

**Greek Tragedy: The Role of Gods, Religion, Rituals, and Myths.
And Their Equivalent Features in *Silappathikaram* in Tamil Literature**

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Part 1

ANCIENT GREEKS AND THEIR GODS IN THE MAKING OF TRAGEDY_

In Greek tragedies ancient gods, religion, rituals and myths play a very important role. They are the essential component elements that the tragedians used them to create suitable situations in plot construction and characterization. The production of tragic drama in the Greek theatre was the later development. The forerunner of dramatic presentation was in the form of a narrative. The adventure, heroism and valour of legendary heroes had been sung as a dramatic lyric which later had been transformed into lyric drama. “Early drama was sacred, having to do with the cult of divinities and particularly with the cult of Dionysus: on the formal side, it was performed to the end on the ground devoted to that god and before his priest; but developed tragedy did not have to be about Dionysus and seldom was.”

Early tragic writers drew their materials from the highly rich and developed tradition of un-dramatic poetry, epic and lyric. Ancient Greeks believed that the heroic characters portrayed in these lyrics and epics were real legendary heroes of the ancient past who walked with gods and in turn gods took part in their crucial moments either for rewarding them for their good deeds or for punishing them for not fulfilling their promise. In his great epic the *Odyssey*, Homer writes about “*Minos*, the ruler of the great Knossos held converse with the god Zeus. The ancient Greeks worshiped many gods whom they identified with the forces of nature. *God Zeus* was *the ruler of the sky*, *Apollo* was the *sun god* and *Poseidon* was the *god of the sea*.”² The ancient Greeks had great admiration, respect and veneration for their ancient heroes whose exploits in the battlefields and adventures in the deep sea were held in high esteem. In social ceremonies,

religious festivals, and for getting victories in battles against enemy countries, they invoked their favourite gods and appeased them by performing suitable rituals and offered sacrifices. The gods were pleased and helped them in solving their unsolvable problems in life and relieve them from their instant and unexpected crisis in their social and political life. They strongly believed that any violation in performing their religious rites would bring untold sufferings.

”As there was no proper canonical body of belief in Greek religion, it was the polis or state universe and the divine world in a religious system, articulate a pantheon with particular divine personalities; it established a system of cults, rituals and sanctuaries and sacred calendar.”³ Quite often there were conflicts between secular and divine laws and that led to tension in the community. There had been an established practice among the Greeks that prevents a tyrant from making anti-people or an undemocratic law, decrees of such tyrant, unsanctioned by the people, are denied the status of law. It is often considered as the basic theme of Sophocles’ *Antigone*. Antigone’s refusal to obey Creon’s edict forbidding burial of her brother Polyneikes’ body is justified as “she has on her side the weight of religious tradition, the universal recognition of the rights of burial, and the performance of those offices for the dead that traditionally belong to women in the *polis* and in the family.” While defying Creon face to face, Antigone said that the elders of the chorus shared her views in the burial of her brother’s body and she also told him that they had kept their mouths sealed for the fear of him. But Creon was not in a mood either to listen to her or Haimon’s appeal and his report about the sentiments of the citizens. Being in a position enjoying autocratic power, he callously disregarded public opinion and condemned Antigone to death and eventually, he lost every one in his family.

RITUALS IN GREEK TRAGEDIES

Rituals are very important part of Greek Tragedies, as the tragedies were performed in ritual contexts. "There is an intimate connection between fifth-century tragedy and rituals. Tragedies are articulated (some more densely than others) with the help of many rituals, such as sacrifices, prayers, and also divine epiphanies, which are not exactly rituals, but whichevoke rituals, and often explain and establish various cults rites.”⁵ The Greek Tragedy had its origin from the cult of Dionysus that produced it. When tragedies were enacted the poets were encouraged to write and perform them at the festival of Dionysus. So the drama began as part of the Greeks religious festival. In ancient days this festival was called *Anthesteria* or the festival

of flowers. In Athens this festival was celebrated for three days by the whole community. It included opening and drinking of the new wine in which the whole community participated for creating a sense of inclusiveness and communality. This collective wine drinking ritual is followed by a procession in which the image of the god Dionysus was escorted into the city in a cart. The image is united with the wife of the 'King' archon (magistrate) in a sacred marriage followed by a mystical female ceremony at the conclusion of the procession. Followed by the procession the festival begins after series of rituals. The first was offering sacrifice, the second award of the honorific crown to those citizens who had made great contribution to the state, the third was a display of “bars of bullion” from those whom Athens had conquered and the fourth was a parade of war orphans, who were educated and trained in martial arts at the state's expense who swore an oath of loyalty to fight for their city as their fathers had done.⁶ Such a procession and rituals were performed in *Indra Vizha* in *Silappathikaram* which is described in detail later part of this article.

