



Chaste Widows, Cunning Wives, and Amazonian Warriors

Imaging of Women in Tamil Oral Traditions

This article is an attempt to cut through the monolithic imaging of women in traditional Tamil societies. In the process, the study critically explores a whole trope of representations of women ranging from chaste wives to deviant and/or cunning women. In studying the *Alli* or *Pavalakkoḍi* myths, this article also attempts to analyze the morphology of patriarchal taming, both of the myth and its female protagonist. In moving from oral recitations to chapbooks, the article also looks at the complexities of the slippages between orality and textuality as well as between the written text and its dramatized performances.

KEYWORDS: Tamil—widows—wives—warriors—ballads—performances

THIS ARTICLE will look at some of the broad paradigms within which women-oriented Tamil myths and legends operate. Besides presenting contrasting images which cut through the frozen iconization of women encountered in classical or so-called “high tradition” texts, I shall also specifically focus on the transformational qualities of folk legends as they move between texts and contexts. The myths in the process of their transmissions and transmutations do not follow a linear course but tend to zigzag between various representational modes.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH AND SOURCES

This study uses women-oriented tales, both in print as narrations and within performance traditions, in an attempt to deconstruct monolithic representations of women in conventional Tamil society. Multiple texts of these ballads exist, ranging from tales such as *Alli Katai* (*katai* in Tamil means “story”), to ballads such as *Alli Arasāṇi Kōvai*, to performance texts like *Alli Nāṭakam* (*natakam* in Tamil means play or drama).¹ With the coming of cinema to the Tamil areas in the 1930s, the cinematic scripts become one more mode of narration of these legends or ballads. This article is based not only on an analytical study of these multiple texts but also on oral narrations heard from my grandmothers and other elderly women in Tamil families. My research also derives from my critical appreciation of the Tamil cinematic versions of these ballads.

One of my methodological concerns is to track the fluidity of oral traditions in moving between the written and the oral, changing every time in tone, emphasis, and even in the narrative content and folk performances. As BLACKBURN and RAMANUJAN (1986, 11) point out in their pathbreaking volume, “the dual nature of folklore that has long fascinated scholars: it is ‘traditional,’ yet it lives through variation. The fixity of form confers authority and familiarity, while variation allows changes in content.”

The article is also concerned with the intertwining of classical-textual and “folk”-oral traditions, rendering these categories “fuzzy.” It is equally engaged with the mutations of some of these women-oriented myths through historical time and space, in the course of which both the myth and its female protagonists go through a metamorphosis. One cannot rule out the possibility of some of these

having been matriloal myths which gradually got subsumed in the patriarchal register. Unfortunately, however, there are no extant versions of the core story of myths and what remains for the researcher to look at are only the myths as they appear after the process of patriarchal socialization. Women's agency in such ballads survives as a sub-text in some versions of the published ballads, as well as within performance traditions.

In the process of their engagement with folklore either by or about women, feminists have found themselves locked in the horns of an intellectual dilemma, being at one and the same time both subject and object of research. In an emic research of this kind it is tempting for the feminist scholar to position herself in such a fashion that the folkloristic representations depict women in a positive or even combative light, constantly challenging male patriarchal society. The research is confronted by the academic dilemma of balancing between natural empathies and intellectual impartiality. Many of the broader feminist theoretical reflections find an echo in this present study on the representations of women in Tamil folklore. The thread of feminist subjectivity is as strongly present in the present discursive analysis as in other studies where women have undertaken a similar exercise.

The printed sources for this article are largely drawn from the genre characterized as "printed folklore." Many of these publications were purchased after a long and arduous search for over a decade, in the by-lanes of the colonial city of Chennai and elsewhere in Tamil Nadu. Much of this popular literature, although not all of it, consists of Periya Eḷuttu publications. Periya Eḷuttu literally means "Big Letters." These small books with large print were printed on thin paper at cheap printing presses from the 1880s. There were Periya Eḷuttu and other publishers producing and circulating similar literature through the Gujili² (also known as Moor Market or China Bazar) market in Chennai, located near the central railway station.³ Kalaratnagaram Press of U. Pushparatha Cheṭṭiar and later several other publishers were maybe involved in the production of these popular Gujili books. The heyday of Periya Eḷuttu publications began from the turn of the last century.⁴ At some point in the course of the mid-twentieth century, Periya Eḷuttu seems to have become a generic term for any "Large Print" publication. Most of the women-centered folk stories which find their way into popular chapbooks were a part of either *kataipāḍal* (song stories), *villupāṭṭu* (bow-songs), performance traditions, or religious/ritual traditions. Interestingly, one may not usually expect to find the tales of women like Alli or Āravalli-Sūravalli nor of tragic-heroic figures like Kaṇṇagi and Nallataṅḡāl in the folksong genre specifically identified with women, such as *oppāri* (lamentation songs) or *tālāṭṭu* (lullabies). The plausible reason could be their deviant or tragic personalities. Nevertheless, these ballads or tales are an important component of popular literature. The Periya Eḷuttu publications, one of the main sources of this present study, are a part of this Gujili market which targeted a neo-literate audience, avid for tales of murder and all forms of deviance including myths and black magic. Writing in the 1990s, Azhagiyanayaki Ammal writes in her autobiography that every Friday the Gujili merchants would travel to the local market carrying low-priced popular books, including Periya Eḷuttu

publications, in a bundle. The hawker would spread his wares on their front patio and her mother would buy *Alli Arasāṇi Mālai*, *Nallataṅgāl*, and *Pavalakkōḍi* for her at very cheap rates varying from four chakrams to seven Travancore chakrams⁵ (VENKATACHALAPATHY 2004, 64).

In sourcing Tamil folktales, I have critically watched the cinematic representations of balladic characters like “Alli,” “Āravalli,” and so on. At the same time, the research for this article is also drawn from the narrations of these tales by Tamil matriarchs like my own grandmother. A. K. Ramanujan, in many of his essays, makes the interesting point about the connection between women as the bearers of tales and women’s agency in shaping these tales in the course of their narrations (see Ramanujan in DHARWADKER 1999, 429–47).

It is important to make the point here that the representational categories used in this article are my own. They are intended to serve the purpose of enabling feminist scholars to use their “double gaze” to critically view these categories within which Tamil women have been imagined. Secondly, I have treated my shifts between these “typecastings” somewhat in the manner of cinematic “cuts,” without seeking to enforce any artificial connectivity between these groupings.

SITUATING THE THEME: TEXTS AND CONTEXTS

The Tamil myths analyzed here, in the process of their transmissions and transmutations, do not follow a linear course but tend to zigzag between the imaging of women within the indigenous Tamil tradition, which predates Brahmanical culture, and their absorption into the Brahmanic-patriarchal stereotyping of women as “silent, chaste, and self-sacrificing.” Section one deals with the two tragic widows, Kaṇṇagi and Nallataṅgāl; section two deals with negative representations and is titled “Cunning Wives and Sorceress Queens: Ballads of Neeli and Āravalli-Sūravalli”; and section three deals with the notion of patriarchal taming, and is titled “Alli and *Pavalakkōḍi*: From Amazonian Rulers to Submissive Wives.”

It is noteworthy that among the earliest scholars to study Tamil ballads were N. VANAMAMALAI (1969, 1981), S. D. LOURDU (1988, 2000), and M. ARUNACHALAM (1976). I have applied some of their insights to attempt a gendered reading of Tamil ballads. In recent years, N. RAMACHANDRAN (2002) has looked at the social tensions that underpin many of these ballads. His book *Tuḍiyāna Sāmigaḷ* (Tamil), analyses the ways in which social tangles and tensions have been handled in *villupāṭṭu* performances. In the *villupāṭṭu* performance, a huge bow is twanged to the accompaniment of the singing of the ballads. The performers also use the *uḍukku*, a percussion instrument, for dramatic effect. These folk representations have passed on from the narrative forms to the field of performing arts. These ballads and legends have been represented in folk performances probably since the sixteenth century when *villupāṭṭu* first came to represent a popular form of the performing arts (GOMATINAYAKAM 1979). The *villupāṭṭu* gradually flowed into theater performances and eventually moved into the cinematic mode.⁶ Much of

Stuart Blackburn's folkloristic research was centered on the *villupāṭṭu* traditions in Nānjil Nāḍu (modern Kanyakumari district).⁷ *Teru kūtu* literally means "street performance" and represents the prototype of street plays. The texts for the various modes of performance differed in keeping with contextual changes and have today become a part of the store of printed material available in old bookshops in Moor Market and Parry's Corner, a famous colonial street in Chennai. Here I shall look both at the texts and the performance contexts of such ballads although there is comparatively little tangible source material on the latter aspect with the exception of the cinematic mode.⁸

TWO CHASTE WIVES/WIDOWS: KAṆṆAGI AND NALLATANGĀL

It is important to foreground the imaging of the chaste wife in Tamil oral tradition with a discussion of the notion of *karpu*, which for want of a better term can be translated as "chastity." *Karpu* is an important cultural signifier for the Tamils. The Sangam (chronologically placed between the third century BCE and the third century CE) text *Tolkāppiyam*, (a grammatical work with sections dating from the fifth century BCE to the third century CE) has an entire section titled *karpiyal*, meaning "The grammar of chastity."⁹ In a significant article, George Hart has pointed out that the notion of *karpu* or chastity, which is considered primary to Brahminical-patriarchy, is actually very much a Dravidian concept (HART 1999, 233–35). The term Dravidian is derived from "Drāviḍa," which refers to the original inhabitants of Peninsular India. Dravidian covers a wide trope of cultural references within the societies and peoples of South India.

