugged the little boy, and combed his hair,
Adorned him, handed him a sword turned
Brown with the stain of blood! And cried,
"Go you my son marching to the battlefield
And come back victoriously!" She blessed him.
Is there any in the world who doesn't glorify
This wonderful scene, Dear mother! . . . .

Poet: (*interposing*) Yes! Yes ! There is.

Cheran: What?

Poet: Such thick-skinned fat souls are there! There are people who slight and slander our valour!

Cheran: Ah!

Poet: Please do not be shocked at my act of insolence, intruding into your privacy when you and the queen are together. I am going to tell you something more shocking.

Cheran: Poet, what do you mean?

Poet: Yes, my lord! Our valour has been slandered by the weeny brained!

Cheran: Are there slanderers around?

Poet: Yes, there are! Kings of northern India jeer at us and try to play the fool . . . . wagging their tails!

Cheran: Then what? Can they swirl their swords at us?

Poet: They say that we conquered the north in the past when there were no Kanakan and Vicayan. . . .They throw down the gauntlet and roar in rage if we have the guts to step into their country now when they are in power.

Cheran: Did they slight our swords? I will make them surrender; Venmal . . . Time has come, to test our valour! I must start!

Scene – 3

King Cheran's Court

Cheran: Tigers of Tamil Nadu, holding lances and upholding country's fame! Here's a call for all of you! Here is yet another good opportunity to prove and establish our valour in the north! It is said that rulers of north India cast aspersions on the ancient and historic imprints we have made on the Himalayan mountains! Simpletons are slandering! Those who have never set their feet upon warfields are scoffing at the Tiger! The worthless fellow has inveighed against our Bow and Arrow. He who has not heard of our exploits laughs at our Fish. Uttiran - Vicittiran -Chittiran – Swethan – Bairavan – Don't blink like that! These are names of humans! To all these frog-headed kings, Kanakan and Vicayan are the heads! The rulers of the Gangetic plains throw a challenge to the Cauveryites! Friends! Let's teach them a lesson – let's start!

A Minister: Why do you get so angered, Lord, when Kings Chola and Pandiya remain unperturbed?

Cheran: Because I'm a Tamil – and because my self-respect has not diminished. Chola and Pandiya might be my enemies; for that reason I cannot, till my death, permit north Indian rulers to tease us! They have disparaged my Tamil language! Ah, the author of *Thirukkural*, the north Indians have insulted you! You are despised, Satthan, who have explicated the meanings of poetry! The ocean that abounds in pearls, the gardens that yield jasmine, you are despised! Oh the seat of the Lion where drums are beaten on all eight directions, you are despised! My mother Narconai, the conqueror of the Himalayas Senguttuvan, son of Netunceralatan, you are despised! You great poet Ilanko, you are despised! My loving brother! Pandiya who sacrificed his life for justice, you are despised! Nedunceliyan, who defeated the Aryans, you are despised! The rightful leonine inheritors of Classical Tamil, you are despised! Scholars! Poets! Artists! All of you are despised! Those that scorned are there alive in the north calling themselves

kings! The Porunai river and capital Vanci surrounded by flowering garderns, you are despised! Despised! The mean and the lowly despised! While there is Minister Alumpil Vel, there is Army General Villavan Kotai – While strength in your robust shoulders is like the growing crescent – Those loose-tongued nomads that are fit only to fritter away their time and energy at the harem are now throwing a challenge! Soldiers! Let's pick up the gauntlet! Soldiers, all of you from Tumpivati, Toranamkarpattu, Vettamangalam fort, all must start! Young lovers, kiss your ladies with parting word that that might be the last kiss! Are we a community afraid of death, a race fearing warfare, to surrender to the slaves holding feathered fans! No, no, not at all! You may lose your head on the battlefield! But they will be cut off with the eyes burning bright! Flesh may be torn off! But that could be done only with the blood that is hot with self-respect! Sound the war drums! Invade the Himalayas! The Tamils had never lost! Never lost! Friends and comrades! .. .. let us march ahead!

Scene – 4

Kuyilaluvam

(*In the battle fought against Kanakan and Vicayan, Senguttuvan emerges victorious*)

Cheran: Villava! What is the name of the place where drums of victory sound?

Villavan: Kuyilaluvam.