THE WORKING OF THE ORACLES IN THE DESTINY OF OEDIPUS

The most powerful Delphic Oracles and uncanny riddles had taken the centre stage in the familial, social and political life of the most ancient Greeks which is ultimately reflected in the Greek tragedies; (i.e.) the most famous riddle of all times in the history of western tragedies in general and Greek tragedies in particular, is the challenging riddle posed by the sphinx which runs in one version: “*What is the creature with one voice which has two, three and four legs?*” In another version the Oedipean riddle could be interpreted as “*What goes on four in the morning, two at noon, and three in the evening?*” This riddle has caused great sufferings to the Thebans. They had to pay their own flesh to the Sphinx until Oedipus driven by his own fate came to free them from the monster by solving the riddle. The paradox is, what Oedipus boastfully thought that he had successfully solved the riddle, in fact the Sphinx simply allowed Oedipus to believe that his answer “*Man*” to the riddle was correct and paved the way for the Oracle to work Apollo's deeper level of the prediction and annihilate and ruin the whole incestuous family of the all-powerful and all-knowing Oedipus. He was taken to Thebes, enthroned him as their king by the grateful citizens of Thebes and as per the custom and tradition he was made to marry the queen (Jacosta) who was none other than his own natural mother and bring forth two sons and two daughters.

Oedipus' fate is sealed by Apollo even before his birth that according to the Delphic oracle 'he was doomed to sleep with his own mother, spill his father's blood, and doomed to bring children into this world'. To avoid this inevitable happening, he fled from Corinth, from his parents Polibos and Merope who he thought that they were his real parents. Fleeing from Corinth, measuring his progress by the stars, searching for a safe place where he would make sure that the dreadful predictions never come true. Contrary to his wishes, driven by fate he was on the road near the crossroads at the three ways, where he met a herald, with an old man riding in a chariot and his driver tried to push Oedipus off the road. In retaliation he hit the driver and quite unexpectedly the old man who stood quiet in the chariot all the while, caught Oedipus on the head with an ugly goad and wounded him. The prophecy moved faster and quicker to force Oedipus to commit and to strike the old man even harder and killed him who was none other than his real father Laios. Apollo's prophecy worked its way and allowed him to live a polluted and cursed life for many years, marrying his own mother, sharing the same bed of his father, and bringing children. Presently, he became the cause of the plague, which destroys the people of Thebes and wastes the city.

When confronted with the all-devastating plague, the Theban citizens, the elders of the city and the priest assemble in front of the palace of their all-powerful king Oedipus. The Theban Priest of Zeus called him saviour and requested him to save Thebes and its people from the present crisis as he had saved them from the Sphinx last time. With his master craftsmanship Sophocles made Oedipus the model of a tragic hero. He cannot both rule in Thebes and possess the queen. The irony of fate plays its part and it begins with his first appearance in his kingly robe and his first words in his address to the citizens that 'he himself came there, Oedipus, famous among all men'. Not knowing he himself is the cause of the plague, he boastfully promises to bring the truth to light but what we confront in the drama is his smallness against the omnipotent Delphic Oracle and the intention of god.

