

Birth of the Tragedy in Tamil: Colonial Compulsions and Cultural Negotiations

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Abstract

This paper attempts to map out the trajectory of tragedy as a genre in Tamil drama. Though tragic elements are abundant in Tamil literary works both of classical as well as folk nature, stories or plays that could be called ‘tragedy’ in the western sense of the term were almost non-extinct till the 1890s in Tamil. This was the case with other Indian languages too, as the Asian theatre traditions were mostly characterised by stylisation in contrast to realism of the west. With the advent of colonial modernity and cultural renaissance modelled upon the western ethos, Tamil, along with other Indian languages, had to relieve itself from the humbling embarrassment of not having tragedy as a genre in its literary and performance corpus. Emergence of tragedy in Tamil drama, both in performance as well as in textual form, followed after this realisation by the urban elite intelligentsia during the late nineteenth century.

With their social status and cultural position coupled with colonial education, this urban elite intelligentsia was at the forefront of the Tamil cultural and literary renaissance, and theatre enthusiasts among them played a crucial role in the emergence of play texts and performances in the Tamil language within the genre of tragedy. Sambanda Mudaliar, Suryanarayana Sastri, Srinivasa Aiyanger, Shankaradas Swamigal and a host of others played different yet simultaneous parts in this process approximately from 1890 to 1920. The birth of tragedy in effect relegated the already available and much popular native folk performances, and instead went on to instil the primacy of text over performance in Tamil drama. This genre was received, rejected and renegotiated by the Tamil audience and theatre artists (both amateur and professionals) at various levels and for different reasons of their respective cultural contexts. This paper will locate these processes, and this discussion might prove fruitful for furthering the understanding of Tamil drama and its confrontations with colonial modernity.

Keywords: Tamil Drama, Tragedy, Colonial modernity, Indian drama, literary renaissance, cultural negotiations

Introduction

Genre politics was at the centre of colonial literary as well as artistic productions in the nineteenth and twentieth century India. With the oriental scholarship embarking upon the ancient literary texts of Indian languages, the tradition of a classical past had been formidably established before the 1850s. At the same time, the educated elites thought that the absence of any genre, or even a sub-genre, was a matter of inferiority to their language, and it was their duty to create those genres in their ‘mother tongue’. In this line, almost all the Indian languages were marked by the absence of a continuous textual drama tradition, to the great embarrassment of the respective elite intelligentsia with English education and colonial affiliation. Though Sanskrit drama texts of Kalidasa had been found and glorified by the oriental scholars, the marked decline of a drama tradition caused much dismay to the Indian elites.

Many languages managed to argue or claim the existence of a dramatic tradition in the past, yet, most of the texts had been lost irretrievably, and their titles were extracted only from the allusions in other texts. This was true even with Sanskrit, as mentioned by H. H. Wilson (1835) that only 28 drama scripts out of 60 texts he could title, were available in the language. Hence, there was an immediate necessity to revive the drama tradition, fill the gap, modify the ‘less suited’, reject the unfit and fill in the absent spaces in drama, of course to suit the great western theatre tradition. Indian theatre traditions were bereaved of an explicit genre of tragedy. This genre was obviously a product of the west adopted and appropriated into the Indian languages through multiple trends and processes of complex nature. (Bhattacharji, 1978; DHARWADKER, 2010; Raghavan, 1962) I try to locate the adaptation and appropriation processes towards the birth of the tragedy as a genre in Tamil drama in the colonial context. In this paper, an attempt is made to map out the trends and different modes involved in making tragedy a genre in Tamil, and the cultural dialogues carried out in that process.

The Spirit of Literary Revivalism in Tamil

While oriental scholars like William Jones, Charles Wilkins and H.H. Wilson established Sanskrit to be the source of all the Indian languages, a host of South Indian orientalist like Ellis, G. U. Pope and Caldwell brought out the non-Sanskrit origin of the Dravidian languages, Tamil being the oldest among them (Trautmann, 2006). As Thomas Trautmann (2006) points out, language was necessarily associated with the nation and its geographical space in the nineteenth century Indian sensibility. The status of one’s language came to signify one’s place within the broader spectrum of nationalist discourses. This linguistic nationality which defined the identity

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of a linguistic community pressurized the construction of a new identity. This new Tamil identity, as in the case with many Indian languages, was deeply rooted in a proud age of ancient literature and culture, a dark medieval time of decline and distress, and a fresh spirit of renaissance coupled with modern culture and literary creations parallel to the west. It was in this backdrop that fiction, prose writing and many subgenres emerged since the 1860s in Tamil just as in the case of several other Indian languages (Trivedi & Bartholomeus, 2005). Vedanayagam Pillai produced the first novel in Tamil with the title Prathaba Mudaliar Charithiram in 1976. It was followed by an array of crime and historical novels for the next 50 years. Poetry was the only genre that made the Tamil elites feel proud of. With the translation of Tirukkural and Naladiar, into Latin and English even as early as the eighteenth century, the rich poetry tradition of Tamil had been established firmly. The Sangam poems of ancient Tamil and Tholkappiyam were also getting printed in multiple editions. (Rajesh, 2011) This spirit of modernity and renaissance led to the creation of the modern drama in Tamil so as to satisfy the western sensibilities and match the Indian classical tradition.