Cheran: Kuyilaluvam . Note it down. All these rocks are pages in history marked with the valour of the Tamils! Victory alone is not enough, Villava! We should not leave the defeated just like that.

Villavan: Kanakan and Vicayan are reported to have escaped disguised in saffron, like rishis!

Cheran: Ha. . .ha. . . ! That is nothing new. . . .That is the only characteristic trait of them!

(*Kanakan and Vicayan are brought on the stage dressed in saffron*)

Cheran: Who are these?

Villavan: They are Kanakan and Vicayan.

Cheran: Kanakan and Vicayan! Kanakan and Vicayan! Ha. . .ha. . ha . .. ! You the bravest of the brave! Very good is your war strategy! To retreat showing your back . . . hiding yourselves in clothes . . . ambushing and attacking. . . .disguising as sadhus. Ha. . .ha. . ha . .!

Disguised as rishis! Answer my question! How many days did it take for the war between Devas and Asuras to end?

Kanakan: Eighteen years!

Cheran: The war between Rama and Ravana . . . ?

Kanakan: Eighteen months!

Cheran: the War in the *Mahabharata* . . . ?

Kanakan: Eighteen days!

Cheran: Warriors, remember this. Cheran Senkuttuvan's war fought in the north lasted only eighteen *'nali'* [1 *nali* equals 24 minutes].

Kanakan: O Lord ! Forgive us, we surrender to you!

Cheran: You mean 'Forgive'? You come to Tamil Nadu and go down on your knees. Let her forgive you!

Villavan: My lord, should we not return to Tamil Nadu? It is already thirty-two months since we started!

Cheran: Yes, let us set out . . .Villava, before that we are to choose a rock fit for sculpting Kannaki statue, aren't we?

Villavan: Yes.

Cheran: We have now got the right bullocks to carry the stone. Kanakan and Vicayan – you hurled a word at the Tamils- - - now carry the stone on your heads!

3 Socrates

- Socrates was the greatest philosopher Greece gave. The largest treasure house of wisdom Athens delivered.
- His product, Plato, remains to this day the father of many political ideologies.
- Communist ideology evolved after long cogitation by Lenin and Stalin, the products of Marx and Engels evolved from the intellectual smithy of Plato.
- Hegel, a German philosopher, used Plato's smithy and signalled the emergence of his faith in the stale Nazism. Mean-minded Hitler and Mussolini turned it to their advantage and took the axe to behead people.
- This is how Plato has been responsible in supplying ingredients for good as well as bad deeds; that Plato was the product of Socrates!.....
- As history records it, Socrates was not only ' a man unafraid of death' but also the author of certain misdeeds!
- Some might argue that some of his ideas are contrary to our own ideas. But the world of rationality is not willing to throw aside the genius on account of these trivial reasons.
- A great thinker like Rajaji in his book entitled 'Cokkiratar' has presented Socrates like another Sankaracharya steeped in orthodoxy.
- But I have attempted in this short play to present Socrates as an intellectual who enjoyed his life.
- Prof. Sabin wonders how such a terrible punishment could have been meted out to a great thinker like Socrates in Athens, which is accepted as the cradle of democracy and civilization. He even suspects there could have been some secret plotting behind the curtain for the death of Socrates.

With this background in mind, start reading the play.

(Short statured –sturdy build - eyes revolving like two bright lights–flat nose–expressive thick eyebrows–thick lips–a small beard–an ordinary single cloth made of silk and cotton covering the body–this is great Socrates, the greatest contribution Greece ever made to the world. This is the man of principles who stops and argues with the passers-by, in all nooks and crannies, and lanes and streets of Athens. The first scene of the play opens in front of his house.)

Scene – 1

At the threshold of Socrates' house

(*People move up and down the street. Socrates calls their attention in a loud voice*)

Socrates: Dear handsome youth of the glorious city of Athens! Come here! I call upon you to transform the stench of Athens and make it fragrant. Valiant youth who are prepared to rush to the war front impelled by impassioned blood! I call these young people. . . . gather around in large groups! Bravery is not saleable if not accompanied by tact and discretion! [Valour without discretion has no value.][Discretion is the better part of valour] Dear talented youth, a sword sharpened and the lance borne on urging shoulders are alone not enough! Take from me the weapon I give you and wield it well! It's the weapon called reason! Rationality is the weapon! Weapon of knowledge!! It's a new weapon, which can wipe out of existence the blind-minded, dark, devilish monster called ignorance! A revolutionary weapon that reveals the inside of the never–retreating warriors! Tiger-like youth! Come with me! The enemy has entered our country. . . .without an army!. . . . He has looted the hearts of the vulgar populace . . . .That enemy known as superstition has crept into Athens in the utter darkness of stupidity! Talented young men, now let us go about reforming the glorious Athens into an oasis of wisdom! March forward on our mission!

