

India: Meena Kandasamy's feminist intervention on the Tirukkural

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The unparalleled Tamil classic's third part, covering desire, was long overlooked, but Kandasamy's new translation looks precisely at it to challenge convention

In the vast expanse of the Tamil literary landscape, the *Tirukkural* – an ancient treatise that offers wise counsel on almost every matter pertaining to living – holds a singularly enviable place. The first-century BCE text remains arguably the most loved, commented on and translated volume in Tamil. The *Tirukkural* is universal. “It does not belong to one class, religion, race, language or country,” says the renowned Tamil scholar Thiru Vi Kalyanasundaram. “It is the text that belongs to the world.” The comment is as much about the secular nature of the *Tirukkural* as it is about its universality. Little is known about its author, Tiruvalluvar, who remains an enigmatic and widely honoured figure in Tamil culture. Every attempt to dissect his identity and every claim made to his overawing legacy has been overwhelmed by the magnificence of the text. That Tiruvalluvar could pack so much wisdom for humankind, transcending time and worlds, into two-line and seven-word verses, remains a feat nonpareil.

The *Tirukkural* holds formidable sway in everyday Tamil life – literary, cultural, social, political and otherwise. Not a day passes in Tamil Nadu without Tiruvalluvar being remembered by politicians, actors, writers or activists. From its incarnations in folk arts, like *parai* and *theru koothu*, to its various literary interpretations, the *Tirukkural* generates a world of endless possibilities. But it is perhaps the text's political appropriation that continues to influence Tamil life like no other literary work.

The *Tirukkural* is irrevocably intertwined with the ideals of the Dravidian movement, whose ideology has continued to govern Tamil Nadu for over fifty years now. The movement's relationship with the *Tirukkural* began by way of rejecting the commentary on it written by the 13th-century poet Parimelazhagar. Dravidian intellectuals, led by the stalwart Periyar, were rightly furious about Parimelazhagar's approach to the *Tirukkural* from the point of view of the Manusmriti, a legal text of Hinduism that codifies the caste system. Periyar claimed that Parimelazhagar, as a Brahmin scholar, had “imported into his commentary most of the Aryan tenets, and almost succeeded in hiding the genuine truths of Tiruvalluvar thoughts.”

In reclaiming the *Tirukkural* from the patriarchal gaze, so shy in the face of human desire, Kandasamy has done what many other commentators could not – give this ancient treatise a much-needed feminist interpretation.

The scholar Devaneyya Paavanar – a proponent of the Thanithamizh Iyakkam, a Tamil linguistic purity movement, who also interpreted the *Tirukkural* in the 20th century – called Parimelazhagar's commentary a “sword that struck at the root of the Valluvam,” contending that his interpretation of the *Tirukkural* was irrational and subjective. The anger was not unfounded. Parimelazhagar's

interpretation was largely based on a Brahminical and Sanskritised understanding, including the laws of varna – the caste-based social hierarchy. A couplet from the *Tirukkural*, *pirappokkum ellaa uyirkkum*, says that everyone is equal by birth. The line that follows, *sirappovvaa seithozhil vetrumai yaan*, as interpreted by many scholars, says that difference comes in the demonstration of their talent in the work they do. Parimelazhagar interprets *seithozhil*, or “profession,” as varna.

The Dravidian criticism set off a new wave of commentaries. Periyar, the founder of the Dravidian movement, was an atheist and a rationalist, and the movement and its offshoots have been rational since the beginning. As part of its rationalist campaign, the Dravidar Kazhagam, a political movement founded by Periyar, campaigned against Hindu epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata, and the messages of discrimination these texts carried.

In the 1920s, Periyar asked, “If Tiruvalluvar had not been a man, but a woman who had written such *kural* [verses], would (s)he have portrayed such ideas?” This was in reference to two chapters – one on the “Worth of a Life Partner” and another cautionary chapter on “Statecraft against Being Led by Women” – which Periyar criticised as introducing “extreme slavishness and inferiority” in relations between women and men.

While Periyar was critical of these prescriptions on the role of a wife, he understood that the text was of central importance to Dravidian ideology. Periyar was of the firm view that the *Tirukkural* preaches virtues beyond caste and religion, and that the text is an embodiment of ideas of self-respect and love. “One of the subtle tricks of Brahmins was to accept rationalist teachers as their own and then twist and turn their teachings to suit the undemocratic, authoritarian Brahminic teachings,” he wrote. “First they did it with Buddha. Next they did it with Tiruvalluvar.”