Drama as a Modern Genre in Tamil

Absence of a classical drama tradition was acknowledged with a great amount of humility by the Tamil intelligentsia. (Sastri 1897; Mudaliar 1998) Some of them considered it was their primary duty to create stage-worthy plays and ‘decent drama’ in Tamil, without which its literary pride and greatness would be laid aside. At the same time, they meticulously elaborated the existence of a considerably rich drama tradition in Tamil. For instance, Surya Narayana Sastri (1897) cited Cilappatikaram and plays celebrating the honour of the king Rajarajan as the evidence for a drama tradition in Tamil. The Tamil scholars also extracted manifold drama texts and treatise on drama which they claimed to have existed in the past and had been lost unfortunately in course of time. Simultaneously, as Stuart Blackburn (2005) points out, printing had an enormous impact over the nature of theatre performance in South India towards the end of the nineteenth century. Drama varieties like Nondi Nadagam, Kuravanji Nadagam and drama scripts preserved in palm-leaves got the privilege of getting printed. New plays also got written in small numbers since the 1870s. Dambachari Vilasam written in 1869 by Kasi Visvanatha Mudaliar is considered the first play authored in modern Tamil. The influence of Parsi theatre companies that toured throughout the Madras Presidency was obvious in the drama and theatre activities in Tamil too. In fact, Parsi theatre companies virtually worked as the agents of the western theatre to the South Indian playwrights. However, a distinct variety of Tamil theatre and Tamil drama in the modern sense emerged only in the 1890s, with the ingenious creative adaptations of western genres, plays, rhetoric and spectacle. Playwrights like Pammal Sambanda Mudaliar, Sundaram Pillai and Surya Narayana Sastri, who formed the drama-conscious set of Tamil elites, categorically rejected the then existing native performances as mere “stomach-filling filthy tactics”. They wanted to completely break away from the contemporary native performances and create a brand-new drama faithfully emulating the western models and genres. Having studied

Shakespeare thoroughly in schools and colleges, they structured their plays in three to five acts. The proscenium theatre, which was used by the Parsi companies, was used for staging plays for the urban elites.

Emergence of Tragedy in Tamil

The 1890s can be very well labelled as the splendid decade for Tamil drama renaissance. Sundaram Pillai wrote his *Manonmaniyam* in 1891, which is considered the first modern Tamil play in the western model. This play is an adaptation of Lord Litton's *the Secret Way*. Sambanda Mudaliar started his *Suhuna Vilasa Sabha* in the same year, through which he produced around 94 plays in his lifetime. Several experimentations and innovations were quite effectively executed in Tamil drama in the next ten years. An entire set of new rhetoric was adapted in the plays written by the educated Tamil elites like Sambanda Mudaliar, Sundaram Pillai, Surya Narayana Sastri and Shankaradas Swamigal. (Seizer, 2005) *Kalvar Thalaivan* (the Chief of thieves) written by Sambantha Mudaliar in 1893 is the first ever tragedy in Tamil. This was the fourth play produced by him and enacted by the *Suhuna Vilasa Sabha*. In his previous three plays, Sambanda Mudaliar experimented in adapting the Shakespearian scenes and dialogues, the plot being his own. As is the case with Shakespeare, most of his early plays were historical fictions set in the past. They also involve the royal characters and their lives. He explains the reason behind the writing of *Kalvar Thalaivan* as follows:

Then I wrote the play *Kalvar Thalaivan*. This is a play with sad ending, which they refer to in English as 'Tragedy'. In a tragedy, the hero and virtuous characters must die or fall down at the end. How much ever tragic it is inside, there is no such convention in our country to end the play with sadness. This kind of ending is not a characteristics of Sanskrit drama (*Naadaka Lakshana*) too. I could not find any drama with a tragic ending. To the best of my knowledge, *Kalvar Thalaivan* is the first tragedy in Tamil. I shall tell my readers the reason for writing this play. When we staged my previous play *Leelavathi Sulochana* in Victoria hall, my boyhood friend Mr. Sreenivasa Aiyangar had also come to witness the performance. ... He wrote a review in the *Hindu* about the play. He also told me his opinion frankly when we met each other after some days. The nutshell of his criticism was this: the playwright should have finished the play with a tragic note. Instead of the hero Sridhathan saving *Sulochana* at the end, *Sulochana* should have been killed by *Kamalanathan* and *Sridathan* should have committed suicide on seeing his dead lover. The happy ending of this play is out rightly unfit for the present drama trend. Even with his English education and fair knowledge about tragedy, the playwright is not courageous enough to make this a tragedy." My ego got hurt, and I was desperate to satisfy my ego by wiping out this shame on me. I told myself, is this your wish? I shall kill all the characters except none on the stage, and you shall get enough tragedy with bonus and interest. Thus, I made all the major characters die on the stage at the end, with heavily loaded tragic scenes all throughout the plot. (Mudaliar, 1998 P. 62)