The term *karpu* does not just connote chastity but is, in fact, a broader term which takes into its sweep virtually all the qualities "good" women are supposed to possess, aside from the imperative virtue of chastity such as "service" (to one's husband), and the spirit of loyalty and self-sacrifice and modesty in bearing. Hart makes the interesting observation that the *karpu* of the wife "consisted of a sort of asceticism, the restraining of all impulses that were in any way immodest. Clearly, the more sexually attractive a woman is, the more power her chastity endows her with" (HART 1975, 97). The stereotyping of women in Tamil society has largely revolved around this notion of *karpu*. From her innate *karpu* comes the sacred power of the woman, whether she is an unmarried girl or a married woman. The power of *karpu* was to be both feared and revered because it could be both boon-giving as well as extremely destructive if threatened. *Karpu* in the *Puranānūru* is equated with "godliness"—*kaḍavul chānra karpu*,¹⁰ literally "divinity like chastity." In a *Ahanānūru* poem (*Ahanānūru*, 184; see HART 1975, 96), *karpu* is treated as being synonymous with divinity—*kaḍavul karpu*. The virtue of *karpu* imbued the wife with immense spiritual powers and transformed her into *pattini-daivam*, literally "Wife-Goddess." The same notion of *karpu* is also found in the didactic Jain text *Tirukkural* which belongs to the late Sangam era.¹¹ Clearly, the operative force behind the worship of the *pattini-daivam* is the fear of her power of chastity.

Chastity as power is a recurrent theme that runs through not only the Sangam text but even the medieval devotional movements.

The fearful aspect of *karpu* connects it with another recurrent term in early Tamil literature, namely, *aṇanku*. A poem from the *Ahanānūru* uses the interesting expression *aṇanku ūru karpu* (*Ahanānūru*: 73; see HART 1975, 96). The coupling of the term *aṇanku* with chastity or *karpu* lends a more nuanced understanding of chastity by connecting it with the nature of female sexuality. In Dravidian cultures, the spiritual power of women was linked to both the fear of pollution (through menstrual blood, and so on) and the male fear of female sexuality. It is likely that the ancient Tamils defined female sexual power as *aṇanku*, a force to be simultaneously feared and worshipped. The woman's *aṇanku*, if contained within the paradigm of the chaste wife, could be auspicious, making her a *sumangali*, literally "the auspicious one." Outside the marital framework, whether she is a virgin or a widow, the *aṇanku* of the woman was a deadly and destructive power. The complete identification of *aṇanku* with female sexuality is a debatable point. However, in the present context, Hart's definition would hold true since the great Tamil late-Sangam epic *Śilappadikāram* does associate *aṇanku* with female power and personifies it into "Aṇanku," the youngest of the seven virgin sisters "who made Siva dance."¹²

The entire discussion on the twin notions of *karpu* (chastity) and *aṇanku*, which broadly covers notions of female sexuality becomes relevant because the two concepts get connected to Kaṇṇagi, the heroine of the *Śilappadikāram*. Kaṇṇagi, who is hailed in texts as *Karpukkarasi*, literally "the queen of chastity," would be the outstanding example from the Tamil epic tradition of the power of chastity and female spirituality. Kaṇṇagi's entry into the court of the Pandyan king of Madurai from Iḷango Aḍigaḷ's text is worth quoting here because the herald's description of Kaṇṇagi is both dramatic and awe-inspiring:

Someone waits at the gate. She is not the deity Korṟvai, the goddess of victory, holding in her hand the victorious spear, and standing upon the nape of the buffalo with an unceasing gush of blood from its fresh wound. Nor is she Aṇanku, youngest sister of the seven virgins who made Siva dance; nor even is she the Kāḷi of the forest, which is the residence of ghosts and goblins; nor again is she the goddess that tore up the mighty chest of Dharuka. She appears to be filled with resentment. She seems to swell with rage. She has lost her husband; she has in her hand an anklet of gold, and she waits at the gate.¹³

The legend of Kaṇṇagi is recorded in the late-Sangam epic *Śilappadikāram*.¹⁴ The epic written by Iḷango Aḍigaḷ can be dated to around the fourth century CE. The main characters are Kōvalan, the son of Mācattuvan (the name means "a great caravan trader"), Kaṇṇagi, the daughter of Mānāyakan (which means "a renowned seafaring merchant"), and Mādhavi, the courtesan who forms the third end of the romantic triangle. The core of the epic is the attempted sale of Kaṇṇagi's anklet by Kōvalan in the bazaar of Madurai to a craftsman who happens to be the king's goldsmith. The king's goldsmith, who has stolen the queen's anklet,

falsely implicates Kōvalan as the thief who is then summarily executed. The *karpu* of Kaṇṇagi blazes forth as she confronts the kings with the truth. The fire of her chastity burns up the city of Madurai. While the power and fury of Kaṇṇagi's *karpu* leaves the city of Madurai burning, she herself retires to Murugavēl Koṭṭam in Malaināḍu (Koḍungallūr or Cranganore), eventually bodily ascending to heaven.

Across the sea in Sri Lanka, the legend of Kaṇṇagi took a curious twist. It is said that after attending the consecration ceremony of the *mā-daivam* (great goddess) or *pattini-daivam*, (wife-goddess), Gajabahu carried with him a consecrated image of Kaṇṇagi. However, when Kaṇṇagi reached Yālpāṇam (Jaffna) her sacral power was seen as vicious and fearful. This fear is reflected in her worship in Yālpāṇam as a five-headed snake.¹⁵ In this folk version, Kaṇṇagi, by the power of her chastity, brought the slain Kōvalan back to life. On regaining consciousness, he uttered the word "Mādhavi," the courtesan's name. In great anger and disgust Kaṇṇagi turned into a five-headed cobra and it is in this vengeful form that the diasporic Tamils of Sri Lanka worship her. Deified in Tamil society as a goddess, Kaṇṇagi also has many temples dedicated to her in Sri Lanka. The *Nagabhushaṇi* (snake temples) in Sri Lanka in and around Yālpāṇam such as the ones at Alavetti, Suruvil, and Seerani, are all temples dedicated to Kaṇṇagi.

In the texts operating between Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka, which lies across the Gulf of Mannar, the representation of Kaṇṇagi changes from a wife seething with righteous anger to that of a vengeful wife, a veritable cobra. Kaṇṇagi and the burning of the city of Madurai have found many theatrical and cinematic representations. One of the best known is R. S. Mani's *Kaṇṇagi*, produced in 1942 with Kaṇṇamba in the lead role. One of the most popular scenes within the performance tradition is that of Kaṇṇagi flinging her breast onto the street of Madurai, causing the entire city to burn:

Men and women of Madurai, city of four temples,
 Gods of the skies and men of austerities,
 Hear me.
 I am enraged at this city
 whose king wrought injustice upon him I love,
 and I am without fault.
 With her hand she twisted off her left breast,
 encircled Madurai three times keeping it to the right,
 uttered a curse,
 and shining with her ornaments
 threw her lovely breast on the pollen-covered street.¹⁶

There is yet another dimension to the multiple representations of Kaṇṇagi—her historicization. Kaṇṇagi seems to exist on the threshold of historical and epic traditions. Parānar, a Sangam poet, specifically refers to Kaṇṇagi and the consecration of a memorial stone to her by the King Cēran Cenguṭṭavan.¹⁷ The reference in the Sangam text *Narrinai* to Tirumāmaṇi, who cast off one of her breasts in fury, is also believed to refer to Kaṇṇagi. The *Puranānūru* evidence also states that the

stone was ceremoniously washed in the Ganges water before being installed in the area of the Chera kings (Kerala). The site of this temple, called Pattini Kōṭṭam, is at Koḍungallūr (British Cranganore) in Kerala, around two hundred and ten kilometers from Madurai. This temple is known today as the Maṅgaḷadēvi temple. Possession of the temple is hotly contested between the two states.¹⁸ According to the Buddhist text *Mahāvamsa*, the consecration of this one-breasted *pattini-daivam* is said to have been attended by Gajabahu, the king of Sri Lanka. V. R. Ramachandra Dikshitar (*Śilappadikāram*, 1939, 73) gives the approximate date as around 172 or 173 CE. The celebration of Kaṇṇagi's *karpu* persists even today in the Pattini Kōṭṭam at Kodungallūr where a major festival (consisting of dances and dramatic performances) is held in honour of Kaṇṇagi in the Tamil month of *Paṅguni*, which falls between 15 March to 15 April.

