

MANIMEKALAI

Sattanar

(6th or 7th century CE)

Reading *Manimekhalai*, translated by A. Danielou, 1989, New Directions

Overview

Manimekhalai is an epic poem composed in the south Indian language of Tamil, probably sometime in the 6th or 7th century CE. It is a sequel to the other ancient Tamil epic (the *Cilappatikaram*), even though it appears approximately one or two hundred years after that earlier work. The self-conscious link between these two works, often called the 'twin-epics', is that the eponymous heroine of *Manimekhalai* is the daughter of the hero (Kovalan) and his lover (the dancer (Madhavi) of the earlier work. The key difference between the two texts is that while the *Cilappatikaram* is a romance with undertones of Jainism, the *Manimekhalai* is a religious story explicitly promoting the ideals of Buddhism.

Cultural significance

Manimekhalai, like its twin sister, the earlier epic *Cilappatikaram*, has earned a prominent place in Tamil culture. The poem itself is valued for its imaginative use of language, its vivid imagery and, most of all, its heroine. Again, like *Cilappatikaram*, this is an epic story in which a woman takes central stage and is the focus of the drama. However, and unlike the heroine Kannaki in the *Cilappatikaram*, Manimekhalai (the heroine) did not become a goddess in popular religion. Manimekhalai remains a textual heroine, but that does not mean she is less important. Indeed, we can say that the poem made a considerable contribution to south Indian culture in that its heroine became a vehicle for the spread of Buddhism throughout the region. Although Buddhism was born in north India, in the sixth century BCE, it spread rapidly throughout the subcontinent, and, after the turn of the Christian Era, it received extensive royal patronage from kingdoms in south India. Recent archaeological research near the ancient port of Puhar (the setting for the story) has uncovered the remains of a Buddhist monastery dating to the 4th or 5th century CE, that is, just before the epic was composed. The epic poem was central to this popularity of a 'hard-sell' religion, which asked its adherents to renounce the world. The Buddhist message of *Manimekhalai* does include a substantial dose of arcane, hair-splitting discourse, but it also presents a human case-study of how someone becomes a Buddhist. The heroine of the epic is everyone's favourite—young, beautiful and innocent—and she wins our sympathy when she tires to fight off a powerful and persistent lover. This is the enduring significance of the epic: a woman gains her freedom through the teachings of the Buddha.

Story

The story begins in the middle of a large religious festival being celebrated in the port city of Puhar, the capital of the Chola kingdom (where the *Cilappatikaram* also began). The capital is bedecked with garlands, music is heard everywhere and the people stroll together on the broad thoroughfares. However, we then learn that preparations for the central event in the festival are in trouble. Madhavi, who is Manimekhalai's mother, has refused to dance as scheduled. Further, she has decided to renounce the world and become a Buddhist nun. She has taken instruction from a teacher and also declares that her daughter, Manimekhalai, shall not become a courtesan and ruin her life. Then Manimekhalai is told the terrible story of her father's death, his execution at the hands of a king. The young girl sheds tears on her garland and her mother orders her to collect new flowers in the royal garden. While she and her companion, Sutamati, walk to the garden, they encounter a variety of people, religious fanatics, dwarfs, hunchbacks, jugglers and eunuchs. Once inside the garden, as they are gathering flowers, Manimekhalai is confronted by Udaya Kumaran, a young prince. Udaya

Kumaran is a would-be-hero: handsome, rich and courageous, he has just subdued a rutting elephant that had threatened to ruin the festival. He is immediately attracted by Manimekalai's beauty and seeks to win her love, but she is not interested, still upset by the story of her father's death. The prince, however, is unrelenting in his pursuit, and she slowly begins to feel some attraction toward him.

At this point, a goddess appears. (She is named Manimekala, which is confusingly close to the name of the heroine, so we will refer to her as 'the goddess'.) The goddess proceeds to tell a story about the dangers of sexual desire and the bliss of spiritual renunciation. She warns the prince to leave Manimekalai alone, and, when he doesn't, she puts her to sleep and whisks her away to a magical island. There, she has a vision of the Buddha and is granted knowledge of her previous births. The goddess then reappears and gives her boons to be able to change her shape and to fly. She also receives a magical begging bowl, blessed by the Buddha to never be empty if it is used to feed the poor.

Now Manimekalai returns to Pukar and to her mother, who has become a Buddhist nun. Mother and daughter receive further instruction from a Buddhist monk, including the famous story of a Brahmin who is banished from his community for saving a cow from slaughter. The amorous prince, Udaya Kumaran, re-enters the story and renews his pursuit of Manimekalai, but she repels him and tries to teach him the Buddhist philosophy of impermanence. When he persists, she uses her magical gifts to change shape and fly away, landing in the court of another king, whom she converts to Buddhism.

