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## UNIT 2 *CILAPPATIKARAN*: A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

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### 2.0 OBJECTIVES

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In this unit we will look at who the author of the epic *Cilappatikaran* is and then look at the way the plot is structured. We will also examine the female presence in the epic, the sense of justice, the destruction that is wreaked on the city, and the resurrection of *Kannaki*. In short, we will be also be a doing a textual analysis of *Cilappatikaran*.

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### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

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The authorship of the *Cilappatikaran* is attributed to **Ilanke Atikal** a supposed and **Atikal** literally means a Jain saint or an ascetic and an interesting legend is associated with **Sattanar** the author of the *Manimekhalai* that he actually met **Ilanke Atikal** to seek his permission to bring out the Buddhist version of the epic which within the politics of the period is quite acceptable as there has never been a large scale violence between the Buddhists and the Jain in history unlike the heterodox sects and the Hindu ones.

The setting of the epic is within the cities of *Pukar* and *Kāñci* within the Tamil domains are significant as two Greek works *The Periplus* of the Erythraean Sea dated at 1<sup>st</sup> CE and Ptolemy's *Geography* dated at 2<sup>nd</sup> CE mentions *Pukar* as the town *Khaberis* and *Kaveris Emporium* and the flourishing Roman trade with the Tamil kingdoms and both the epics describe at length the markets in the two towns providing a setting which is common place and with common men within the larger urban setup unlike the larger North Indian epics the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Situated within the larger Jain and the Buddhist themes are the mercantile communities and the guilds and the role of trade and its contribution to urbanity with courtesans, palaces, the common man and the religious institutions and individuals who people the epics.

Situated in *Pukar* the epic *Cilappatikaran* develops a kernel of the *Kovalan* and *Kannaki* story that was a part of the oral extant tradition and presents it in epic form situated within the larger Jain tradition to be presented before a largely Jain audience. It could have been as a result of the inroads of Jainism into Tamil society or as a result of the epic being presented to a Jain audience.

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## 2.2 THE PLOT

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The story begins in the city of *Pukar* a flourishing seaport and the capital of the *Chola* kingdom. The town is festive as the people gather to celebrate the marriage of *Kovalan* and *Kannaki* who belong to two prominent families in the area. The couple live happily for a few years in *Pukar* as *Kannaki* settles down to a life of domesticity and *Kovalan* begins to earn a living. What is noted here is the deep love between them. In the town of *Pukar* lives a beautiful courtesan named *Matavi* who is a very talented dancer. The *Chola* king in recognition of her talent presents her with a garland and a thousand and eight pieces of gold. *Matavi* decides to auction the garland to anybody who will purchase it at the price decided by her and in the process she would also marry the man who buys the garland. Accordingly she asks her servant *Vacantamalai* to announce this to the people of *Pukar*. *Kovalan* hears the announcement, purchases the garland and abandons his wife *Kannaki* and begins to live with *Matavi*. *Kannaki* is extremely heartbroken as a result of her husband's actions. *Kovalan* meanwhile is so enamoured of *Matavi* that he squanders a lot of his wealth away on her neglecting his wife *Kannaki*.

Soon it is spring and the city begins the celebration of the season with a special festival to god *Indra* who is the king of the gods. Everybody heads to the sea shore and *Kovalan* and *Matavi* set up a small pavilion there. *Matavi* hands *Kovalan* a lute and requests *Kovalan* to play the lute. *Kovalan* begins to sing a number of songs about a lovely woman who has hurt her lover. Hearing the songs, *Matavi* assumes that *Kovalan* is not interested in her any more. She takes the lute from his hands and begins to sing a song of a woman who has been betrayed. *Kovalan* too begins to feel that *Matavi* probably does not love him or care for him any longer and leaves her. *Matavi* is heartbroken and writes a letter to *Kovalan* imploring him to come back. *Kovalan* refuses to do so and tells *Matavi*'s servant *Vacantamalai* that at the end of the day *Matavi* is only a dancer and not someone fit to be in a lifelong relationship. *Matavi* is extremely unhappy about this and endures the loss silently. By the time *Kovalan* ends his relationship with *Matavi*, he is thoroughly impoverished and now at the mercy of his wife *Kannaki*.