(*The youth, and the warriors stand around and listen to the words of Socrates. Xanthippe, wife of Socrates, stands at the threshold frowning at her husband Socrates, unhappy with his conduct. . . .Crito, an aged friend of Socrates, enters. On seeing him . . . .*)

Socrates: Crito! Have you come? Come, welcome! . . . .I am marching ahead in my old age, duty-bound, with the intention of taking the youth into the path of righteousness! . . . . I am blessed with a second wife. . . . Xanthippe. . . . Look how wrathfully she tries to obstruct me ! Look! Look! Are they eyes? . . . . They are like a terrible flash of lightning; yes, lightning!

Xanthipe: (*angrily*) Yes, lightning, indeed. . . . To this old man, wife's eyes appear like lightning . . .!

Socrates: What to do. . . ! Had I been an inventive poet, I would have eulogised your huge waist calling it lightning! Crito. . . .You know Socrates never tells lies; I speak the truth. . . .because I see the brilliance of lightning in her eyes! . . . ain't I right, my friend!

Xanthip: Enough ! Enough! . . . . Limit your arguments, explications, discussions, shaky and slippery philosophy to the passers-by ! No wonder, your first wife Mirdo, it was her good time that she passed away! I am here to suffer with . . . . .a family. . . .Should not this man ever have any concern about his wife and three children!

Socrates: (*pointing at the youth surrounding him. . .*) Look! I work for these children also. . .my darling! The sun keeps discharging his duty to all living creatures that populate the earth and the oceans surrounding it!

Xanthipe: You always speak of the earth and the sky, but desert your wife midstream. . . . (*angry with her own self*) eh, Xanthippe, why do you get entangled in such rows!. . . .

Get lost!. . . . Live as you like! The graveyard is a better place than this confounded house!. . . . Instead of struggling with this logician, it would be better to put a noose around my neck and hang myself.! Yes, die! Die!

(*She goes into the house, making a big hue and cry. As soon as she goes in, Socrates looks around at all, and smilingly says . . .*)

Socrates: What a relief! Thundering has ended. . . . When there was lightning I knew it would thunder. Young Athenians! . . . .many a hindrance blocks the ways of aspirants! It has been so with the family! . . .What about the country . . . . much more so! Politician Anitas does not want any circumstance to come up that might discover the misdeeds and atrocities he has done. Meletus is happy to be living in a world of myth he has created. Lycon, the carver in stone and smith, who makes statues of brass, fear that my intellectual arguments have started shaking their very foundations, and are furious with me. . . .The greatness of Greece is not unknown to the world! But that does not permit the act of hiding the tears and scratches that have occurred. It is like trying to conceal the stinking wounds with the scent of civet! . . .That's why, my friends, I bow and beg of you to learn to think! Wisdom! Wherever it lies in the world I appeal to you to seek and acquire it! . . . . "Know yourself!" I call upon you all to realise this truth. Young men dearer to me than my life! I invite you to learn to inquire into every thing.

(*Just then Xanthippe brings a pitcher full of water and pours it down on Socrates' head*)

Crito: Ah! What 's this? What's this?. . . . .

Socrates: Do not get shocked, Crito! . . . .It's nothing. . . .. First you saw the flash of lightning. . . .then it thundered a loud, now it is raining. . . . . that's all!

Scene – 2

(*Anitas, Meletus, Lycon – all three deeply immersed in serious thought*)

Anitas: Seething volcano! Turbulent ocean! More terrible than all these is Socrates! . . . Weapon of Wisdom! All the world would surrender to this missile, it is said.!. . . . If that weapon were to be manufactured in Greece we would not be able to raise our heads, Meletus! What do you say, Lycon? . . . .