NALLATAṅGĀḷ, THE GOOD YOUNGER SISTER

The story of Nallataṅgāḷ captures the tragic imagination of the Tamils and is an evergreen favorite within performance traditions, including the silver screen. Nallataṅgāḷ was a widow with many children who was left destitute by her husband. Ill-treated at her in-laws place and at her brother's place during his absence by her sister-in-law, Nallataṅgāḷ decides to kill herself and her helpless children. She pushes them into a well and jumps into it herself. In another version, Nallataṅgāḷ's husband went off to distant lands to make a living. His wife was therefore left at the tender mercies of her cruel in-laws and driven to suicide. Irrespective of her location in patriarchal society, either as an abandoned wife or as a widow, her tragic end remains the same. In some later versions, Nallataṅgāḷ and her dead children are restored to life by her brother who had committed suicide in remorse and become a "benevolent" ghost. The resurrection of Nallataṅgāḷ in some of the popular versions may owe its story twist to the middle class penchant for "happy endings."

In the Periya Eḷuttu edition of Puḡaḷendi Pulavar's *Nallataṅgāḷ* ballad, her father is Rāmalinga Mahārāja, a petty chieftain of Madurai. The parents die, leaving their daughter Nallataṅgāḷ in the care of her brother Nallatambi who is married to the evil Moolialangāri. Nallataṅgāḷ marries a prince of Kashi. The reference to Kashi in this context must be to some petty principality near Madurai since Kashi or the holy city of Varanasi is located in Northern India, miles away from Nallataṅgāḷ's birth place. Nallataṅgāḷ gives birth to seven children. The ballad now takes a dramatic turn with the description of a severe famine which devastated the kingdom. In the face of impending starvation, Nallataṅgāḷ decides to seek refuge with Nallatambi. The conclusion takes the familiar trajectory with the ill-treatment of Nallataṅgāḷ and her children by her sister-in-law. The hapless woman falls into a well with all her children. Her husband and her brother, who are looking for Nallataṅgāḷ, both commit suicide out of guilt and remorse. This version ends on a miraculous note with the divine couple Śiva and Pārvati intervening in the

tangled lives of these human beings and bringing the dead back to life. The coming back to life of Nallataṅgāl is not, however, the most abiding image of her in folk memory. Her presence in the Tamil folk landscape is that of the tragic widow who is driven by a cruel patriarchal society into killing herself and her innocent children.

The myth of Nallataṅgāl has been made popular on stage and screen through innumerable theatrical and cinematic versions of her story. In 1935 two versions of *Nallataṅgāl* came out simultaneously, produced by Angel Films and Pioneer Films respectively.¹⁹ The patriarchal subsuming of Nallataṅgāl, which iconizes her as a suffering widow without imbuing her with any spirit, takes us back to the paradigmatic dilemma that while some women's folklore are about women they do not fall within the domain of women's active agency. Rather, the narration is indicative of male appropriation of woman's (in this case a widow's) misery as aesthetic expression. On the other hand, it is possible to argue that Nallataṅgāl seems to move within the structure of patriarchy but at the same time indicts it in unqualified terms. The validity of either reading may largely depend on the emotive power of the woman acting the part of Nallataṅgāl on stage or cinema. The legend of Nallataṅgāl was woven into the lives of modern day Tamils by the anthropologist Margaret TRAWICK in her book (1990) based on her fieldwork undertaken in the 1990s. In her chapter titled "Desire in Kinship" she looks at social tensions within Tamil kinship, especially the deep seated antagonism between wife and sister-in-law, between wife and mother-in-law, and the brother-sister bonding which places the wife at the periphery (TRAWICK 1990, chapter IV).

CUNNING WIVES AND SORCERESS QUEENS:
BALLADS OF NEELI AND ĀRVALLI-SŪRAVALLI

The second section will deal with two balladic traditions which have two anti-heroines center stage—Paḷayanūr Neeli and the murderous queens Āravalli and Sūravalli. While the negative representation of the latter two follows a linear pattern, the legend of Neeli tends to zigzag between two bipolarities. She is sometimes the dreaded Neeli *pēy* (the term *pēy* can be broadly translated as "demoness"), sometimes the feared and worshipped goddess Isakki Amman, and yet again the revered Kāraikkāl Pēyar²⁰ of the *Periyapurāṇam*, a twelfth-century Saivite hagiographical text. The versatile Neeli thus goes through a range of imaging from a prostitute to a proselytising Jaina nun to the saintly Shaivite Nayanar "Pēyar."

Split Images of Neeli: Demoness or Goddess?

The story of Neeli occupies a whole trope of literary genre ranging from ballads and tales to the dramatic poetic forms known as *villupāṭṭu* and the folk theater, especially *yakshagāna* in Karnataka. The tale or myth is as widely varied in historical time and space, changing its character as it moves from Tamil Nadu into Karnataka.

The theme of *Neelakēsi* is the folk story of the Paḷayanūr Neeli. The folktale/ballad of *Neelakēsi*, which is popular to this day, is encountered for the first time with some crucial variations in the story of *Neelakēsi* narrated by the saint Chekkīḷar in his celebrated hagiographical text *Periyapurānam*, which is a narration of the lives of saints. This text is placed sometime in the twelfth century. In this version Neeli was the chaste wife of a Brahmin of Paḷayanūr (the place is identified by this author with Tiruvālangāḍu) who fell into the trap of a prostitute and killed his pregnant wife, robbing her of all her jewelry.²¹ In the next birth the Brahmin, now in his incarnation as a merchant (that is, a *cheṭṭi* who is a non-Brahmin), came to Paḷayanūr in search of trade prospects. Neeli, who had turned into a vengeful ghost (*pēy*), pursued him with a ghostly child that she had materialized. Claiming to be his wife, she appealed to the Veḷḷāḷar (the agricultural community typifying wealthy landlords) to restore her conjugal rights.

It is said that the deceitful Neeli shed copious tears to hoodwink the village elders. Even today in Tamil culture any woman shedding hypocritical tears is said to shed *neeli kaṇṇeer*, meaning “false tears.” This shows the extent to which mythical imaging in its turn gets reflected in common parlance and popular culture. Despite the protests of the Brahmin that he did not know her, the Veḷḷāḷar believed her story and forced them to stay together. In the night Neeli murdered him most cruelly, thereby avenging her own murder. It is said that the seventy Veḷḷāḷar elders of the village who had passed the judgment committed mass suicide in remorse. Evidence of memorial stones to the Veḷḷāḷar from the Tiruvālangāḍu site seems to confirm some of these events. If one were to alight at Arakkōṇam junction and travel about fifteen kilometers towards Tiruvāḷḷur, one would come across a place known as Tī Pāyṉta Kuṇṭam at Paḷayanūr. In a dilapidated stone structure here one finds the statues of the seventy Veḷḷāḷar who immolated themselves. There is also said to be a memorial stone to Neeli at the same site.²²

After murdering her husband, Paḷayanūr Neeli continued to live in Tiruvālangāḍu. The Tiruvālangāḍu *Sthala Mahātmyam* gets linked with the Neeli legend at this point. Neeli had become the dreaded Kāḷi of Tiruvālangāḍu, reigning on the border between Paḷayanūr and Tiruvālangāḍu. As the Ellai Dēvatai²³ of the area (the unknown author of the *Sthala Mahātmyam* states that this Kāḷi was none other than Neeli), she, along with a fearsome army, spread devastation all around her. Even the gods found her antics intolerable and appealed to Lord Vishnu (the force signifying protection among the trinity) for help. Vishnu told them the Kāḷi had the support of Śiva’s consort Pārvati and hence they must appeal to him. Instead of waging an open war against the destructive Kāḷi, Śiva decided to challenge her to a dancing contest. Following the famous mythology of the Śiva Śhakti dance which is narrated in other Śaivite sacred sites like Chidambaram, Kāḷi matched him step for step till he took recourse to the Chanda stance in which the legs had to be lifted up. As a woman, Kāḷi would not do this out of modesty and therefore lost the contest. Thus at Tiruvālangāḍu the dancing Natarāja reigns supreme while Kāḷi abides at the borders as a subordinate Ellai Dēvatai.

