

**The Western Impact of Poetry Criticism on Tamil Literary Scene:
Ka. Naa. Subramaniam's Reception of Western Literature as
Represented by Arnold, Eliot and F.R. Leavis**

Dr. S. Chelliah, M.A., Ph.D., D.Litt.

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the impact created by western poetry criticisms on Tamil criticism of poetry with reference to Ka. Naa. Subramaniam. Starting from M.H. Abrams' views of criticism, this paper moves the various critics such as Arnold, F.R. Leavis and T.S. Eliot. This paper takes the criticism of various periods into consideration. After discussing western poetic criticism, the Tamil poetic criticism was discussed briefly starting from Tolkappiar. Coming across various critics who spoke both good and ill about poetry, this paper gets into Ka. Naa. Subramaniam's views and this paper helps the readers to understand the impact created by poetry criticism of the West on Tamil poetry criticism.

Keywords: Ka. Naa. Subramaniam, Poetry criticism, impressionism, traditional approach, western theories and Tamil criticism.

The growth of literature has been perennially stimulated by ideas borrowed by writers consciously or unconsciously, whether the source of ideas is foreign or native. Many details have been generated about western criticism, Tamil criticism, Poetic criticism and novel criticism. Before going for analysis about either poetic criticism or novel criticism, one has to know what criticism is and how the criticism gets practised in western countries as well as Tamil criticism. As M.H. Abrams puts it, "criticism is the branch of study concerned with defining, classifying, expounding and evaluating works of literature" (P 36). It was the common explanation given by Abrahams. But when one looks into the Stalwart's definitions regarding criticism which cherish the explanation of their own notion will be said to be 'apt and meaningful'. For example, Arnold writes:

"I am bound by my own definition of criticism:
a disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate
the best that is known and thought in the world"

(The English Critical Tradition 42)

F.R. Leavis in his preface to *The Common Pursuit* writes, “the Common pursuit of true judgement that is how the critic should see his business...” (P 5)

In Europe, the art of criticism began in ancient Greece in 4th century B.C. receiving considerable attention, thereby creating an intellectual awakening in Athens. All such learned men as Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Socrates and Aristophanes wrote many literary works applying critical theories in some way or the other. The first one namely *The Frogs* by Aristophanes had a co-relation with the relative merits of Aeschylus and Euripides. This critical canon started as a healthy step in the earlier periods. In the words of Aristophanes, the creative art and the critical art are one and the same thing and later it got divided into two. The 14th century was found to be an age of critical inquiry and critical analysis. Though western criticism emerged from such a background, the first English critic who used criticism is Sir Philip Sidney who is said to have followed the model of Aristotle. When poetry was called ‘imitation’ and poet ‘an imitator’, Sidney took upon the noble task of defending poetry by writing *Apology for Poetry* in which his poetic concept is stressed upon as an activity ‘to teach and delight’. Then, the history of English literary criticism had Ben Jonson who is better known as a poet and a dramatist than a critic. But as a critic, his *Discoveries* is a valuable book in which he writes about Spenser, Marlowe, Bacon and Shakespeare who interested him mostly in his literary insights. Then John Dryden’s *An Essay of Dramatic Poetry* came up as the lonely but important work in which he upholds Aristotle’s theory of poetry as a process of imitation. His slogan about the object of poetry was delight instead of teaching. Dr. Johnson considered Dryden as the ‘father of English criticism’, for from him alone, English criticism took a clear root. ‘When Pope’s critical opinion started spreading through his *Essay on Criticism*, Dr. Johnson’s critical outlook got explicated from his writings like *Preface to the plays of Shakespeare* and *Live of the Poets*.