Lycon: I am a sculptor who carves God out of stone. . .! Once even this Socrates was a sculptor like me! But now he has metamorphosed into a sculptor of thoughts! . . . It's all right! After the three of us – me who create God out of stones, Meletus the poet who with his Midas touch gives divine shapes to bundles of imagination, and political genius like you—once we have colluded together . . . . Socrates is nothing more than a worthless particle upon an ocean, isn't he, Anitas. . . . !

Meletus: Hurray, Lycon! Kudos. . . .! Only as long as the people are like donkeys would they patiently bear the burden of falsehoods we place on their backs! Only if they are blind will they follow the way we show! We must put an end to him before he succeeds in opening the intellectual eyes of the masses who dare not cross the line we draw . . . .

(*All of them go away with a determination*)

Scene – 3

(*Socrates is addressing a gathering at the market place*)

Socrates: Oh dear people who come to the market to buy things . . . . ! I have something special for you which you cannot find anywhere in the market! An invaluable diamond! . . . A brilliant pearl that is got by diving into the deep ocean called research! A thing that is not sold in the shops! Wisdom! Wisdom! Come here dear men to buy this sweet product!

(*A Greek soldier enters*)

Soldier: Stop! Stop your harangue!. . . .

Socrates: If I stop, there are several disciples to continue!

Soldier: Stop your mumbo-jumbo! You are spoiling the youth! Raving in the streets like a madman!

Socrates: Go and tell those who sent you here. The teachings of reformers are not like the grass that is eaten by cattle to be exterminated! The brilliance of rationality is not like a wild horse to be noosed and controlled by authorities! . . . .

Soldier: You big mouth! Let the court hear your declamations, tomorrow! Now come with me!

(*drags Socrates away*)

Crito: Atrocious! Where do you take away our Treasure-house of Wisdom in his old age? . . . .Leave him …. I say . . . let him go.

Socrates: No, my friend! Don't stop him! Where do I go? Only to the court of law, don't I? Not to the execution chambers! . . . . Let me go! As long as there is clarity of thought and strength of conviction, the wise and the discrete need not fear anything! I'll go. I am going to confront the unfair and unjust men who try to drive out the clear-headed thinkers!

(*The soldier drags away Socrates*)

Scene – 4

Court of Law

(*The Athenian court of law consisting of five hundred members has assembled. Judges are seated on a wooden bench. Some planks are covered with mat. Short wooden paling separates the rows of judges and the commoners. On the right side of the hall the chair for the Chief Justice is placed. By its side is another chair. That is where the plaintiff and respondent come to present their cases to the judge. On the left side there are seated separately the two groups with their witnesses. A box known as Hedge Log was brought and after opening the seal, the box was tipped and the contents were transferred to the table. An attendant reads out the charge sheets.*)

"Meletus, son of Meletus of Pitanspet, presents the following charges against Socrates, son of Soberinnisco of Alopesil: That Socrates does not approve of the Gods worshipped by the country and the government. He tries to corrupt the young men with his preaching. It is fitting that he be sentenced to death.

(*Like Meletus , Anitas and Lycon also level charges*)

Anitas: Socrates! . . . A soul not fit to walk the street! . . . .The creature which finds fault with our democracy is venomous all over! . . . The aged man of mean character who rouses the youth against the government and the penal codes with his persuasive arguments which compel those who have not listened to him yet to crave for it. . . .

(*Socrates laughs aloud*)

Chief Justice: Why do you laugh? What is the reason?

Socrates: It's nothing, my lord! Anitas forgets for a moment that he himself is old, and calls me an old man. The thought came to my mind . . . and I laughed!. . . .My hair as well as Anitas' hair has turned as grey as the froth on the sea, hasn't it? Courtiers! .. .. What say you, Anitas, ain't I right?

Meletus: Socrates! The trial does not relate to your hair! I wish to draw your attention to this fact.

Socrates: Thank you very much Meletus! . . .but . . . .one thing! . . . even as the head is most important to the eight-span tall body . . . ., head is very significant in this case!. My reasoning emanates from my head! . . . and to thwart nonsensical thoughts arising from your head. Political arrogance that comes out of Anitas' head– – the conflict is among the three forces–that is the cause of this case!

Chief Justice: Socrates! What is your reply to these charges levelled against you?

Socrates: Even the hardcore law would show mercy to me on hearing my explanations . . . .but would this assembly show me mercy?

Anitas: Note this point my lord! It is contempt of court and the assembly! This is how he corrupts all young men!

