

VOICES OF DEFIANCE: A CROSS-CULTURAL COMPARATIVE STUDY OF FEMALE RESISTANCE IN ROYAL HISTORIES, TAMIL EPICS, AND SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGEDY

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Abstract

This study undertakes a cross-cultural and comparative analysis of female resistance as represented in three symbolic figures: Velu Nachiyar from South Indian royal chronicles, Lady Macbeth from Shakespearean tragedy, and Kannagi from the Tamil epic Cilappatikaram. This study examines how each figure articulates female agency within distinct socio-political and literary frameworks by drawing on feminist historiography, postcolonial theory, and memory studies. While Velu Nachiyar embodies anti-colonial sovereignty and martial leadership, Lady Macbeth dramatises the psychological and moral costs of female ambition within patriarchal power structures, and Kannagi transforms widowhood and grief into cosmic justice. The study highlights how genres such as epic, tragedy, and chronicle shape not only narrative form but also cultural memory. The very factor also determines whether female resistance is celebrated, pathologised, or mythologised. By juxtaposing these figures across historical and literary terrains, this study reveals convergences in courage and agency while tracing divergences in representation and afterlife, ultimately contributing to feminist and postcolonial debates on gender, power, and narrative authority.

Keywords: *Female Resistance, Cross-cultural Feminism, Velu Nachiyar, Lady Macbeth, Kannagi, Tamil Epic, Gender, Power.*

1. Introduction

Resistance is never merely a rupture; it is also a reckoning. It is a negotiation between what is possible and what is forbidden, and between voice and silence, sovereignty, and suppression. Across cultures and times, women have stepped beyond the limits imposed upon them. These women have often been described in terms of extraordinary spectacles, including queens, witches, and ers. However, over the last two decades, feminist, postcolonial, and literary criticism has begun to ask not only what these figures do but also how they do so. They also ask how they are remembered and what their stories reveal about their power in different genres. This study, by pairing Velu Nachiyar's anti-colonial sovereignty, Lady Macbeth's psychological ambition, and Kannagi's moral rage, seeks to trace female resistance across the royal chronicle, tragedy, and epic. Thereby, both the shared structures of constraint and the distinct affordances each genre provides.

At its heart, this is a cross-cultural comparative project. It is not a comparison for its own sake but a way to see how resistance functions when framed by different historical forces, literary expectations, and cultural memories. Velu Nachiyar offers a royal chronicle rooted in eighteenth-century South India, where colonial pressure and local politics intersected. The character from Shakespeare's well-known play, Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, offers a tragedy from

early modern England, where gender and political sovereignty are bound up in religious, dynastic, and psychological discourses. Kannagi from the Tamil epic attributed to Iḷaṅkōvaṭikaḷ (Ilango Adigaḷ), Cilappatikāram¹, moves between domestic affection, civic law, and divine retribution in a sacred epic deeply embedded in Tamil culture and devotional memory. Each figure emerges from texts and traditions that differ in genre, audience, and style. Yet, each enacts resistance in ways that complicate simple binaries: public and private, sacred and secular, human and divine.

Recent scholarship has enriched the understanding of these figures, but rarely do we see them studied together to illuminate the ways genre itself shapes resistance. For Velu Nachiyar, Rajeshkumar (2022) highlights her campaigns between 1772 and 1780, her tactical alliances, her administrative reforms, and her status as “the first queen to fight colonial forces in Tamil Nadu” (p. 54). Jekila & Barathi (2020) foreground her alliance with Hyder Ali and the symbolic labourers of exile. Vanajakumari & Vimala (2016) trace how her story has been preserved in local memory as a ritual and martyrdom. These works recover the political subjectivity of women rulers in colonial formations. In Shakespearean studies, critics like Cheng (2023), Fatemah (2020), and Zereen & Muna (2023) have re-examined Lady Macbeth beyond villainous caricature, probing her inner conflict, her gendered constraints, even her eventual psychic collapse. Studies of Silappatikāram, such as Farooqui (2024), Tejaswini & Jha (2024), and Miller (2016), have explored Kannagi’s chastity, moral authority, the ethical and ecological dimensions of her wrath, and how her afterlives are reshaped in performance, ritual, and oral tradition.[1][2][3][4]

What remains underexplored, however, is how these figures are situated on different textual and historical terrains. They reveal common patterns of how female resistance must often remain partial, provisional, and haunted by costs. This study aims to answer these questions by reading Velu Nachiyar, Lady Macbeth, and Kannagi in dialogue. It shows not just how each of the female characters resists, but also how resistance is shaped by form, context, and memory. Several theoretical lenses are useful in framing this enquiry. Feminist historiography and postcolonial memory studies insist that resistance must be read in relation to archives and erasures (Spivak, 1985; Chakrabarty, 2000). Literary theory, especially in feminist readings of tragedy and epic, teaches genre structures. Psychoanalytic and affect theory help us understand the cost, psychological burden, and emotional labour behind visible acts of defiance. Ritual or performance theory reminds us that stories are retold, re-performed, made sacred or political, and that the afterlives of texts matter.[7][8]