*Kannaki* the ever dutiful wife has a nightmare about a misfortune that *Kovalan* will face. She is obviously extremely worried about her wayward husband and is overjoyed when *Kovalan* arrives home having deserted *Matavi*. Needless to say, *Kannaki* welcomes him back and the couple reconcile as *Kovalan* admits to his relationship with *Matavi* and apologises to *Kannaki*. The happy couple decide to leave *Pukar* together and go to the city of *Maturai* the capital of the *Pandyan* rulers to start afresh. They hope to begin a new life there by selling an anklet that belongs to *Kannaki* in order to start a new business. *Kovalan* has no money left to begin anew as he has spent all his money on *Matavi* and is not inclined to ask either his or *Kannaki*'s parents for a loan. Early one morning they leave for *Maturai* and on the way they meet a Jain monk named *Kavunti* as they proceed to the town of *Uraiyyur*. They pass through the dense forests that form the boundary between the *Chola* and the *Pandyan* kingdoms. Eventually, they arrive at the banks of the river *Vaiyai* and they get a glimpse of the towers and the homes of *Maturai* on the opposite bank. *Kovalan* leaves *Kannaki* in the care of the Jain monk *Kavunti* and slips into the fort of *Maturai* unnoticed by everybody including the *yavana*

guards that are posted there. He begins a tour of the city to get a sense of the city that they intend making their home now. On his way back to the forest grove where *Kannaki* and *Kavunti* await him, he meets a *Brahmin* named *Matalan* who informs him of the birth of his daughter *Manimekalai* as *Matavi* has given birth. *Kovalan* shares the ominous dream with the *Brahmin* wherein he is riding a buffalo the mount of *Yama* the god of death, and we realise that, that was the dream that made *Kannaki* and *Kovalan* leave the city of *Pukar*. *Kovalan* explains to the *Brahmin* that the ominous dream was the reason for them to leave *Pukar* as they feared that some harm would befall him. *Kavunti* the Jain monk entrusts *Kannaki* in the care of a herdsman named *Matari* and both *Kannaki* and *Kovalan* begin to live with the herdsman's family and in their living quarters.

In a domestic scene in the epic, *Kannaki* collects some raw food from *Matari* the herdsman and cooks a delicious meal for *Kovalan*. *Kovalan* is deeply disturbed by his act of infidelity and he begins to despise himself for all the grief that he has caused *Kannaki*. *Kannaki* is deeply hurt by the memory of *Kovalan's* affair with the dancer *Matavi* and she expresses the pain and the anguish his actions have caused her. The reformed *Kovalan* is ashamed of his behaviour in the recent past and after listening to his wife, teary eyed he leaves for the town of *Maturai* taking her anklet with him to sell and generate some money to begin afresh. On the way he sees a humped bull which is considered to be a very bad omen but distraught as he is, does not notice the humped bull and continues on his journey to the market. He finds a goldsmith, shows him the anklet and asks for an estimate for it. The goldsmith takes the anklet asks *Kovalan* to wait and rushes to the palace of the *Pandyan* king to tell him that he has apprehended the man who has stolen the Queen's anklet.

Truth be told, the goldsmith is the one who has in fact stolen the Queen's anklet and is excited at the thought of putting the blame on *Kovalan* while he goes free and undetected himself. The King and Queen are not on talking terms due to a misunderstanding regarding the loss of her anklet and the King in an effort to please her and gain her favours again, is delighted that the thief has been located. Without ascertaining facts he orders that the thief be caught and executed without a trial immediately. The fact that he had the Queen's anklet is proof of guilt. Note that today we would decide that that is circumstantial evidence. The guards follow the goldsmith to his shop during which the goldsmith lectures the guards on morality and deceitfulness of thieves and their community. He asks the guards to execute *Kovalan* when they reach there. The guards apprehend *Kovalan* and one of them cuts him down with his sword. Strangely enough the guards are apprehensive about striking *Kovalan* initially as they believe him to be innocent. *Kovalan* falls down once he is struck and lies on the ground life ebbing away. The goldsmith is extremely relieved that the secret of his theft remains a secret and having got an innocent killed is safe forever. He is very happy to have the anklet back and returns it to the King. As the reader/viewer of the play, we know that an innocent has been killed and that the anklet that has been given back to the King actually belongs to *Kannaki*. While the real thief the goldsmith is a free man.