Socrates: How can an old man spoil young men? . . . .Am I a prostitute who casts her net to catch young men?. . . .a damsel to feast their eyes?

Meletus: You have an enchanting language which sluts do not have . . . .Use of enthralling words which the whores do not have . . . verbal tricks . . . endearing phrases . . . You have mastered such tricks! . . . .

Socrates: You might even call me a wizard! . . . .Dear loving young man! . . . Do I corrupt young men? Or do they come to me on their own and get spoilt?

Meletus: You voluntarily accost them and corrupt them!. . . . At the market places, at junctions of streets, on pavements, in midstreets, in shades of trees where some four men would gather to rest . . . there is not a time when you do not harangue!

Socrates: So in the whole of Athens I am the only person who corrupts the young men .. . .isn't it so?

Meletus: Yes.

Socrates: You do not spoil?

Meletus: No!

Socrates: Anitas?

Meletus: No!

Socrates: Sculptor Lycon?

Meletus: No!

Socrates: These judges?

Meletus: No!

Socrates: So none spoils the youth; all do good to the young men, excepting me! . . .

Meletus: Yes, yes!

Socrates: While all these– why the entire Athens– try to correct the youth, can I turn them on evil path?

Meletus: A drop of poison is enough to spoil a whole pot of milk!

Socrates: Why, you can even say like this. A lamp for a house drowned in darkness! Why, Meletus, do you look flabbergasted? The political sagacity of Anitas, and your exuberant imagination-filled poetry . . . . when these could not fascinate the young men , if you argue that I attract them, then the credit goes, not to me but to the principles of rationalism which keep Athens, the people, and me alive! Dear audience! The reason why the youngsters of Athens keep hovering about me like larks is not the beauty of my juggling with words! It is the never drying fount of constructive thoughts ––– magnanimous principles that never lose their standards– –golden thoughts which the world most needs!

I am accused of enthralling the budding youth with my charming use of language, and jugglery with words. Let me question those who accuse me. That language is not my personal property. I never barred Anitas and Meletus from using the language! Let them also use the language and address the youth! Unfortunately, they tried and miserably failed! Not because the language lost its natural charm . . . but because their thoughts were blackened with blemishes! Darkness has devoured them!

I endeavour to dispel in a short while the darkness that has surrounded us for a very long time! And this is the reward for it: 'Socrates is an evil-doer– –What is there in the sky and on the earth, asks this atheist . . . . a cheat who tries to change all falsehood into facts and truths- - - - these are some of the appellations they give me! It's all right! Anitas and Meletus are very eager that I, who am at the witness stand for the first time in all my seventy years of life, should somehow be sentenced to death! Their desire and expectation might get fulfilled on their own in a few years–or a few months ! I have become so old! I wonder why they should try to earn the bad name that they murdered Socrates quite unjustifiably!

Chief Justice: Socrates! Stop your talk! Death penalty–imprisonment–exile–fine–any of these punishments may be imposed on you. Which do you prefer?

Socrates: If I were to die I ought to have been executed when I protested against and walked out of the senate of thirty members of which I was then a member . . . .

against the unjust impeachment of the generals for not bringing back the bodies of the dead soldiers and the debris of the broken ships from Argena! When I was commissioned by the senate with three others to kill Lennon I refused, walked out and went home; that was the time when I could have been executed! Luckily, if that was the desire of the Court that it should witness the death of Socrates, rather than the Senate, then I would not protest now!

You may recommend imprisonment – It is better to die instantly than to remain forever the slave of the jail warders!

You would let me go if I am prepared to pay the fine! But, had I been rich enough to pay the fine I would rather have committed more of such crimes as my money could afford! Banishment can be accepted . . . .One can wander freely around in a different country . . . But there is a question: when my own country does not approve of my ways of thinking and arguments how can it be taken for granted that people of a different country would accept them? My dear Athenians! You might instead grant me the punishment that is given to the winner in the horse-drawn chariot race at Olympia – an honorarium for bravery – and let me live in joy and peace till the end! And continue to provide me with all necessities to continue with my propaganda! That would be the right respect that you could show me and my principles!

(*All at the assembly are shocked*)

Chief Justice: Irresponsible speech! . . ., an insult! Let the members of the jury vote and decide. . . .! Is it Death to Socrates? Or . . . . amnesty? Let us count the shells on both sides.