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This study makes three main claims. First, the female resistance in these three figures is always in tension with the constraints. This shows that the sovereign exists, but often through sacrifice, as in the case of Velu Nachiyar. In the case of Lady Macbeth, ambition is real, but often destabilised by guilt. For Kannagi, moral outrage is divine, but also painful. The second claim concerns the genre. The royal chronicles allow historical and political visibility, as well as risk mythologization. Tragedy reveals inner conflict and psychological realism, but often ends in erasure. The epic magnifies moral authority but also sacralises it, sometimes displacing human costs. The third claim is that memory mediates resistance, whether through local folklore, colonial archives, literary traditions, or ritual performances. It amplifies certain

moments and obscures others, shaping what subsequent generations understand to be resistance.[9]

Illustratively, Velu Nachiyar's reign (ca. 1780-c. 1790) reveals political strategy, alliances, and administrative agencies (Rajeshkumar, 2022; Jekila & Barathi, 2020), yet colonial and nationalist accounts often reduce her to a symbolic identity as Veeramangai, bravery, battle, and martyrdom. Lady Macbeth's eloquent speeches and psychological complexity are well analysed (Cheng, 2023; Reyes & Kenny, 2020), yet what literature often sidelines is her motivations as constrained by gender ideology and the relational cost when Macbeth uses the agency she has activated. Kannagi's epic trajectory (Farooqui, 2024; Miller, 2016) imagines chastity not simply as a virtue, but as a weapon. It presents morality as a universal concept. However, tragedy accompanies this moral cosmic power; as she becomes divine, the city burns, lives are lost, and moral purification carries collateral damage.[21]

The scope of this study is limited to texts and traditions surrounding Velu Nachiyar, Lady Macbeth, and Kannagi, focusing on their representation in primary texts and their reception or memory in later traditions (folklore, ritual, performance). While other figures such as Rani Lakshmi Bai and women in other epics resonate similarly, this paper concentrates on these three to allow depth and generative comparison across genres and cultures. The novelty of this study lies in its ability to insist that female resistance is not a footnote, but central to how we reconstruct histories, literature, and moral imaginaries. When Velu Nachiyar reclaims territory, when Lady Macbeth speaks of crowns and blood, or when Kannagi's anklet rings and the city burns, they are doing more than surviving. They insist on a standard of justice, the possibility of sovereignty, and the language of refusal.[5][6]

2.1 VELU NACHIYAR'S ANTI-COLONIAL SOVEREIGNTY AND THE FEMINIST RECLAMATION OF HISTORY

History often leaves certain figures shimmering at the edge of myth, not because their deeds are exaggerated but because the courage they embody unsettles the ordinary frames of political narrative. Velu Nachiyar, the eighteenth-century queen of Sivaganga, belongs to the incandescent realm, where memory, gender, and anti-colonial resistance intersect. Born in "1730 to Raja Chellamuthu Sethupathy and Rani Sakandhimuthathal of Ramanathapuram" (Madhan Kumar, 2011, p. 18), she was heir not by accident but by intention. Indeed, as Jekila and Barathi (2020) emphasize,[10]

"She was only daughter to her parents. Since there was no male heir for the Kingdom, King Chellamuthu Sethupathy wished to grow her daughter like a son. She was trained to use war weapons like sword, valari², silambham³, horse riding, and archery and also in martial arts" (p. 893).

This preparation signalled a remarkable rupture from the gendered norms of succession. Madhan Kumar further notes that "the absence of a male heir made the royal family invest in Velu Nachiyar the kind of training usually reserved for princes" (2011, p. 19). Before colonial incursions reshaped the political and social landscape of South India, she had already inhabited a liminal space between convention and possibility. She was a daughter, scholar, warrior, and future queen, composed at the threshold of historical transformation. In her, the lines between

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intellect and valour, femininity and authority, tradition, and revolution were deliberately blurred, rendering her story an inspiration for both historical memory and feminist imagination.[11]

Marriage did not diminish Velu Nachiyar's rigorous preparations for governance and warfare. At the age of sixteen, she married Muthu Vaduganatha Periya Udaiyathevar, the ruler of the Sivaganga dynasty (Madhan Kumar, 2011, p. 19). As Kumar notes, [13]

“During the British colonial rule, Muthuvaduganathar was firmly against them and refused to accept them to take over the authority of Sivagangai. Velu Nachiyar too was in the same thoughts of her husband. Since British were well aware of the strength, they didn't plan any invasion plan but planned to assassinate Muthuvaduganathar” (2011, p. 19). [14]

From the outset, she is not merely a consort. She was a strategic partner in the dynastic enterprise and actively shaped policy and military planning. Shubendra (2019) describes her as “a queen who sat in statecraft councils, whose views shaped decisions”, underscoring the intellectual and political authority she wielded. However, this alliance of marriage and governance soon collided with the aggressive expansionism of the British East India Company and the Nawab of Arcot. In 1772, British forces, allied with the Nawab, attacked Kalaiyar Koil, resulting in the death of Muthu Vaduganatha, the plundering of the palace, and the seizure of the throne (Rajeshkumar, 2022).[15]