Then in the Romantic Age, literary criticism did significantly change its course and methods in that it could be called ‘Romantic criticism’ for which Wordsworth and Coleridge laid the foundation through publication of *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* and *Biographia Literaria* respectively - the two important works that bear the critical theories of the romanticists. The chief tenets of this romantic criticism are ignoring rules, being impressionable and individualistic in approach with an emphasis on emotion and imagination. With the emerging of Victorian compromise, the fight between the neo-classical school and romantic school came to an end and Arnold emerged as the key figure by writing critical treatises like *Preface to the Poems of 1853* and *The Study of Poetry* – the first one is on the art of poetry; the second on the art of criticism. The 20th century saw the birth of New criticism where T.S. Eliot, I. A. Richards and F.R. Leavis made their critical theories so influential and reasonable with an emphasis on textual analysis structuralism post-structuralism, and many such approaches as psychological, mythical and the like. In this evolution of literary criticism down from the Ages, poetic criticism started approximately in between 427 BC to 348 BC with Plato and in English critical

tradition, the poetic criticism started right from Sir Philip Sidney and Arnold set right the poetic criticism as a separate discipline.

In Tamil literature too, in the early phase, Tolkappiar who wrote *Tolkapiyam*, as the originator of Tamil literary criticism, in which he framed his literary principles as ‘thematic conception’ and ‘poetic convention’ in clear terms, as mutually related. In *Porulathikaram* Tolkappiyar does beautifully explains themes of ‘akam’ and ‘puram’ relating to romantic poetry and heroic poetry respectively. Parimelazhakar, the greatest writer on *Tirukkural*, Nacinarkkiniyar, the commentator on *Kalithohai*, C.V. Damodaran Pillai and U.V. Swaminatha Aiyar, V. Kanakasabha Pillai, Maraimala Adikal and the yeoman service in passing valuable commentaries on innumerable Tamil classics by giving a new direction to contemporary criticism, that too, by applying the western principles, to evaluate a work of art one critic by name M. Ramalingam rightly observes:

“Modern Tamil literary criticism began in the first decade of the 20th century. In that formative stage, Tamil scholars had drawn their inspiration from the study of western literature” (P 1127)

T. Selvakesavaraya Mudaliar and V.V.S. Aiyar are considered to be the pioneers of the modern Tamil literary criticism. The former wrote about ‘poetry’ and ‘prose’ in his *Tamil Viyasankal* (Tamil essays) while the latter brought out the significant features of the epic in his critical study of *Kamba Ramayanam* making the claim that Kambhar was superior to Homer, Virgil and Milton in some respects. Following them in critical thinking and poetic critical convention, T.P. Meenakshisundaram emerged as a critic with a profound scholarship through publication of *Kanalvari* and *Kudimakkal kappiam* which are considered to be the two important books for revealing his critical principles. Then came Ka. Naa. Subramaniam who established himself in the history of Tamil literary criticism as an impressionist through publication of his *Mutal Aintu Tamil Navalkal* (First five Tamil Novels). He was responsible for the incoming of English critical theories and methods to India, especially Tamil literary field, and he made the foreign novels available in the Tamil language by translating many novels from various languages. He wrote thus:

“Though the impact of western literary criticism upon Malayalam, Marathi, Kannada, Bengali is far more than that upon Tamil, Tamil too had its impact from it to a considerable extent” (Kalai Nutpangal 79).

Truly speaking, poetic criticism started in the west when Plato, the most celebrated disciple of Socrates, started attacking poetry. He made satirical remarks against poets and poetry by condemning the poetic inspiration, for he was of the opinion that poetic inspiration will not represent truths based on

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reason. His contempt for poets and poetry less concerned with morality and truth gets reflected in his *Republic*. This condemnation of poetry evoked the attention of the succeeding generations. Plato's distinguished disciple Aristotle (who was also known as the tutor of Alexander the Great) called the poets 'imitators' and never insisted that poetry should be instructive. Here from this background, English poetic criticism emerged. As B. Prasad puts it, "It was only after the Renaissance when the Greek and Latin treatises on criticism became available to English scholars, that they began to apply their minds to this department of literature" (P.72). This tendency of criticism naturally blossomed with the attack and the defense of poetry then it changed its attitude to the qualification of a poet, then to the function of poetry. Then Johnson appeared on the scene in the 18th century, who paid his attention to the various kinds of poetry, versification and poetic diction thereby exercising a greater influence on his Age by paving way to poetic criticism, that too, with an emphasis on the historical approach. Then poetic criticism blossomed in the hands of Wordsworth and Coleridge, the poet critics of the age of Revolution especially in the romantic triumph in literature. Wordsworth opposed the practice of judging a work of art by the application of tests based on ancient models and Coleridge based his literary criticism on philosophical principles.