A narrative climax, of sorts, then occurs when the prince is killed in a case of mistaken identity. The situation is this: Manimekalai has assumed a disguise of another woman and is seen speaking to the prince by that woman's husband. In a pique of jealousy, the enraged husband drives a knife into the innocent prince's heart. Manimekalai is distressed that she is, indirectly, responsible for this terrible death. The father of the murdered man, it turns out, is a king, who has Manimekalai arrested and put in prison. Inside, she is threatened with horrific torture and rape, but each time she escapes by virtue of the boons given to her long ago. She also manages to convince the queen of her innocence and escapes. After a series of wondrous journeys and complex religious teachings, she enters a temple dedicated to her father (Kovalan) and his wife (Kannaki).

In a brief concluding chapter, the action returns to Pukar. The city is burned to the ground for failing to celebrate the festival properly. This then leads to the final scene, in which Manimekalai fully renounces the world and becomes a Buddhist nun.



(Manimekalai and her mother, Madhavi, ink drawing, c. 1990s)

Themes

Buddhism The predominant theme of this epic is the value of Buddhism, and especially its redemptive power. The story was created at a time (500-700 CE) when Buddhism was a strong presence in south India. Although it was eventually 'sung out' of India by the poet-singers of devotional Hinduism, during this period it gained patronage from most of the rulers in south India, having defeated Hinduism and Jainism in a sort of 'battle of religions.' There are in fact large sections of the text that are simply presentations of Buddhist teachings, such as the brilliantly concise Four Noble Truths. But it also includes explications of recondite and mind-numbing philosophical doctrines, such as 'dependent origination' (*pratityasamutpada*). All of this, however, is given a human dimension through the characters of Manimekalai and her mother, Madhavi. Their lives, as a courtesan and a courtesan-in-the-making, set up the dramatic tension of the story: between renunciation and the world of desire. Both women eventually reach the point where they do renounce the world, but only after considerable doubt and suffering, particularly by Manimekalai, who is younger

and more vulnerable than her mother. She faces unwanted sexual advances from powerful men and is only rescued from them by the intervention of another woman, a goddess. Even then, Manimekalai is made to suffer with the knowledge of her previous lives, in which she committed impious and immoral acts. And not only in the past, but in the present, too, when she is (however indirectly) responsible for the death of an innocent man. All this wrongdoing and injustice, all this suffering and pain, can only be avoided by renouncing the world and becoming an ascetic who devotes herself to helping the poor and needy. This is the redemptive power of Buddhism that transforms the lives of Manimekalai and her mother. Although they have been born as courtesans, the karmic grip on their lives can be broken through Buddhist instruction. By giving up the world, by converting to Buddhism, they can be free.

Desire While the Buddhist message of the story is explicit, almost hitting the reader over the head at times, the poet does not avoid the complexities of its central teaching that desire is the root of all suffering. This is the meaning of the Second Noble Truth, that everything negative in life can be traced back to desire, greed and lust. This is why the poet has chosen to make his heroine a courtesan, who makes her living by exciting and satisfying desire. The courtesan and the nun are thus the polar opposites between which Manimekalai is caught. But the issue is not quite so obvious as it first appears. Yes, the poet seems to say, pleasure is dangerous and leads to suffering, but can we give up all desire? What about compassion, the desire to help others, feed the poor and aid the infirm? These are the natural reactions of a good human being. Are all forms of love to be renounced, even a mother's love for her child? These questions surrounding the Buddhist ideal of renunciation are dramatised in the relationship between Manimekalai and the prince, Udaya Kumaran. At first, she is repelled by his advances, but later she admits that she is attracted by him. Her ambiguity is later resolved (in favour of renunciation), but the poet has posed the question and it hangs in the air until the close of the story. Even the structure of the plot presents a similar dilemma. The epic begins with a sensuous description of a festival, the fragrance of flowers, the scent of perfume, the intoxicating music and gracious curves of slender women. The poet thus draws us into a world of visible pleasure in the first scenes, using words with a pleasing rhythm. Now, having ensnared his readers in the wondrous realms of the senses, he must find a way to demonstrate that such pleasure is the root of all suffering. The ambiguous nature of desire thus runs through the entire poem, in both form and content.

Characters

Manimekalai Manimekalai is the eponymous heroine of the epic. She is the daughter of a courtesan, Madhavi, and a prince, Kovalan, who was killed in an earlier story (*Cilappatikaram*). She is the vehicle that the poet employs to tell his tale of the redeeming power of Buddhism. Born to be a courtesan, she becomes a nun.