For many dispossessed royals, exile signified political eclipses. Velu Nachiyar became a strategic incubation period. Displaced from her kingdom, she first sought refuge in Virupakshi⁴ and later under the protection of Hyder Ali⁵ at Dindigul, transforming vulnerability into opportunity. It was in this liminal space that she began forging the alliances that would eventually reclaim her throne⁶. A letter preserved in the Sivaganga District Manual (1916/2007) reveals the audacity of her strategy. She formally requested Hyder Ali's military assistance against the British, a move both diplomatically and daring, given the volatile dynamics between Mysore and the East India Company. Recognising her tactical acumen and personal valour, Hyder Ali acceded, offering not mere asylum but soldiers, arms, and political backing (Hasan, 2005). In exile, Velu Nachiyar's agency is neither diminished nor deferred. It was sharpened, laying the groundwork for a return that would fuse martial strategy with sovereign resolves.[12]

However, Velu Nachiyar's resistance was not solely dependent on Mysorean aid. During these years, she formed her own military wing, including the famed women's regiment *Udaiyaal Padai*, named after her adopted daughter Udaiyaal, who died, destroying a British ammunition depot (Jekila & Barathi, 2020). Oral ballads recount the story of Kuyili, a commander in this regiment, who performed Rajeshkumar (2022) memorably calls “India's first suicide bombing⁷”. He writes,

“that brave, young woman, after dousing herself with inflammable oil (ghee), walked into the arsenal and lit herself. Seconds later the entire place was ablaze. There was nothing but

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destruction and chaos all around. After this humiliating defeat by an army led by a dynamic, woman warrior, the British left the place for good, never to turn back” (Rajeshkumar, 2022, p. 778)

As Rajeshkumar (2022) argues, such acts were not only tactical but symbolic, turning female bodies into sites of anti-colonial defiance: “Kuyili’s sacrifice inscribed women’s courage onto the very memory of the land” (p. 58). Velu Nachiyar launched her counter-offensive by 1780, after nearly a decade of preparation. With forces trained under her command and Mysorean support, she recaptured Sivaganga, becoming what multiple sources identify as “the first queen in Indian history to defeat the British” (Jekila & Barathi, 2020). Her reign, lasting roughly until 1790, combined military vigilance with administrative acumen.[16][17]

Yet, feminist historiography reminds us that power never exists outside narratives that frame, elevate, or erase it. The British archives, preoccupied with treaties and trade, mention her only in passing; local chronicles and ballads, in contrast, celebrate her bravery, sometimes mythologising details of battle and sacrifice (Vinay, 2021). This contrast reveals “the gendered asymmetry of memory, where colonial records minimise female agency while oral traditions amplify it” (Doss 2021). For instance, while statues in Tamil Nadu hailed her as *Veeramangai* (brave woman) and a postage stamp was issued in her honour in 2008 (see figure 1), few school textbooks outside the state recounted her campaigns with comparable detail. Public memory, as de Mel (2025) observes, often turns women warriors into symbols, lionised for courage but detached from their political, diplomatic, and administrative complexities.[18][19][20]



Figure 1: Velu Nachchiyar 2008 commemorative stamp issued by the India Post. (Source, From Velu Nachchiyar 2008 stamp of India [Stamp], by India Post, Government of India, 2008, Wikimedia Commons)

This symbolic tendency marks a representation of the *Udaiyaal Padai*. The image of female soldiers, armed and disciplined, defying both colonial power and patriarchal norms, recurs in plays, festivals, and articles celebrating Velu Nachiyar (Rajeshkumar, 2022; Jekila & Barathi, 2020). Yet, as Vanajakumari and Vimala (2016) note, “the archival silence on their organization, training, and everyday lives contrasts with the loud memory of their sacrifice”. One remembers the fire of Kuyili’s body but not the texture of her voice, her routines, her relationships, or a pattern familiar across feminist readings of history, where women emerge as icons more often than as subjects with inner worlds.[22][23][24]

Indeed, the emotional landscape of Velu Nachiyar’s life, including widowhood, exile, alliance-building, and governance, rarely appears in the official records. However, as affect theorists argue, emotion itself constitutes a site of political meaning (Ahmed 2014). To lose husband, daughter, and throne in a single invasion, to spend years negotiating with uncertain allies, and to live knowing betrayal or defeat, which shaped her rule as surely as guns or treaties. One wonders, reading between the lines of chronicles and ballads, what grief accompanied her strategies, what private costs underlay the public image of *Veeramangai*⁸. As de Mel (2025) insists, feminist historiography must read for “silences, affective residues, and narrative gaps” (p. 119), not only for triumphant acts.[25][26][27]

Her death in 1796, recorded laconically in the *Sivaganga District Manual* (1916/2007), passed without elaborate memorials to later nationalist figures. The Marudu brothers succeeded her, leading to resistance until their own deaths in 1801, after which British control tightened across the region (Hasan, 2005). However, Velu Nachiyar’s legacy, although regional, remained nationally muted until recent decades. Statues in Sivaganga, commemorations by the Tamil Nadu government, and works like *Veeramangai Velu Nachiyar* (Vanajakumari & Vimala, 2016) have reasserted her place in history, although often emphasising the battle over diplomacy and fire over governance.[28][29]