In the 1940s, Periyar organised a series of conferences on the *Tirukkural* and urged Dravidian scholars to write commentaries on it. Among those heeded Periyar’s call was M Karunanidhi, who would go on to become a five-time chief minister of Tamil Nadu at the head of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) party. His commentary on the *Tirukkural* remains easily the simplest of the many available, closest to the everyday language of the Tamil public. Karunanidhi’s love for the *Tirukkural* also found expression in the Valluvar Kottam – a monument built in Chennai in the 1970s in honour of Tiruvalluvar, with inscriptions of all the 1330 couplets of the *Tirukkural*. Karunanidhi, as chief minister, declared a day in honour of Tiruvalluvar – the day after the traditional Pongal festival. In 2000, he unveiled a 133-foot stone statue of Tiruvalluvar at Kanyakumari – its height commemorating the 133 chapters of the *Tirukkural*.

Ideas of freedom, desire and sexuality run through the writings of Tamil women poets of the Sangam era, but it is easy to miss this in the current literary corpus.

The overarching presence of the *Tirukkural* in the Tamil polity has had its consequences. India’s ruling Bharatiya Janata Party is still struggling to make inroads in Tamil Nadu, and perhaps hopes the *Tirukkural* will offer some way forward. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has quoted verses from the *Tirukkural* at unlikely places – including at Ladakh in 2020 when meeting army personnel. The *Tirukkural* has also made regular appearances in parliamentary budget sessions presented by the finance minister, Nirmala Sitharaman. When Sitharaman failed to bring the *Tirukkural* into her presentation this year, Kanimozhi Karunanidhi, a DMK member of parliament, promptly took a dig, asking if the BJP had forgotten the *Tirukkural* since elections were not due in Tamil Nadu anytime soon. Kanimozhi said she “would like to remind you of something by quoting a *Kural* – *Idipparai Illaatha Yemaraa Mannan Keduppaar Ilaanum Kedum*”: A king without honest counsel doesn’t need enemies to come to ruin. Of course, there’s a *kural* for every occasion.

In 2019, the Tamil Nadu unit of the BJP tweeted an image of Tiruvalluvar clad in saffron. This was seen as an attempt by the Hindu right to appropriate the saint-poet, and it led to a political storm. Many decades ago, with little information available on Tiruvalluvar, the artist K R Venugopal Sharma created an imagined picture of Tiruvalluvar. The Tamil Nadu government made it the official image of Tiruvalluvar in 1964, and it remains widely used by the public to date. The picture portrays the saint-poet in white robes, seated, holding a writing instrument in one hand and palm leaves in the other. Sharma has recorded that he took cues from the verses of *Tirukkural* – for instance, not using any religious symbols because the *Tirukkural* has none. That the BJP tried to subvert this acclaimed, long-accepted image was not merely an act of artistic license; it was an attempt to alter the essential idea of the *Tirukkural* – one that had held Tamil society together through centuries.

It is against this backdrop, through the prism of the text's continuing social and political relevance, that one must examine Meena Kandasamy's powerful translation of the *Tirukkural*'s third section, the Inpattuppal (or Kamattuppal) – published as *The Book of Desire*. For the uninitiated, the *Tirukkural* comprises three sections – Aram, Porul, Inbam (Morality, Materialism and Desire) – and 133 chapters. Each chapter has ten verses – making for a total of 1330 couplets, written in seven words each.

Among the many interpretations of and commentaries on the *Tirukkural*, Kandasamy's interpretation is perhaps the first of its kind. For example, the *Tirukkural* verse *Inbam kadal matru kaamam Akthadungol Thunpam athanir perithu* is translated by the 19th-century missionary and scholar G U Pope as "A happy love's sea of joy; but mightier sorrows roll, from unpropitious love athwart the troubled soul. The pleasure of lust is (as great as) the sea; but the pain of lust is far greater." Kandasamy's translation stands out in its directness, and does not embellish the intended emotions: "Sex: its pleasure (a wordless word), a sea; Its path leading to a pain even more immense."