After the conflicts between neo-classical school and the Romantic School, the poetic criticism took its new turn in the hands of Matthew Arnold, the poet-turned critic. "His criticism in them all may be said to fall into two broad divisions: that on the art of poetry and that on the art of criticism" (Prasad 202). He is more a propagandist than a critic. Following the footsteps of Arnold, Eliot, the American settled in England made a remarkable attempt in the field of criticism, especially poetic criticism. F.R. Leavis, the teacher and the critic, dictated his terms in the field of poetic criticism to certain extent. He was influenced by Arnold, Eliot and I.A. Richards, John Paul Pritchard observes Eliot's influence as:

"His analysis of poems in terms of language, imagery and metaphor, has however been taken over by the New critics and has become basic to their practice" (Criticism in America 236).

Arnold's poetic criticism can be considered as the one that formulates the definite theme in the field of English literary criticism and his poetic criticism propagates many theories. This is due to the age in which he lived. Arnold lived in an age of materialism when spirituality was its lowest ebb. The advancement of science caused the religious set back in the minds of the people. Arnold found nothing but poetry that could fill in the void, that was created by the industrial advancement. Since materialism crept into religion, he had no hesitation in substituting poetry in the place of religion. In his *The Study of Poetry*, Arnold wrote rather rightly thus:

"More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn

to poetry to interpret life for us to console us, to sustain us without poetry, our science will appear incomplete and most of what passes with us, for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry” (P 63)

It was poetry that was all in all to Arnold and he insisted on the superiority of poetry by looking for poetry even in religion and said: “The strongest part of our religion today is its unconscious poetry” (63). This act of substituting poetry in the place of religion led to adverse criticism by other poets and critics like T.S. Eliot and A.H. Warren. They were critical of Arnold for misleading the reading public with his inadequate idea of religion and his confusion between religion and art, but in Tamil literary criticism, Ka. Naa. Subramaniam did not confuse art with anything. Though he closely followed and exercised the Western thoughts and methods in the Tamil; literary field, he never allowed this sort of confusion between poetry and other areas like religion and philosophy. He viewed literature as literature and never substituted it for anything Ka. Naa. Subramaniam said:

“Poets do not degrade the modern writings by giving much importance to classical writings. They used to stand in the modern ground while appreciating for classical writing” (Kalai Nutpangal 18).

Eliot too had said about the relationship of past and present in the poetic world. Roger Sharrock in his “Eliot’s Tone” reflected Eliot’s view that “the poet too must master the past and make it present” (P 170). Therefore, one can understand that Ka. Naa. Subramaniam’s idea of the relationship between the past and present may be because of the influence of western theories. Arnold in his preface to 1853 poems remarked that a great poetry should be able to delight us without the confinement of particular period and time. To quote his works, “A great human action of a thousand years ago is more interesting to it than a smaller human action of today’s” (P4). This idea is reflected by Ka. Naa. Subramaniam in his “Ilakkia Visaram” in *Ilakkiyathukku Oru Iyakkam* as,

“The great poet is the one who write poetry which can be used at any time. That is, the poetry written by great poets can be made to suit all occasions. But that does not mean that he had written it for that purpose only” (P 8).

Ka. Naa. Subramaniam is well aware that great poetry should entertain all the people at all time irrespective of Age discrimination by his vast readings and by his experience through western impact. As regards literature, either poetry or prose form, Ka. Naa. Subramaniam opines that literature in any form is created to present meaning to life and poetry especially creates so many fresh meanings in the minds of the readers. This multiplicity of meaning is considered an important object of literature.

