A Comparative Study of English and Tamil Ballads

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Introduction

A comparative study of English and Tamil ballads tend to give new insights in understanding the cultures of the two distinct groups, English and Tamil. A comparative study often tends to juxtapose a work (of art) written in a native language with a foreign work either to establish the supremacy of the native product or to prove the uniqueness of the native product [Fredrickson 8].

World Literature

Comparison is as old as ‘thought’ itself. Comparative study of literature is a late entrant following the established field of enquiry like comparative law, comparative philosophy, comparative medicine, etc. But the history of comparative study of literature presents the fact that the concept of ‘one literature’ or ‘world literature’ was pronounced as early as 14th century. German Comparatist Wolf Van Goethe pronounced the term World Literature (Weltliteratur) in the 14th century as an attempt to break the barriers between the nations. Mathew Arnold, citing the nexus between the literatures of the world advocated the concept of ‘one literature’ or ‘global literature’ in his lecture at Oxford in 1872. His view is that, “Everywhere there is connection, everywhere there is illustration. No single event, no single literature is adequately comprehended except in relation to other events, to other literatures” (Azhagarasan 2).

Ballad and Kathai Paatal

The history of world literature exhibits the fact that poetical expressions are considered to be the earliest art form in almost all the languages and ballad is the oldest form of poetical expression ever recorded in the history of any literature. W.H. Hudson claims that a ‘ballad is a form which appears to have arisen spontaneously in almost all literatures, and represents one of the earliest stages in the evolution of the poetic art’ (104). H.M. Chadwick, in his book Heroic...
Age (1911), establishes the presence of heroic songs in most of the classical languages like Greek, Sumerian and Tamil. Even in African societies traces of heroic songs are identified. C.M. Bowra analyzing the heroic poetry of various nations posits the fact that heroic poetry is the preceding art form to ballad. He is of the view that both heroic poetry and ballad are similar in treatment but different in style.

**Heroic Poetry and Ballads**

The distinction between heroic poetry and ballads is not so much of matter and spirit as of form and function and effect. G.U. Pope on studying the Tamil heroic songs conforms to Chadwick and Bowra, that heroic poetry of many nations were similar in the expression of human mind in accordance with the spirit of their time. Such a unilinear evolution of human mind was expressed by Alan Dundes in his article, “The Anthropologist and the Comparative Method in Folklore”, “…it was assumed that all peoples had progressed or were progressing from initial savagery through barbarism to the final stage of civilization’ (126). The twentieth century ballad scholars by drawing attention to the Darwin’s theory of evolution expressed their view that the intellectual evolution should be similar to the biological evolution.

**Comparative Cultural Study**

The currency of cultural studies incorporates both fields of enquiry namely the comparative study and cultural study. A new approach called as ‘comparative cultural studies’ challenges the single language based enquiry on one culture or the other. The objective nature of the ‘ballad’ produced by the throng denies it the status of being compared. A comprehensive study of ballads of many countries claims that the ‘polyphony’ voice of the ballad is far superior to the esoteric voice of the author centric literature. Child’s theories that many voices diffused into one voice and Bell’s view that all voices could be heard in one voice in the ballad creation have to be taken into consideration. The genuinity of these records of the past stand as a testimony of time as the feelings registered have germinated from the soil which is nearer to nature. Percy has acknowledged the greatness of the ballads in his letter to queen Elizabeth while presenting his collection of ballads to her, ‘…these poems are presented to your ladyship, not as
labours of art, but as effusions of nature, showing the first effort of ancient genius, and exhibiting the customs and opinions of remote ages’ (Percy XXIII).

**Polyphonic Effusions of Nature**

A ballad is a spontaneous production of the communal memory. The customs, beliefs, rituals, birth, death and other day to day activities of the primitive men, which are in the common stock, are recorded rapturously along with the stories. Many scholars argue that ‘ballad’ being a medium of communication helps us to understand the currency of the culture that was prevalent at the time of its composition. The currency of ‘culture’ itself has undergone several paradigm shifts, in its relationship with tradition in a society, from time to time.

Different fields of enquiry view ‘culture’ from different points of view. An anthropologist views culture as ‘behavior’ of the people. A folklorist views it as the processes of social life, where politics, economics, religion, kinship, are integrated for a logical manner. In simple terms ‘culture’ can be understood as an integration of people and the process. People are the creators of the culture and the reverse is always arguable. The same people who are the creators of the culture are involved in the creation of the ballads.

Thus ballads are not esoteric knowledge of the individuals. Hence a ballad which reflects the cultural currency of a period becomes traditional after passing many generations through oral medium. The primitive men believed that only permanent folk materials can survive, against time, through oral medium. A ballad incorporates many folk materials of the society including folk belief, myth, proverb, riddle etc that provides a bird’s view of the primitive society. It is possible therefore to register through these ballads, the natural happenings in the society like child birth, education, love, marriage, family affairs, work, death and other conflicts in the given milieu. In the absence of valid native historical records in the Tamil language, the insights these ballads throw into the political, administrative and cultural process of the society can be considered as authentic records of the society.
Code of Communal and Individual Conduct and Ballads: Comparison and Contrast between English and Tamil

The code of conduct of men and women in the society, their responsibilities etc of the primitive cultures are recorded in the ballads of both the languages. Both the societies project men as breadwinners of the family and women as home makers. In the ballad *Ruggleton's Daughter of Iero*, a song from the collection of Child, the husband takes severe measures to remind his wife of her household duties and the wife agrees to cook and bake only after the husband punishes her.