In reclaiming the *Tirukkural* from the patriarchal gaze, so shy in the face of human desire, Kandasamy has done what many other commentators could not – give this ancient treatise a much-needed feminist interpretation. But not before indicting Tiruvalluvar for his slip-ups. "As much as Tiruvalluvar was a man ahead of his times, he was inevitably a product of them too," she writes on couplets that condemn prostitution, ones that exhort women to worship their husbands and articulate the "collective male fears of becoming hen-pecked husbands and emasculated men." In her exhaustive, layered and brilliantly articulated introduction, Kandasamy contrasts the *Tirukkural* and Sanatana Dharma – the Brahminical "eternal order" – to establish how Tiruvalluvar's work was progressive for its time. "While the control of women is the heartbeat of Sanatana Dharma, the Hindu social order, nowhere does *Tirukkural* call for any woman to be controlled," she writes. Quoting Pope's translation of a kural that compares the domestic life of an incompatible couple to living in a shed with a snake for company, Kandasamy places it in the context of her own life and experience as a survivor of domestic abuse. She writes that "unlike the Brahminical-Hindu marriage, which unites a husband and wife for seven lives, or the concept of pativrata – loyalty to a husband for eternity – the *Tirukkural* suggests that incompatibility can be fatal. Don't risk your life, is the undercurrent of this kural."

Reimagining the *Tirukkural* along anti-colonial and feminist lines is long overdue for a text that has seen many translations and commentaries. Starkly, not many women have attempted either. Before Kandasamy, Soibam Rebika Devi, a renowned Manipuri translator, was perhaps the only woman to have translated the *Tirukkural*. Inspired by the universality of the *Tirukkural*'s expressions, Devi translated all 1330 couplets into her mother tongue, Manipuri. In her translator's note for *Tirukkural in Manipuri*, published in 2012, Devi writes, "It was a stupendous task to translate the rich content

words, the rhythm, brevity, etc. of *Tirukkural* into Manipuri ... Words and concepts which are related to Tamil culture mostly in the third section in *pam* could not be translated into Manipuri fruitfully." For example, the pronouns *avan* (he) and *aval* (she) in Tamil could not be translated because Manipuri has a single, gender-neutral word – *mahak* – for both. Hence, the translator chose to use *nungshibi* (female lover) and *nungshiba* (male lover).

Among the rare commentaries by women, perhaps most notable is the terse commentary of the Sangam poet Avvaiyar. In *Thiruvalluva Maalai*, an anthology of 55 ancient Tamil poems on the significance and grandeur of the *Tirukkural* written by predominantly male poets of Sangam era, Avvaiyar describes the depth of the *Tirukkural* as something that "split an atom and infused it with seven seas." Interestingly, there is more than one Avvaiyar in Tamil literary history – the earliest figure going by this name is believed to have been a poetess of the Sangam era. There is also folklore about Avvaiyar intervening to help Tiruvalluvar get the *Tirukkural* published in the Madurai Thamizh Sangam, a Tamil literary academy, which initially rejected it for its grammatical flaws. But, like many tales about Tiruvalluvar, this is arguably a flight of fertile imagination.

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Kandasamy's decision to translate only the *Inpattuppall* of all the three sections is informed by her politics as a feminist and an anti-caste activist. She calls her endeavour "the first feminist interventionist translation into English – remaining true to the female (and male) desire throbbing through the lifeblood of this text, while retaining the drama that pervades the quintessential Tamil world of exaggerated hurt, lover's quarrels and evenings lost to longing." Kandasamy points out how the *Inpattuppall* "sidesteps that didacticism. Instead of pontificating on 'how one ought to love', the text presents a pair of lovers: anonymous, universal, absolutely democratic."

The delightfully reckless abandon of the *Inpattuppall* has in the past left some too unnerved to attempt any interpretation or translation of it. The Jesuit priest Constanzo Beschi, also known by his Tamil name Veeramamunivar, chose to leave the *Inpattuppall* aside when he translated the *Tirukkural* into Latin, considering it taboo for a Christian. Kandasamy points out in her introduction how Veeramamunivar's decision was the "beginning of a gradual but widespread neglect of the *Tirukkural*'s third portion."

