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An Artist in the Making - James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and Akilan's *Paavai ViLakku* – An Analogical Note

S. Niraimathi, Ph.D.

The Focus of the Paper

This paper proposes to do an analogical study of James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and Akilan's well-known Tamil novel *Paavai ViLakku*. The main concern of both *The Portrait* and *Paavai ViLakku* is the process of the gestation of an artistic soul which develops from an embryo with distinct traits. In both the novels, the readers' interest is focused entirely on the central character, the artist hero.



James Joyce, 1882-1941

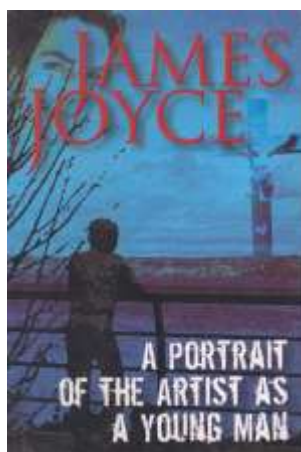
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The Heroes of the Novels under Study



The hero in James Joyce's *Artist* is an imaginative but an unathletic small boy. He is hard-pressed by the narrow orthodoxies and strict disciplines and rules of a Jesuit boarding-school. He slowly realizes, with growing sadness, that his family is drifting into squalor. Amidst these adversities, he progressively summons pride and arrogance to his aid. Brought up in the Catholic tradition, faith and practice, he has developed an overwhelming sense of sin and this bringing up imposes upon him an extreme sense of guilt and sin because of his untimely sexual initiation. He goes through an anxious and elaborate religious observance. However, despite stumbling he still makes an impeccable advance in art, through reverie and through conversation with whatever acquaintances will listen. He displays an understanding of the realm of art and his elected place in it. The crisis of his break with Church and family, and the exalting moment of revelation and dedication – all these are vividly rendered experiences of *Portrait*.



Akilan, 1922-1988

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Like Stephen Dedalus of *Portrait*, Thanikasalam, the artist-hero of *Paavai ViLakku* grows through the three-fold divisions of the novel from an adolescent boy to a matured artist buffeted by the winds of fortune, and at last achieves a high sense of artistic refinement when the rough edges of his personality are shaped by the varied experiences life offered him. The subject matter of both the novels is esoteric, resulting from an intense self-investigation.



Paavai ViLakku

The Quest for Self-identity

Both the novels revolve around the quest-myth for self-identity. They are psychological novels in the sense that “they deal with materials drawn from the realm of human consciousness – with the lessons of life, with emotional shocks, the experience of passion and the crises of human destiny all of which go to make up the conscious life of man and his feeling life in particular” (Jung 210).

Inner Developments and the Themes

Both are structured on the stages of the inner developments of the hero as a potential artist, against a formidable battery of opponents and their souls’ discovery of the goal

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towards which these have been mysteriously proceeding – the goal of life. In their pilgrimage through trials and tribulations towards self-identity, both the heroes progress through a series of encounters with women. Each encounter with a woman character is a lesson by which the hero comes to realise his self. The women in both the novels act as a fuel of high potency to the artist's growth.

The theme of the *Artist* – how a gifted imaginative and intellectual misfit frees himself from the shackling influences of family, religion and society and sets out as an exile to fulfill his vocation as an artist – is the central axis of Joyce's *Portrait*. Being shaped by Freudian and Jungian psychology, Joyce probed into his own soul and chose the inner workings of his own psyche as the thematic material for his *Portrait* and presents his hero as an objective rendering of his subjective experience.

Structure of the *Artist*

Each of the five chapters of the novel, faithful to Stephen's nature, reveals a stage of its development. All through the novel, his struggle with his external conventional environment is fused with the development of his own inner life. Initially unconsciously but later fully consciously, he revolts against his surroundings. The conscience of his race as it appears in the world of his own childhood, adolescence and youth is uniformly corrupt and brutal.