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Further when he writes about the objectives of *Puthukavithai* (New verse), he does obviously consider 'Puthukavithai' as the echo of modern life for exposing the current complexities of life as 'complexities'. Arnold in his *Study of Poetry* deals with the discrimination of good and bad poetry. He writes:

“For in poetry the distinction between excellent and inferior, sound and unsound or only half-sound, true and untrue or only half true, is of paramount importance” (P.64).

Arnold's method of criticism is necessarily dogmatic for he believed in systems and theories and he wanted only the best and highest things from poetry. He was able to discern the quality of poetry with his theory of disinterestedness by revealing the original colour of the work of art. Ka. Naa. Subramanian has also reflected the very same idea in *Etherkaka Ezhuthukiren* (why I write); where he writes:

“The aim of the art is to see disinterestedly the work of art and to make others see it in the same way by repeating it to them. And that is the aim of the literary writers. For this reason alone I write” (P 34).

A sense of creativeness is there in his criticism. He criticizes a work of art in order to help the reader and not to kill the writer. So he is better called an appreciator. More or less Ka. Naa. Subramanian's place in the field of poetry criticism is the same as of Matthew Arnold. According to Arnold, the critic should find out the poetic quality in poetry as in the touch stone passages. This is checked only in the mind and not on papers. Ka. Naa. Subramanian simply took this method and introduced it to Tamil literary critical field. In the introductory passages of *Kalai Nutpangal*, he wrote about this scaling system by saying thus:

“A critic equips himself with this literary scale by reading the important world literature repeatedly” (P ix)

The next important influence came from T.S. Eliot for Ka. Naa. Subramanian. Eliot, the poet, the critic, the dramatist belonged to the tradition of Dryden, Johnson, Coleridge and Matthew Arnold and he was highly an influential writer almost in all the forms of his writings, especially in his critical theories. Eliot's critical exposition was commented upon by Mario Praz thus:

“... literary criticism is the field in which his personality has found its full expression” (262)

Eliot's idea of 'Tradition and Individual Talent' influenced almost all the successive writers and critics in the west and also Ka. Naa. Subramaniam here in Tamil poetic criticism. In his essay "Tradition and Individual Talent", Eliot means 'Tradition' as all those habitual actions, habits and customs, from the most significant rites to a conventional way of greeting a stranger which represents the blood worship of the same people living in the same place. This idea of 'tradition' is all the same with regard to any tradition. Whenever a poet or any creative writer tries to write a creative piece of work, he consciously or unconsciously represents partially the past. So Eliot observes:

"No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone, you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead, I mean this as a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical criticism" (P 169).

As Eliot writes, "Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it, you must obtain it by great labour". According to Eliot, Great labour gives the sense that one has to understand the tradition by reading a lot. So this great labour needs a separate capacity, that is individual talent. This individual talent differs from man to man, the more he works hard the greater is his knowledge about tradition. All these theories about tradition and individual talent were reflected by Ka. Naa. Subramaniam in Tamil with some alterations and additions. He devoted a topic "Ilakkiya Marabum Thanimanitha Methaiyum" (Literary Tradition and Individual Talent) in his book *Kalai Nutpangal*. Ka. Naa. Subramaniam argues that tradition changes from time to time and gives way to another tradition. He comparison this tradition to a living organism which grows by intaking many new matters. According to him, the reason for the still living nature of literature is the intention that one can write new things without any damage to the tradition. Moreover, the crossing of tradition, too, becomes a part in the tradition in due course. Ka. Naa. Subramaniam clearly has projected his idea of criticism in *Ilakkiyathukku Oru Iyakkam* that the ultimate aim of criticism is to look into the technicality and the continuity of tradition. Again in the same book, Ka. Naa. Subramaniam says about the use of Criticism:

"The criticism should be useful for us to know the present achievements and or traditional achievements" (P 132).