"Oedipus is king and pharmakos (scapegoat), political leader and the polluted scapegoat who is driven out into the wilderness with the pollutions of the community upon him. The unfathomable coming together in one person is a riddle." In solving the pressing riddle of the feline woman beast the Sphinx, and in trying to find the correct meaning for the Delphic Oracle unfortunately or driven by fate, he tries to get the answer from outside whereas the answer to the

riddle and the meaning for the oracle lies within himself. It is obvious to everybody that the protagonist's very name "Oedipus" the swollen foot is the answer but ironically, he who carries the name does not know. There are many instances in which Oedipus could have understood or as we see that he comes very close to realize the truth that he was the killer of his own father Laios, yet he moves on for deeper truth. When the messenger from Corinth and the shepherd from the village come together to the palace the truth about the identity of Oedipus was revealed. After the revelation of the identity of the murderer and the origin of the birth of Oedipus, the reversal of fortune began to play its part and tragedy engulfed the palace; Jocasta hanged herself, and Oedipus blinded his eyes as he had already promised to his people to inflict such a punishment to the murderer of Laios. Immediately after that, he comes out of the palace, he is blind, his mask is bloodstained, and declares that he raised his two hands and stabbed out his two eyes. So Oedipus descends down from god like all powerful King-the all knowing- the challenger of blind philosopher Teiresias to a defiled person.

Oedipus, in the evening of his life's journey, moves on threes. Now he is both a cursed and sacred holy thing. In "Oedipus at Colonus" we see him arriving at Athens as a blind old beggar escorted by his affectionate daughter Antigone. Here again, the gods and the oracle work their way in his rehabilitation and deification. Ismene, his another daughter, arrives to inform him of the Oracle's prediction and the value of his tomb and also the nature of his gift he offers to those who will have him. Athens and its legendary king Theseus assured him all that he wanted, saved his daughters and drove away Creon empty handed. Creon becomes the second most tragic character as he has upset the cosmic order by his decrees forbidding the burial of the body of Polyneikes and denying the marriage of his son with his niece Antigone. Creon lost his son, his wife and in the end kills himself.

THE MYTH OF ANTIGONE

For the nineteenth century German philosopher, Hegel, Sophocles' Antigone' is "one of the most sublime and in every respect most consummate work(s) of art human effort ever produced." His accolade was not only limited to the drama but also to the myth of Antigone. Hegel's view is that Antigone myth has played a major role in the evolution of European Consciousness. According to Alan. H. Sommerstein Antigone myth is a brand new myth which is created by Sophocles in his most famous Oedipus Trilogy. Aeschylus in his *Seven against*

Thebes, made only a small reference about Antigone in the last scene. That too is said to have been a later addition based on Sophocles' original myth of Antigone. Euripides, another contemporary of Sophocles' produced a different version of Antigone based on Sophocles' Antigone. In Euripides Antigone, Haemon seems to have helped Antigone in the burial of Polynikes. They are married and had a son called Maeon. There is a trial scene but with a lesser intensity and poignancy in its tragic effect as the drama begins with a prologue in the Euripidean style.

In Sophocles' *Antigone*, with his master craftsmanship Sophocles increases the tension stage by stage so as to intensify the tragic effect. Antigone defied King Creon's edict forbidding burial of her brother Polyneikes. she is unmarried and in her prime youth and also betrothed to Haimon who had no role in the burial of her dead brother. There is neither a love scene nor any reference of love making between Antigone and Haimon. Antigone's struggle is between state and individual; between the sovereign authority of the king and the lone fighter who is trying to establish the strong bond of family love at the cost of her own life. In the trial scene the news of her betrothal to Haimon was revealed by her only surviving sister Ismene at the very crucial time when Creon was determining the fate of Antigone. Antigone is not taken off to die immediately after the pronouncement of the death sentence. The farewell scene in *Antigone* is emotional and heart-rending. In spite of firmness on her commitment in the burial of her brother's dead body at the cost of her life, her lament proves that she doesn't have any fanatic passion for death to become a martyr. Her reluctance to die quite young before marriage shows her human quality. Even though the chorus was reluctant to be sympathetic of her pathetic situation openly in the beginning, through their words and gestures, later they make it clear to Creon the king that Antigone's act is a righteous one and at last they are also sympathetic with her. When Creon realises his mistake and decided to save her, it was too late and by the time he reaches her, she kills herself. Even in death Antigone showed her defiance to Creon by disproving his order for her punishment.