Aravanan Aravanan is the principal Buddhist teacher in the story. He plays a major role in the epic by convincing Manimekalai of the value of Buddhism, which leads her to renounce the world and become a nun.

Udaya Kumaran Udaya Kumaran is a young prince, who falls in love with Manimekalai and pursues her, unsuccessfully, throughout much of the story. Toward the end, he is killed by a jealous husband in a case of mistaken identity.

Madhavi Madhavi is Manimekalai's mother, who (in the earlier epic, the *Cilappatikaram*) was a courtesan who had a love affair with her father, Kovalan. She has lost interest in dancing and is converted to Buddhism, like her daughter.

Cittirapati Cittirapati is Madhavi's grandmother, who is angry with her granddaughter for refusing to carry out the duties of her profession by not dancing as a courtesan at the festival with which the story begins. She appears from time to time throughout the epic and attempts to persuade various kings and queens to force his daughter to resume her profession.

Aputhran Aputhran is a little different to these characters in that he appears in a story told by one of them and does not appear in the main story itself. That said, he is a central figure inasmuch as he represents the core Buddhist teaching of compassion.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Manimekalai (Committed)

Character Manimekalai is the eponymous heroine of this Tamil epic. She is the daughter of Madhavi, a courtesan, and Kovalan, who died in the earlier epic (the *Cilappatikaram*). As a young, talented woman, born into a high-status courtesan family, Manimekalai can see her life unfolding in front of her. She will have the protection of wealthy and powerful lovers and customers. She will not want in material terms. Indeed, she will enjoy the pleasures of the royal court, almost as if she were part of the king's family. But Manimekalai has her doubts, raised in part by her mother, who has given up her life as a courtesan, and also by hearing the story of how her father died, many years earlier. Talented and beautiful, she is vulnerable, sought after by princes. But she is also wise beyond her years and takes advice from various Buddhist teachers. More than just their counsel, she also absorbs a great deal of complex Buddhist philosophy, which she then utilises to spread the *dharma* (as 'Buddhism' was known before that term became popular, in the post-classical era). Despite these intellectual and spiritual capabilities, Manimekalai is also a young woman and not entirely free of passion and desires.

Activities As a young woman in the first part of the story, Manimekalai lives a life of a courtesan-to-be. She learns to dress with care, to wear various flowers in her hair and to walk in a certain way. She spends time with other young women, going to public events, such as weddings, festivals and court performances. Later, after her conversion to Buddhism, she spends time doing philanthropic work, feeding the poor, setting up hospitals and instructing rulers on the truth of the Buddha's message.

Illustrative moments

Strong-willed Essentially, the drama of this long, convoluted epic is encapsulated in a single scene, in which Manimekalai struggles to overcome desire and chooses renunciation. This is the key moment in the story, in which she achieves a spiritual victory and escapes from the pain and suffering that Buddhism teaches us is inherent in a life of the senses. Narrated in the fourth and fifth chapters of the epic, the situation is that Manimekalai has been hidden in a mysterious 'marble room', from where she can see and hear others but is herself invisible to them. Outside the room, her friend, Sutamati, is arguing with the prince, Udaya Kumaran, trying to convince him that he must give up his pursuit of Manimekalai because the body 'is subject to age; is the receptacle of ills; cause of desire, doer of misdeeds. It is a pit that hides the snake of anger...' Inside, Manimekalai hears these words, the teaching of the Four Noble Truths, and her mind becomes a battlefield. Despite her initial rejection of the prince, she has found herself attracted to him, to his beauty, courage and wealth. She is disgusted with herself because she admits that 'he spoke injurious words about me, as a woman of no virtue, a woman for sale whom he would purchase.' And still she felt love for him. Now, hearing the words of her friend, she realises how deeply she has descended into the 'cesspit of desire.' In a flash, she 'casts off the dark design of *maya* (which means both illusion and desire). Having struggled and come to a firm decision, to renounce the prince and the world, she speaks with words 'as if dipped in fire.' Raising her head up high, she says, 'Is this the nature of desire? If so, let it be destroyed forever.' The young woman who appeared so delicate, like the many flowers that adorned her, and so vulnerable to men, has shown her metal. She has struggled with her own demons of desire and overpowered them. She is now on the path to becoming a Buddhist nun.