In choosing to translate the *Inpattuppall* alone, Kandasamy seeks to set right this historical wrong – an endeavour perhaps attempted just once before, and in Tamil. In *Maalai Malarum Noi*, a collection of essays published by Kalachuvadu in 2021, the writer and poet Isai seeks to bring contemporariness to Tiruvallur's couplets, in the process reiterating their timelessness. "Tiruvallur's place as a love poet is not adequately established in Tamil," Isai writes. "This is an attempt to remove his priestly attire and put him on a throne on par with Kabilar and Velliveethiyar" – both Sangam-era Tamil poets who wrote erotic poetry. Isai's commentary draws parallels between the *Inpattuppall* and modern Tamil cinema and literature, and sometimes even contemporary issues like honour killings. "*Alar* [gossip] plays a major role in enabling honour killings," Isai writes. "In the Sangam era, mothers would gently berate their daughters. Today, they are willing to kill and bury them."

A couplet in the *Inpattuppall* speaks about a woman's deeply personal conflict on the return of her lover:

புலப்பன்கல், புல்லுவன் கல்லு, கலப்பன்கல்

காணன்னா கெலிர் வரின்

Pulappenkol, pulluven kollo, kalappenkol

Kananna kelir varin

In Kandasamy's translation:

Would I quarrel? Would I embrace,

Would I have sex –

When the love of my life,

The light in my eyes, returns to me?

In a similar poem from the Sangam-era text *Kurunthogai*, Avvaiyar wonders “who to hit, who to assault, who to seek out for intervention, in a village that sleeps without worrying about her lovesickness?”

புதுவன்கல்? தாக்குவன்கல்?

புதுவன்கல்! தாக்குவன்கல் புதுவன்கல்

புதுவன்கல் தாக்குவன்கல் புதுவன்கல்

புதுவன்கல் தாக்குவன்கல் புதுவன்கல்

புதுவன்கல் தாக்குவன்கல் புதுவன்கல்

Muttuven kol? Thakkuven kol?

Oren! Yaanum oru petri melittu

Aa a ole nak koovuven kol

Alamara lasaivali yalaippa en

Uyavu noi ariyaathu thunjum oorkke?

In another poem in *Kurunthogai*, the poet Kabilar proclaims that kaamam – lust, but often translated as love – is large but life is short. Here, a woman's friend exhorts the man she loves to marry her because, “like jackfruit hanging on short boughs of the tree, her lust is large but life, short.”

புதுவன்கல் தாக்குவன்கல் புதுவன்கல்

புதுவன்கல் தாக்குவன்கல் புதுவன்கல்!

புதுவன்கல் தாக்குவன்கல் புதுவன்கல்!

புதுவன்கல் தாக்குவன்கல் புதுவன்கல், புதுவன்கல்

புதுவன்கல் தாக்குவன்கல், புதுவன்கல் தாக்குவன்கல்!

Veralveli verkkot palavin

Saaral naada! Sevviyai aakumathi!

Yaar athu arinthisinore! Saaral

Sirukottup perumpazham thoongiyaangku, ival

Uyirthavach hirithu, kaamamo perithe!

While Tiruvalluvar's Inpattuppai is not dissimilar to these works, what sets it apart is not just its pithiness but also the intimacy of the text, which is not particularly a characteristic of the first two sections of the *Tirukkural*. The Inpattuppai, as many have said before, is a standalone collection by itself, making Tiruvalluvar the finest among those who wrote classical love poetry in Tamil.

The woman in the Inpattuppai lays as much of a claim to desire as the man does. In Kandasamy's translation, we witness the quintessential Tamil woman in all her glory and power: the woman who strutted freely, with an air of easy confidence, through the verses of poets like Velliveethiyaar and Avvai. She was not afraid to love or have sex. She was not afraid to be vulnerable when in love. She was not afraid to demonstrate her lust. She was not seeking validation. Instead, she was forcefully demanding her rightful place in a relationship.

The chapter "Ninaithavar Pulambal", or The Lament of Memory, is about a woman speaking of her lover's absence and her memories of him. Declaring that sex is sweeter than wine, then declaring in the very next verse that sex is in fact sweeter than anything else, she embodies this power.

செவ்வியை அகமதி! சாரல் நாடா!

சாரல் நாடா! சாரல்

சாரல் நாடா! சாரல் நாடா! சாரல் நாடா!

சாரல் நாடா! சாரல் நாடா!