Part-2

The Role of Gods, Religion , Religious Rites, Rituals And Myths in

Silappathikaram

As in any other World Literatures of ancient civilizations, the first epic in Tamil Literature *Silappathikaram* also contains abundance of ceremonies, rituals, gods and myths. There are interactions between gods and human characters. *Silappathikaram* insists on three great Spiritual truths, which cannot be realized without the interference of gods, supernatural elements and human beings endowed with extraordinary powers. Justice is the bedrock of kings when it is violated, it brings them dishonour and death; past evil deeds recoil upon the doer in an opportune time and punishes him terribly and irreparably and the third truth was that the woman of chastity will be worshipped not only by men of wisdom but will be worshipped even by gods. The Jain monk *Elangovadikal* who composed the epic *Silappathikaram* himself renounced the princely life to make sure that justice is done to the hierarchy and his elder brother Kuttuvan becomes the king of Ceranadu. Renunciation was there in his blood, heart, and soul. We are able to understand this fact when Kannaki became goddess, through Tevanthi she narrated Elango's past events. Elangovadigal says:

“I too went in, and rising before me ,
Divine Kannaki spoke through Tevanti;
'You, seated below the king, in the royal hall
At Vanci, have the kingly qualities all'
At which you looked at the speaker angrily,
And to remove your elder brother, Kuttuvan's misery'
(Kuttuvan also possessed all the qualities of royalty)
You took a holy vow before the men godly
Outside the western entrance to the city.
'You became a king of spiritual domain
And limitless joy,' said the daughter divine.”

“In this way Elango states how the Divine Daughter Kannaki, after having narrated his past events in oracular voice through Tevanti, also blessed him to compose the epic poetic drama *Silappathikaram*. Now it is clearly understood that Kannaki's oracular prophecy preceded his writing of her immaculate story. Elango became a monk only to avoid the astrologer's prediction become true. Instead of becoming the king of Ceranadu, Elngo became a renunciant but ultimately, he became the king of the spiritual world.”

Elangovadigal has set aside one full canto for the celebration of **Indra Vizha** in the first Book of silappathikaram. The first of Book of Silappathikaram is named after the ancient city Poompuhar in which the fifth canto is **Indra Vizhavu Vooreduttha Kathai**. During the **Festival of Indra**, Indra's Flag was taken in a procession. And the image of the god of gods was bathed in Kaveri's holy water.

“In a palanquin whose sides sparkled
With precious stones, and whose top
Shone with plates of beaten gold
The idol of **Indra** was in slow pace
Taken along the main streets of the city.”

As per the laid down protocol the five top ranking officers of the king, eight of their deputies, scions of the royal family, sons of merchants, troops of elephants and young people came marching along the procession bravely in a festive mood. The marching people in the procession shouted spontaneously, “May our king ever wield his sceptre noble”. This follows the vedic rites and religious ceremonies of worship to Lord Siva, Muruka, Baladeva, Tirumal and Indra and on this sacred occasion, the Chola king orders through his royal edict that the defeated princes and captive kings in the war be released and granted freedom.

This **Indra Vizha** is celebrated on the full moon day in the Tamil month of Chithirai. This celebration in glory of **god Indra** reminds us of the celebration of Anthesteria, the spring festival of Dionysia, in the Greek city of Athens. In this Greek festival, god Dionysus was escorted in a procession into the city, in a cart shaped like a ship. Then the image was bathed in holy water and united with the wife of the “King”. As per the ancient myth, the arrival of the image of Dionysus into the city in procession was the reenactment of the original arrival of god Dionysus. The “sacred marriage” was seen as the union of Dionysus and Ariadne. It seems that both the celebrations of Dionysia and Indra vizha are intended to uphold the value of the kingdoms, wellbeing of their citizens, and victory in war against their enemies. Above all both the Festival of Dionysia and Indra Vizha seem to have been celebrated to keep up the morale of the warriors in high spirit.

The myths of Kovalan , Kannaki, and Mathavi have their origin from the *karma* of their previous births. This is revealed by the *goddess of Mathurai* who narrated all that happened in the previous life of Kovalan and Kannaki. Appearing before Kannaki the goddess spoke:

“With vengeful wrath you have set fire
To Mathurai by hurling at it your left breast;
All your sufferings are caused at fate’s behest;
In previous birth you and your husband were cursed
By the wife of Cankaman, a merchant of Cingapuram
In Kalinkanatu and now its effects are experienced.