Meanwhile *Matari* the herdsman sees inauspicious signs in the herdsman's quarters and is worried that some tragedy is about to strike them. She and the others arrange for a sacred dance in the praise of *Krsna* in which they would enact his life story. After the dance is over *Matari* walks down to the

river *Vaiyai* to bathe where she learns of *Kovalan*'s murder. She is shocked and does not inform *Kannaki* about it as she feels that the news of *Kovalan*'s execution will break the latter. *Kannaki* learns about the execution of *Kovalan* through a stranger who informs her that *Kovalan* has been killed on the charges of the theft of the *Pandayan* Queen's anklet. *Kannaki* is distraught and angry and denounces the *Pandayan King Netunceliyan*. The people of *Maturai* also come together protesting the death of *Kovalan* and demand justice from a King who they feel has moved away from the path of true justice. *Kannaki* proceeds to the site of the goldsmith's shop and finds the dead body of her beloved *Kovalan*. In the process of embracing him he appears to stand before her and console her wiping her tears away, and he begins the divine ascent to heaven. He blesses her and asks her to live in peace.

*Kannaki* fighting for justice storms the court of the *Pandayan* King demanding justice from him along with an explanation for the hideous murder. The *Pandayan* Queen in the meantime has seen very inauspicious dreams and she is woken up with the piercing cries of *Kannaki* demanding an explanation at the palace. *Kannaki* holds the anklet in her hand and with her hair loose appears as a wild aspect of justice to the *Pandayan* King as he listens to her demand for justice and an explanation for the murder. The king protest as he claims that he is innocent while *Kovalan* was a thief who had been caught with the Queen's anklet which was proof of guilt and that it was his duty to punish the thief. *Kannaki* in a fit of anger breaks open her anklet and gems stream and fall all over the floor. The gems that tumble out are rubies which prove *Kovalan*'s innocence as the Queen's anklet had pearls in it. The King is dismayed after confronting the evidence in front of him. He admits his guilt and dies out of remorse and his Queen follows him in death.

*Kannaki* deeply angered and in a rage, storms out of the palace and curses the city that has brought her so much grief - *Maturai*. In a fit of superhuman power that will later transform her into a goddess and an important part of the Tamil consciousness, she tears her left breast away from her torso leaving a deep wound in her body and hurls it over the city cursing it and the moment her left breast falls on the ground the city of *Maturai* bursts into flames. In a beautiful passage in the epic the presiding deity of *Kannaki* appears before her explaining the Jain laws of *Karma* and the problem of causality. She informs *Kannaki* that in a former birth *Kovalan* was called *Bharata* and that he was in the service of King *Vasu* where he had mistaken one *Cankaman* who was a just merchant to be a spy. *Cakaman* had been beheaded on *Kovalan*'s orders. So an innocent life had been taken. *Cankaman*'s wife *Nili* is so deeply shocked by this injustice that she curses *Bharata* (*Bharata* was *Kovalan* in an earlier birth) and commits suicide by jumping off a cliff. Due to the effect of the Karmic cycle the presiding deity mentions that, *Kovalan* had to suffer in this birth. Hence, *Kovalan* had to suffer the same fate as *Cankaman* as atonement for his actions in his previous life. The presiding deity informs *Kannaki* that she will rejoin her husband in fourteen days.

*Kannaki* then leaves the city of *Maturai* and proceeds to the *Chera* kingdom and arrives at the *Netuvel* hills eventually. She ascends to heaven on the chariot that Lord *Indra* sends for her. This begins the transition of *Kannaki* to a goddess as the dwellers of the hills witness her ascent to heaven. They inform the *Chera* King *Cenkuttuvan* about this miracle. The King is camping on the banks of the river *Periyar* and the poet **Ilanko Atikal** who is also present there tells

the *Chera* King about all the unhappy events that occurred in *Maturai*. The *Chera* queen *Ilanko Venmal* asks the King to build a temple for *Kannaki* and to worship her as a goddess. The *Chera* king *Cenkuttuvan* decides to have a statue of *Kannaki* sculpted and has the sacred stone brought from the Himalayas. He begins the great march to the north of India where he seeks to bring the *Arya* Kings to heel and to prove that the Tamil people are as strong and brave as the *Arya* Kings. He defeats all the *Arya* Kings in a pitched battle and finds the sacred stone where the image of *Kannaki* is engraved and purified by the waters of the sacred *Ganges*.