Spiritual Exile and Release

The first chapter shows Stephen as a spiritual exile from his social surroundings since early childhood. The natural man reaches a temporary fulfillment in the second chapter and in the third one the spiritual man prevails, but the strict disciplinarian Catholic way of life limits and restricts the artist's imagination. The Church and its strict sexual code of discipline, its sacraments, its promise of grace, do not win over the artist who feels that his senses have to be kept alive, "the senses of his soul would not be bound . . . (98).

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Catholic piety fails him and the freer and wider world of the pagan calls him forth: “An inaudible voice seemed to caress the soul, telling her names and glories, bidding her arise as for espousal and come away . . . (152). A walk along the Strand brings Stephen his real vocation – an outburst of profane joy at the bird-like beauty of a girl, a realisation of the fabulous artificer whose name he bears, a consciousness of the power of words to confer an order and life of their own.

The final chapter shows the soul, already fully developed, fattening itself for its journey until at last it is ready to move. To fulfill himself Stephen must leave Ireland, and he tells his friend Davis, “When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets” (208). In exile, with a creator’s cunning, “I will try to express myself”, he says, “in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can” (247).

Hence the novel fittingly ends with the artist’s assertion of his love for freedom in order to create or embody the experience that is born out of an interaction between the societal forces and the individual unconscious. This interaction waxes the collective unconscious into expression; an expression which is vested with universality of art: “So be it”, says Stephen at the end of the novel, “Welcome, O life! I go to encounter, for the millionth time, the reality of experience, and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race” (253).

Quest for Myth in Akilan’s *Paavai ViLakku*

Joyce’s quest myth for self-identity is the same theme handled by Akilan in *Paavai ViLakku*. “The whole novel is the journey of the soul groping in darkness and struggling in search of the redeeming light” (Ramalingam 69). The struggling soul of the hero confronts obstacles in all levels and at last transcends them to find out his self identity as a creative artist. Like Stephen in *Portrait*, Thanikasalam, the artist hero in *Paavai ViLakku*, also grows through the three-fold division of the novel from an adolescent boy to a matured artist.

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The structural division of *Paavai ViLakku* into three parts – ‘The Innocent Boy’ ‘Struggle, and ‘She – The giver of light’ – marks significant stages in the growth of the protagonist who finds a woman always crossing the path of his progress towards enlightenment as a writer which is finally brought about by an acceptance of the tragic implications of life.

Stages of the Novel – The Roles of Women

In the first part of the novel, Thanikasalam is introduced as a poverty-stricken college student with puritanical tastes and habits. He believes in the ideal that a man can live in this world without sensuous love by showing pure love, the eternal bondage between the souls, to others. The struggle of Thanikasalam between his ideal and his earthly life is the core of the whole novel.

Devaki, a young and virile widow, is responsible for making Thanikasalam realise his self, his potentialities. According to Devaki, Thanikasalam is a combination of two men – “one who is an innocent child and the other a man who really knows things” (40). Thanikasalam does not respond to Devaki’s subtle teasing and cajoling because there is in him an indescribable feeling of pain of the adolescence which blinds him to her beauty and youth; “he is in love with this pain and is wedded to it” (44). Since the growing poverty of his family has rendered education a costly luxury, Thanikasalam prepares himself for his bouts with life by offering his services as a clerk. The artist in him, who has been aroused by Devaki’s proddings, prevents him from selling his soul for a handful of silver.

The love episode between Thanikasalam and Sengamalam is a milestone in his progress as a full fledged artist. Though it is a failure in terms of love, it is a success in terms of art. Thanikasalam writes his first short story, dipping his pen in the raw blood of his own bitter experience of love. No writer, not even the greatest, can exist in vacuum and his most glorious visions are rested in the base of life and this base for Thanikasalam is silently and efficiently provided by Gowri, his wife.

At this stage as an artist he gets himself emotionally involved in the complexities of life and his writings take their origin from three sources: unrequited love for Sengamalam, yearning for his wedded wife, Gowri, and the anger and frustration of a young man who hates the moral turpitude of the people around him.

Thanikasalam's life as a school teacher in Courtallam arranges his tryst with destiny – Uma, a highly emotional creature with an uninhibited appreciation of anything she likes. She is his alter ego without whom his life as a writer will be rendered meaningless. She becomes indispensable both for this life and his mission. In the first part of the novel, Thanikasalam has tried to bend life to his heart's desires and in the second part life tries to bend and break him.