The goddess of Madurai made it clear to Kannaki whatever happened to Kovalan happened because of his deed in his previous birth and in the same manner the faultless king Pandiyan committed injustice to Kovalan due to *karma* of his previous birth. Realizing her error of judgement and the consequent setting the city ablaze she accepted “The king of the south (Pandiyan)is faultless, I (Kannaki) am his daughter.”

It is from Mathavi’s initiation dance performance, the working of the fate begins to unfold in the life of Kovalan and Kannaki. The graceful dance of Mathavi captured the attention of every one present in the royal theatre. Her impressive dance put the Chola King into rapture and he conferred upon her the title, “Dance Excelsior” with the prize of green necklace, worth a thousand and eight gold coins. Having bought this ornament Kovalan claimed the hands of Mathavi leading to his separation from his devoted wife, Kannaki. Although separated from her husband, Kannaki establishes her divine chastity in the course of her life’s journey. On the other hand, Mathavi excels herself as a chaste woman, inspite of her birth in the courtesan family. Elangovadigal makes it clear that during the period of Kovalan and Kannaki, there were interactions between human beings and gods. From this point of view, we are able to ascertain

In giving title to this monumental work of art, the author of the epic Elangovadigal has given importance to the ornament of woman, *anklet*, which in Tamil called *silambu* and so the epic is titled *Silappathikaram*. Kovalan, the rich and wealthy merchant, after marrying Kannaki the most beautiful young lady of Poompuhar, lived a wonderful conjugal life but separated from his wife and started living with the dancer Mathavi. Again there was another separation in the life of Kovalan as his evil deed in his past life begins to recoil upon him. He was separated from

Mathavi due to differences and misunderstanding the meaning of the *Kanal vari song* sung at the end of the Indra festival in the seashore. Returning to his wife Kannaki, they leave Poompuhar in the middle of the night with her anklets as their only valuable possession to begin a new lease of life and reach Madurai in the company of the saint Kavunthi Adigal. In Madurai he met the goldsmith who himself had already stolen the queen's anklet and was looking for a similar one to replace it. He found a scapegoat, when Kovalan requested to help him sell his anklet. Asking Kovalan to wait, he rushed to the king Pandiyan Nedunchezhiyan and told him the thief was caught. The king who was in a perturbed state of mind ordered the execution of the thief without proper enquiry. The security guards who had taken Kovalan to behead him doubted the words of the goldsmith and said that the accused had every quality of good and honest man and so he could not be guilty but the king's order could not be disregarded. One of the drunken security guards beheaded him thoughtlessly.

The cruel act of killing Kovalan is recorded in the following pathetic poetic words:

“..... and his blood

Blood flowed freely; the goddess earth went

Into grief; the king's sceptre was bent;

As *Kovalan* died of wounds, the old fate

Ran its course; retribution was complete.

Through time inexorable fate gathered power,

And resulted in bending a just king's sceptre”

On hearing the dreadful execution of her husband, the shattered Kannaki implored the *Sun god* calling Him the witness of all deeds on earth demanded to vouchsafe if her husband was a thief:

“You who send burning rays know' I believe

All that happen in the wide world,

That's by the billowy sea encircled;

Hence tell me if my husband is a thief”

And in aerial voice clearly says

Your husband is not a thief, and he

Who accused him is of this city,

That will be consumed by fire fully.”

On knowing that her innocent husband was executed by the king, she stood up courageously in the palace and by breaking the anklet proved that the king was to blame for his injustice and the king bemoaned that the famed justice of Pandiya dynasty has been tarnished and cried aloud, “Am I a king? I am the thief!” and fell down dead instantly. On seeing the king dead the Queen too catching hold the King’s feet died immediately by wailing that after the death of husband there is no one to replace him for a virtuous lady.

In spite of many similarities and dissimilarities in their monumental work of these two great authors belonging to continents apart, we are able to perceive oneness in their thought and identical in their views that human beings endowed with great virtues and spiritual strength could be elevated to the status of god. The synthesis of Elangovadigal’s *Silappathikaram* and Sophocles’ *Theban Triology, Antigone, Oedipus the King, and Oedipus at Colonus* shows that they transcend their regional and national identities and affinities and moves on to a higher strata of universality.

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