

Projection of Resemblance between Greek and Tamil Elegies in Treatment of Theme and Structure : An Appraisal

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Abstract. This is an attempt to project the resemblance between Greek and Tamil elegies in respect of theme and structure. Greek and Tamil ancient poetry deal with common theme, with the point that both Greeks and Sankam people gave importance to courage and valour. In times, personal poems treating the theme of love come under elegy, here Tamil and Greek both project the same sensuous emotion and thought. For the treatment of theme and structure of an elegy language is not an important element but the concept and ideas play a vital role, which is neatly touched upon in this research paper.

Keywords : Tradition; elegy, legend, Sangam literature, lamentation, sorrow-stricken.

“Greek Elegy”, says Jebb, “deals with the greatest variety of subjects – love, the wars which the poet’s city waging, the political feuds among the citizens, the laws or principles which the poet wishes them to adopt, his own opinions on the manners and morals of the day, his views as to the best way of enjoying life, festive pleasure, lamentation for the dead, everything that the poet and his friends are want to think and talk off” (Hudson, 102). What he said of Greek literature is also exactly true of ancient Tamil poetry. Anyone who reads this similarity will surely raise up his brows in wonder to see, how two different literatures of two different countries with different tradition and culture stand in parallel lines.

Regarding Greek Literature, the classical poetry of ancient Greek consists of the Epic Tradition, Lyric Poetry, Tragedy and Comedy. Of the literature, of ancient Greece only a relatively small proportion survives. Yet it remains important, not only because much of it is of Supreme quality but also because until the mid nineteenth century the greater partly of the literature of the western world was produced by men, were familiar with the Greek tradition, either directly or through the medium of Latin, who were conscious that the forms they used were mostly of Greek invention and who took for granted in their readers some familiarity with classical literature. Two things are likely to appear strange to anyone unfamiliar with Greek Literature. “First Greek poetry was intended to be sung or recited publicly, not to be read in private; secondly, the subject of Greek poetry was myth, that is to say, the great mass of traditional material which was one of the peculiar riches of the Greek spirit; this was part legend, sometimes based on the dim memory

of historical events like the fall of Troy or Thebes, partly folk tale, partly primitive religious speculation” (Encyclopaedia, 868).

Tamil poetry arose about thousand B.C, but almost all the poems of the first millennium, including those on which Agattiyanar, Tolkappiyar and other early grammarians based their grammatical researches have perished. Yet they were all occasional odes on one or other incident of love or war, as described in the *Poruladigaram of the Tolkappiyam*. The Sangam poets were bound by certain very definite laws of form and expression which have been enunciated in the most ancient Tamil Text on grammar and poetics, *Tolkappiyam*. However, as they were creative poets of great ability, they did not allow their production to become formal, stale and hackneyed. The sap of creative life pulsates through every line. Tolkappiyam divides all literature into two on the basis of its subject matter-interior and exterior poetry, “The pride of place in Sangam Literature has been given to Interior poetry” (Subramanian, 3).

Love as the subject matter of poetry has been studied in amazing detail by the ancient Tamils. They appear to have gone further ahead in the matter than the ancient Greek or the Sanskritist Hindus of our country. Love, according to the Tamil, can only be felt and experienced; it is subjective and is not expressible in terms of words. They certainly were aware of gross, carnal passion and being men of subtle understanding, they did not treat it in the manner they treated love. The personal poetry in Greek was started with the first hedonist of literature, Callinus or Tyrtaeus who proclaimed unashamedly that in the short passage to the grave, all that matters is pleasure and especially love, “The bulk of his work seems to have been written to a flute-girl Nanno, and through his Roman imitators, proper times and Ovid; he is a founder of love-poetry” (Bowra, 25).

Both Greek and Tamil ancient poetry treat a common theme. To start with the point, both the Greeks and the Sangam people gave importance to courage and valour. According to the Greeks death is an end to all but death by war alone brings fame to man. The hero who dies without fighting in battle, will never be respected. The idea of Callinus, a Greek poet,

Unlamented he dies – unregretted – no so
When the tower of his country, in death falls the brave
Thrice hallowed his name amongst all. (Hades, 161)

is vividly seen in *Purananuru*, where a member of the warrior’s family died of ill-health, it was the custom to put the corpse on a bed of grass and slash it in twin with a sword that he might go to the heroes’ heaven. If a hero dies heroically in a war, “his glory, his name shall never die” (164) had been the central idea of Greek and ancient Tamilians.

Personal poems treating the theme of love come under elegiac poems. Sappho’s longer pieces talk about the in tenses moments in her emotional life. She

is capable too of pure joy, when she hears the water pattering among the apple trees, or sees the moon swelling to fullness, or the evening star brings back the sheep and goat and the child to its mother. She can write with scorn of an ignorant woman who will flit dimly among the unsubstantial ghosts because she has never plucked from the Piercian rose-tree, or with exquisite and fitting beauty of a young bride,

Like the Sweet apple which reddens upon
the topmost bough,
A top on the topmost twig – which the
Pluckers forgot somehow –
Forgot it not, nay, but got it not, for none
Could get it till now (184).

This resembles the song by Parinar in *Kuruntokai*:

Like a poor man craving pleasures,
You want most, what is most precious, my heart.
The same way you learned
How good she is,
You didn't learn how rare she is
and difficult to obtain (Pillai, 64).