He took a stick down off the rack;
Fal lal lal lal li-do,
And on the back went rickety-rack
Of Ruggleton's daughter of Iero.
O I will bake and I will brew
Fal lal lal lal li-do,
And I will cook your meat for you
Said Ruggleton's daughter of Iero. (20-27)

Similarly in a Tamil ballad collected by Vaanamaamalai, a husband broods over the inefficiency of his wife to cook, though he had paid the money, demanded by her father. The song besides recording the practice in the Tamil society that dowry was given by men, which is different from the English custom; it also reveals the common habits of wives in both the societies.

Three hundred and one I gave
Your father has it safe
You do not know to cook
Am I to weep marrying you? (311)

Folklore Materials
Ballads in both the societies borrow materials from the folklore, the repertoire of the society, which is the uniting thread of the people in a society. In defining the folklore Ben Amos tries to classify it under three categories. Folklore is a body of knowledge, a mode of thought or a kind of art (Amos 5) or all the three together. Bascom enumerates the four functions of the folklore as: amusement, validation of the rituals of the culture, education and shaping the individuals social behavior. Tradition has always proved static and the art forms are dynamic, they often change in order to address the current needs of the people in a society.

**Portrayal of Women and Men**

A comparative study of this nature based on the works of the native men presents the characters of men and women in the society and their actions relating to basic human passions like chivalry, love and betrayal. Women are often portrayed as frail and personified as symbol of greed and jealousy. They fail to understand the evil ways of men and are often after the material wealth which fixes them in trouble. Men excelled in the art of deceiving. They often act cunningly and accomplish their mission without much strain. A woman who elopes with her lover is often humiliated and is left in the lurch. Besides drawing the wrath of the family members for bringing disgrace to the family pride, they also lose their love. The men of the ancient society see a woman as a frail being with full of jealousy. The ballad *The Farmer’s Curst Wife* (Child) summarizes the character of the women as viewed by men. A devil abducts a farmer’s wife to the hell but sends her back to the farmer immediately, afraid of her wily nature. “They say that the women are worse than the men, / They went down to Hell and got kicked out again”. (45-46)

**The Concept of Woman as Goddess**

Tamil society worships a woman as the goddess and keeps her in high esteem. Their capacity to produce lives is the main reason to hold them in awe in the society. A woman was portrayed as a humble being in the oral and written literature. Their meekness is also considered as their weakness and they are humiliated and subordinated by the male members of the society. Stuart Black Burn observes that the women and the untouchables in the society are believed to
have destructive capacity. This theory also endorses the prevalent hypothesis that woman are treated as menials in par with the untouchables. A woman in the Tamil society is deprived of an identity. They are subsumed in the identity of the father or the husband. Satisfying the sexual desires of the men, begetting children and rearing them and keeping the house were the bounded duties of women in the society. A woman’s voice is either subdued or subsumed into the dominant voice of the men.

The English society enslaved the women directly whereas the Tamil society implemented it in the name of god and religion. The Goddesses are given more power than the gods in the Tamil society. The Tamil society will treat a malati (a barren woman), like a widow. The Tamil society does not count a male responsible for the barrenness of the woman. There are many occasions when men are married for the second time in this regard. The agony expressed by muttāyi in The Story of Palavecañ Cervaikkārrar (Nirmala Tevi) is a genuine record of the agony of the barren women in the primitive Tamil society.

Grieving I’m in pain and anguish,
What is the use of gold aplenty?
When a woman goes barren and sad?
Won’t she be seen cursed and sinful?
Women my peers have grown-up children
And sterile my womb is O my dear!
Did we ever commit sins so dark?
Did we ever kill a mulching cow? (85-92)

Conclusion

The Comparative Study of ballads of both the languages exhibits the nature of mental progress of mankind of both the societies which are much the same. The themes of the ballads in both the languages are universal in nature comprising valour, love, greed etc. The expression and the techniques they use vary depending on the nature of the men where these songs are (orally) circulated. While the English societies imply moral justice indirectly the Tamil kathai paatal
often ends with a preaching. A comparative study of this nature often picks out the ‘subtypes’ and ‘oicotypes’ of two cultures to bring out the uniqueness of the works of the cultures compared. For example the custom of ‘deification’ of the deceased is a practice in Tamil Nadu where the good men are resurrected when they meet an untimely death by villainy. Whereas the English mourn the dead for a year and a day to ensure that the dead is not disturbed from its cold tomb.

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Works Cited


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