In yet another feat of metamorphosis, the Karaikkāl Pēyar, the highly revered seventh-century Nayanar saint of Tiruvālangāḍu, blends into the Neeli legend. According to Chekkiḷar,²⁴ Punitavati is a beautiful woman who is deserted by her husband and as a consequence severs her links with the world and becomes a skeletal being, a *pēy*. She assumes the eternal role of witness of Śiva's dance at Tiruvālangā *ḍu*. The opening stanza of Karaikkal Ammiyar's own composition *Tiruvālangāttu Moota Tiruppadigam* is very revealing in the context of the Paḷayanūr/Tiruvālangāḍu Neeli *pēy*. I quote:

She has shriveled breasts
and bulging veins
In place of white teeth
empty cavities gape
with ruddy hair, hollow belly
a pair of fangs, knobby ankles and long shins
the demon woman (*pēy*) wails
at the desolate cremation ground
where our Lord
... dances among the flames
His home is Ālangāḍu.²⁵

Śiva's abode is at Tiruvālangāḍu close to Paḷayanūr where the wicked Neeli fooled the people with her tricks and her tears. Alternately moving from chaste wife to temptress/murderess, Neeli at one point is imaged as goddess Pārvati herself. The consort of Śiva in the temple of Tiruvālangāḍu is called Vanḍaiyar kuḷali, which seems to be the exact Tamil equivalent of the Sanskrit name Neelakēsi. Perhaps Neeli, who had troubled the people of Tiruvālangāḍu and been subsequently subdued by Śiva, had eventually found a place by his side as Vanḍaiyar kuḷali. The zig-zagging of mythologies and folk traditions between Neeli, the wicked demoness, and the divine consort of Śiva is so "fuzzy" that it takes us back to the point raised by Blackburn and Ramanujam (BLACKBURN and RAMANUJAN 1986, 4–5; 14–15) as to how categories such as "folk" and "classical," "oral" and "textual," even "secular" and "sacred" are rendered untenable because of the obvious "continuum" which is, however, not linear but zigzag in its movement.

The earliest textual Jain version which draws the story line of Neelakēsi from oral traditions is the *Ratnakāraṇḍaka Sravakāchāra* by the Jain Acharya Sāmantabhadrā of the second century CE, dealing with Jain Grahastha dharma or "duties of the householder." Sāmantabhadrā is said to have been one of the leading lights of "Jīna Kānchi," so called because Kānchīpuram was then under the sway of Jainism. The text has an elaborate commentary by Bhattāraka Prabhāchandrāchārya of the fourteenth century.

Another early version of the Neeli story is found in the Jain text *Neelakēsi* which has an anonymous authorship but is roughly datable in terms of its time frame to the sixth century CE. The other contemporaneous work in which Neeli is referred to at some length is the Buddhist text *Kundalakēsi*. The author (unnamed) of

Neelakēsi claims that the entire plot was unfolded before him in a vision. It is significant that the central women characters in both these texts would be treated as anti-heroines in the Brahmanical canon. Kuṇḍalakēsi, who is said to have defended Buddhist philosophical doctrines and spread her faith widely, was a prostitute. Neelakēsi, who became her main rival and challenger, is said to have been Neeli *pēy*, a cunning female demoness, before her conversion to Jainism and her emergence as its votary. The first ontological confusion immediately arises out of the apparent transformation of a spirit into a person and the question of whether she exists in the spirit world or the material (“real”) world.

The Jain versions refer to Neeli as the daughter of a Jain merchant who was married off by trickery to a Buddhist merchant named Sāgaradatta. When asked to cook meat for a Buddhist guest (some Buddhists, unlike Jains, had become meat eaters), Neeli responded by making a dish out of a leather slipper. This was dangerously deviant behavior and Neeli’s husband and in-laws retaliated by falsely accusing her of unchastity. Eventually the gods themselves came forth to proclaim her pure and virtuous. A *dēvata* (deity) appeared to the king in a dream, informing him that the gates had been sealed through magical power and that only a chaste woman of the city could open them again. The next morning the king ordered all the women to assemble at the city gates and try one-by-one to open them. All the women failed to do so. Neeli had not been called upon to take the test because her in-laws had already branded her as unchaste. When finally Neeli was called upon to try, her mere touch opened the door and Neeli was thus proclaimed as being virtuous and divine. It is noteworthy that in the medieval fourteenth century commentary on *Neelakēsi* by Diwākara Vāmana Munivar, Neeli is reverentially addressed as *Mā daivam*, literally “the great goddess.” This Neeli is then described as having won great theological battles against the Buddhists, especially at the great polemical debates held at Kampili.²⁶ One of the interesting aspects of this version of *Neelakēsi* is that this Neeli could be the prototype of any chaste wife within the Brahmanical patriarchal structure. Incidentally, this text also shows that, unlike the period of the *Śilappadikāram* when the heterodox faiths presented a joint front against Brahmanical orthodoxy, by the sixth to seventh centuries Buddhism and Jainism were each cutting into and destroying the support bases of one other.

The story of *Neelakēsi* as retold by its fourteenth-century commentators, both Bhaṭṭāraka Prabhachandra Acharya and Diwākara Vāmana Munivar, gives rise to another vexing issue. Is the social situation described by these commentators in any way an authentic representation of the age of Acharya Sāmantabhadra, which was the second century CE, or is it more reflective of the problematic of the medieval commentators themselves? Some of the tensions between Brahmanism on the one hand and Jainism and Buddhism on the other, as they existed in the post-Sangam age right up to the Pallava period in the seventh century, is borne out by multiple sources, including the Sanskrit play *Maṭṭavilāsaprabasana* by King Mahēndravarmaṇ of the Pallava dynasty. It is therefore likely that these tensions

do actually reflect the concerns of Sāmantabhadra. However, the latter elements of the story dealing with the Veḷḷāḷa community are suggestive of a medieval context during which the landowning community of Veḷḷāḷas had gained both power and prestige. The importance given to the Veḷḷāḷa community in both medieval commentaries supports this assumption.

Popular versions of this myth conclude with the deification of Neeli and her enshrinement as Isakki Amman in the Tirunelvēli and Kanyakumari districts as well as the area in and around Pālayamkōttai, and as Kaḷiyamma in the Chingleput district, especially Tiruvālangāḍu. The deification of deviant or dangerous women (including murderous women) who can be said to constitute the socially marginalized/ostracized “subaltern” women, is not a phenomenon that is uncommon to South Indian culture.²⁷ The jilted virgin (exemplified in the Kanyākumari Amman), the murdered woman, and the murderous woman have all been regarded with fear and awe leading to their worship as local deities, or Ellai Dēvata. The worship of deviant women as Ellai Dēvata suggests very interesting possibilities. “Ellai” in the Tamil language literally means “border line” but can be interpreted to mean either village “limits” or liminalities of social, moral behavior and the transformation potential of these deviant women. Valorizing and worshipping deviant women can be one way of freezing them at the borders of an established culture threatened by potential change.

At present, two significant representations of the *Neeli* tale are to be found in the performance traditions: *yakshagānam* (BLACKBURN 1980 and 1988) and *villupāṭṭu* (*Neeli Yakshagānam*, 1994). *Yakshagānam* (the “tamilization” of any word is indicated by the addition of an “m” at the end of the word) broadly represents the folk musical theater in the Karnataka and Andhra regions. Like the *teru kootu* of Tamil Nadu, it takes up for rendition popular stories from south Indian myths and traditions including the *Alli Katai* and the *Neeli Katai*. According to oral tradition, Lord Śiva sent his followers, called *ganās*, to learn music from the sage Shukrāchāriyār, and this came to be known as *yakshagānam*. In Andhra the local people call such music *Jukkula Pāta*. This genre of dance music was popular in the Vijayanagar court. Kavi Nannayya wrote *Karutachala Yakshagānam* while Allasani Peddanna codified the musical grammar of *Yakshagānam*. The genre of musical story narrations known as *villupāṭṭu* is still widely prevalent in the Tamil areas. The term “villu” refers to a huge bow which is the main musical instrument along with the *uḍukku*, a percussion instrument used for dramatic effect by the *villupāṭṭu* singers. The themes were closely associated with mythology (*seeta kalyānam*), folk deities (*aiyyan katai*), or folk ballads (*Nallattāṅḡāḷ katai*). The *villupāṭṭu* “Neeli Katai” had a dual implication—it was the ballad of the deceitful demoness Paḷayanūr *Neeli* and at the same time the story of the “folk” goddess *Isakki Amman*/Paḷayanūr *Kāḷi*. The “Neeli Katai” versions of both the *yakshagānam* and *villupāṭṭu* constitute representations of the popular culture and religious beliefs of the South Indians. Interestingly, most of these tales have currency among the tribal or lower-caste communities of Tamil Nadu. Issaki Amman or Kāḷiyamma, who become symbols of the metamorphosis of Neeli, are folk

deities, worshipped by communities like the Paraiyah, Pulaiya, Māla, and Maḍiga,²⁸ which are low-caste or outcaste.