Unfulfilled love has been the subject of Sappho's love poetry. Because of this unfulfilled love, Greek poets like Anacreon and Stesichorus have abused their very life on earth by singing:

In less than two and twenty
My laves have worn out (Hades, 304).

This is similar to one of the Sangam poems where the poet says that this love disease is something which cannot be cured and remedied. There are some songs of lamentation over the death of friends in Sangam and Greek literature. Archilochus laments over the death of Perikles, by singing thus:

Blaming the bitterness of this sorrow, Perikles no man,
In all our city can take pleasure in festivities (178).

In another instance, Sappho feels sad for Timas, her friend's death. Her friends cut their hair in sorrow, at the death of Timas:

This dust was Timas' ere her bridal hour
She lies in Proserpina's gloomy bower,
Her virgin playmates from each lovely head
Cut with sharp steel their locks, the Strewments for the death (185)

In Tamil Sangam poetry, there is a song of lamentation by Avvaiyar, on the death of Athiyaman. But the situation of the elegy is quite different, "Court feasting is one of the familiar scenes in Tamil bardic poetry" (Chadwick, 222).

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When a minstrel goes to a new court, he is always feted, and he is offered mead or wine. He shares with the king's retinue the roasted meat. This, in fact, is a popular theme and Avvaiyar has highlighted this aspect in an elegy:

If he had a little mead, he gave it to us:
 Alas it is no more to be!
 If he had little rice, he shared it in many plates:
 It is no more.
 The spear that pierced his great breast
 Through the eating-bowels of the minstrels
 Who are always respected, shot through
 the palms of those who came begging
 and while it dimmed the sight with tears
 of those whom he protected, it certainly
 Shot through the tongues of poets who have
 the subtle wisdom to choose the beautiful words
 Oh! where is he gone, my lord, my stay! (Kailasapathy, 105)

The poet Callimachus, on the death of his friend, recollects the olden days which they both enjoyed together and thus laments for the death. He says,

I wept as I remembered; how often you and I
 Had tired the sun with talking and sent him down the sky (300).

This can be compared with the song of Kapilar over the death of Pari. One can see the emotional ties that bound Kapilar to Pari. Having taken a genuine liking for the chieftain, Kapilar loved all that was associated with him. The mountain of Parambu was a recurrent theme in his poems. When Pari was at war with a confederation of kings, who besieged his mountain fortress, Kapilar shouted down his challenge at them, completely identifying himself with his lord. And in the battle Pari died and Kapilar was sorrow-stricken. He sings,

In death thou would'st not take me with thee; left me behind!
 By this desertion seems thy friendship in complete.
 Here in this birth we meet no more, nor joy
 As we were wont; in another birth
 I look that lofty fate shall join us once again,
 And I shall see thee yet, nor lose the vision ever more. (Pillai, 179)

A poet called Meleager, after burying his dead wife laments by addressing the burial place:

Oh! Mother Earth! who nourishes all things
 Do thou enfold, gently to thy breast
 My Helidora, flower of my devotion,
 Wept of all mankind (Hades, 373).

This goes in tune with the elegy by the Seva King, Kottambalathuthu Thunjcia Makkuthai. When he lost his wife, his feeling of sorrow knew no bounds. Hence this song:

What charm, beth life hence forth for me? . . .
 My queen hath left me. Like the sea
 Though deep and surging is my grief,
 It has no strength, alas! to me
 From hated life to bring relief
 Would that grim death had come to me!
 The fairest queen on earth is dead.
 The nectar of my life was she;
 Ah, therefore hath my angel fled? (Sanjeevi, 13).

Pak Kudukkai Nan Kaniyar, a Sangam poet anticipates death anytime in his life. This is similar to a poem by Meleager, where he says,

That morn which saw me made a bride
 The evening witnessed that I died (Hades, 374).

Both Sangam and Greek poems deal with the evanescence of youth. Mimnermus hates the old age by saying,

. . . . hateful old age come upon us,
 Striking the good and bad equally cruelly down (165).

In *Purananuru*, one finds a lyric of high order. An old man bent double with the weight of the old age looks at the sunlit meadows of his youth, through the casement of his withered old age. He laments over the vanished innocent joys of the Spring-time of his youth, "Will the youth with all its innocent past time ever return to me?" is the passionate cry of the old man who falls into a melancholy reverie over the buried joys of his early childhood. One can perceive the same note of sadness in Pladimus's poem where he says,

I loved, I played, I drank my wine
 In youth's brief blith some hour of gladness
 who has not heard the voice divine.
 Inviting joy akin to madness?
 Alas! it's o'er! my wrinkled brow
 Comes like the warning of a sage
 To say that pleasure's past, and now
 My thoughts change into suit my age (378).

Is it not exceedingly surprising and strange that this mood of an old man lamenting over his vanished youth was captured and imprisoned in one of the immortal lyrics of the Sangam Age? Philosophy also finds an outlet in that elegies. A poet called Solon, who lived in 640 B.C. said that a man's life in this world is full of sufferings and man himself is responsible for the sufferings. The same philosophy is seen in

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Sangam poet Kaniyan Poonkunranar's poems. Just like the Greek poet Alcois, who feels that life in this world is to be enjoyed, the same thought runs in the mind of Koogai Kotiyar, in *Purananuru*:

We must not let our spirits give way to grief,
By being sorry we get no further on
My Buckhis, best of all defences
Is to mix plenty of wine and drink it (188).

So far, the resemblance between Greek and Sangam poetry has been traced and accordingly they can be called sisters in elegiac tone for both speak by and to the same organs.

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