Ullinum tirap perumakil ceytalal

Kallinum kamam initu

Enaittona rinitekaan kamamtam vilvar

Ninaippa varuvatonru il

As Kandasamy has it:

Sex is sweeter than wine -

Causing a ceaseless rapture

Even when it is not present -

For mere memory intoxicates

Sex is sweeter than anything else -

Mere thought of my lover

And everything else disappears

In Kandasamy's translation, the woman is powerful – she relishes wine but knows sex is better. In Parimelazhagar's commentary, the same verses were interpreted from a male perspective. He starts with the comment that this was told to a messenger by the male protagonist – that since lust makes one happy from within, it is sweeter than wine. Was he afraid of a woman who drinks?

In *The Book of Desire*, Kandasamy adopts ideas that give the text a certain radical element. To put it another way, Kandasamy restores the radical element in the original that had been lost in the labyrinth of interpretations and translations, most done from a conformist male point of view. She achieves this by “eliminating archaic words in translations” – for example, sex is referred to as “union” or “congress” in many English-language translations, which undermines the intensity and nuance of the original text. Kandasamy's translation itself is intimate, defying the tendency to be vague by “layering up the meaning where it felt necessary, paring it down to the bare bones to reflect the exact Tamil.” What is lost or enhanced in translation may vary to various degrees, but translations like *The Book of Desire* are literary works in their own right.

In most Tamil volumes of the *Tirukkural*, the Inpattuppall is divided into two sections: seven chapters called *kalaviyal* and the remaining 18 called *karpial*. In the introduction, Kandasamy notes that *kalavu* has often been mistranslated as the “clandestine meeting of lovers” and *karpu* used to refer to the “wedded (chaste) state of married life”. Kandasamy chooses to forgo these divisions imposed on the text centuries after it was originally written, including by figures like Parimelazhagar. In arguing that her translation “comes into being in a society where women continue to inhabit a shaming culture, where offhand divisions of premarital or clandestine love versus married love will feed damaging stereotypes,” Kandasamy undoes the limited understanding of feminine desire through the prism of the *Tirukkural* and breathes fresh life into the text.

Kandasamy reminds the reader that the *Tirukkural* “stands in opposition to Brahminical-Sanskrit texts which perpetuate ideas of birth-based inequality” and also “in opposition to them through its celebration of female desire.” Her own task via translation is to free the *Tirukkural* from the burden of stilted interpretations that have tried to negate the idea of feminine desire. The word *nirai* from the original *Tirukkural* has often been interpreted by male translators as “chastity”. Kandasamy chooses to avoid the connotations of shame that this term carries, and instead uses the translation “unwavering mind” to challenge “lazy patriarchal notions”. Similarly, she interprets *penniyalaalar ellarum* as “everyone with womanness” to be inclusive of all who identify as feminine. Kandasamy also notes in her introduction that she decided to use “man and woman” instead of “husband and wife”, and “wherever possible, the gender-neutral lover” to open the text up to a non-binary reading of gender. In the process, she has looked to “stop burdening this text of love with social custom whose contemporary connotations may be far removed from how they were employed in Tiruvalluvar's time.” This is what sets Kandasamy's labour of love apart from other works on the *Tirukkural*.

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The first two sections of the *Tirukkural*, on morality and materialism, have been dissected,

interpreted and canonised widely in the Tamil literary world and beyond. The Inpattuppal, however, has not received adequate attention. *The Book of Desire* is not merely another addition to the countless translations of the *Tirukkural*. Instead, it rescues the text from misogynistic, patriarchal and often reductive interpretations. Kandasamy adopts a new approach to the text and sets it free, bringing to life the unafraid Tamil woman of yore. *The Book of Desire* is a work of liberation – of both the woman and the text.

The *Tirukkural* will always remain the most fascinating and sought-after Tamil work for translation, but the interpretations of it are of uneven quality and often fail to capture the nuances and progressiveness of ancient Tamil literature. The same is sadly true of other classical works. Ideas of freedom, desire and sexuality run through the writings of Tamil women poets of the Sangam era, but it is easy to miss this in the current literary corpus. Among the vast canon of Sangam poetry, the contributions of around 40 women poets, with over 150 surviving compositions between them deserve greater attention and efforts at reclamation. This includes Avvaiyar, Velliveedhiyar, Ponmudiyar and Nachchellaiyar, among others. One piece of welcome news is that the Tamil Nadu Text Book Corporation has an ambitious plan to publish the entire corpus of Sangam literature. This would mean the voices of pioneering Sangam-era feminist poets will be more accessible in the years to come, inviting further exploration and commentary.

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