*Āravalli and Sūravalli: The Sorceress
Queens, or the Ballad of the Seven Sisters*

The ballad of Āravalli and Sūravalli²⁹ is set in the kingdom of Nellūru Paṭṭinam, of which the title characters were the undisputed rulers. The ballad in fact refers to seven sisters but the reins of control were in the hands of these two women, who are described as sorcerers. Like the ballad of Alli, this ballad also feeds back into the Mahābhārata legend. This time the chief protagonist is not Arjunā but Bhīma. While the Pāṇḍavās ruling Indraprastha are perturbed over the militant quality of these two women, who used both might and cunning combined with sorcery to ruthlessly crush all opposition to them, Bhīma offers to conquer them. The first part of the ballad is about the ignoble defeat of Bhīma at the hands of these two women, who utterly humiliate him and send him back to his brothers.

In this context one can go beyond Blackburn's arguments of a classical-folk continuum. The printed folklore versions of Āravalli-Sūravalli lend themselves to being studied as counter-texts. Conceptually, the dominance of women appears to be a nonexistent notion in mainstream epics but is brought in deliberately in oral literature, which is what makes ballads like Āravalli-Sūravalli seem more like counter-texts because of the stark contrast to the patriarchal images in the Sanskrit epics.

The main plot of the story unfolds when the hapless Pāṇḍavās use the astrological skills of Sahadev to formulate a master plan against the two cunning women. The plan is to adopt their nephew Alli Rājan (also called Alli Muttu), the son of their sister Sangavathi, for the specific purpose of taking up the challenge posed by the sisters on behalf of the Pāṇḍavās. Neither Sangavathi nor Alli Muttu figure in the mainstream texts of the Mahābhārata and are to be seen only in this Tamil ballad.

In the third part of the ballad, Alli Rāja, who is now the legal heir of the Pāṇḍavās, goes to Nellūru Paṭṭinam. On the way, he defeats Ellai Kāḷi, the local goddess who stands at the borders of the village and guards the villagers through her awe-inspiring presence. Kāḷi is pleased with the earnestness of Alli Rāja and his special mission. She therefore gives him sacred water (water sanctified by powerful incantations) and other assets like a magical horse.

The major part of the epic comes to an end with the humiliating defeat of the two cunning sorcerers Āravalli and Sūravalli. The defeat is not through actual combat but in the defeat of Āravalli's cock by Alli Rāja. Here the importance of cockfights as status deciders is noteworthy. Cockfights become signifiers of a power struggle involving loss of territories and political eclipse. Here I would like to draw attention in particular to the celebrated essay by Clifford Geertz (GEERTZ 1973, 412–54).³⁰ A significant departure from the Balinese tradition in this Tamil story is the pro-active role played by the queens and their women in the bloody cockfights, while women are conspicuous by their absence in the Balinese context.

The cunning queens of Nellūru Paṭṭinam had so far managed to poison or meddle with their opponents' cock to bring about their defeat. The victory of Alli Rāja's cock marks the end of this battle of wits in the arena of the cockfight. As a sign of their submission the two queens offer their adopted daughter Palvarisai in marriage to the victor.

The concluding part of this ballad is like the fifth act of a Shakespearian play. The scenes are packed with dramatic incidents leading to the denouement. Alli Rāja initially suspects that the daughter may have learned black magic from her mothers but is eventually convinced of her goodness and innocence. The newly-wedded pair make their way into the forest where the bride in her innocence follows the instructions of her mothers and gives poisoned lemon juice³¹ to her husband after first intoxicating his senses with the fragrance of a poisoned bouquet.

Palvarisai discovers the perfidy of her foster mother only when her bridegroom lies dead. She curses her wicked mothers and the land of her birth with the strongest invectives, including her curse seeking the destruction of Nellūru Paṭṭinam by fire.³² Āravalli and Sūravalli welcome their widowed daughter triumphantly, seeking to console her by promising remarriage (*Āravalli Sūravalli Katai* 1978, 80–81). It is unusual to find a reference to widow remarriage in ballads which are largely patriarchal in tone. This is held up in the text as a further indication of the devious path taken by the two cunning queens.

The defeat of Āravalli and Sūravalli brings about the patriarchal taming not only of these defiant queens and their unbridled energies (born probably out of their celibate virginal power) but also of the tale itself, which seems to be strongly rooted in a non-patriarchal Tamil society. The crowning achievement of patriarchy is the inspired advice of Lord Krishna that Palvarisai, having become the wife of Alli Rāja, should now bear the Sanskritic name Balambal, completely discarding her original Tamil Dravidian identity!

Gods and mortals actively participate (as in the Greek plays) towards a final solution of the human tangle. The play ends with the resurrection of Alli Rāja and the burning of Nellūru Paṭṭinam. Not only Āravalli and Sūravalli, but all the seven sisters are disfigured by having their noses cut off, and these are strung into a garland and offered to Ellai Kāḷi.

The dramatized versions of Āravalli and Sūravalli, as well as its cinematic versions (in 1946 by C. V. Raman and in 1957 by Modern Studios), have followed the pattern of unbridled female power eventually tamed by patriarchy. However, the texts are rendered complex by the “excess” which flows through them, indicative of non-patriarchal elements forming a fragmented sub-text. To give just one instance, while the leading female protagonists are “tamed” by patriarchy, one of the sisters escapes into Kerala and becomes the “fierce Bhagavati” (evocative of the fearsome Goddess Durga or Kāḷi) who attracts worship embedded in fear.³³

There is a constant tension in the many *gujili* texts and performance scripts of the *Ballad of the Seven Sisters* between the female protagonists of the ballad and its multiple renderings. Āravalli and Sūravalli, as well as their other sisters, were “cunning queens” and “sorceresses” in the eyes of whom? The appropriation of these

characters by male scriptwriters and their strong negative representations create a different problematic for the entire genre of women-oriented myths, re-forming the myths as a part of a patriarchal agenda. The narrators of these ballads were all male, and very often even the performers of these anti-heroines were male until the nineteenth century when women began appearing on stage, subtly changing the mode of representation. Deconstructing the renderings of the Āravalli-Sūravalli texts may probably present us with images not of cunning witches but of women rulers with political acumen who refused to succumb to any kind of taming, whether “patriarchal” or “political.”³⁴

ALLI AND PAVAḶAKKOḶI: FROM
AMAZONIAN RULERS TO SUBMISSIVE WIVES

Alli and PavaḷakkoḶi were probably local cult figures and the products of a society that was non-patriarchal.³⁵ These reflect the process by which myths, born out of an early Tamil tradition that was Dravidian and matrilineal, get tamed and are eventually absorbed into the dominant Sanskritic mythology of the *Mahābhārata*. In the zigzag course of its transmission, the stories of Alli and PavaḷakkoḶi develop a finely textured life of their own.

The Alli myth in its various shifts and movements may point to a coming together of two somewhat divergent traditions. *Alli Arasāṇi Mālai*, in terms of its literary and cultural content, combines indigenous Tamil traditions, which can be broadly categorized as Dravidian, and the Sanskritic (Upper-caste non-Brahmin and/or Brahmanical) tradition. The latter makes its presence felt in Tamil culture towards the late-Sangam period (*Katai Sangam*). This cultural encounter was a long, drawn-out process. Rigid caste hierarchies were not indigenous to early Tamil societies, which consisted of *kuḶi*, a generic term meaning “inhabitants.” The *kuḶi* were economically stratified in terms of occupational differences, but caste hierarchies were marked by a certain degree of fluidity.³⁶ The Sangam poet Auvaḷyār, a low-born Virali (minstrel) of the Pānār caste, talks of her dining with the king at his table. In his article on “Early Evidence for Caste in South India,” Hart identifies the Pānār with Pulaiyar, a medieval “untouchable” caste (HART 1987, 2–4). There are many such instances of social egalitarianism in ancient Tamil society. However, caste itself is not extraneous to early Tamil society but is embedded in Dravidian culture, as Hart has argued. What is therefore rendered “fuzzy” is the notion of caste hierarchies and social distancing.

Alli is said to be the only child of a Pāṇḍyan king who is not located in chronological time or identified by name. The location of the Alli myth in Madurai, the capital of the Pāṇḍyan kingdom, is once again interesting since the hagiographical tradition, enshrined in the *Periyapurāṇam*, states that Madurai was ruled by the three-breasted Meenakshi, who eventually went on to become the wife of Śiva. Like the divine ruler Meenakshi, Alli too was trained in martial arts and went to a *gurukula* (traditional school) to learn sacred texts as well as texts of governance.