Meanwhile back in *Maturai*, *Matalan* the Brahmin arrives with the information that both *Kavunti* the Jain monk and *Matari* the herdsman have ended their lives as they failed to protect *Kannaki*. The *Chera* King *Cenkuttuvan* then proceeds to head back to his kingdom where he installs the engraved image of the goddess *Pattini* / the deified name for *Kannaki*. The process of the daily worship of *Kannaki* begins at this temple. On the advice of *Matalan* the *Chera* King *Cenkuttuvan* performs the *Rajsuya* sacrifice and proclaims his lordship over the entire Tamil country. He begins the elaborate endowment of the *Pattani/Kannaki* temple and slowly other Kings begin worshipping her as the embodiment of virtuosity and chastity. The worship we are told begins and is consolidated even in faraway Sri Lanka in the kingdom of King *Gajabahu*. Eventually the goddess *Pattani* herself appears before them bestowing her blessings. This is the summary of the epic *Cilappatikaran*. In the next section we will look at the presence of female characters in the epic.

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### 2.3 FEMALE PRESENCE IN *CILAPPATIKARAN*

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India is a country that has traditionally been largely male dominated though, every now and then there has been a strong feminine voice as well. A singular case is the voice of *Draupadi* in the epic the *Mahabharata* who articulates both at the level of the voice as well as that of the body. She comes across as an articulate woman in the epic who voices her ideas on the injustice meted out to her and at the same time her open hair becomes a symbol of resistance (articulation through the body). This is not so apparent in the other epic the *Ramayana* where there is domesticity apparent with *Sita* becoming emblematic of a new ideal of womanhood which, has been and is being questioned in most discourses today. The two epics *Cilappatikaran* and *Manimekalai* (which is the story of *Matavi* and *Kovalan*'s daughter *Manimekalai* and is a sequel) are singular as they have women protagonists who bring out the voice of injustice during the ancient period when these epics were written. They are also domesticated voices as in the case with *Kannaki* who endures *Kovalan*'s abandonment of her or the case of *Matavi* the courtesan who accepts the fact that *Kovalan* has left her. Apart from this is the fact that the voice of *Kannaki* as an example of an injured womanhood of a universal kind is very apparent. She transforms from being the ideal daughter-in-law (taking care of her aged in-laws even after being abandoned by her husband), ideal wife as she welcomes the straying husband *Kovalan* back to, a symbolic figure fighting for justice again for the same husband who left her for a dancer/ courtesan transforming into an avenging goddess and is later canonised into a benevolent, protective deity.

The presence of women as central characters in the *Cilappatikaran* and the *Manimekalai* unlike in *Sanskrit* epics where the male protagonist is central

to the plot is the influence of Buddhism and Jainism on the epic tradition of Tamil Nadu. Egalitarianism was a big thing in Jainism and Buddhism and it is largely these influences that have allowed women to function with their distinct identities in the epic. The local context comes into play as well, when we see *Kannaki* being transformed to the goddess *Pattani*. This transformation in keeping with the local context, points to the creation of a newer imagination which results in the formation of new cults and belief systems. Tradition is an evolving process and this also points to the pluralism that was present in early India which provided a space for different voices to be articulated. This leads to the formation of a new goddess who is now imbued with a myth and a discourse which originates in a tragedy that involves normal human beings bringing out the synthesis between the human and the divine. *Kannaki* the woman becomes the symbol of a vengeful woman and when her presence as a transformed figure is accommodated in the Buddhist tradition, she becomes an emblematic voice. Her demand for justice assumes the universal nature of *Dharma* and finally there is the elaborate scene where she is absorbed into the larger mainstream tradition of beliefs and thoughts and becomes a distinctive goddess.

There are two kinds of women in the epic. One variety are the simple folk be it the herdsman or the domestic help or the women who have a distinct public profile as in the figure of the courtesan *Mathavi* and the other variety is of the divine. This is reflected in the figure of *Kannaki* who transforms from a simple housewife to a canonised goddess.