Through feminist and postcolonial frameworks, Velu Nachiyar’s political life complicates both colonial archive and nationalist memory. Studies argue that early resistance to colonial expansion was not merely episodic, but constituted a spectrum of political strategies that often fell outside the dominant narrative of the 1857 Revolt (Hasan, 2005). Velu Nachiyar’s campaigns against the British in the 1770s extended the spectrum. It positioned a female sovereign at the centre of anti-colonial praxis decades before canonical insurgencies. Moreover, her reign unsettles patriarchal historiography, which has long relegated women rulers to the margins of political theory in premodern South Asia. As Santhi and Saravanakumar (2020) note, the lives of figures such as Velu Nachiyar have frequently been reduced to allegories of courage, their administrative acumen, and strategic diplomacy overshadowed by heroic romanticisation. Against such erasures, Velu Nachiyar emerged as a figure of intentional power, a queen who forged alliances, commanded armies, and orchestrated military campaigns while navigating the fraught terrain of colonial and regional politics.[30][31][32][33]

3. LADY MACBETH’S AMBITION AND THE TRAGEDY OF TRANSGRESSION

Lady Macbeth (see figure 2) has long haunted the corridors of literary criticism as Shakespeare’s most unsettling portrait of female ambition, desire, and psychic disintegration. She is a character who ignites Macbeth’s tragic arc yet is consumed by the very flames she sets alight. Her role quickly shifted. At first, she seems like a supportive wife, but she then uses her

closeness to Macbeth to question his courage and push him toward murder. When she mocks him, [34][35]

“Wouldst thou have that
Which thou esteem’st the ornament of life,
And live a coward in thine own esteem
Letting ‘I dare not’ wait upon ‘I would’” (1.7.41–44)

As soon as she read the witches’ prophecy in Macbeth’s letter, she acted with speed and confidence. She decides almost at once that killing Duncan is a way to gain power. Early commentators called her Shakespeare’s “fiend-like queen”, a woman who weaponizes marriage to topple kings and “unsexes” herself to orchestrate power (Cheng, 2023, p. 4). However, feminist, psychoanalytic, and cultural critics have complicated this character over the last century. They have suggested that Lady Macbeth cannot be confined to the moral binaries of villains, victims, witches, wives, masculines, or feminines. Instead, she emerges as what Cen (2024) calls “a site of contradiction,” desiring power yet fractured by the very structures, gendered, political, and linguistic, through which power must be negotiated (p. 2).

The radicalism of Lady Macbeth’s character lies first in her imagining of power beyond the limits imposed by Jacobean culture on women. When she calls upon the spirits to “unsex” her and fill her “from the crown to the toe top-full of direst cruelty” (1.5.40–43), here, she performs more than conjure gothic incantation. She exposed the cultural assumption that power and femininity are incompatible. To act with lethal resolve, she believed that she must be stripped of what early modern society coded as feminine virtues, including nurture, tenderness, and compassion. Butler (1990) famously argues that gender is not a fixed essence, but a performance regulated by social norms. [36][37][38][39]



Figure 2: Gabriel von Max's depiction of *Lady Macbeth*. (Source, Lady Macbeth (1885), painting by Gabriel von Max. From The Yorck Project: 10.000 Meisterwerke der Malerei (DVD-ROM, 2002), Directmedia Publishing GmbH. Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons)

Lady Macbeth recognizes this and seeks to rewrite the script entirely. Shakespeare shows her wrestling with this transformation in a sequence of escalating prayers. First, she demands the spirits.

“Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
Of direst cruelty!” (I. 5. 40-43)

She was fearing that the pity may have weakened her resolve. Rahman and Tajuddin (2015) state that because what she asks for goes against her instincts, “she becomes afraid that remorse may intervene. So, she further prays:”

“Make thick my blood;
Stop up th’access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctions visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
Th’effect and it!” (I. 5. 43-47)

Yet, she feels that the instincts of her womanhood persist, holding her back from the ruthless resolve she seeks. Therefore, she continued to pray, calling upon the spirits to strip away the last traces of tenderness and compassion that might weaken her purpose.

“Come to my woman’s breasts
And take my milk for gall, you,
Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on nature’s mischief!” (I. 5. 47-50)

Wilson Knight (2001) reads this speech as more than strong-willed. For him, Lady Macbeth seems “possessed of evil passion. No ‘will-power’ on earth would account for her invocation... It is mysterious, fearsome, yet fascinating: like all else here, it is a nightmare thing of evil” (p. 173). However, others suggest that the scene’s true power lies in its ambiguity. Lady Macbeth invokes the demonic not only to gain power but also to expose how fully female ambition had been demonized in the early modern imagination. Shakespeare stages this moment with deliberate tension. As Reyes and Kenny (2020) observed, early modern culture often linked women’s ambition to witchcraft, disorder, and sexual danger. Lady Macbeth’s words, therefore, carry centuries of cultural anxiety about women stepping beyond the roles prescribed to them. Recent critics argue that she inhabits this tension knowingly, and both use and subvert the language available to women seeking power, aware that ordinary social roles deny her political authority (Cen 2024).

However, Lady Macbeth’s power remains indirect. She never kills Duncan herself, famously admitting she would have done so “had he not resembled my father as he slept” (2.2). Instead, she orchestrates regicide through words that shame, seduce, and provoke Macbeth into action. Feminist critics have long observed that Shakespeare grants Lady Macbeth the rhetoric of persuasion rather than a sword. She manipulates the levers of conscience and masculinity, telling.