She became the ruler on the death of her father. The whole land is described as having been in terror of the Pāṇḍyan queen Alli. The *Pavalakkōḍi Mālai* says:

If you take the name of Alli
 Even the bird will not sip water
 If you take the name of Alli
 The goblins (Gaṇās) will dance.
 If you take the name of Alli
 The decapitated head will chatter! (*Alli Arasāṇi Mālai*, 52)

When Alli was ruling in Madurai, the much married Pāṇḍavā prince Arjunā sets out with Krishnā, his friend, cousin, and spiritual guide, on a long pilgrimage. Starting from Mathurā and Kāshi, the two pilgrims reach Madurai wearing the garb of ascetics. Here an innkeeper acquaints them with the valor and beauty of Alli. The man describes Alli's victory over Neenmugan and her authoritarian rule in Madurai, under which any slight lapse would cause heads to roll (*Alli Nāṭakam* 1967, 12). Arjunā's sarcastic innuendoes at her masculinity suggest the imaging of Alli as a "castrated male." In Tamil, eunuchs are called Alli, perhaps drawing on this folk legend. At this, the narrator treats him to a detailed description of Alli's stunning beauty and her many charms. Arjunā is told that since she cannot tolerate the presence of any man, all her governmental functionaries, both high and low, ranging from military commanders and ministers to carpenters and other petty craftsmen, were women (*Alli Arasāṇi Katai* 1987, 31). Even today among Tamils an all-female household is sarcastically referred to as "Alli Rājyam," literally "the administration run by Alli."

The rest of the Alli ballad deals with the taming and domestication of Alli into a virtuous and obedient wife to Arjunā. Arjunā enters the Pāṇḍyan kingdom in the guise of an ascetic (*sanyāsi*), presumably to hide his well-known penchant for beautiful women. A popular saying in the Tamil areas is "Arjunā sanyāsi," meaning a sanctimonious humbug! Arjunā tries to seduce Alli in various ways. He must, however, be seen to preserve patriarchal norms, and marriage was and is considered a most important social norm. Thus the texts that retold and reworked the Alli myth emphasized the fact that Arjunā's seduction of Alli was followed by marriage. Arjunā cheats the man-hating Alli by penetrating her bedroom in the form of a beautiful snake given to her by Krishnā in disguise. Alli in her innocence plays with the snake, which eventually hypnotizes her. The imaging of Arjunā as the seductive and aggressive male snake indicates the use of very powerful sexual imagery. A graphic description in the *Alli Katai* says that the love play of Arjunā drained Alli of all her resistance, making her feel drugged with passion (*Alli Katai*, verses 1035 to 1940). Thus, Arjunā seduces Alli without her knowledge or consent. The process of Alli being tamed by a patriarchal hero is thus set into motion with the sexual conquest of Alli resulting in the loss of her virginity, which was believed to be the source of her power. Arjunā achieves the ultimate "triumph" over Alli when he secretly ties the *Tāli*, the yellow thread symbolizing a woman's marital status in South Indian tradition, around Alli's neck and she conceives the

same night. Alli is furious and outraged and wants to murder Arjunā. However, at this point she is made to realize by her female companions that she is now a married woman, and as a would-be mother she has no option but to submit to the will of Arjunā.

The ballad of Pavaḷakkoḍi (*Pavaḷakkoḍi Mālai* 1975) follows virtually the same trajectory as the story of Alli. The story of Pavaḷakkoḍi is also a multilayered text with versions ranging from the *Pavaḷakkoḍi Mālai* of Pugaḷendi Pulavar, an oral ballad, to the *Pavaḷakkoḍi Nāṭakam* or performance texts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Pavaḷakkoḍi was another female ruler who became the victim of Arjunā's desire. The ballad begins with Alli's son Pulandaran crying for a toy chariot made of coral. Neither queen Alli nor her son Pulandaran have been visited by Arjunā since the birth of the boy five years earlier. The all-women team of ministers advise Alli that coral could be obtained only from the dense coral forests located at a distance of eight hundred *yojanas* (one *yोजना* being roughly fourteen kilometers, making the distance approximately 11,520 kilometers) from Madurai. They tell Alli that she must swallow her pride and request help from her husband Arjunā, since he was the only person capable of achieving this task. A furious Alli tells them:

A loveless betrayer, a *parama caṇḍālan*,
 A *brashṭa* who cheats women
 Betraying truth, dealing in lies,
 On seeing that Caṇḍāla, I shall behead him³⁷ (*Pavaḷakkoḍi Nāṭakam*)

Love for her son makes Alli suppress her resentment. She writes a false letter to Yudhisṭhira at Indraprastha seeking Arjunā's presence in Madurai because Pulandaran is on his death bed. Arjunā is enjoying the company of Subhadrā, Krishna's sister and one of his many wives, when the news reaches him.

Arjunā enters Madurai with trepidation, fearful of Alli's righteous fury. The shamefaced Arjunā is abused by Alli and threatened with dire consequences if he does not get Pulandaran a coral cart within eight days.

Pavaḷakkoḍi, like Alli, is not conceived naturally but found on a coral creeper by the childless royal couple of the Cheramboor area. Pugaḷendi Pulavar says that she has been dressed and brought up as a boy, and that most people did not know their future ruler was a woman. Spurning marriage, Pavaḷakkoḍi had been governing her kingdom for sixteen years.

Arjunā sets out in search of coral and comes upon the princess Pavaḷakkoḍi, literally the coral creeper, in the Cherambūr area. As usual, Krishnā joins him to aid and abet him in sexual conquests. Arjunā, who had seduced Alli as a snake, now enters the bedroom of Pavaḷakkoḍi as a swan and makes a conquest of her. Pavaḷakkoḍi is humiliated and angry at the loss of her virginity. She taunts him by asking him "who else he has seduced in like manner." Arjunā's brazen response is to list the names of those women who he had initially raped and then married:

Hear then, my beauty, if you think
 yourself the only one so seduced
 Many are the women I have violated
 Draupadi born from fire
 Minnoḷi born from the clouds
 Nāga princess Ulupi conceived by a snake
 Subhadra sister of Krishnā and
 the able ruler Alli
 All I have raped and more!³⁸

(*Pavaḷakkōḍi Mālai*, 51)

Following her seduction and rape when Pavaḷakkōḍi laments her fate, Arjunā consoles her by saying that she will be in the company of Subhadrā, the sister of Lord Krishnā, Draupadi, and Alli, the Pāṇḍyan queen. As with the ballad of Alli, the story of Pavaḷakkōḍi ends with her taming by Arjunā into a submissive wife.

When Arjunā fails to return to Madurai even after sixteen days in the land of Pavaḷakkōḍi, Alli declares war in order to hunt him down and kill him. She tells the court, “Let the world know that Alli Nayaki hated her husband and let other women draw inspiration from me and gain fame” (*Pavaḷakkōḍi Nāṭakam*, 32). Arjunā feigns death in order to escape the wrath of Alli and the play ends when Alli gives away all her *parisam* (matrilineal) lands to Krishnā (in the guise of a physician) for bringing Arjunā back to life.

It is noteworthy that the notion of conquest—of both woman and land—is built into all these tales, cutting across multiple renditions. By seducing and marrying the female rulers, Alli and Pavaḷakkōḍi, the Pāṇḍavā prince Arjunā also annexes virgin territory.

The performances of Alli and Pavaḷakkōḍi in what is termed Company Drama or *teru kootu* is a fascinating story of women’s inclusion and exclusion, both offstage and onstage. In the performances of the Śankaradās Svāmigaḷ troupe, *stree-part* (literally “women’s part”) roles were enacted mostly by male actors. An interesting aspect of early performances of Alli is that the role was initially performed by men called *stree-part*, such as “Alli” Paramesvara Iyer. Thus *stree-part* in conventional usage came to refer exclusively to men playing women’s roles. This happened sometimes even with “soft” female roles, meaning the portrayal of women who are not characterized by “masculinity” like Alli Rāṇi but are very feminine in their delineation. For instance, S. G. Kiṭṭappa, who went on to become a celebrated male actor, played the female role of Āṇḍaḷ in the play *Sri Āṇḍaḷ Tirumaṇam* (Āṇḍaḷ’s wedding) in 1928. However, towards the end of the nineteenth century, the softer female/feminine roles were beginning to be performed by women themselves. Names like Parsi Miss. P. Vaḍivāmbāḷ (Vaḷḷi in the play *Vaḷḷi Tirumaṇam*), T. M. Kamalavēni (SEIZER 2007, 88–89), and a decade later K. P. Sundarāmbāḷ, begin to appear in drama notices.³⁹ From the mid-1930s women were beginning to dare playing roles like Alli Rāṇi. In her book, Susan Seizer has discussed a drama notice of *Pavaḷakkōḍi* in 1936 where K. P. Jānaki plays the role of Alli Rāṇi, and Rathināmbāḷ acts as Princess Pavaḷakkōḍi (SEIZER 2007, 98). There are occasional

cases of women appearing in male roles, such as K. B. Sundarāmbāl in the lead role of Nandanār in the film *Nandanār* in 1935, or M. S. Subbalakshmi as Nārada in the film *Sāvitrī* in 1941. When women began to act on a regular basis in cinema around the 1930s, hardly any of them would accept the role of Alli because of its negative image in society, and the first cinematic Alli was an Anglo-Indian actress. Subsequently, women began to perceive the role as a challenge and agreed to perform it. One of the earliest such performances was by S. D. Subbulakshmi in 1934 in *Pavalakkoḍi*. Susan Seizer's study of special drama artists has poignant accounts of the social marginalization of these early actresses. Her documentation reinforces the notions of stigma attached to women on stage, a theme that has been so eloquently written about in the context of Bengali stage actresses like Binōdini Dāsi (BHATTACHARYA 1998; BANERJEE 2000).