(*Shells are arranged on a plank on both sides of the petitioner and the defendant. Poll is over. The shells are counted. 281 shells favoured Death sentence. . . and 220 shells for his pardon. The assembly looks at Socrates' eyes. There is a new brightness in his eyes!*)

Chief Justice: 220 voted for his pardon! 281 have voted in favour of his death! According to the votes, Socrates is condemned to death by poison!

Socrates: The court of law of the city state of Athens has a silent smile on reading out the proud decree! I am proud to be the first in history to receive this judgement from the Athenian court! They have rewarded me with death for having instructed them to hold up the lamp of intelligence in their hands! 281 . . . .221! 31 votes . . . had they been polled on this side, the life of Socrates could have been saved! Even those votes were bought at a high price and this fact cannot be hidden! Nothing to worry! It is far better to speak in my style and die than to play the second fiddle to the verdict and expectation of the court.! . . . . I know, a man could speak anything, and do anything and finally if he seeks forgiveness he would be spared from

punishment! As a soldier I had never thought of prostrating at the feet of the enemy on the battlefield; therefore I prefer to accept the death punishment.

Scene – 5

Prison house

(*Socrates' legs are chained and locked; he keeps moving up and down in the small space. The door opens and Crito enters.*)

Socrates: Crito! My dear friend! Come, come . . . .

(*comes out to see*) . . . . Oh . . . . who is that?

Crito: Your wife . . . .and children!

(*She weeps, children weep, and the small baby also screams.*)

Socrates: Oh my dear! . . . . . did you see? You have always found fault with me as a worthless fellow wasting my time in idle philosophical debates; and been angry with me for getting involved in logical disputations. Now see, your husband has become a great hero praised by the world, and acclaimed by the country as a martyr! You are very fortunate, indeed! You are wife to a duty-bound hero who opposed the power of money and the army, and finally closing his eyes in death dauntless and in pride! . . . Take care of our children! When they had grown to be adults and deviate from the path of ethical goodness, try to correct their ways as I did yours. . . . Go . . .it's getting late. Guards will become angry. Crito! See them off.

(*Crito leads them out. Then Crito alone returns*)

Socrates: Crito! Don't you know! Thirty days' imprisonment is over today! According to the court verdict today is the final day when I must take poison and die!

Crito: Socrates! Now poison is going to kill you who could not be defeated by philosophical argumentations! . . . I have a suggestion! There's still time; and I have a lot of glittering gold! What if we could make good our escape by winning them over to our side . . .?

Socrates: I feel ashamed, Crito! Socrates is not afraid of death. The reason why I tried to make an issue of the conditions laid down by the court, expressed willingness to pay the fine, expatiated on the decree of exile, and elaborated on the purport of my propaganda . . . all these not out of fear of death! That was mainly to establish that the Greek court was quite unnecessarily intent upon killing me as if with a vengeance! So do not wrongly estimate that I was afraid of death, Crito! Time is fast approaching for me to part from my friends like Plato, Crito, Apollodorus, my wife and children, and my dearest city of Athens. Poison is

getting prepared for me inside! In less than twenty minutes the guard will come with the poison!

Crito: My dear friend! Mountains might crumble; but you, brave man, you have a heart that will never crumble. When can I see again in your frame and form, those brilliant rolling eyes, those broad eyebrows, the thick lips that uttered explanations non-stop and unfailingly to the queries that were hurled by your opponents?

Socrates: Don't cry, my friend ! There comes the ambrosia! The feast hosted by the State to Socrates' army of wisdom! A reward the sinister state gives to an aged person! There it has arrived!

(*The guard comes with a cup of poison*)

Socrates: Jailer! What should I do with it? Tell me the procedure of consuming it!

Guard: (*Removes the shackles and says crying*) Grand old man! You must drink the entire poison . . . . Then you must walk up and down! Continue to walk till the legs become numb . . . . then you can sit . . . gradually your body becomes cold and chill . . . then you can lie down.

Socrates: Happy blissful sleep! A sleep that cannot be disturbed even by dream-maiden! . . . Guard! Give it to me.

(*He takes the cup*)

Crito: My friend! You can drink it even a little later! It is permitted in the prison!