“When you durst do it, then you were a man;
And, to be more than what you were, you would
Be so much more the man” (1.7.49-51).

Here, the play entwines gender with violence, as she suggests, to be a man is to be bloody, daring, and ambitious. Lady Macbeth does not invent this ideology. She weaponizes this, showing how patriarchy traps men and women alike in performances of dominance (Zereen and Muna 2023). However, this strategy rebounds on her. When Macbeth plans Banquo’s murder without consulting her, he fully inhabits the hypermasculine role she provokes earlier,

rendering her influence obsolete. The logic she used to go to him ultimately excluded her from power, leaving her isolated in guilt and ambition (Cen, 2024).

It is this isolation that modern critics find tragic. Cen (2024) argues that Lady Macbeth begins as Macbeth's "dearest partner of greatness" (1.5), claiming rhetorical and political space beside him. Yet after Duncan's murder, Macbeth increasingly acts alone, first in hiring Banquo's assassins, and later in descending into tyranny and paranoia. Lady Macbeth, once the play's center of rhetorical energy, fades into its margins, her sleepwalking scene granting her a haunting afterlife but no political voice⁹. Cen (2024) calls this the "tragedy of erasure". Lady Macbeth unleashes forces that ultimately silence her, showing how patriarchal power uses and then discards female ambition (p. 5).

The psychoanalytic criticism deepens this sense of fracture. Freudian readers interpret "Lady Macbeth as torn between id-like desire—ambition, dominance, sovereignty—and the superego of conscience, morality, and social decorum, with the ego caught in untenable mediation" (AlShalan, 2024). Before Duncan's murder, she suppresses hesitation, and afterwards, repression erupts as hallucination, sleeplessness, and compulsive hand washing. Her cry, "Out, damned spot! Out, I say!" (5.1) dramatises guilt not as abstract morality but as bodily memory, a stain invading the skin and psyche alike. Yet, even before madness overtakes her, Lady Macbeth bears the costs of inhabiting female ambitions in a patriarchal world. The patient had to renounce maternal tenderness. To prove that her cruelty matches Macbeth's hesitation, she declares, "I would have dashed the brains out" (1.7) of the child she once nursed. She must invoke spirits, night, and secrecy, because no legitimate public language exists for women who desire crowns. Spivak's (1988) famous question echoes here, as Lady Macbeth speaks, but only in registers marked as transgressive, mad, or monstrous. The play grants her no idiom of righteous female powers. She is either fiend-like or silent, a queen, or nothing.

Moreover, her ambition is entwined with the marriage itself. Shakespeare gives us no Lady Macbeth outside her relation to Macbeth; her dreams of queenship depend upon his kingship. Lady Macbeth both exploits and exposes this structure. She can influence Macbeth, manipulate his desires, and even reshape his masculinity; however, she cannot rule in her own name, unlike historical figures, such as Velu Nachiyar, whose reign in eighteenth-century South India embodied female sovereignty. Lady Macbeth inhabits a world where women may desire crowns but only men can wear them. This gap between aspiration and structure renders both radical and doom. She imagines that the gendered politics of the play will not be permitted.

Lady Macbeth's cry to be "unsexed" finds uncanny echoes in modern spaces. At this place, women leaders are told to be tough but not cold, ambitious but not aggressive, authoritative, and always likable. The double bind persists, where power remains coded as masculine. Lady Macbeth exposes this bind with brutal clarity¹⁰. She tries to inhabit masculine ambitions, even cruelty, but the play punishes her with madness, isolation, and death. Butler (1990) argues that this shows gender itself as a regulatory fiction. Lady Macbeth performs power, but the performance collides with the roles available to women in Jacobean and perhaps modern imaginations. However, what makes her tragedy enduring is not only its feminist dimensions but also its emotional depth. Unlike one-dimensional villains, she suffers from love and despair. Her ambition wounds her before it destroys her, as if the price of desiring power in a woman's body were the body itself, sleepless, haunted, and silenced. To read Lady Macbeth's character today is to confront how patriarchy scripts women as either passive wives or dangerous transgressors, offering them little in between.

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4. KANNAGI'S GRIEF AND THE FEMININE ETHICS OF MORAL CONFRONTATION

Kannagi stands at a confluence of grief and justice. She is a figure whose moral intensity has burned through centuries of retellings, temple rituals, and scholarly debates. However, she retains an immediacy that transcends the bounds of time and text. When one turns to *Cilappatikāram*¹¹ by *Ṭaṅkōvaṭikaḷ* (Ilango Adigal), it appears not merely as a classical artifact of Sangam literature but as a living chronicle of gendered power, civic ethics, and moral confrontation. Kannagi's story unfolds as though written in fire. It presents the love of a husband, the betrayal of that love, the injustice of a king, the destruction of a city, and the transformation of a wronged wife into a divine avenger.



Figure 3: Statue of Kannagi at Marina Beach, Chennai. Photograph of Balamurugan Srinivasan, 2009. Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons

The epic itself signals the cultural reverence for women anchored in the Agam or private domains: “And beyond all praise was Kannagi’s name renowned for making a home” (Ilāṅkōvaṭikaḷ, Canto 2, lines 110–111). Yet in its narrative arc, Kannagi moves beyond the home’s sanctified space into the public realm of law, kingship, and divine wrath, “not only a literary heroine but also a moral archetype, a feminist icon *avant la lettre* whose voice reverberates across history, myth, and cultural memory” (Miller, 2016).