Another facet to these dramatic performances is the swing in the characterization of Alli from the angry virago to the romantic virgin. In early twentieth-century Chennai, B. Ratna Nayakar and Sons brought out a performance text of Alli called *Alli Nāṭakam* which began to be staged soon after publication. This version continued to be printed even in the 1960s (Tirumagal Press, 1967). Following Pugaḷēndi Pulavar, the sixteenth-century author of *Alli Arasāṇi Mālai*, all later versions hold up the submission of the militant Alli to Arjunā as a moral lesson which all right-thinking women should draw upon—that a woman's ultimate destiny is fulfilled only as a wife and a mother. It was also imperative for the success of stage performances that Alli's personality be softened for the story line to develop a romantic interest which, while providing occasions for song and dance sequences, would attract the largely (perhaps entirely) male audience. The induction of romance by populist playwrights then altered the stage script. To give just one example, the Alli of Kappinipadi Piḷḷai, a playwright, in the eighteenth-century stage version is a tender-hearted woman who runs to the aid of Arjunā when he swoons upon seeing her in the forests of Madurai. The verse goes:

On seeing Alli, Vijayan, that most handsome of men,
 Vijayan of the famed bow;
 falls prostrate like a coconut tree cut at its roots...
 Māyan (Krishnā) gathered him into his arms while Alli
 ran up in haste and said “blow the breath of dry ginger upon his face.”
(*Alli Katai*, 25)

With the coming of the cinema, as many cinematic versions of Alli and Pavalakkoḍi appeared as there were films made on chaste heroines like Kaṇṇagi. *Alli Arjunā* in 1935, *Alli Vijayam* in 1942 and *Alli Rāṇi* with S. Varalakshmi in the lead role are some of the commercially successful cinematic versions of the Alli story. Similarly, the production of *Pavalakkoḍi* in 1934 and again in 1949 (the latter version with T. R. Rajakumari in the lead), shows that these ballads held a continued fascination for the Tamil audience. The film *Mandirikumāri*, scripted by M. Karuṇānidhi,⁴⁰ is about the physical and moral conquest of Pavalakkoḍi by Arjunā. Men, who largely comprised the theater audience, enjoyed the performances overtly, while women

covertly read the Gujili versions until such time as women began to perform (by the late 1930s) and interpret these roles in their own fashion. Women also began to frequent the theater, thereby changing the composition of the audience.

Yet this fascination of women for daring and deviant females apparently did not extend to their acceptance in orthodox homes. Neelāmbikai Ammaiyār, the celebrated daughter of Marai Malai Aḍigaḷ and the founder of the anti-British, anti-Congress movement Tani Tamil Iyakkam, writes in her essay *Muppenmanigal Varalāru* (The Life of Three Women):

Women should not be permitted to read texts like *Alli Arasāṇikkovai Pavalakkoḍi Mālai*, *Ēṇi Ēṭram*, and so on, which may lead them into bad ways (author's emphasis mine). They do not only read such texts day and night but also read books (Brahmanical Sanskrit texts) like *Kaivalya Navaneetam* which are false doctrines. (NEELĀMBIKAI 1946, 26–27)

Neelāmbikai Ammaiyār's statement indicates, on the one hand, the patriarchal responses to the Alli myth which was regarded as corrupting and subversive. At the same time it shows that the notion of women's freedom and the urge to carve out one's own spaces independent of the ubiquitous patriarchal male did exercise the imagination of girls/women who showed a penchant for the Alli ballads. Deviant behavior was seen to be encouraged by the reading of the multiple versions of the printed folklore of Alli Rāṇi or by watching its performances.

AN OPEN-ENDED CONCLUSION

This article has endeavored to use folkloristics as the mode to trace the process by which the indigenous imaging of women by women or by various male agencies in Tamil folklore have engaged with a society that appears to be predominantly patriarchal. One of the foci of this study has been to highlight the processes of mutations in the tales/myths center-staging Tamil women.

This article has also tried to engage with male-female responses to these women-oriented stories within performance traditions. On the one hand, ballads like that of Alli, Neeli, and Āravalli-Sūravalli, at the social level, represent reprehensible social and moral behavior but, on the other hand, continue to excite the imagination of the Tamils cutting across gender lines, as proved by the popularity of these themes in “public” theater and Tamil cinema.

A question that arises repeatedly in looking at women-oriented folklore is the extent to which they actually represent a “feminist” gaze. This suspicion is borne out by reexamining these texts, many of them deliberately representing women as either powerless, suffering “subjects” or as cunning witches. To quote Barbara A. Babcock in her review of JORDON and KALCIK (1985), “an important distinction should have been made between the folklore about women, which, quite significantly, may or may not be authored by women, and women's folklore, that is verbal or nonverbal genres used or created by women” (BABCOCK 1986, 734–35).

She is making the obvious point that folklore about women can also be contained within the patriarchal register.

A. K. Ramanujan has raised the question of women's agency in the context of women-oriented Tamil tales (DHARWADKER 1999, 429–47). He begins with the interesting point that even when men narrate these tales, the original narrator of the tale would have been a woman (DHARWADKER 1999, 429). Ramanujan points out that the “stories are told performatively” (DHARWADKER 1999, 438), although portrayals of characters and performances themselves vary a great deal in narrations, texts, and performances through time and space.

In the woman's tale singled out by Ramanujan, as well as in the *Alli* story, the snake lover appears as a powerful motif. The penetration of the sensuous snake into the bedroom of the virgin and her seduction and eventual conquest lends itself to the printed text, (it being much more vexatious to introduce a sensuous snake on stage), suggesting a male readership. The notion of merit and demerit, what the printed folklore calls *phala-sruti* (the fruits of hearing and narrating), is very much a part of these stories. These are usually didactic in tone and constitute moral lessons for women. The *phala-sruti* neatly draws a “woman's tale,” which may be deviant in tone, back into the folds of patriarchy. Does this indicate that these tales in some of their more visible/popular versions were the products of male fantasy?

I have at the same time endeavored to show that the tales of deviant women like *Alli* definitely had a female readership, and women constituted a major section of the audience when these stories found a niche in popular cinema from the middle of the twentieth century. This article has at various points raised the question of women's agency in the conception, creation, or performance of these women-oriented ballads. This issue has come up in Seizer's recent book on Tamil performance traditions (SEIZER 2007) by discussing women stage actresses from the 1930s till the present.

By the 1950s and 1960s, along with the stiff competition among actresses to emote in films like *Kannagi*, every popular heroine was vying for the role of the valorous female—T. R. Rajakumari (Pavaḷakkoḍi) and Savitri Ganesan (Rāṇi Cengamalam), to name only two. Phoenix-like ballads such as *Alli Katai* continue to surface in the culture, especially in the cinematic matrix of the Tamils, the most recent example being *Alli Arjuna* with Richa Pallod in the lead role in 2001. This is an important indicator of their continuous validation in Tamil society in which there is an almost symbiotic link between Tamil cinema and everyday lives.

Folklore being multi-textured, (whether the tales appear as oral renditions, performances, or popular printed texts) does not provide simple answers to this complex methodological question of intent and agency. What is clear, however, is that these texts or performances could change their gender contours depending on the primary agency behind them. Women performers could and did bring to these stories a deviant/defiant spirit that undercut the patriarchal agenda and appealed to certain constituencies of women.