Susceptible However, the brilliance of this epic lies in the fact that the poet puts human psychology ahead of Buddhist ideology. He has shown us that the gentle heroine has steel within her, but he knows that struggles such as hers are not settled in a single episode. She has made her brave decision to become a Buddhist nun, but she must still achieve that goal, and along the path of perfection there will be setbacks. One such moment, which illustrates her susceptibility to normal human emotions, occurs much later, toward the end of the story. Manimekalai has been struggling to maintain her vow of renunciation, and it is tested again when she finds that her suitor, the prince Udaya Kumaran, has been killed. Looking at his lifeless body, bloody from knife wounds, stabbed by mistake by a jealous husband, Manimekalai remembers a previous birth when she and the dead man

were married. Now her iron-grip on her emotions falters, she becomes a normal woman and is sad that her husband (from a previous life) lies murdered. She regrets the loss of a life that would have meant marital bliss, family and children. At this moment of supreme uncertainty, she is given instruction by a magic pillar. All notions of a self—me, myself, I, my—all these ‘ideas of separation’ are false and dangerous. Sees that the exclusive ego is the source of pain (and pleasure) and must be let go. She must embrace the notion of universal, or communal, love, for all creatures, human and animal. This is the moment when she consolidates the victory she achieved earlier (inside the magic ‘marble room’). Now she has completely broken out of her egotistical shell and entered the truthfulness of non-self (*an-atman*), which is a central idea of Buddhism.

Reformer With this final victory over ‘desire,’ Manimekalai is cut loose, emotionally and spiritually, from the royal court and the life of a courtesan and the men who pursue her. Now, she is able to devote herself to doing ‘good works,’ such as feeding the poor and aiding the sick. This is the special feature of Buddhism—it is a religion of both renunciation and engagement. Manimekalai withdraws from the world precisely in order to change it. There are several examples of her selfless philanthropy, which is facilitated by her converting kings and queens to Buddhism, but a particularly illuminating case is that of her prison reforms. She has been thrown in prison by a Chola king (who mistakenly thinks that she is responsible for the death of his son). When she is released, she does not simply walk away with relief. Instead, she asks for an audience with the king who wrongly imprisoned her. He asks her what she wants, and she answers: ‘Do away with the prison. Demolish it and erect in its place a house of charity, where the poor may be feed and homeless housed.’ And this is what the king does—he knocks down the prison walls, builds a low-storey house of charity and endows it in perpetuity with royal funds. Manimekalai’s proposal for prison reform would not be out of place in a modern political debate. The heroine of this ancient epic fulfils both requirements of being a Buddhist: she is spiritually detached while at the same involved in helping to improve the world around her.

Aputhran (Compassionate)

Character Aputhran is an unusual character in that he does not actually appear in the main story and does not have illustrative moments. Instead, he is a character in a story that is told by someone within the story of *Manimekalai*. His story is one that is found in several contemporaneous Buddhist texts as an exemplar of compassion. His tale begins with his birth to a Brahmin woman named Sali of Benares (in north India). Sali is a prostitute who has given birth to Aputhran outside marriage or indeed any liaison, such as keeping a mistress or lover. Although she is ostracised by her local Brahmin community, Sali keeps the child and travels south, to Kanya Kumari on the very tip of the subcontinent. On the way, mother loses track of the child, who is rescued and protected from snakes by a cow. That is how he is given his name (‘son of a cow’) by another Brahmin who found him. In later life, Aputhran returns the favour and saves a cow from slaughter. Contrary to popular opinion (in the West and even in India), Indians and Brahmins ate beef in the ancient period before a gentler form of Hinduism evolved. Like his mother, Aputhran is criticised by his fellow Brahmins, and he asks them why they would kill an animal, like the cow, who sustains life with its milk. He then tells the scornful Brahmins a series of tales about pious men who protected animals. Despite the power of his tales, the Brahmins chase him out of their village and he runs off to the city of Madurai, where he finds refuge in a temple. Chinta Devi, the resident goddess there grants him a boon of a begging bowl that will always be full of food, which he can then distribute to the poor. The king becomes jealous of the young man’s growing reputation in the city and exiles him to Indonesia. After he lands on the large island of Java, Aputhran finds that the people there are suffering from a famine, but he is taken to another, deserted island and abandoned. Thirsty and hungry, he refuses to use the magic bowl to produce food for himself while others starve. Instead, he places it in a lake. It is from this same lake that Manimekalai, on one of her several magical journeys, withdraws the bowl and uses it to feed poor people back in her city of Pukar. Aputhran’s great deed was to not use the bowl to feed himself—that would have cancelled the bowl’s special power because it had been given for communal feeding. For this act of compassion, he is hailed as an exemplar of the core Buddhist ideal of compassion: ‘There is no greater deed than to give food, shelter and medicine to the needy.’