The epic begins with the story of love and betrayal. Kannagi and Kovalan, married in the city of Puhar, seem destined for a happy life. However, Kovalan, tempted by the courtesan Madhavi, leaves his wife and wastes his wealth. When he finally returns to Kannagi, the poor and regretful, she forgives him and joins him on a journey to Madurai to start anew. However, tragedy strikes when Kovalan tries to sell one of Kannagi’s anklets to recover money. He is wrongly accused of stealing the queen’s anklet, and without any trial or investigation, the king orders his execution (Miller, 2016). This quick judgment and its terrible consequences create a central moral crisis. When Kannagi learns of her husband’s death, she marches into the royal court, denounces the king, and proves Kovalan’s innocence by breaking her remaining anklet to show its rubies, which are different from the queen’s pearl-filled ornament. The king, realising his mistake, dies in grief. Kannagi’s anger extends far beyond him. In her fury, she tears off her breast, throws it against the city walls, and calls upon Agni (the fire god) to burn Madurai and to spare only the innocent¹² and the animals. The city burns, “Madurai falls, and Kannagi, consumed by grief and rage, walks westward until, in many retellings, she becomes divine, worshipped in temples and remembered in legends” (Miller, 2016; Lakshmi & Rajeesh, 2021).

Kannagi’s story shows us a woman who is both deeply human and more than human. Her grief was both personal and immediate. However, her response goes far beyond that of private sorrow. She does not remain silent or accept her fate. Instead, she confronts the king, the city, and the law itself, demanding not only recognition of her pain but also accountability for injustice. As Rani (2021) points out, “Kannagi refuses the role of the passive widow so often given to women in classical literature”. She did not simply suffer. She calls out the wrongs of those in power, proving that even wronged women can challenge kings and kingdoms. Her chastity, rather than limiting her to domestic virtue, becomes the moral ground from which she speaks the truth to power. The moment when Kannagi tears off her breast has drawn much critical attention because it combines grief, body, and moral anger in a single act. On the surface, it shows the depth of her sorrow, a strong grief that turns violent. However, as Farooqui (2024) notes, this act also turns the feminine body into a weapon against patriarchy and royal authority. The breast, normally linked to care and motherhood, is a mark of rage and justice in Kannagi’s hands. By tearing it off and throwing it in the city that wronged her, she transformed a symbol of nurture into one of resistance, using her body to condemn the moral failure of the state.

Kannagi’s shift from private grief to public, even cosmic, vengeance shows what Burla and Ramakrishnan (2024) describe as the “politicization of chastity” in *Cilappatikaram*. Her loyalty to Kovalan does not trap her in silent suffering. This gives her the moral right to demand justice in ways that challenge both gender roles and royal power. Modern feminist critics have often pushed back against older, patriarchal readings that praised Kannagi only as the ideal chaste wife, the *pativrata*¹³. Scholars such as Sivaselvi and Preethi (2022) argue that “chastity in *Silappatikaram* is not a passive virtue, but a form of moral authority. It gives Kannagi the

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¹³

strength to speak in court, to question kings, and to expose injustice”. When she proves Kovalan’s innocence, she is no longer merely a mourning wife. She becomes a moral witness, forcing political power to answer ethical truths. The epic emphasises this point through public scenes in which Kannagi speaks and acts in spaces normally reserved for kings, warriors, or sages. As Rani (2021) and Lakshmi and Rajeesh (2021) note, her presence in these spaces disrupts the gendered order of classical Tamil society, placing women at the very centre of law, justice, and collective memory.

The epic’s environmental and cosmic vision is equally powerful. When Kannagi calls upon Agni to burn Madurai, the fire spares the innocent and animals, even as it destroys the city that carried out injustice. Scholars such as Sivaselvi and Preethi (2022) read this scene through an ecofeminist lens, arguing that Cilappatikaram “links political oppression, moral chaos, and ecological disaster in ways that anticipate modern critiques of both patriarchy and human domination over nature.” The fire is not only a divine punishment but also a cleansing of civic space, a moment where cosmic forces intervene to restore the balance between human power and the natural world as Akhter and Islam (2024) remind us in their study of environmental destruction, ecological collapse often emerges as both a symptom and a consequence of moral and political disorder, a connection Cilappatikaram dramatizes with striking force. As Kapoor (2023) observes, “Kannagi’s anger reveals the deep ties between the exploitation of women, the abuse of nature, and the violence of political authority, showing how fragile kingship and human institutions become when confronted by ethical and ecological judgment”.