This play is a perfect appropriation of the Cenacan tragedy with the stage loaded with corpses at the end. Jeyabalan, a poison physicist makes a deadly slow poison and gives it to Sauriyakumaran, prince Emanthagagan's younger brother. There follows a series of murders and betrayals, and everyone is dead at the end.

Another tragedy Manorama or Irandu Nanbarkal (Two Friends) was written two years later. Sambanda Mudaliar's elaborate discussion of this play shows how this genre was simultaneously advocated and hesitantly received by the educated elites and actors and audience at large. He writes:

This is one of the most important plays that I wrote. I wrote this play for My good friend C. Renga Vadivelu to act the part of the main woman character. I made it a tragedy in which the heroine Manorama, the hero Chandrathithiyar and the villain Jayadevan die on the stage at the end. However, my dear friend refused to perform the tragic role, and pleaded with me to make the ending a happy one. I tried hard to convince him, failing to do which I changed the ending to a happy one. When we staged this play in August 8th 1896 in Madras Victoria Hall, Mr. V.V. Srinivasa Aiyangar wrote in the Indian Stage magazine that the happy ending of the play is not at all appropriate. He further wrote when the drama in other languages was growing with new experiments and fresh kind of creative genius, Tamil alone suffered with this lacuna of insufficient dramatic varieties. Realizing the truth in his argument, I changed the ending into a tragedy when I printed the play some three years later. My friend never played Manorama's role after I changed the ending, though he appeared in tragic roles in other plays. (Mudaliar, 1998 P. 89)

This explains the performance related tensions, negotiations and clashing concerns of the audience as well as actors from different classes, educational and social orientations. Cultural dialogues between the elites desperate to create a colonial modernity of their own and the traditional theatre aesthetics that did not permit tragedy on the stage are also seen standing in contrast to each other in the staging and printing of this play.

Sambanda Mudaliar wrote his third and final tragedy in 1897 under the title Sathrujith or Blind Ambition. Notably, the second title was given in English for the first time in Tamil drama. This trend prolifically continued for the next 40 years at least. This play is an experimentation modelled upon the Parsi performances. What he says about the writing and success of this play exhibits the fantastic strategies adapted by the Tamil playwrights to bring in this new and generally unaccepted genre:

It is a general notion among our drama companies that tragedies will not fetch much crowd in the theatre. I was also a victim of this notion for quite some time. At that time, A Parsi drama

company came from Bombay for a three-month tour in Madras. They performed plays every day and the tickets were rare to get. ... when our own drama companies did not make tragedies, they performed tragedies with glorious scenic arrangements and proper stage-settings. Even though they performed in Hindustani language that was unknown in madras, they could gather a large group of audience for their dramas and went off earning a huge profit. I learned the lesson from them that even if it is a tragedy, the people will come if presented with a variety of colourful settings and appropriate properties and costumes. Then I wrote the tragedy Sathrujith with several innovative scenes like the burning house, demolition of the palace, two men swimming across a huge river, on the stage wars and so on. The play was received with a warm crowd. ... (Mudaliar, 1998 P. 97)

This shows the efforts put in by Mudaliar and his Suhuna Vilasa Sabha to modernize the Tamil theatre performance with new settings, costumes and stage techniques. The playwright responded to the need of the day to write experimental plays without losing his earning, with several changes he brought into the manner of performance and staging.

The second phase for making tragedy into a well-established genre in Tamil language happened through Shakespeare adaptations. There were 91 Shakespeare adaptations between 1876 and 1920 in Tamil, as indexed by Sisil Kumar das and Poonam Trivedi. (Trivedi & Bartholomeus, 2005 p. 26) Apparently, all the four great tragedies as well as the Roman tragedies of Shakespeare were adapted into Tamil drama, both in textual and performance varieties for several times by at least a dozen playwrights. Though Shakespeare adaptation started in 1870s, the tragedies were adapted only since 1902. However, Shakespeare's was not the first tragedy to be adapted into Tamil. Milton's Samson Agonistus was adapted into Tamil as early as 1884, authorship and text for which are not traceable. Romeo and Juliet was the most frequently adapted play among the Shakespearian tragedies. Around 8 adaptations were written based on this play. Romaiyanum Jolithaiyum (1908) by S.V. Srinivasan and Jeevalitha Ramanan (1910) by Vaduvur Duraisami Aiyangar were the early adaptations of this play to appear in Tamil. Sambanda Mudaliar was again the first to stage Shakespeare adaptations since 1902. He wrote an adaptation of Hamlet in 1907 and performed it on the same year. He writes about his adventure in the following words:

Hamlet is the most complex among Shakespeare Mahakavi's plays. Even the western actors and directors are said to be struggling a lot for performing this play. I thought if I am fit at all to render this great Mahakavi's great work in Tamil. Hence, I postponed my attempts several times, and it took me five years to complete this work. (Mudaliar, 1998 p. 145)

Needless to state the awe and reverence with which the intellectual intelligentsia held Shakespeare. Notably, Renga Vadivelu, who refused to play the tragic role in Mudaliar's early

tragedy, acted as Ophelia many times. Mudaliar (1998 p. 179) recounts this as: “My dear Friend Renga Vadivelu enthusiastically took up Ophelia’s role. He, who refused to act in my *Irandu Nanbarkal* some years ago, acted as a dead person, then as corpse to be carried on the stage and buried. He had much admiration for Shakespeare Mahakavi as I have, and that must be his reason in playing this role without any complaint.” This exemplifies the decisive role played by Shakespeare in the colonized elite’s mind and in establishing the brand-new genre of tragedy in the world of Tamil drama.

The play *Hamlet* was adapted as *Amaladithan* or *Kurjara Nattu Arasilangumaran*. In this text, Mudaliar omits the sexually loaded conversations of the source play. He also leaves out the culturally irrelevant references in a few incidents. *Hamlet* becomes *Amaladathan*, *Ophelia* *Abalai*, *Paulonias Balanesan*, *Claudius Kaladevan* and *Getrude Gowrimani*. He also adapted *Macbeth* in 1910, although it could not get into stage performance in Sambanda Mudaliar’s lifetime for various reasons. This play was more closely adapted than the previous one, and there are not many omissions. However, main women characters in both plays are given a more sympathetic treatment whenever possible. The author justifies this in the following words: “I have taken a firm oath that I shall never write or stage plays that would demean the character and morale of our women, and would be even slightly disgusting to the eyes and minds of the honourable women coming for my plays.” (Mudaliar, 1998 p. 35) *Gertrude* and *Lady Macbeth* get a soft treatment perhaps due to this conviction of the author. Interestingly, Mudaliar did not adapt *Romeo and Juliet*. On the other hand, Shankaradas Swamigal, who contributed prolifically to Tamil drama through his Puranic, mythical and musical drama, adapted this play in 1910. However, the script is lost. It would have been quite interesting to see how he had responded and negotiated with the Shakespearian love tragedy.

Another parallel trend was the importance given to the puranic and folk characters having a tragic end. *Karna*, *Abimanyu*, *Indrajith*, *Ravana* and *Driyodana* were given a tragic treatment in this period in many Indian languages. There were also hard efforts made by the Indian scholars to establish the existence of tragedy or immense tragic elements in their respective cultures. In Tamil too, this trend is apparent. *Kodayali Karnan*, *Indrajith*, *Abimanyu Charithiram* and a host of such plays were written by Sambanda Mudaliar, Shankaradas Swamigal and other theatre enthusiasts. In addition to this, the Tamil folk texts with tragic elements also became the prevalent source for the Tamil playwrights. Blackburn (2005) mentions the tragic elements present in the folktales of Tamil country. He also elaborates how they got into print and were transformed into stage drama at the beginning of the twentieth century. *Nalathangal Charithiram* was written by both Mudaliar and Swamigal with an immense tragic tone. *Kovalan Charathiram* was also produced by several boys’ companies and troops professional and amateur.

Concluding Remarks

Thus, Tamil identity and colonial modernity shaped the emergence and establishment of tragedy in Tamil. In turn, Absence of this genre was conceived to be a lacuna for the Tamil language, and its birth was received with a great amount of reverence. Thus, Tragedy also shaped the process of constructing Tamil identity and colonial modernity.

There were at least three trends most visible in the birth of tragedy as a genre in Tamil drama:

1. Creative Experimentations in the urban theatre,
2. Shakespeare adaptations, and
3. Plays centred on the tragic Puranic and folk characters.

The elite intelligentsia rushed forth to redefine and rectify anything that would differ from the canonical western model; tragedy was advocated energetically, and any violation was seen as a grave deed of injustice to the language and their colonial education. Tragedy made its way into the Tamil stage drama and text editions during the period of Tamil cultural and literary renaissance, roughly from 1890 to 1920. The prominence accorded to elitist moralistic concerns, heavy exploitation of the western forms as well as an effective marginalisation of the native performances happened to be the major aspects in the making of tragedy as a literary genre in Tamil drama.

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