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## 2.4 THE IDEA OF JUSTICE IN *CILAPPATIKARAN*

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The *Cilappatikaran* apart from the status as a ritual epic in Tamil Nadu is also noteworthy for the representation of justice in the early eras of Indian history. Woven around the mythological aspects of the epic is the idea of justice which has been subverted. Justice in early India can be seen in some early texts like the *Arthashastra* which brings out the early aspects of **Maurayan** rule and the idea of a King administering it with elaborate penalties for crime. The idea of a king as a divine figure administering justice is woven around the nature of the judgement. The king had to be impartial so that the miscarriage of justice did not take place.

This formulation is very different from the ideas of justices as seen in a modern nation state where there are norms and rules not only in every country but there is also a forum where justice can be administered for nation states through agencies like the United Nations. The epic deals with early Indian social conditions where the idea of monarchy prevailed and hence, the conception of justice is based on the body of the king who is divinely appointed and imbued with the wheels of administering justice. The King needs to be a “just and fair King” who follows the *Dharma* as *Dharma* is important for administering justice. The entire universe in the Jain and Buddhist tradition is governed by *Dharma* and any subversion of this would obviously result in a physical catastrophe. This physical disturbance of space is noted in many cultures and is reflected in many national literatures. An example can be taken from **Shakespeare’s** *King Lear* where *Lear* abdicates his responsibilities as the custodian of the kingdom as he begins the process of dividing the Kingdom between his three daughters. This is a violation of the idea of a moral code imbued in the body of the king. Hence, any disturbance within this can lead to a physical catastrophe reflected

in the civil war in *King Lear* and the subsequent death of *King Lear*. Something similar happens here in the *Cilappatikaran* when there is the miscarriage of justice. As a result of the miscarriage of justice by the *Pandyan* King, the city of *Maturai* burns.

The error made by the *Pandyan* king was in not examining facts in the case of *Kovalan*. By ordering his death on the grounds that he was a thief he set up the problem of the violation of *Dharma* and he pays a price for this action. The violation of *Dharma* in ancient literature is not just an individual act but the consequences affect a large number of people. This is apparent in early *Sanskrit* epics like the *Mahabharata* where a single error by *Drtharashtra* in not dividing the kingdom between the *Kauravas* and the *Pandavas* results in the *Mahabharata* war leading to mass scale destruction of lives. In the next section we shall deal with how the city of *Maturai* comes to be destroyed, is resurrected and rises again.

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## 2.5 DESTRUCTION, RESURRUCTION AND THE ASCENDENCY OF THE CITY

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*Puhar* the *Khaberis* (in the Egyptian records) of **Tolmy** and *Maturai*, are the two cities that form the setting of the epics *Cilappatikaran* and *Manimekalai*. *Pukar* known as *Kaveri Poompattinam/ Poompuhar* in old Tamil memory and *Maturai* are the two cities that appear to have been destined for destruction following the law of *adharm*a that was committed by the King when he orders the execution of *Kovalan*. Much of what remains of *Puhar* is now beneath the sea; a part of the shifting coast lines and the geo tectonics of continental plates. Modern day *Madurai*, is most likely where *Maturai* was situated. The areas we are talking about (*Puhar* and *Maturai*) have a historical reference to the sea eroding and reconstructing the coast line. *Poompuhar* was one of the most prosperous port of the early *Cholas* and both the epics *Cilapathikaram* and the *Manimekalai* mention the prosperity of the port. *Cilappatikaran* mentions the general lay out of the plan of *Poompuhar* in Section five of the epic when the festival of *Indra* is celebrated. It provides a fascinating glimpse of the early *Chola*, *Chera* and *Pandyan* economy where the markets streets are filled with traders from distant lands, where silks, grains, fur, cotton, coral, sandalwood, pearls, gems and gold are traded and sold.

*On the edge of the burnished waters lived  
And mingled as one traders from the distant  
Lands, come for goods carried  
By ships. With paints, scented powders,  
Incense and fragrant perfumes, hawkers  
Went around the city streets.*

Further the epic mentions an interesting lay out of the port city with the suburbs being the residences of the princes and the landed gentry. There were separate streets for the astrologers, charioteers, bards, panegyrist, farmers, physicians, astronomers, dancers, harlots, flower sellers, betel leaf vendors, musicians and drummers.