The story of Kannagi does not end with the fall of Madurai. As Miller (2016) notes, its retellings in oral traditions, temple worship, and regional folklore continually reshaped her character. Some versions have presented Kannagi as a goddess from the beginning. Others highlighted her suffering more than her anger. Some adapt the story to speak of local histories of injustice and resistance. Far from weakening the epic, these variations illustrate what Assmann (2011) calls “cultural memory”, the process through which a text survives by changing across time and place. Each retelling chooses and reimagines elements of Kannagi’s story. For some audiences, she embodies the loyal wife, for others, a protest against tyranny, and for still others, a cosmic avenger or a feminist figure confronting patriarchy and state power (Rani, 2021; Lakshmi & Rajeesh, 2021). This adaptability explains why Kannagi remains a living presence in Tamil’s cultural and religious landscape. Temples are dedicated to Kannagi, such as the one at Kodungallur in Kerala, the celebrated shrine in Madurai, and the famous statue at Marina Beach, Tamil Nadu (see figure 3). People honour her not only as a heroine but also as a goddess, Pattini Devi, whose chastity and anger are both seen as sacred. Folk traditions, such as kuttu plays, oral ballads, and annual festivals, keep her story alive. They blend classical epic with local languages, devotional practices, and present-day concerns (Miller, 2016; Burla & Ramakrishnan, 2024). In many villages, women sing songs and perform rituals invoking Kannagi when seeking justice or mourning injustices, as if her ancient rage still gave voice to women silenced by power.

What renders Kannagi especially compelling feminist theory is the way her story unsettles the binaries of speech, silence, gender, and power. Gayatri Spivak’s (1988) question, “Can the subaltern speak?” found a paradoxical answer in Kannagi. She speaks with such a force that kings die, cities burn, and communities eventually deify her. However, her voice emerges only through loss through grief that is already inscribed by violence. Widowhood becomes the precondition of her speech and rage—the medium through which justice is expressed. Placed alongside other female figures, such as Lady Macbeth with her haunted ambition, Velu Nachiyar, with her anti-colonial resistance, Kannagi reveals a distinct configuration of power. Unlike Lady Macbeth, she covets no crowns and plots no

regicides. Unlike Velu Nachiyar, she commands no armies and forges no political alliances in exile. Her power erupts instead of moral betrayal, rather than political ambition. It comes from persistence that truth must be vindicated when institutions of justice fail. However, like them, she refused silence. She transgresses the boundaries between feminine virtue and public authority, turning suffering into speech, body into weapons, and memory into monuments.

5. COMPARATIVE REFLECTIONS: FEMALE RESISTANCE ACROSS HISTORY, TRAGEDY, AND EPIC

When placed side-by-side, Velu Nachiyar, Lady Macbeth, and Kannagi inhabit three radically different worlds. One is eighteenth-century South Indian anti-colonial resistance, the second is the Jacobean tragedy, and the third is Tamil epic poetry. However, their stories converge in the ways in which they dramatise female agency against entrenched structures of power. Across chronicles, plays, and epics, they occupy the uneasy threshold where women refuse silence, yet remain bound within cultural, political, and textual limits. What unites them is not the similarity of plot or temperament, but the tension between aspiration and constraint, action and erasure, ambition, and its costs. To read them together is to see how women's voices and genres have been mediated across centuries.

One axis of comparison emerges through the power that each figure embodies. Velu Nachiyar explicitly wields political power. She commanded armies, forged diplomatic alliances, and reclaimed a throne from the British colonial forces decades before the Revolt of 1857 (Rajeshkumar, 2022; Jekila & Barathi, 2020). Her authority operates in the realm of cannons and courts, military strategy and statecraft, suggesting what de Mel (2025) calls "the 'prehistory of anti-colonial resistance', where regional actors, often erased from nationalist historiography and fought colonial incursions on their own terms". However, gender mediates memory. British records minimised her campaigns. Oral ballads elevate them to the legend. The statues and festivals celebrate her as Veeramangai (the brave woman) at a time of flattening her political complexity (Vanajakumari & Vimala, 2016). Her story, therefore, oscillates between archive and folklore, sovereignty, and symbolism.

Lady Macbeth, by contrast, wields rhetorical and psychological power rather than armies or alliances. Shakespeare grants her no independent political role. Her influence travels through language, including taunts, persuasions, and soliloquies, which shape Macbeth's imagination of kingship and masculinity (Cheng 2023; Reyes and Kenny 2020). When she calls upon spirits to "unsex" her (1.5.40), critics hear both the desire to inhabit masculine power and the cultural fear of women who transgress gendered boundaries (Butler, 1990; Wilson Knight, 2001). However, her words ultimately recoil on her. The more violence Macbeth embraces, the more he excludes her from decision-making, leaving her isolated in guilt and madness (Cen, 2024). Here, the power proves to be double-edged. Language can incite murder, but cannot secure lasting authority. The crown rests uneasily on Macbeth's head but never on hers. As Adelman (2012) observes, early modern drama often figured women as "conduits rather than holders of power" (p. 119). Lady Macbeth exposes this structure by inhabiting it fully, only to be destroyed by it.

Kannagi embodies a different mode. Here, moral and cosmic power is grounded not in ambition or alliances but in ethical outrage. When the Pandya king executes Kovalan unjustly, Kannagi transforms from grieving wife to divine avenger. She summons fire to consume Madurai and spares only the innocent (Miller, 2016; Farooqui, 2024). Her authority erupts from the "politicization of chastity" (p. 602). As Burla and Ramakrishnan (2024) suggest, here "fidelity becomes the ground for indicting kingship itself, for demanding that political sovereignty submit to moral law". Unlike Velu Nachiyar, she does not seek the throne, and, unlike Lady Macbeth, she does not manipulate her husband. Her power speaks in the language

of justice rather than strategy or ambition. Through Kannagi, the Tamil epic imagines a feminine anger so potent that it collapses the monarchy, implicates patriarchy, and unsettles the boundary between the mortal and divine.