Socrates: Crito! You have a trivial desire! Imagine I take the poison some forty minutes later! And if I happen to die of heart-attack in the mean time . . . . . How can the verdict of the Greek court be carried out? Will another Socrates be born again to fulfil this? No, no . . . .I shall drink it right now!

Crito: My friend! Tell me something in the end?

Socrates: What new thing am I going to say? . . . *Gnothi seauton* . . .Know yourself! Question everything as What, Why, and How? That is how the carver in stone became a carver of thought . . . a thinker. "Never lose your sense by accepting anything as authority as this man said, or that man said – whatever any man says try to assess their words in your own way using your rationality. " That is the message I want to tell you and the world at large.

Crito: Oh, the colossal lion of Athens! Our treaure! Greek genius! Is the poison going to separate you from me? Alas! My heart trembles to think of it! Socrates! How do you wish your body to be disposed of? . . .

Socrates: If you are going to bury me, bury along with me all the superstitious myths and falsehood that abound in the world! If you are going to burn me, burn all the bundles of books written by false philosophers, and dissolve in water even

the ashes of them! Give me leave now! Poison invites me! I am taking leave of the people of my country!

My dear Athenians! Now Socrates is going to die quite happily! The Grecian Court dumped on him baskets full of charges, and also ordained him to drink a cup brimming with poison which is meant to drink his life! The lips that disseminated his thoughts are going to kiss the brim of the cup containing poison! Just a couple of minutes more! Then the bond between the body and the soul would snap, and put a full stop to the serial called life! Farewell Greece! . . . . . Farewell! My dear Athens, farewell! The broad and beautiful streets of Athens, which helped me to run round in joy and deliver my emotional outbursts, Farewell! Shades of trees along the streets! Platforms in the front of the houses! This aged man takes leave of all of you! Proud young men that walk upright! Young brothers and protectors of our nation! Dearest friends! Old men and mothers! The cubs of the country! May the last tender respects Socrates tenders all be yours! If there be any who truly and whole-heartedly still believes and contends that this old man corrupted the Greek youth, let them forgive me! Let them forgive me! Let me go. Bye! Fail not to think! Eh, world! Fail not to think! Know yourself! Know yourself!

(Socrates gulps down the poison; walks till his legs become unsteady; then lies down. The body becomes chill! The guard pulls the cloth over his face. A few seconds later, Socrates lifts the cloth from his face)

Socrates: Crito! I forgot to tell you one thing. . . . I owe a cock to Asclepius; will you remember to pay the debt? Forget not to return it to him.

(*With that the great man of Greece breathed his last. Crito cried. Some time later, Greece bathed his grave with tears*)

About the Project Makers

Bharathiar University, Coimbatore - named after the nationalist Tamil poet Subramanya Bharathi, who exhorted the Tamils to identify things worthy in their language, and give them unto the world for enjoyment and edification - conceived this Project viz., *Kalaignar in English Translation* by which to make available in English the extraordinarily rich and varied literary works of Kalaignar M. Karunanidhi, who, by the sheer volume and weight of his output, makes a compulsive demand on us that he be studied and given his due.

Prof. G. Thiruvasagam, Chairman of the Project Committee and Vice Chancellor of the University. The genesis of this Project owes to his academic vision. His initiative and leadership as much as his passionate and studied interest in the excellence of Kalaignar's creativity has seen this Project through within a short span of ten months.