Though the death of Uma marks the tragic climax of the novel, it leads Thanikasalam to the final acceptance of life as a composite of the tears of joy and sorrow. Having been exposed to the tragic vicissitudes of life through a series of disasters including economic and domestic, the tragic aspect of life leaves a more lasting impression on the man and the writer in him than the lighter aspects of life. The two personalities are brought closer by his growing intimacy with Uma who finally succeeds in fusing those two with the cement of her life, a moment of triumph and tragedy in the passion-packed life of Thanikasalam.

The artist in him has come of age and so is able to penetrate the appearance of things and reach at reality. When the novel ends, Thanikasalam proceeds step by step carrying his Uma and this is suggestive of his progress in the ladder of the victory of the ideal. Thanikasalam does not cease in his creative efforts. He is marching on and on besides his limited successes and failures.

Paavai Vilakku and The Portrait

In both the novels, in the heroes' pilgrimage through trials and tribulations towards self-identity, the role of woman as redeemer and as a fuel of high potency to the artist's

growth is significant. The artist-heroes' encounters with women characters are turning-points in their spiritual development as artists.

As for Stephen, his relationship with Emma Clery makes him recognize the futility of his attempt to establish human communication. His encounter with the prostitute emphasizes the supreme role of senses in moulding the artist in him. Last but not least, the wading girl is undoubtedly the projected image of the artist's 'anima' wading in the world and seeking the soaring experience of artistic inspiration.

In *Paavai ViLakku* Thanikasalam is the centre around whom four girls revolve. Devaki awakens the 'anima' in him: in Sengamalam we have the flowering of sensuousness. She suggests that he must dip into the pond and pluck the flower, whereas Thanikasalam only wants to simply enjoy the beauty of the flower. But when he comes to Uma, he reaches the stage of creation and that is why she gives him a pen. When she plays the role of a copyist listening to the dictation of Thanikasalam, she symbolises the muse and the sanctity of art. Gowri, his wife symbolises 'Sakti' in its sustaining domestic role.

The Artistic and Spiritual Growth of the Authors

It is clearly shown that the undercurrent of the artist-theme runs in both these novels and we find the growth of this theme in relation to the growth of the artists, Joyce and Akilan. The subjective elements in these novels provide them with a continuity and wholeness. Though we cannot say that these novels are merely the exteriorization of the novelists' personality, it is true to a certain extent, that both to Joyce and Akilan, their life and work are complementary, one elevating the other. As Joyce and Akilan have a strong and fertile personality, they have given a universal touch to their personal suffering or joy.

Liberating Literature from the Spatiotemporal

Comparative literature seeks to liberate literature from the restraints of the spatiotemporal order provided by our partial perspectives and makes us see literature in simultaneity of time and space. It is true that every work of art has autonomy of its own existence. In the two novels under consideration here, the heart-beats of two different

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cultures are heard very strongly. But, at the same time, they have resonances outside the books to the whole of human experience and they have filiations with the whole living and growing organism, which is 'life'.

The novels may attempt to be western or eastern in thought, feeling, emotion or experience, and also may try to court the graces of different languages for expression. But the agonies and victories, failures and achievements, on the whole and the analysis of the inevitable destiny are universal, which is shared by every one of us.

Pervading Universality

Viewed from this perspective of 'universality' pervading through literature, Joyce's *Portrait* and Akilan's *Paavai ViLakku* meet on the common ground that both map out the intellectual struggle of the artists. While the differences are on the surface, the sense of sameness flows below them as in an underground river. We duly recognize the baptism of rebirth into the fellowship of a human faith.

Though these mutual illuminations lead us to recognize the similarities in theme and form between *Portrait* and *Paavai ViLakku*, we cannot eliminate the limitlessness of artistic meanings in these novels which could be national, regional and above all individual.

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A Note on the Translation of Tamil Passages

The passages quoted in this article from Akilan's *Paavai ViLakku* and the passage from M. Ramalingam's *Punai Kathai VaLam* have been translated by me. -

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