*One saw the fine work of making  
Cloth from silk, fur and cotton  
In the weavers quarters. Silk, coral,*

*Sandalwood, agar, flawless pearls,  
Gems, gold, and an endless profusion  
Of rare ornaments were piled high  
In the commodious streets.*

The image painted of the city in the epic is almost like the land of plenty where:

*Heaped separately  
Were grains in the streets of the grain merchants,  
As also a variety of provisions distinct from one  
Another.*

The various trades practised by the people, the types of food and wines sold are all described very vividly. It's almost like the cataloguing that happens in Greek Epics.

*Peddlers of pastry, appam;  
Women hawking wine; fishermen  
Offering fish for sale; vendors  
Of white salt; sellers of betel  
Leaves; perfumers; butchers flogging  
Different kinds of meat; oil mongers;  
Overcrowded shops packed with food;  
Braziers; coppersmiths; painters; sculptors;  
Goldsmiths; jewellers; tailors; cobblers;  
A host of artisans making various  
Flawless objects with cloth and pith;  
The homes of great musicians, expert  
In the traditions of music, who could display  
Impeccable skill on the flute and the lute by sounding  
The first seven notes; and other workers  
Who excelled in small crafts-  
All had their homes in the suburbs of the city.*

Apart from the description of trades plied, commodities bought and sold, types of food, the dwelling spaces of different occupational holders are also mentioned.

*In the city itself stood the Kingsway,  
The flagged car street, the market square,  
The boulevard where merchant princes dwelt  
In tall mansions, the brahman homes,  
The houses of landed families and their tenants  
Farmers, of physicians, astrologers and those employed  
In other tasks, the broad street  
Of the homes of those who with skill bored  
Holes into bright gems, and those who polished  
Ornate conches. In separate houses  
Lived charioteers, bards, panegyrists.  
Astronomers, handsome dancers, harlots,  
Actresses, flower and betel girls,  
Maid servants, professional musicians.  
Drummers of various sorts, and jesters.  
Surrounding the fort were the spacious houses  
Of cavalymen with swift horses, riders*



*Of male elephants, drivers of lofty chariots,  
Fierce looking soldiers. Celebrated in song  
Was this part of the town and well known  
For the great and renowned men who lived there.*

It was a part of the larger / popular imagination, of a big port city. Moreover being the capital city it occupied a special place in the imagination of the poets who received the impressions of the past through the glory sung within literature and through collective memory/ folk songs. It had a resonance like the *Sthala Puranas*/ the narrative of places. Both the epics being urban epics in the classical sense celebrate the city and the various hues of the city. The impressions of the city have been drawn long after the original sites have disappeared with the passage of time, much like *Krishna's Dwarka* that is celebrated in the *Mahabharata* as a part of the collective unconscious that is handed down from one generation to the next. It is important to note that simply because the physical city itself is long gone, faced by the ravages of time and natural calamities like *tsunamis* and earthquakes, the memories of the lost city are consequently rebuilt - layer by layer of memory that cut across time as seen in *Poompuhar* of *Cilappatikaran*.

Somewhere though in the stratigraphic layers of the soil on the land and at the silt on the bottom of the ocean lie the physical remnants of the old imagination; artefacts of daily use that have not biodegraded like bronze coins, terracotta, sculptures in stone and beads. The land below holds within the layers of soil entire cities with fort battlements, residences and streets now reduced to rubble and mere foundations. This is also seen beneath the sea near the coasts as the eroding coast lines *tsunamis* swallow entire cities leaving remnants for marine archaeologists to discover and in the case of *Poompuhar* the old submerged city has been found and the many *Maturais* of the creative and folk imagination are connected with the lost lands swallowed up by the sea. Take for instance the case of *Kumari Kandam* or the Tamil lost lands. *Kumari* stands for *Cape Camorin* and it is now connected deeply within Tamil nationalism to the lost submerged mythical continent of *Lemuria*.

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## 2.6 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit we have summarised the epic *Cilappatikaran*, we have examined the presence of female characters in the epic, looked at the sense of justice, the Jain influence on the epic and also at the collective consciousness/ memory that contributes to the nation building/ myth making process.

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## 2.7 QUESTIONS

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1. Who is the author of *Cilappatikaran*? Why do you think authorship is speculated?
2. Outline the plot of *Cilappatikaran*.
3. Comment on the female presence in *Cilappatikaran*.
4. Discuss the idea of justice in *Cilappatikaran*.