I would like to conclude with the observation that, in the context of Tamil folklore, almost every kind of Western theoretical category, while serving as a useful starting point, breaks down when subjected to the nuances of Tamil culture. No linear methodology can be employed in understanding the shifts and mutations of these women-centered oral traditions. I therefore end this article with a quotable quote from Henry H. Stahl's classic work, *The Traditional Romanian Village Communities*:

The only method to use in order to understand this apparently chaotic muddle of social phenomena, which are mixed from century to century and from region to region, is to proceed not only backwards or in reverse but also forwards, in chronological order, zigzagging from time to time, from century through century, as much forward as backward. (STAHL 1980, 9)

NOTES

* I wish to thank S. Karmegham, George Hart, Susan Vishwanathan, Kumkum Roy, and Sadhana Naithani for their comments on this article, and my husband C. P. Krishnan for his fine-tuning of the text. Some of my research was carried out in the folklore library of St. Joseph's College at Palayankottai in Tamil Nadu. I am grateful to Professor Lourdu for sharing with me his rich folklore material as well as his methodological insights in the context of my work in November and December 2007. With his sudden death in 2008, Tamil folklore studies has lost a great scholar.

1. In the transliteration of Tamil words this article follows the international convention of the Library of Congress. Where feasible, I have followed the recognizable Anglicized form. All translations from Tamil are mine unless otherwise stated.

2. VENKATACHALAPATHY 1994. The thesis has an interesting section on Gujili literature.

3. Moor Market still exists and I would like to draw the attention of this journal's readers to a delightful piece posted on the following website: <http://baleshlakshminarayanan.wordpress.com> on 10 June 2008 titled "Reading Ain't that Costly in Chennai" (Accessed 3 February 2010).

4. On this point I am grateful to Venkatachalapathy for his email communication on 15 July 2009.

5. The chakram was currency that was legal tender only in the old Travancore State. In the early twentieth century the exchange rate was twenty-eight chakrams to the British rupee. As late as the 1970s the price of a book was still one rupee or seventy-five paise, that is three quarters of a rupee. This will give an idea of the cheap price of these publications.

6. Interesting definitions of the *villupāṭṭu* tradition and its dramatically changing themes, from mythologies to an AIDS campaign, were presented at a workshop hosted jointly by the National Folklore Support Centre and Ēkalaivan Villupāṭṭu Centre at Chennai, 21–25 November 2005.

7. BLACKBURN 1980 and 1988. A useful overview essay is BLACKBURN 1981. The more recent work is BLACKBURN et al., 1989.

8. An interesting article that attempts precisely this is DE BRUIN 2001.

9. *Tolkāppiyam* of Tolkāppiyar. The text has many commentaries, notably by ḷampūranār of the Sangam period, and Daivacilaiyār and Naccinārkinīyār in the medieval period. I have here followed the text and translation provided by E. S. Varadaraja Iyer, *Tolkāppiyam*:

Poruladikāram, 1948. The lengthy section on *karpīyal* along with *poruḷiyal* is on pages 230 to 424.

10. *Puranānūru*: 198, see George L. HART 1975, 96. This discussion on *karpū* draws heavily from the sections on *karpū* in this book as well as on conversations with George Hart on this issue. I am grateful to him for sharing this.

11. *Tirukkural of Tiruvalluvar*, chapter 6, stanza 54, V. R. Ramachandra Dikshitar 1994, 13.

12. *Śilappadikāram*, ed. Dikshitar (1939) xx: 34–44. See *Śilappadikāram: Moolamum Uraiyum*, ed. Swaminatha Iyer (2007).

13. *Śilappadikāram*, ed. Dikshitar (1939) xx: 34–44. See *Śilappadikāram: Moolamum Uraiyum*, ed. Swaminatha Iyer (2007). The translation of the canto is by Dikshitar (1939), 247–48.

14. There are other interesting versions of the story of Kaṇṇagi titled as *Kōvalan Katai* (1972), written with the focus on Kōvalan, the ill-fated husband of Kaṇṇagi. NAZIMUDDIN provides an anthropological perspective in his *Kōvalan Caritram* (1992).

15. For the Sri Lankan versions of the Kaṇṇagi legend see KANAKARATNAM 1984.

16. Kaṇṇagi in *Śilappadikāram* 21, 40–57, translation by HART 1975, 105–106. A discussion on historicizing Kaṇṇagi can be found in RAMASWAMY 2007 in the section “Chastity as Female Spiritual Power,” 49–52.

17. *Puranānūru*, 1963, 369. Two other verses from the text also refer to Kaṇṇagi on pages 144–45.

18. See the website <http://forumhub.mayyam.com>. The passage was written by Padmanabha on 11 February 2007 (accessed 19 October 2008).

19. Recently, Nallataṅgāl was remembered by the Tamil community by brothers giving green saris on the day of her supposed death anniversary. Why green? This was perhaps because green symbolizes the renewal of life. The people I interviewed in the course of my fieldwork in 1997 were unable to give reasons for their choice of month and date for commemorating the event.

20. This honorific “Pēyar” is unusual since it literally means “demoness” but was being used as early as the eighth century CE by Saivite saints like Sundarar and others to connote the extreme renunciation of Kāraikkāl Ammaiḃār. Sculptural representations on many ancient temple walls of a demonic figure beating time with cymbals to the cosmic dance of Śiva reinforces her nomenclature as “Kāraikkāl Pēyar.”

21. See the Tamil essay by HAMEED, which attempts a lengthy comparison of the behavior of the two wronged wives, Kaṇṇagi and Neelakēsi (1968).

22. Balakrishnan et. al. provided the English rendering of the *Neeli Katai* (1996) under the title *A Tale of Nemesis*. Balakrishnan relates his field visit to the site of Tiruvaḷangadu connected with Neeli and states that the local people, especially women, still believe the area to be haunted by Neeli.

23. The term refers to folk deities placed on the borders of villages for the purpose of preventing bad elements, including marauders or diseases from entering the village. These Ellai Dēvatas (devatai is the feminine form) can still be seen in interior Tamil Nadu.

24. The story of Kāraikkāl Ammaiḃār is to be found in the *Periyapurānam* of Chekkīḷar.

25. For Norman Cutler’s translation see RAMASWAMY 2007, 132.

26. Some versions of the story of *Neelakēsi*, including the above version, are to be found in RAMASWAMY 2007, 97–98.

27. The phenomenon of deviant women emerging as village goddesses was analyzed for the first time by WHITEHEAD 1921, 21, 52–53, and 117–18.

28. Under its policy of affirmative action in the cause of social justice, the Indian Gov-

ernment has defined these communities as “scheduled castes.” These are groups of castes and tribes who were considered “backward” socially and economically so that they could be granted special concessions and privileges with the Indian democratic constitution.

29. In this article I have followed the Periya Eḷuttu printed version provided in *Āravalli Sūravalli Katai* said to have been composed by Pugaḷēndi Pulavar in 1973.

30. Following Geertz’s study, other scholars have looked at the significance of cockfights in traditional cultures and politics. Cockfights in the context of the regime of the Philippine dictator Marcos and his overthrow in the subsequent electoral battle is discussed in a recent publication in Tamil (BRITTO 1999, 220).

31. Lemons are usually used by the performers of black magic to contain their incantations in the fruit. Sweet lime is therefore perceived in traditional Indian society both as a source of bewitching and at the same time used as an antidote to black magic. It is not uncommon to find a garland of margossa (neem) leaves interspersed with sweet limes, hanging on the threshold of traditional South Indian homes.

32. Palvarisai’s imprecations can be read in *Āravalli Sūravalli Katai* 1978, 78–79, 81.

33. *Āravalli Sūravalli Katai* 1978, 97–98. The connection between dangerous sexuality and controlled “female power” is discussed in HART 1999, 233.

34. The story of the seven sisters as the legend of Āravalli and Sūravalli has been subject to analysis as performance text by DHANANJAYAN 1999.

35. A detailed contextualization of Alli within the cultural-scape of the Tamils has been made in RAMASWAMY 2002, 72–74.

36. The changing status of women in Tamil society with the growth of Brahmanisation and a transforming economic order is discussed in RAMASWAMY 1997, 223–45.

37. The term “Caṇḍāla” refers to the untouchable castes like professional castes involved with death rituals. Parama Caṇḍāla means the most accursed of the untouchable castes. *Brashta* refers to one who has deviated from the norms and duties of his caste, hence *dharmā brashta*. The term is being used here by Alli as the worst form of pejorative for Arjunā.

38. The word used in the text repeatedly is *karpalitta*, which translates most aptly as “rape.” The version I have followed is in *Pavalakkodi Mālai* 1975, 51.

39. Valuable input on the participation of women on stage is provided by SEIZER 2007.

40. Karuṇānidhi is presently in his third term as chief minister of Tamil Nadu.

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Note: *Katai* means “story” while *Natakam* means “play.” The word *Mālai* is usually used for poetry although in these texts even *katai* is in poetic form. Most of these texts do not carry an author’s name.

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