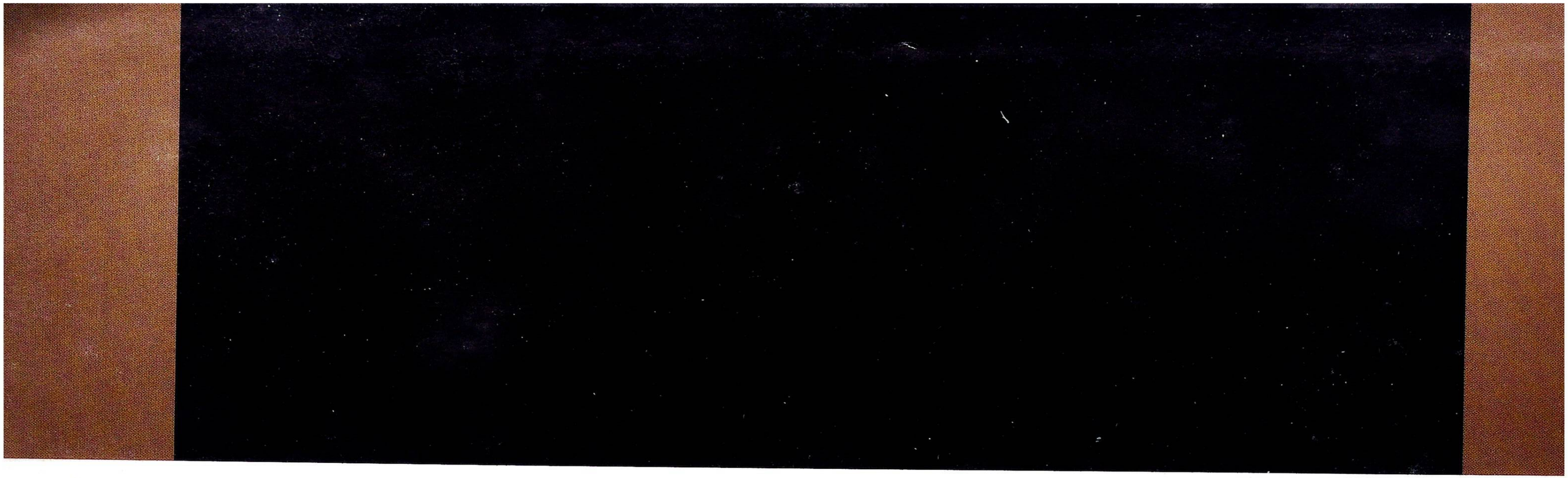
Kavipperarasu Vairamuthu, Vice-Chairman of the Project Committee. An intellectual poet in Tamil endowed with an astonishingly fecund poetic energy and representing a rare blend of ratiocinative powers and aesthetic sensibility, Vairamuthu has brought a sense of direction and significance to bear on the dynamics of the Project.

Dr P. Marudanayagam and Dr V. Murugan comprising the editorial team - the former a ripe Professor of English and a comparatist of towering erudition, and the latter a bilingual lexicographer and a distinguished translator with the translations of *Tolkappiyam, Kalittokai, Tirukkural* and *Narrinai,* and *Oxford English-English-Tamil Dictionary* to his credit.

Dr C. Sivashanmugam, Professor of Linguistics, **Dr R. Palanivel**, Professor of English and **Dr S. M. Ravichandran**, Professor of Tamil, Bharathiar University, the coordinators of the Project, who kept the Project on track.

The late **Dr S. Agasthialingom,** a renowned linguist and former Vice Chancellor, Tamil University, **Sirpi Balasubramanian,** a highly decorated poet in Tamil, **Prof. Tamizhachi Thangapandian**, **Poet Kayalvizhi Venkatesh** and **Dr N. Ramani,** members of the Expert Committee, whose learned counsel, suggestions and views have added to the strength and credibility of the translations as a whole.

Macmillan Publishers India Limited, who have done an excellent job through their passionate commitment to the project, their legendary technical expertise and their unfailing feel for accuracy and perfection.



Kalaignar M Karunanidhi, one among the select 'who is who' of contemporary India, is a ripe political personality of more than seven decade standing, a statesman and a proven administrator, with the rare distinction of being the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu for five terms, besides being a relentless crusader for rationalist revival and an undaunted, missionary-like fighter for social and political causes.



Notwithstanding, it is the title 'Kalaignar' meaning 'an artist par excellence' by which he is identified and characterized, so much so that it is no longer a title but a proform designation of Dr M Karunanidhi, in the same way as 'the Bard' is used to refer to Shakespeare.

For Karunanidhi, whose formal education did not extend beyond the secondary school, is a multifaceted, prolific writer with an amazingly large volume of literary output to his credit. He is a poet, a playwright, a novelist and short story writer, a letter writer, an elegist, a journalist and a columnist, a script-writer, a political satirist, an essayist, a translator, an autobiographer and a social and literary critic, besides being an extraordinarily eloquent and powerful speaker. His creative and critical works have been published in 59 volumes, memoirs and autobiography in another 8 volumes, and other writings in 115 more volumes, large and small.

What astounds one is the fact that he has been writing on all these genres contemporaneously, putting the same amount of interest and energy in each kind, that too in the midst of his most exacting administrative and political activities.

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