The second axis of comparison lies in genre and representation. Velu Nachiyar entered history through chronicles, district manuals, ballads, and statues. Lady Macbeth through Shakespearean tragedy and Kannagi through epic poetry, temple ritual, and oral performance. Genre shapes not only how these women act but also how they are remembered. As AlShalan (2024) notes, tragedy isolates individual ambitions and guilt. Thus, Lady Macbeth becomes a portrait of psychological unravelling, her sleepwalking scene staging, which Freud would later call the return of the repressed. Epic, in contrast, elevates Kannagi into collective and even cosmic significance. Her grief becomes the city's destruction, her voice the community's conscience, and her memory a pilgrimage and festival site (Miller, 2016; Burla & Ramakrishnan, 2024). Chronicles and ballads about Velu Nachiyar oscillate between these forms, "at times noting dates of battles and treaties, at others mythologizing Kuyili's fiery sacrifice or Hyder Ali's alliance" (Rajeshkumar, 2022; Vanajakumari & Vimala, 2016). As Assmann (2011) reminds us, "cultural memory depends on generic plurality, archival records, oral legends, literary forms, and ritual practices together shape how figures like these persist across centuries".

A third point of convergence lies in how patriarchal and political constraints mark each woman's story, even at the height of her power. Velu Nachiyar reclaims a throne, yet remains marginal in nationalist historiography compared to the male rebels of 1857 (Santhi & Saravanakumar, 2020). Lady Macbeth speaks daringly of murder and sovereignty, yet disappears from the stage long before the play ends. She was reduced to an offstage death and a husband's terse elegy: "She should have died hereafter" (5.5.17). Kannagi burns a city yet speaks only after widowhood, as though a female voice requires the alibi of prior suffering¹⁴ (Spivak, 1988; Rani, 2021). Across history, tragedy, and the epic, female action emerges as extraordinarily fragile. These are enabled by circumstances yet contained in narrative closure, including death, silence, and deification, so that the social order ultimately absorbs or erases the threat it briefly faces.

Despite these constraints, these figures' afterlives defy containment. Statues of Velu Nachiyar in Tamil Nadu, feminist rereadings of Lady Macbeth by Cheng (2023) and Cen (2024), temple festivals for Kannagi in Kerala and Sri Lanka, all testify to what Assmann (2011) calls "the surplus of memory" beyond official history (p. 128). Each figure, though separated by centuries and culture, has been claimed to have modern causes. For instance, Kannagi's anger has been read as a proto-feminist resistance to patriarchy (Sivaselvi & Preethi, 2022). Velu Nachiyar has become a symbol of indigenous resistance to empire, and her story has been revived in regional historiography and popular culture (Rajeshkumar, 2022; de Mel, 2025). Lady Macbeth, especially in twenty-first-century criticism, embodies the psychic costs of performing power within masculinist orders that demonise female ambitions (Cen, 2024; Reyes & Kenny, 2020).

What ultimately binds these women across texts and contexts is how their stories illuminate the fragility and necessity of female intervention in worlds designed to curtail them. Whether through the battlefield, court, or cosmic curse, they carve spaces of resistance within structures that seek to render them marginal. However, their legacies differ sharply. One finds that Velu Nachiyar ends as sovereign, though history half-forgets her. Similarly, Lady Macbeth ends up as a sleepwalking madwoman silenced by death. Kannagi, as a deified goddess, is absorbed into rituals and myths. These endings reveal what Spivak (1988) terms

the “aporia of female speech” under patriarchy. Here, women may speak, even shatter thrones and cities, yet their voices risk appropriation by narratives that claim to honour them.

6. CONCLUSION

This comparative exploration of Velu Nachiyar, Lady Macbeth, and Kannagi reveals how female resistance emerges at the intersection of power, memory, and narrative forms across radically different cultural and historical terrains. Through the martial sovereignty of an eighteenth-century Tamil queen, the psychological and moral turmoil of Shakespeare’s tragic heroine, or the divine wrath and justice of a classical epic figure, each woman embodies forms of intervention that are shaped and often constrained by patriarchal, colonial, and literary structures. Yet their afterlives resist erasure; statues, festivals, feminist reinterpretations, and academic criticism reclaim their voices, underscoring what Assmann (2011) calls the “surplus of memory” beyond official historiography.

Taken together, these figures illuminate both the possibilities and limits of female intervention in worlds designed to marginalise it. These stories insist on reading across genres, epics, chronicles, and tragedies. It also insists on reading across geographies, South Asia, Europe, and the transnational academy to forge what Spivak (1988) terms a “planetary” feminist consciousness attentive to silence, appropriation, and the ethics of memory. For world literature pedagogy, feminist political thought, and subsequent studies, this cross-cultural mapping invites criticism that is intersectional, transhistorical, and alert to the fragile yet persistent traces of women’s resistance in history and art. It calls for comparative feminist hermeneutics that refuses both the ‘monumentalization’ and the marginalisation of women.

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