He gives a word of caution to the effect that tradition should not be let down, at the same time tradition should also be overtaken by its limit and he also asserts that the critic must expose the relationship between the two similar works of art in two different word languages. Though Eliot was the base or the starting point for the New criticism to emerge, he condemned the emphasis on the study of text alone, and its word by word analysis and interpretations. Apart from his affinity with this new school, Eliot was critical of being too textual. Like Eliot, Ka. Naa. Subramaniam too, instead of

condemning the new criticism – like approach in Tamil, insisted on criticism with psychological impacts, affectations, social factors and the like. In an interview in 1984, he said rather rightly thus:

“Since I’ve belief in latest explanations, psychological affectations, social factors, belief, and circumstances related to creativity should be taken into consideration when a work of art is criticized. With this background only, one can criticize reasonably” (Ilakkiyathadam, 97-98).

Thus, it can be said that Ka. Naa. Subramaniam becomes the representative of western literature in Tamilnadu. It is he who brought out the great and influential theories of Eliot to bear on Tamil literature, thereby attempting to keep Tamil literature prominent in the world literary scene.

Like Eliot’s influence the influence of F.R. Leavis was found to be great on Ka. Naa. Subramaniam. While analyzing the influence of Leavis on him, the literary critical impacts, one can find more contrastive points than comparable points. But at the same time, one also cannot deny the impacts which Ka. Naa. Subramaniam got by his readings of F.R. Leavis. Basically F.R. Leavis was a professor at Cambridge and so he was called a professor-critic. But Ka. Naa. Subramaniam was not a professor, he was a full-time literary writer. Besides this social status, Leavis and Ka. Naa. Subramaniam occupied a distinctive place at the same time, a similar place in the minds of Tamil literary readers and writers. This statement is thoroughly valid:

“If Ka. Naa. Subramaniam was to be given a western example, as he did very often, one has to point out the Cambridge professor Dr. F.R. Leavis” (Kanaiyazhi 14).

This comparison was done by N. S. Jaganathan not because they belonged to the contemporary period but because they had many comparable elements in their literary theories. Both the writers are of the opinion that apart from science, history, economics, philosophy, literature is the important, because it helps the reader to understand life as it is and to enjoy life with moral guidance. But the degree in which they give importance to social aspects of life in literature varies. Ka. Naa. Subramaniam is just next to F.R. Leavis’ social outlook on literature. His criticism explicitly reveals his notion of focusing around the value of life.

Both Leavis and Ka. Naa. Subramaniam insisted that the language used by the poets should be ordinary, that is the language of the day. Falling in line with the critical thinking of Leavis, Ka. Naa. Subramaniam echoed the point of using common language in the sense, ordinary language belongs to the day-to-day language. Ka. Naa. Subramaniam states:

“One can write poetry with day-to-day language in an independent form.” (Kalai Nutpangal 109)

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Commenting about Wordsworth's poetry, Leavis says that Wordsworth uses the language of everyday use, even rustic and his poetry never needs further explanations. Also, Wordsworth is appreciated by Leavis for his critical bent of mind. Ka. Naa. Subramaniam, on the other hand, writes about Bharathiyar's poetry. He finds a clarity, simplicity and above all a movement in Bharathiyar's poetry. Again Ka. Naa. Subramaniam in his very early critical attempt placed Kamban, Shakespeare, and Karaikalammaiyar in a single group. Both Ka. Naa. Subramaniam and F.R. Leavis insisted that anything written as literature should have a vital relation to speech, to the living language of the time and should have the social concern for the human life.

To conclude, it may be said that Ka. Naa. Subramaniam gives more importance to the growth of Tamil literary field both in the creative and critical activities than the moralistic approach to teach. He too, like Arnold and Eliot, recommends 'Touchstone' like method and the sense of tradition. Thus, Ka. Naa. Subramaniam's reception of Western literature represented poetry criticism by Arnold, Eliot and F.R. Leavis is found worth mentioning and noticing so as to enable the readers to understand the impacts of exercised by the western writers.

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Dr. S. Chelliah, M.A., Ph.D., D.Litt.
Professor, Head & Chairperson
School of English & Foreign Languages
Department of English & Comparative Literature
Madurai Kamaraj University
Madurai – 625 021
Tamil Nadu, India
schelliah62@gmail.com

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